

Contemporary Feminist Art in Vietnam: The visual emergence of agency

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Abstract

This inquiry into the concerns currently faced by women in Vietnam notes the transformation of feminist ideas in the country from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. The focus of this study is to open a debate on feminist art practice in Vietnam. The existence of feminist art in Vietnam has been denied by one scholar, yet the shortage of published research on the topic leaves little room for a theoretical discussion. The purpose of this article is to conjoin various topics relating to women's sense of self, observe how they have been represented in contemporary art, and lay a basic groundwork upon which a feminist art history can grow. By unravelling some of the messages on womanhood and female identity in contemporary artworks by women artists, this article proposes that feminist art exists in Vietnam, on the basis that it challenges social norms, critiques the pressures on women imposed by social structures, raises awareness on women's issues and models alternative modes of thought. Nonetheless, a number of artists do not overtly define their practice as feminist art, even when intentionally creating work with a liberating undercurrent. Research shows that this also happens in other parts of the world, suggesting that feminist art practice is alive and well, although the framework and language used to define it calls for a reappraisal.

Keywords: Vietnam, Feminist Art, Contemporary Art, Women, Gender, Post-socialism

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Introduction

In the early part of the twentieth century, a women's movement or feminist movement formed in Vietnam, yet its activity over time has not exactly snowballed. This inquiry highlights some of the concerns currently faced by women in Vietnam through the prism of visual self-expressions of womanhood and female identity created by artists. Existing research in the Humanities and Social Sciences on the topic of Vietnamese women has mostly examined women as objects of desire, as wives or prostitutes for foreign men, as victims of exploitative systems, or as figures—human or divine—of veneration. There is, however, a pronounced shortage of published research on feminism in Vietnam in general, and on feminist art specifically. Our research problem starts, therefore, with limited theoretical backup. This article does not seek to attach theories onto Vietnamese feminist activity, nor does it ignore the problem presented by labelling the chosen art production as feminist art, given an international reticence by some artists to be defined as feminists. The purpose of this research is to conjoin aspects of women's sense of self, observe how they have been represented in contemporary art, and lay a basic groundwork upon which a feminist art history can develop.

To begin, I highlight some of the ambivalences and shifts in the construction and the subjective experience of womanhood in the Vietnamese context. Next, I take a step back to the dawn of the twentieth century, from where I sketch the ideological developments and transformations of gender roles and feminist activity in Vietnam. Female identity in contemporary Vietnam is then explored in more detail, analysing beliefs around gendered behaviours, female role models and social pressure through the lens of selected artworks.

The Experience of Female Identity

An exploration of the autobiography of a Vietnamese woman whose life story unfurls in the second half of the twentieth century is helpful to become familiar with the context. Actress Lê Vân's narrative tells of her life as a woman who grows up in wartime and later struggles with Vietnam's shift from the subsidy period to a market economy. The book begins with Lê Vân asking herself the question "who are you?", only to write her answer in the last sentence of the book: "I am I, a woman". John Schafer analyses this work of contemporary popular literature as a way of unpicking notions of "Vietnamese womanhood".²

The life journey told by Lê Vân helps reveal the forces that Vietnamese draw upon in constructing notions of female gender. Schafer's study finds that notions of matriarchy, romance, sacrifice, fate and chastity, bolstered by The Four Virtues: diligence, physical grace, deference and faithfulness, are the myths that support the patriarchal system that fetters women. He posits that a slight respite in these pressures upon women came along at the time of *Đổi Mới*, the economic renovation of the late 1980s, as this new political context made it possible for women to shape their lives in ways not available to previous generations.³ However, not too long after women grasped the market economy's liberating opportunities to gain some financial independence, their freedom was curbed by government campaigns to re-domesticate them. The Communist Party leaders launched the 'civilized' or 'cultured' family model, to bring traditional values to the forefront and redirect women back to the

² John Schafer, "Lê Vân and Notions of Vietnamese Womanhood", *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 5/3 (2010), 131.

³ Due to its break with certain social norms, notably filial piety, the autobiography of a dancer and actress, *Lê Vân: Loving and Living*, published in 2006 by the Writers' Association, gave rise to controversy and serious debate.

home and fulfil unpaid caring and domestic duties.⁴ Effectively, this was a U-turn in public discourse on women's roles in society, a paradox that would tinge the collective imaginary.

Since these events mark the context in which Lê Vân develops her individual agency, unsurprisingly, she expresses contradictions in her actions, her beliefs and even her values. There is a distance between her drive to make free choices for herself, and the social conditioning she has internalized that makes her want to comply with certain norms, even though they don't conform to her aspirations. She is aware of the cultural codes that instil traditional values –detrimental to women— yet her conscious mind also applies the logic of feminism, a tool to curb the self-sabotage women choose when making painful personal sacrifices on behalf of social propriety. According to both Confucian and socialist ideals, two prevailing ideological worldviews, *hy sinh* [sacrifice] is a Vietnamese word closely associated with womanhood, though "There are some signs, however, that Vietnamese women are growing tired of sacrificing", Schafer recognises.⁵

The words 'fate' [*số phận*] and 'misfortune' [*bất hạnh*] are also commonly associated with women [*đàn bà*], diverting blame from men (who are exonerated of failing to live up to their responsibility), to women, who are to blame for accepting their lot too passively instead of showing agency and demanding fairer treatment.⁶ Lê Vân's personal account shows undeniably that she struggles with internal forces that pull her in opposite directions. Some or even all of these forces continue to impinge on younger women, as will be garnered from the narratives told by post-war artists.

Female Identities in Vietnam's Feminism

When women in Russia were given the right to vote, in 1918, Vietnamese women asked "What is feminism?" for the first time in the media, in Nu Gioi Chung newspaper.⁷ This was the time when French colonial education in Indochina gave a few women (less than a fifth of the 1% of the literate population of the early twentieth century) the opportunity to gain an education distinct from the teachings in family values that was the only option previously open to women.⁸ Many of the Vietnamese female intellectuals that emerged advocated for gender equality and took part in modernizing movements for women's liberation and for national liberation. With the advent of women's newspapers in the 1930s, many of these intellectuals wrote opinion columns or articles such as "What is feminism or women's rights?" (1933),⁹ or "Can working women gain the absolute female liberation?" (1934).¹⁰

⁴ Richard Tran Quang-Anh, *From Red Lights to Red Flags: A History of Gender in Colonial and Contemporary Vietnam*, (PhD thesis, Berkeley: University of California, 2011), 75.

⁵ Schafer, "Lê Vân and Notions of Vietnamese Womanhood", 154.

⁶ Ibid., 163-166.

⁷ Dang Thi Van Chi, "Vietnamese Women Intellectuals and Global Integration in the First Half of the 20th Century", *Journal of Mekong Societies*, 11/1 (2015), 49.

⁸ Ibid., 25-26.

⁹ Except where citing sources, the word "feminism" prevails in this paper over the expression "women's rights", although in Vietnam no significant distinction is made. The title "What is feminism or women's rights?" suggests an identification of feminism with women's rights, a fact corroborated by media artist Nguyen Trinh Thi, who says that the Vietnamese word feminism derives from the Chinese for "women's rights". Hero Mother Symposium, "Artist Panel with Nguyen Trin Thi, Sasha Pirogova, Mariana Vassileva, Marina Belikova", *Momentum Worldwide Vimeo*, 18 August, (2016), min. 16. On her part, Wendy Duong discusses some of the nuances of wording in Vietnamese relating to these issues. Wendy Duong, "Gender equality and women's issues in Vietnam: the Vietnamese woman-warrior and poet", *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 10/191 (2001), 194.

¹⁰ Dang, "Vietnamese Women Intellectuals and Global Integration in the First Half of the 20th Century", 36.

At the same time as men and women's equality was being espoused by Ho Chi Minh's Indochinese Communist Party, works written by the so called Self-Reliance Literature Group featured female characters who were portrayed as a defiant lead player and as a victim, an antagonism that symbolised the cultural clash brought about by colonialism.¹¹ This inaugural period of collective consciousness for women's rights was also reflected in representations of 'modern women' or 'new women', whose attire ("flashy dress, hair-style, high heels and use of make-up")¹² was quite distinguishable from the modesty of traditional feminine appearance.

It stands to reason that under colonial upheaval, the emasculation enforced on colonized men would generate a shift in their relationships with women, causing the hierarchies of gender and race to be in constant flux.¹³ Diverse aspects of male and female roles for Vietnamese men and women under colonialism have been addressed by various authors, including Richard Tran Quang-Anh, who mirrors the two periods of modernity in the twentieth century: the colonial period prior to the mid 1950s and the post-socialist period after 1986, to question the framing of the dominant binary sexual order and to challenge the reconstruction of a queer past.

Following independence from the colonial regime in 1954, Vietnam became a socialist country and women's roles shifted again. Feminist advocacy was historically entangled with party politics and no women's movement was ever far from nationalism or socialism, according to Wendy Duong's research on Vietnam.¹⁴ During the anticolonial resistance and during the Vietnam/American War, women were portrayed as fighters and workers, leaving a pervasive residue: "In the iconography of contemporary Vietnam, women often symbolize national identity", says Caroline Grillot.¹⁵ Studying cinematic images made during the war and in socialist times, media artist Nguyen Trinh Thi reaches a similar conclusion: "the image of women was used for propaganda purposes, to garner support from everyone, regardless of their gender, for war and socialism building efforts".¹⁶ She adds that female imagery in general was –and continues to be— used instrumentally.

Political scientist Judith Stiehm examined case studies from Eastern Bloc countries before the end of the Cold War, finding that the Marxist theory that women's oppression would end along with class oppression was disproved by reality, even in Cuba, where men had the legal obligation to contribute an equal amount of housework.¹⁷ Communist practice in the early 1980s did not make women free or powerful, nor was women's equality just a class problem, Stiehm concludes.

In Vietnam, the onset of a post-socialist state at the end of the 1980s through renewed economic policies (*Đổi Mới*), brought about some dramatic shifts that in Bùi Thị Thanh Mai's opinion reduced the gender gap and saw women participate in almost all aspects of

¹¹ Boitran Huynh-Beattie, "Vietnamese Modern Art. An Unfinished Journey", in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art. An Anthology*, eds. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), 37.

¹² Quang-Anh, *From Red Lights to Red Flags*, vi.

¹³ Jennifer Anne Boittin, Christina Firpo and Emily Musil Church, "Hierarchies of Race and Gender in the French Colonial Empire, 1914–1946", *Historical Reflections*, 37/1 (2011).

¹⁴ Duong, "Gender equality and women's issues in Vietnam", 194.

¹⁵ Caroline Grillot, "Between Bitterness and Sweetness, When Bodies Say it All: Chinese Perspectives on Vietnamese Women in a Border Space", *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7/1 (2012), 108.

¹⁶ Magdalena Magiera, "Nguyễn Trinh Thi 'Eleven Men'", *vdrome.org* (2016), <http://www.vdrome.org/nguyen-trinh-thi>.

¹⁷ Judith Stiehm, "Socialism and Women's Equality: Looking Backward and Forward", *Studies in Comparative Communism*, XIV/2&3 (1981), 217.

social life.¹⁸ However, the trend towards gender equality that began in the early 1990s was certainly not as exemplar as Bui suggests.¹⁹

Jayne Werner's field study of the 1990s found that women accepted the normative state views on gendered subjectivity, at least in rural Vietnam.²⁰ Werner challenges the argument that state feminism serves women's needs and improves women's status in society, on the basis that it hinders direct representational political participation. While the Communist Party defines what gender equality is and what women's needs are, it is unlikely that Vietnam's Women's Union will lobby to empower women from below or to change the gender imbalance in power.

Feminist Art in Vietnam

Bui Thị Thanh Mai, a lecturer of Art History at the Fine Arts University in Hanoi and currently deputy-director of the Vietnam Museum of Fine Arts, begins her article *Why Hasn't Feminist Art Been Formed in Vietnam* with the allegation that contemporary Vietnam has seen extraordinary leaps in the social advancement of women. However, she laments that the post-socialist renovation policies did not achieve equality. Her article attempts to cover a lot of ground in a few pages, failing to elaborate sufficiently on the issues it raises. Despite its lack of depth, Bui's text has the rare value of situating feminism in relation to contemporary Vietnamese art and it is a novel addition to the discourse on global feminisms.

Vietnam's history is rich in empowering imagery of iconic female figures, a history maimed by the disempowering legacy of the Confucian worldview. Bui Thị Thanh Mai considers that Vietnam's Confucian heritage is the source of many stereotypes and social expectations about women that still dominate. She defends this point with the dubious claim that all artistic depictions of female figures—a popular subject matter—are objectifying representations, even when the artworks are authored by female artists, artists who by default must have internalized long-standing prejudices about women. The persistent social structures that curb women's full independence are not fleshed out in Bui's article, but one infers that this conditioning is in turn reinforced by the bland images of women depicted in art.

Bui Thị Thanh Mai posits that the feminist movement has not reached Vietnam's artworld, basing her claim on the logic that if it had, the achievements of women artists and female art historians would be more visible. Aware of the void of female creativity in the Fine Arts, Bui finds it paradoxical that feminism has existed in Vietnamese literature, as seen in the works of female authors dating centuries back, such as Ho Xuan Huong.²¹ From a

¹⁸ Bui Thị Thanh Mai, "Why Hasn't Feminist Art Been Formed in Vietnam". *Vietnamese Arts*, 25 April (2011), <https://buiithanhmai.wordpress.com/2011/04/25/why-hasnt-feminist-art-been-formed-in-vietnam/>.

¹⁹ Wendy Duong confirms that women in Vietnam make up just over half of the workforce, but is less optimistic about gender equality, stating that women "have fewer employment choices than men, receive lower compensation, have less job stability in the private sector, and have to moonlight to make ends meet more frequently". She also finds that at the dawn of the new millennium, the traditional view that the woman's primary role is in the home persists, imposing on Vietnamese women the role of taking charge of domestic duties. Duong, "Gender equality and women's issues in Vietnam", 228.

²⁰ Jayne Werner, *Gender, Household and State in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 170.

²¹ A female writer frequently mentioned is Hồ Xuân Hương, active in the early 19th century, known for her poems that rile against the female exploitation of women or convey risqué sexual metaphors. Hồ Xuân Hương is described as "intelligent and funny, passionate and independent" by Nora Taylor, *Changing Identity*, (Washington, DC: International Arts & Artists, 2007), 76. The echo of the historical poet Hồ Xuân Hương is such that it has even been cited in tandem with hip-hop singers: Leslie Nguyen-Okwu, "How Hip-Hop Is Fueling Feminism in an Unlikely Place". *Ozy.com*, 4 May (2017), <https://www.ozy.com/fast-forward/how-hip-hop-is-fueling-feminism-in-an-unlikely-place/77095>.

legal standpoint, Wendy Duong's research on feminism in Vietnam considers some poems by Ho Xuan Huong to be precursors of the struggle for women's rights.²² Duong found evidence of a positive collective identity that urged Vietnamese women to take the lead in society and to resist gender injustice, a "cultural identity" that calls to be revitalized and capitalized, she exhorts, in order to advocate for gender equality.²³

On her part, Bùi Thị Thanh Mai does not appear to acknowledge a cultural identity of feminist values in the visual arts. In contemporary art from Vietnam, Bùi thinks that "even some of the most radical female artists [...] have not been able to approach feminist ideals", an assertion that seems overdramatic, although no artist's names are cited to enable readers to reflect on this. The women artists at work nowadays, Bùi says, have not challenged the "traditional thinking of respecting men and looking down on women".²⁴ This statement is particularly interesting on two accounts. First, there could be women artists whose practice addresses other feminist issues besides male oppression and privilege. On another note, research conducted by Jayne Werner finds that many women do not object to traditional thinking patterns around gender roles,²⁵ and are even content to identify with them, something also discussed in Schafer's research, already mentioned. Women artists are not immune to social conditioning, and as in our initial example of experiences of womanhood, may well suffer the conflicts and inner turmoil that pulled Lê Vân in various directions, whilst acknowledging feminism as an empowering mindset. Much of the literature puts forth that traditional values calling for women's subordination are persistent and known to women in Vietnam, who are likewise aware that these values carry negative consequences for them as women.

The situation of feminist art in post-communist Eastern Europe as described by Pachmanová,²⁶ presents some similarities with the picture in Vietnam, such as a lack of self-reflection on a gender discourse and a social ambivalence towards feminism based on the belief that it is not needed. Art theorist Suzana Milevska stated that this made women artists victims, since it led them to "believe that there is no need for reflection on the gender difference".²⁷

We find that in Vietnam some contemporary artists make similar claims, yet entangle them with comments that clearly show an awareness of gender difference. For example, poet and visual artist Ly Hoàng Ly feels that women artists from the 1980s have been freed from the pressures and expectations placed upon previous generations, and young artists have equal opportunities to male artists. Yet she states that "Being a woman to me is a matter of course, I do not work with a sense of gender, but I think my female gender and my experiences of being a woman are among the materials that constitute the distinctive features of my works".²⁸

Researching in the early 1990s, Jayne Werner found it paradoxical that women in Vietnam had access to considerable formal power yet they had low power within the family.²⁹ On her part, Bùi Thị Thanh Mai does not make a distinction between the forms of power available to women, but she highlights that feminism in Vietnam has overwhelmingly

²² Duong, "Gender equality and women's issues in Vietnam", 205.

²³ Ibid., 196.

²⁴ Bùi, "Why Hasn't Feminist Art Been Formed in Vietnam".

²⁵ Werner, *Gender, Household and State in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*, 162.

²⁶ Martina Pachmanová, "In? Out? In Between? Some Notes on the Invisibility of a Nascent Eastern European Feminist and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Art Theory", in *Feminist Art Theory. An Anthology 1968-2014*, 2nd edition, Hilary Robinson (ed.), (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 206-207.

²⁷ Ibid., 206.

²⁸ Ly Hoàng Ly, e-mail message to author, 21 August 2018.

²⁹ Werner, *Gender, Household and State in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*, 161.

been confused with something quite different: the representation of women as objects to gaze at. Artist Nguyễn Trinh Thi also agrees that there is some general confusion between feminism and femininity in Vietnam, a country where in her view also, feminism is not very developed.³⁰

The misunderstanding that conflates feminism with the visual presence of the feminine is, as many of us know, not exclusive to Vietnam. The contradictory messages in such a misconception evoke the double standards that women often face, and in Vietnam are also mirrored by the clashing messages projected in museum displays. Hue-Tam Ho Tai has found that representations of women in these spaces, as well as on billboards and in popular magazines, symbolize several conflicting aspects of Vietnamese society and culture and especially of the concept of womanhood, that need to be disaggregated in order to understand how such a myriad of female identities is used and received.³¹

As mentioned, Schafer examined the forces causing a woman to be torn between her sense of duty, social obligations and personal drive. The quest to be true to oneself is, apparently, the hard task. It is this that feminism in Vietnam seeks to facilitate, by and large. Bùi Thị Thanh Mai proposes that feminism should be understood "as the right of women to voice their opinions, to think independently and female characters have the right to live up to what women wants, not what the men expect them to be".³² Bùi exhorts Vietnam's artists to tackle social issues—implying those concerning women—and to create feminist art, an art that produces representations of historical female figures and of women's achievements. She does not question if achievements in themselves could be gendered, and appears to defend a view of history where warriors and leaders or figures in the memorialized canon are those who wield power, thus, we infer that a conventional notion of power is the goal for women, to be achieved though feminism. This construct, which I dispute, must be left as a springboard for further research.

Self-expression as Female Identity

If feminism is understood as the freedom of self-expression for women and the opportunities to guide their own life choices independently, feminist art must therefore project these ideas. Contesting Bùi's claims to the contrary, I argue that feminist art does indeed exist in Vietnam, although, like in every other country to my knowledge, it is a marginal practice within the volume of the nation's art production at large. Nonetheless, artist Đinh Ý Nhi, highly recognized in Vietnam, has projected feminist ideas in her art since the 1990s.³³

Bùi Thị Thanh Mai's appeal for a feminist art that represents the achievements of women and historical female figures is certainly desirable,³⁴ but insufficient to cover the range of concerns that affect women, many of whom may be less worried about historically-worthy achievements and more about the preservation of their overall well-being or about challenging the normative social roadblocks to personal fulfilment. Therefore, I discuss works of art that reject women's subordination, challenge conventional women's roles and represent aspects of female identity and sexuality from the perspective of artists who have agency to express their preoccupations and desires as women. Based on the literature and on

³⁰ Hero Mother Symposium, "Artist Panel", min. 16.

³¹ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting", in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 168.

³² Bùi, "Why Hasn't Feminist Art Been Formed in Vietnam".

³³ Nora Taylor, *Changing Identity*, 45.

³⁴ The inspiring role of indigenous feminist icons has led to some disagreements with regards to a possible Western influence, or their use as national symbols subverting their supposed mission to challenge hegemonic masculine structure. These are discussed in: Lisa Long, "Contemporary Women's Roles through Hmong, Vietnamese, and American Eyes", *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 29/1 (2008), 6-7.

interviews with artists, the types of concerns that have surfaced come under the broad remit of social pressure and the weight of tradition, which includes beliefs around gender roles, and access to power, with the symbolic support of female role models.

Art that contests social norms and the weight of tradition

Received ideas frequently transmitted to women in Vietnam impinge on them in two ways. The first is an essentialist view of femininity, which projects a constrained, gendered idea of women as individuals. In a different way, traditional ideas on social norms burden women with expectations about the duties they must fulfil, their behaviour and their appearance. These traditions are diverse and have changed at different points in time, but several authors mentioned earlier have referred to Confucian values and to socialist propaganda as systemically funnelling dogma to push women to actively fight wars or to be home keepers. A long history of such teachings has invariably left an imprint too strong to be erased by subsequent ideological propulsions. Bui's article made a sweeping generalisation of women artists as collaborators in the continued subordination of women, falling short of including some of the nuances exposed by Werner or Schafer regarding women's internalization of traditional roles and obligations.

The topic of female sacrifice inspires a recent series by contemporary artist Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang, whose observation that Vietnamese women are willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their family is counterbalanced by her belief in an inner strength, depicted under the guise of a dragon. The red and blue dragons in Giang's series *Inside of me* (2018) are Asian dragons, not to be connoted with the meanings attributed to dragons in other cultures.³⁵ These paintings celebrate the resilience, in the form of the dragon, that women draw upon when enduring personal difficulties just to bring happiness and joy to their loved ones. Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang's silk paintings of dragon-women, by unequivocally displaying historical references to the dragon as an Asian symbol of power (from Vietnam's foundational myth onwards),³⁶ fuel the state feminist narratives of women as a force of the nation, such as Werner and others have put forth. These powerful dragons refer back to nationalist discourses and a Confucian tradition, which are here reclaimed as a historical source of pride.

Yet these icons of power are entwined with female figures, the women whose inner strength they portray, and who on the whole suggest another layer of meaning, much less compliant with normative projections of female power. Bodies are tired, stocky, naked—in itself a strong statement of defiance of social norms and an expression of unabashed openness—and in some cases, faceless, or even bald, baldness dispelling another stereotypical beauty marker for Vietnamese women: long, black hair.

Representations of women in the media are rarely expected to be disruptive of traditional values. Images of a certain type of Vietnamese woman, seductive yet docile, have been used officially and commercially to promote national identity and to operate as a sensual bait. Grillot discusses these representations to some length, while Bui reproaches that no artists in Vietnam seem to be avoiding the "cliché of young ladies in traditional dresses." As can be garnered from Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang's images, Bui's statement is too broad and fails to take account not only of the works of some of the women artists whose

³⁵ Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang's solo exhibition of silk paintings *Inside of Me (Bên trong tôi)* was presented in Vin Gallery, HCMC, Vietnam, 2018. <https://www.vingallery.com/nguyen-thi-chau-giang>.

³⁶ See for example, "The Story of 100 Eggs", in *Vietnamese Legends and Folk Tales*, anonymous, (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2013), 17-23; or the "Legend of Hong Bang" as told by Nghia M. Vo, *Legends of Vietnam: An Analysis and Retelling of 88 Tales*, (Jefferson, North Carolina, USA: MacFarland, 2012), 75-77.

works are discussed in this paper, but also of the various ways in which artists may be contesting the clichés of traditional women's appearance.

By embedding the images of women into the historically-rich iconography of the Asian dragon, Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang's paintings portray conservative notions of women as individuals who sacrifice for the wellbeing of their kin. The dragon supposedly represents female strength, but it also operates as a defusing mechanism, akin to men gifting flowers to women on Vietnam's Women's Day, only to continue enjoying the benefit from female sacrifice without relinquishing an ounce of male privilege. Women who behave as society expects them to are praised and valued regardless of the cost to themselves. However, these paintings lay bare the travesty of representations of women that silently contribute to condition women into submission. The female figures in Giang's work are not wearing the satisfied mask of the contented woman who cheerfully fulfils her familial duties, as in advertising imagery. By rejecting that manipulating vision, the door to feminist self-awareness has been opened.



Fig. 1. Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang, *Inner Conflict*, watercolour and ink on silk, 80 x 90 cm.
Image courtesy of Vin Gallery, HCMC, Vietnam, www.vingallery.com.

In Schafer's study summarised at the start of this article, Lê Vân laid blame on women, including herself, for accepting their lot too passively. Bùi Thị Thanh Mai shunned this damaging self-belief, a belief that is visually represented in Giang's painting *Inner conflict* (fig. 1), where a red and a blue dragon serpent is wrapped around the body of a startled naked woman, helplessly keeled over by the force of these raptors. Thus, when even the artist claims that the dragon symbolises the inner strength of the woman, the artist has shown, perhaps unconsciously, that the image of female resilience is not always received passively as a role model. Blindly accepting the public message that women are strong and should sacrifice for others is destructive, and the damage has been made explicit.



Fig. 2. Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang, *Inside of me (3a)*, watercolour on silk, 120 x 80 cm.
 Image courtesy of Vin Gallery, HCMC, Vietnam, www.vingallery.com.

Less agitated is *Inside of me (3a)*, (fig. 2), another watercolour on silk by Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang, where the power of the dragon is a mere mask, it is the ‘face’ of the compliance and endurance that society expects. The woman wearing the dragon mask is much less keen to follow suit, we infer from her assertive stance, hand in pocket almost forced into nonchalance. There is a rawness to this semi-dressed individual, who has left her jeans unbuttoned to breathe freely and appears to be taking a respite from performing the social theatre of posing for the camera/paintbrush/neighbourhood. Werner wondered how to distinguish the “public face” of the social subject from “an inner self”, if the socialist state’s norms of ideal womanhood had become a part of female subjectivity.³⁷ This painting gives that question a visual answer, the “public face” being the traditional red icon of power, whereas the full figure, behind the mask of tradition, is standing in a personal space of agency and individual choice.

Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang’s dragons bear little resemblance to little flowers, yet the intended meaning of the dragon is almost identical to that expressed by artist Ly Hoàng Ly, who comes up with the metaphor of a snowdrop flower, recalling its name in French, *perce-neige*, (literally: pierce-snow), to evoke the low-level, quiet struggle of women. Ly recognizes that women are “always” more disadvantaged than men in many respects, but she marvels incessantly at the extraordinary power of women to rise in the face of adversity, an inner strength that “creates a fierce, magical difference”, she says.³⁸

The recurring topic of inner strength or resilience recalls that of self-sacrifice, sometimes required for the good of the nation, and sometimes for the good of the family, and thus also for the nation. A salient finding in Werner’s study is that women reported being content with images of subordinated roles for women in the family.³⁹ Both men and women

³⁷ Werner, *Gender, Household and State in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*, 164.

³⁸ Ly Hoàng Ly, e-mail message to author, 21 August 2018.

³⁹ Werner, *Gender, Household and State in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*, 162.

subscribed to the belief that women's place was first and foremost in the home, according to Werner's investigation, a doubly treacherous belief, she interprets, because although constructions of femininity or womanhood's appeared to arise from the private sphere, in fact they derived from state sanctioned gendered narratives.⁴⁰ Ly Hoàng Ly has made artworks that vividly address the domestic sphere: housework, menstruation, breast-feeding as nurture, lullaby singing, windows as openings in domestic confinements, and other themes in her installations, performances and poems bring to the fore some aspects of female identity that are often associated with the home.

Monument of Roundtrays (2000)⁴¹ is a conical installation of aluminium meal trays, measuring 4 metres in height and 8 metres in width. The trays, of the type used traditionally to serve various food dishes, are a kitchen tool loaded with connotations of women as providers of nourishment and domestic service. Ly Hoàng Ly is well aware of the antagonism between the will to "revolt" and the acceptance of "habit" in modern Vietnamese women.⁴² The artist fondly recalls preparing the tray of rice for the family meal when she was a child. Later, as an adult, she spent a month repetitively attaching metallic trays to the string structure she had build to hold up the cone, a toil that repeats the monotony of domestic routine. Viewers can enter the space inside the cone-shaped hut, where, shielded under the round trays, hang 100 pictures of nude women in flight, freed from the restrictions of routine, says the artist who wants these pictures to encourage a dialogue about women's wants and desires.

Although this work speaks of the inner contradictions women experience in society, Ly Hoàng Ly states that she has not made this piece in order to solve the problem.⁴³ The artist is assuaging it, rather, creating a monument to women's unpaid labour. Nonetheless, in a performance based on this installation, the majestic grace Ly has tried to imbue into the monument was forgotten under the movement and clatter of the artist as she ran around it, her body also covered in trays.⁴⁴ She fiercely attacked the monument with chopsticks, while flashing lights inside the conical structure illuminated the rage of the whole scene. Without uttering a word, the artist enacted the pain of women's liberation by generating loud noise. The trays became twisted and damaged as much as women's personal choices: battered into submission and worn out from the effort.

The weight of tradition in creating unwritten obligations for women has been the topic illustrated here, in support of the idea that feminist art in Vietnam is addressing the conflicts and pressures born by women, for whom feminism can be a consciousness-raiser. Another idea I wish to address is that of female role models, or the accessibility of a lineage under which women may find themselves situated in a historical continuum. The presence (or absence) of female role models and their use by the dominant worldviews or societal models emitted by the different periods in recent history bears a relation to traditional teachings, since icons of womanhood in the social imaginary play a part in the sense of value women feel. Representations of Vietnam's historic heroines, admirable as they were, pose the risk of conflating nationalist values with female power, given the use of these images with nationalistic objectives at various points in time. Thus, I look at artists who create new role models, images in which other women may find inspiration.

An interesting discovery is made by Jennifer Purtle about women in sixteenth century China. The period and the place are unrelated to our research, but Purtle's study of female power conjures up an enticing vision. Powerful women of the Ming court, we learn, admired

⁴⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁴¹ Ly Hoàng Ly artist website, <http://www.lyhoangly.com/monument-of-round-tray/>.

⁴² Ly Hoàng Ly, e-mail message to author, 21 August 2018.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ A video of the performance can be found on the artist's website, see footnote 41.

feminine ideals such as female invention and self-expression, values and activities that were unheard of in canonical texts. It was the figure of the woman artist, as transmitted via ink paintings of the time of Empress Zhang, which symbolized these ideals, including the ability of women to take political action.⁴⁵

The invisibility in the dominant texts of the female ideals some women desired, takes us to an exploration of the productive power of invisibility. Natalie Newton explores this notion and its use by a lesbian community wary of marginalization, given that media messages often imply that lesbians shirk their filial piety reproductive duties.⁴⁶ Newton theorizes that invisibility can be a generative force, rather than a negative consequence of gender inequality.

The artist based in Ho Chi Minh City known as Himiko (Himiko Nguyen), has produced two series of work titled *Come Out* (2011), and *Come Out II* (ongoing) respectively. The layers of meaning in both *Come Out* series coincide with arguments made by Natalie Newton on the contingent invisibility of the lesbian community in Ho Chi Minh City, and have been discussed elsewhere.⁴⁷ *Come Out* is a piece made up of a number of independent, wall-hanging boxes that contain nude self-portraits, whereas in the second creation, *Come Out II*, 27 boxes are assembled into a single sculptural monument, treasuring the photographic portraits of different people. The monolithic body of work that is *Come Out II* resembles a large piece of furniture, and is in fact a sophisticated photographic framing device. The art experience grants viewers agency to see each photograph, by giving spectators the power to switch on the light needed to see the image inside each box, yet it complicates the viewing, since the photograph can only be perused through a small hole. In *Come Out II* access to view becomes more difficult due to the large scale of the piece, yet it is also a design that brings the community closer together, to collectively make visible the subjects who are almost literally encased “in the closet”, yet they had previously liberated themselves by posing nude for the artist’s photographs, recursively bringing out personal drives and choices. As such, they are role models of personal agency, even though their visibility is contingent upon the viewing experience, and the agency of the public, who has the power switch.

The theme of visibility takes a sharp turn in a piece by media artist Nguyễn Trinh Thi, whose preferred mode of work is to reclaim and edit existing film footage, much of it from the socialist period. *Song to the Front* (2011) is a short film that reverses certain conventions about male and female interactions, at least until the final scene. In *Song to the Front*, what might be an idyllic romance is distinct because the female gaze dominates, whereas the male character has been blinded by war and thus plays the role of the victim and of the gazed-at subject. Only after he has recovered his eyesight, under the watchful eyes of a number of female nurses, does he revert to being a masculine, ‘heroic’ character, an action man that takes it upon himself to go on a shooting frenzy against an invisible enemy. It would be a silent film but for the soundtrack, Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, which alludes to the (forcible) compulsion to dance to death in sacrifice (in the original myth, by a young virgin) for the god of Spring, the season of renewal. The role reversal at the beginning of the film is of course a renewal of the established order.

⁴⁵ Jennifer Purtle, “The Icon of the Woman Artist: Guan Daosheng (1262–1319) and the Power of Painting at the Ming Court c. 1500”, in Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton (eds.), *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell (2011), 290–317.

⁴⁶ Natalie Newton, “Contingent Invisibility: Space, Community, and Invisibility for Les in Saigon”, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22/1 (2016), 113–114.

⁴⁷ Cristina Nualart, “Queer Art in Vietnam: From Closet to Pride in Two Decades”, *Palgrave Communications*, 2, 19 April (2016), <https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms20169>.

Song to the Front and another film, *Eleven Men* (2016), were Nguyễn Trinh Thi's works in an exhibition titled *Hero Mother* (Berlin, 2016). *Eleven Men* is richer in narrative and its strength is weighted towards the script, a voiceover. We cannot see the woman whose voice we hear, but she has full agency to tell her story and to speak uninterrupted. Nguyễn Trinh Thi claims to have made *Eleven Men* with irony, and with a precise objective: "I thought that by observing her female roles over the years and alongside the changes in Vietnamese society we might be able to see how women have been seen and portrayed in Vietnamese cinema and media. I was also interested in somehow trying to give back some agency to the women and actors/actresses—maybe also subversions".⁴⁸

In the film *Eleven Men* the anonymous woman's recital lashes against predictable behaviour and convention. Her voice tells of 'her' eleven men, describing them one by one. Presumably, these are lovers, yet the woman has little appreciation for them. They are flawed men that, as the descriptions progress, become less desirable to the woman who has these eleven men. The suggestion, since here is another role reversal, is that men who have concubines in polygamous societies, as Vietnam used to be, despise the women they switch between.⁴⁹ Aware of how a disconnect with the past is a loss of knowledge, Nguyễn Trinh Thi revisits history to gain insights into society and "its connection to and explanation of the situation today".⁵⁰

The most important goal of *Eleven Men* is to give the woman a chance to speak, to speak long and honestly. "I think about power and structure in society. I just want to give agency to the suppressed voices. So I think the most important gesture in this work is that of giving a woman a chance to speak".⁵¹ The men, says the artist, are secondary, and what they symbolise is of little importance. Men have been quite secondary to feminism, with many doing little, if anything, in terms of giving up their excess of privilege, or rallying alongside women to distribute society more equally. We may rightfully call on men to own up to their accountability, and to listen to women's needs and concerns. And while not exonerating them from any responsibility, we must also acknowledge that effective listening cannot take place without a somewhat clear articulation of a message on the part of women.

So far, the artworks commented here do effective work, albeit subtle, communicating female retaliation to the status quo. The artists project the notion that women desire to be heard on their own terms. A final piece that rounds off this selection of feminist messages is a full frontal portrait of a woman who has liberated herself. Titled *The Joker* (fig. 3), Lê Hoàng Bích Phượng's self-portrait with her fingers in her nostrils, literally lifting two fingers to the prevailing beauty stereotypes, is the most compelling image of a woman refusing normative behaviour patterns.

⁴⁸ Magiera, "Nguyễn Trinh Thi 'Eleven Men'".

⁴⁹ Poet Hồ Xuân Hương (mentioned in footnote 21), a concubine herself, critiqued the polygamous social structure that gave privilege to men.

⁵⁰ Kaitlin Rees, "Nguyen Trinh Thi", *Word*, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: Nhà xuất bản lao động (2012), 150.

⁵¹ Magiera, "Nguyễn Trinh Thi 'Eleven Men'".



Fig. 3. Lê Hoàng Bích Phương, *The Joker*, watercolour on silk, 85 x 87 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Lê Hoàng Bích Phương is around ten years younger than the other three artists, and had her first solo show in 2012. She has been described as “a childish girl” because she uses myths and fairy tales as inspiration, instead of “stories of real life”.⁵² Ironically, the comment reiterates the weight of the expectations placed on women. The assumption that myths are infantile but real life is ‘adult’ disparages the rich Vietnamese tradition of popular folk stories, and also denies the intellectual activity of the artist, who is thought of as infantile.⁵³ The irreverent gesture of *The Joker* could be read as a childish prank, but underlying the playfulness in it, we see the adult woman returning to a time of unfettered freedom.⁵⁴

What is powerful about much of Lê Hoàng Bích Phương’s work, mostly watercolours on silk,⁵⁵ is her method of bringing the allegorical forces of tradition and lore into

⁵² Đào Mai Trang, *Art & Talent. A foreground on the 8X contemporary artists generation of Vietnam*, (Hanoi: Đào Mai Trang, 2016), 175.

⁵³ The condescending tone of the comments about Lê Hoàng Bích Phương strike another parallel with the situation of feminist art in Eastern Bloc countries, in light of Pachmanová’s lamentation of the “disturbingly low awareness of gender issues among Eastern European journalists who write about art”. Pachmanová, “In? Out? In Between?”, 207.

⁵⁴ Further evidence of the artist’s disruption of convention is the *blog* section on her website, featuring a video self-portrait (a breathing blob) and series of photographs titled “rules do not apply here”: <https://www.lehoangbichphuong.com/unspekable-daily-thought.html>.

⁵⁵ The significance of the mediums chosen by each artist have not been analysed here, yet it is a topic meriting further consideration, given that since the 1970s feminist artists from various countries have spoken

contemporary life. Phụng does not create imagery that directly evokes popular myths and legends, she invents new hybrid creatures with human and animal features, sometimes with an ambiguous touch of cyborg. This ambiguity comments on the fears of social alienation caused by difference, while creating a new space where gender is undefined, mutable and of little importance. “Speaking of feminism and masculinity”, says Lê Hoàng Bích Phụng, “I think it is an endless war and I think that each generation of women should have the freedom to explore and explore themselves and their interests as human being”.⁵⁶

Conclusion

I have argued that the Vietnamese artists discussed above are making feminist art, understood as art that consciously raises awareness on the mechanisms used to keep women in a subordinated position, although the label feminist art may be circumvented. A further detail that advances this claim is that these artists have not turned down opportunities to join women-only art exhibitions. This article cannot encompass the wide debate on gendered shows or positive discrimination in the artworld, yet it is significant in itself that women only art exhibitions continue to be organized worldwide, even if they do not carry an overt feminist agenda.

Nguyễn Trinh Thi has been invited to participate in a number of exhibitions of women artists: *In The Course of Our Contacts...* (2008), a Yunnan (China)-Vietnam exchange programme for female artists, *Women In-Between: Asian Women Artists 1984-2012*, at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan (2012), and *Hero Mother*, in Berlin (2016). Ly Hoàng Ly also went to Yunnan in 2008, and had previously been selected for the exhibition *Changing Identity* that itinerated the United States in 2006, along with Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang.

The strong messages in the artworks discussed here signal that artists in Southeast Asia are engaging with feminist ideas. In post-communist Eastern Europe, many artists do not openly commit to feminism, although their critical art strategies and their informed, self-reflective works, suggest that they are, as are the gender politics of art in general.⁵⁷ The selection of works commented here is small, yet enough ground has been covered to suggest that feminist art is being made in Vietnam, on the understanding that the choice of this word has not been made explicit by the artists, and that several of them have expressed that gender inequality in contemporary society is not a concern that troubles them. It may be that gender inequality is not worrying them because the agency of creating feminist artworks is in itself playing a part in cancelling detrimental beliefs in the minds of the artists, and ultimately contributing to eradicate insidious social pressures.

of the symbolic importance of the materials and formats they chose to use. For example, silk painting in Vietnam carries some connotations of being a “feminine” practice.

⁵⁶ Lê Hoàng Bích Phụng, e-mail message to author, 19 August 2018.

⁵⁷ Pachmanová, “In? Out? In Between?”, 207.

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