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We welcome submissions and inquiries from prospective authors. Please visit our website (<http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/mmd/index>), or contact the editor for more information.

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Photo Essay: “Vietnamese Here Contemporary Art and Reflections” Art Exhibition, Melbourne, Australia, May 2017

Anh Nguyen

Anh Nguyen was co-curator, with Nadia Rhook, of the “Vietnamese Here Contemporary Art and Reflections” exhibition about Vietnamese migrants in Melbourne, Australia, May 4–26, 2017. Phuong Ngo’s work, the basis of this photo essay, was part of the exhibition, which featured visual art, performance art, and readings reflecting on Vietnamese heritage, history, and memory in the diaspora. The exhibition was sponsored by the Australian Research Council’s Kathleen Fitzpatrick Laureate Fellowship, of which Anh Nguyen is a researcher.

Phuong Ngo’s work in the “Vietnamese Here: Contemporary Art and Reflections” exhibit grabs you by the throat in a most gentle manner. A small selection of photographs from Ngo’s “Welcome to My Place” exhibit is strung on a clothesline, evoking a domestic narrative of bare necessity and joyful intimacies experienced by a family of boat refugees. Ngo writes on his website (<http://www.pthngo.com/w>):

These images represent a portion of the memories that I have of my home in Adelaide. They are presented with conversations that I have had with my siblings, these memories are personal to us, and therefore are portrayed without any sense of identity or ownership. The quality of Ngo’s conversations and prints are in equal measure to the dignity of the family wearing their Sunday best on the lawn.



Sunday Best (above)

We can imagine the children playing hide-and-seek in the cupboard, living out the paradox of poverty in a lesser portion to happiness.

Cupboard (left)

It is with some empathy that the viewer hopes for more for these refugee children who wear charity clothes and live in tight quarters. Yet, as an outsider, the viewer may not feel the joy of being the child inside the cupboard, waiting with anticipatory excitement to be seen.



'You use to spend a lot of time hiding
in cupboards...'

'Hey, it was good fun.'

'Yeah, until one fell on you...'



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Kids (above)

These photographs are memories of a happy refugee childhood. The majority of Vietnamese refugees who settled in Australia did so after 1975, when whitewashed multiculturalism held sway in Australia. The question being asked was how Vietnamese refugees—the inheritors of “Yellow Peril” prejudices that had been applied to the Chinese during the gold rush of the 1850s—would blend into contemporary history with white Australians. Could the question be resolved as easily as child’s play, where sticks and stones did not break bones, or did it feel more complex, like children playing with spears?

Concrete Spears (right)

Following more than forty years of Vietnamese presence in Australia, this exhibition of contemporary Vietnamese artists recreates the refugee experience. Just as their experience stands out against the negative space of the White Australia policy, each of Ngo’s prints is set against this larger white space, which is necessary for the photographs to tell their story.



'Do you remember sharpening pop sticks and bits of wood on the old concrete water tank?'

'... making spears.'

'I remember you spearing me in the forehead. I still have the scar to prove it!'

'... yeah... well at least I didn't drop bricks on your head like some other person.'

'I was young and didn't know what I was doing!'

'You climbed a tree and dropped a brick on my head on two separate occasions!'

'Not to mention hitting me in the head with a shovel.'



'...our family activities tend to revolve around cultural and religious traditions.'

'and food...'

'Don't forget that graduations have also become a family event.'

'Yeah, we seem to be collecting degrees.'

Altar Education (above)

Phuong Ngo is a second-generation Vietnamese Australian artist. This selection of his works is part of a larger exhibit of works by Vietnamese artists with refugee heritage who have grown up in Melbourne and are making art to tell their story and inform contemporary family and refugee history. Their artistic freedom as visual artists, playwrights, and novelists allows them to build upon the family altars of education. The larger exhibit includes readings from Chi Vu, Hoa Pham, and Dominic Golding, as well as the visual art of Huong Nguyen and Naomi Ngo.



VIETNAMESE HERE ART EXHIBITION
