

Migration Patterns: Art, Nature, and the Long Roots of History

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Migration Patterns: Art, Nature, and the Long Roots of History

Quỳnh Lâm

To my mind, one does not put oneself in place of the past; one only adds a new link.

—Cy Twombly (paraphrasing Cézanne)



Quỳnh Lâm, *History of Color*, 2019, site-specific installation at Vincom Contemporary Center Hanoi. Curated by Mizuki Endo. Images courtesy of the artist and VCCA.

Black Mountain's spirit of artistic experimentation, freedom of expression, and my desire to be close to Black Mountain College during my interview with the Fulbright program fostered in me an abiding connection with the college. My current research in the American South continues and expands the use of decaying plant pigments which for me is not only a way to produce novel tints and textures, but also a philosophy predicated on the natural processes of life, death, and decay.

I first visited the new Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center in October 2018, a week after the museum moved to their new venue. A year later, I was invited on a trip to Black Mountain campus at Lake Eden valley, as a part of the international conference program, and was fortunate to learn so much about the legend of it. My sense of Black Mountain is that it is a deeply haunted place—historically, socially, artistically, and culturally. This sense of haunting appealed to me and has stayed with me ever since. My own work is concerned with the ways that the past haunts our present. I investigate the passage of time, the way things change, and the ways that history is always with us.

At *ReVIEWING Black Mountain College 11*, I presented on my research interests: historical and reconstructed memories, as well as displaced identities reflected in the duality of my observations and experiences living in the U.S and other countries. These themes resonated with the stories I knew about many artists and intellectuals who resettled in North Carolina after fleeing postwar Europe because of Black Mountain College.

As someone who is between different cultures all the time, I like to collect ephemera, examine and experiment on and with found objects. I investigate histories, my own and those of the places I temporarily inhabit. I conflate time and place in my installations by mixing materials sourced locally, and by incorporating physical materials such as plant matter with painting, drawing, and video. In 2019, I created *History of Color*, a site-specific installation at Vincom Center for Contemporary Art—VCCA in Hanoi, Vietnam.¹ The work at VCCA was a version of a performance I had done in Knoxville, Tennessee earlier that year, *I Am Not a Spy*.² I could not reproduce the same work in Vietnam because of the tense relationship and misunderstandings between

Vietnamese inside and outside the country. There, I used Cy Twombly for inspiration, as a touchstone for the audience, alluding to his drawings and their lines and linear gestures.



Quỳnh Lâm, *I Am Not a Spy*, 2019, performance at Gallery 1010, Knoxville, Tennessee. Image courtesy of the artist.



Quỳnh Lâm, *History of Color*, 2019, site-specific installation at Vincom Contemporary Center Hanoi. Curated by Mizuki Endo. Image courtesy of the artist and VCCA.

I treated the piece I made in America as text and translated it, abstractly, in Vietnam, with the Twombly-esque scribbles on the walls and cut flowers in various stages of decay as the visual language. I am an artist who loves to make art in two versions or two ways, sometimes in parallel, presenting different perspectives—that is, seeing from both sides. Mizuki Endo, the curator of the exhibition, said my flower graves look like mountains.

Building upon historical research, I use plant-based pigments in my work that directly engages with social issues as a way to question the relations of the roles of women in Vietnamese society. I use materials such as flowers, leaves, fruits, and vegetables, traditionally associated with “women’s work” to define the cultural link between women and nature. In my work, I experiment with organic pigments to explore ideas about the creation of life. In particular, I use rotten organic pigments to talk about the complicated postwar Vietnam history: a decaying society after a tornado of political change as well as the process of creation of life, a rebirth.

¹ Louis Raymond, “Q&A: A History of Fading Colors — An Interview With Artist Quynh Lam,” *Urbanist Hanoi*, November 22, 2020. <https://urbanisthanoi.com/hanoi-art/16851-q-a-a-history-of-fading-colors-an-interview-with-artist-quynh-lam>

² Nathan Robert Cox, “A Surveillance: Review of Quynh Lam’s ‘I Am Not a Spy,’” *The Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network (DVAN)*, Mar 24, 2021. <https://dvan.org/2021/03/a-surveillance-review-of-quynh-lams-i-am-not-a-spy/>