

# Trong Gia Nguyen

## Works



Trong Gia Nguyen

## **BIO**

Trong Gia Nguyen (b. 1971, Saigon, Vietnam) is a multi-disciplinary artist based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He received his MFA in Painting from the University of South Florida (Tampa, Florida, USA). He has exhibited internationally in numerous exhibitions, including solo shows in New York, Frankfurt, Berlin, and Ho Chi Minh City. Group exhibitions include *California Pacific Triennial* (Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA, USA, 2017), *Eye of the Storm* (Housatonic Museum of Art, Bridgeport, CT, USA, 2013), *Satellites in the Night* (Freies Museum, Berlin, Germany, 2010), *The Sixth Borough* (Governors Island, NY, USA, 2010), *Sequences 2008* (Reykjavik, Iceland), *9th Havana Biennial* (Cuba, 2006), *Conflux 2007* (Brooklyn, NY, USA), and *Performa 05* (New York, NY, USA). Nguyen has received grants and residencies from the Museum of Arts & Design (New York, USA), Artist in Residence in the Everglades, LegalArt Miami (USA), Foundation for Contemporary Arts (New York, USA), Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (New York, USA), Harvestworks Digital Media Center (New York, USA), Bronx Museum of the Arts (New York, USA), and Puffin Foundation (New Jersey, USA).

## **ARTIST STATEMENT**

Often employing humor while at other times engaging sober reflection, Trong Gia Nguyen's artistic practice elevates the condition of doubt and reveals the power structures behind our most trusted institutions and beliefs as they relate to issues of domesticity, culture, politics, and economy. The artist questions the status quo through subtle modes of subversion and interruption. On the flipside, it is an aesthetically pessimistic vantage point, one of retreat that espouses a dimension of decadence, at the expense of charlatanry. Whether taking the shape of sculpture, painting, iPhone applications, film, or web-based performance actions, Nguyen's conceptual approach walks the fine line between humor and sorrow, subtlety and blatancy, night and light, and beauty and beast.

HO CHI MINH CITY

Galerie Quynh

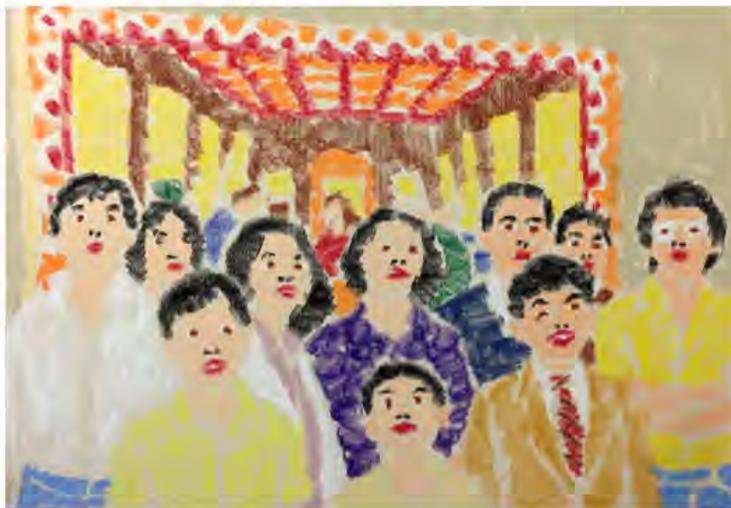
## TRONG GIA NGUYEN

THE LEAVERS

At age four, artist Trong Gia Nguyen left his uncle's house in Vietnam in a Renault Dauphine and headed toward the city port. From there, on April 30, 1975, his immediate family of eleven and three other relatives fled to the United States on the last boat to leave Saigon before the reunification of Vietnam. This past March, Nguyen, now based in Brooklyn, returned to Ho Chi Minh City for "The Leavers," an exhibition of works that chronicle the events before and after his family's harrowing displacement 40 years earlier. Nguyen's second solo show at Galerie Quynh was derived from *DONG* (2014–), his ongoing art documentary featuring interviews with his family. While the film conveys the vicissitudes of memory, the exhibition was an insightful visual commentary on its ambiguity and transience. On view were seven oil-pastel works, based on old family photographs, which portray how people's perceptions skew the ways in which they shape, colorize and remember the past.

The exhibited works' titles were not provided at the gallery, which deprived viewers of context, but also referenced the uncertain nature of memory. Visitors first encountered a large-scale portrait, *Family, circa 1962* (2014), near the gallery's entrance. Painted in muted colors, and with a crayon-like aesthetic, the canvas is covered in wide, haphazard strokes that depict undefined contours and shapes, which reiterate the notion of remembrance being organic and fluid. Gathered together in the foreground are six figures: a woman in beige holding an infant stands next to a man dressed in gray and black, while three children wearing white and beige clothing are lined before them. Each lacks eyes and a nose, but has black hair and, except for the baby, round red lips. The figures' simplified shapes and colors fit awkwardly with a choppy background portrayed in a similar color scheme. A chalky blue sky seen at the top of the canvas highlights a white, tower-like structure in the background. Viewers must mentally redraw and define the painting's missing lines and spaces—an act that stirs curiosity and anxiety, and resembles the act of recalling and working through one's memories.

The processing of memories was further explored in five large-scale landscape paintings, which feature not only Nguyen's unembellished crayon-like aesthetic, but also a vibrantly polychromatic palette. In *Family, Beach, circa 1960* (2014), a father and his three children, highlighted against a goldenrod beach, azure sea and cerulean sky, pose in front of a retro-lime sedan parked adjacent to an electric-orange pier. They are all colorfully outfitted: the father sports violet pants; the oldest child dons a canary-yellow blouse; the younger has marigold pants; and an infant cradled



T-shirt. Nguyen's hyper-bright palette projects a childlike rendering of past events, suggesting a sense of naïveté, but also an acknowledgment of his own limits in translating the disposition of his family from different eras in their history. By choosing not to present the paintings in the chronological order of their reference photographs, Nguyen hints at the instability of memory. Without an accompanying display of titles or indication of time frames, viewers saw *Family, Enid, circa 1982* (2014)—in which ten relatives in formal clothing pose within a warm-toned room—alongside *Grandmother's Funeral, 1974* (2014), where a rainbow-colored group of villagers congregate around a violet burial ground. Though one was inclined to understand how these scenes aligned within the Nguyen's family narrative, deciphering their full context posed a certain challenge.

Offering closure at the back of the gallery was *The Leavers* (2014), an endearing, shrine-like assortment of variously sized portraits illustrated in Nguyen's signature style, depicting his immediate family members and relatives. In using vivid oil pastels, a medium that never completely dries, he restores and keeps memories alive. Certainly, Nguyen seeks reconciliation with his heritage, like many other artists of the Vietnamese diaspora. As parents and their children grow older, there is an impetus to validate and illuminate all that has been dimmed or forgotten from the family's history, and Nguyen's works—introspective and deferential—show that old photographs can be a puzzling, but ultimately worthwhile, starting point.

RUBEN LUONG

December 3, 2015

by

Sarah Cascone



Trong Gia Nguyen, with his Pulse Prize winning installation

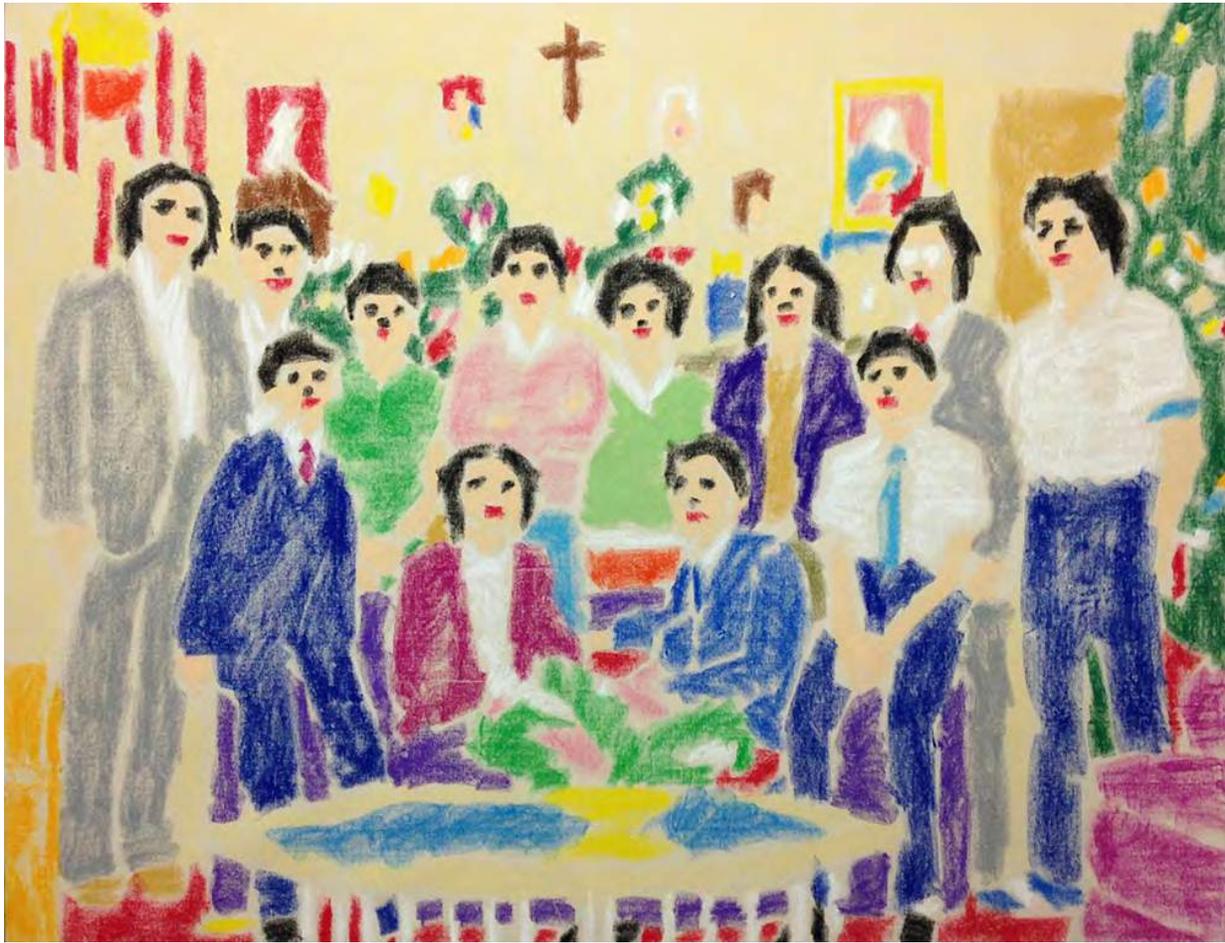
Trong Gia Nguyen is the winner of the 2015 Miami Beach Pulse Prize at Pulse Miami Beach. The artist's work was the subject of a solo presentation at the booth of Milan's mc2gallery. "My work is concerned with structures of power as they relate to the process of looking at art," the artist explained to artnet News via email. "It's a wrestling match in which the viewer can never win."

His unusual installation at Pulse was immediately striking. Its visual centerpiece was a set of wooden saloon doors welcoming visitors into the gallery booth. When closed, a silhouette cut-out in the doors evoked a scene of lynching, with the seam between the panels standing for the rope. Inside the booth itself, a disjointed domestic space full of interactive sculptures was designed to disorient the viewer.

"Despite the wall frame bisecting his booth, I was immediately pulled in and had to know more," said juror Casey Fremont, executive director of the Art Production Fund, in an e-mail to artnet News. "What I discovered were multidisciplinary works that are thoughtful, sophisticated, and feel entirely contemporary."

The artist, who splits his time between Brooklyn and Ho Chi Minh City, was selected by a panel of jurors made up of Fremont; Don Baciagalupi, director of the forthcoming Lucas Museum of Narrative Art; Sarah Harrelson, founder and editor-in-chief of Cultured Magazine; and Deborah Willis, chair of the department of photography and imaging at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Nguyen will receive a \$2,500 cash prize.

"Nguyen's work is dazzling because the artist combines an interest in issues of our time, a keen awareness of art and literary history, and a commitment to the virtuosic making of objects. I've often said that the greatest works of art must appeal to our eyes, our minds, and our hearts, and Nguyen's work does all three," Baciagalupi told artnet News, also via e-mail.



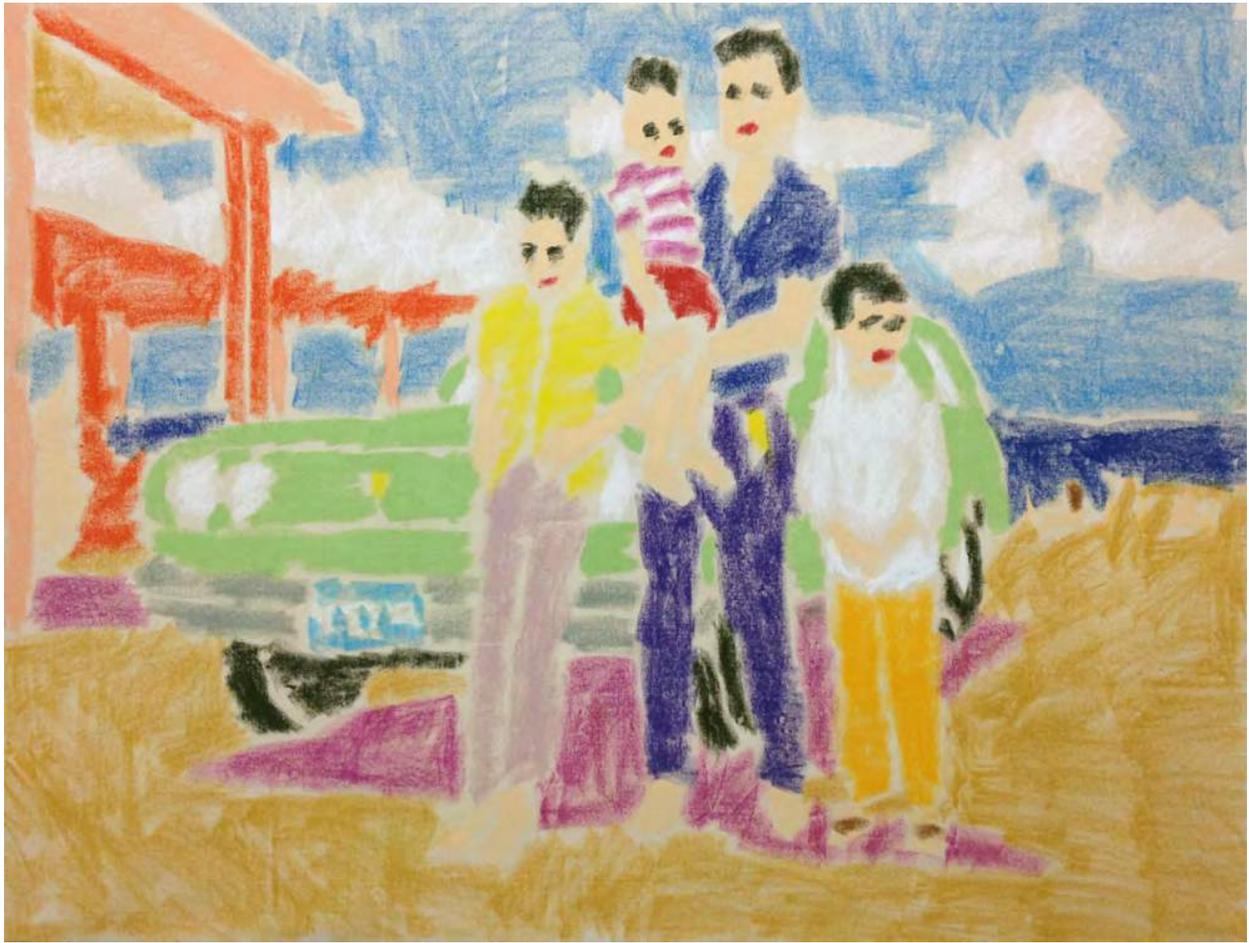
**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Family, Enid, circa 1981*** from the series ***The Leavers***  
2015, oil pastel on canvas  
51 x 66 inches

### ***The Leavers***

*The Leavers* is a series of paintings informed by the artist's ongoing film project, *DONG*, an exploration of family history through the imperfect lens of memory. Sourced from old family photographs, the paintings depict coloring book images that have been filled in, but with the black outlines removed. As such, they are metaphors for the skewed ways in which we remember, shape, and colorize the past. Nguyen asks of the viewer to mentally redraw the missing lines, to give definition to this fuzz. Employing oil pastels, a medium that never fully dries, Nguyen reiterates how memory is organic and ever shifting.



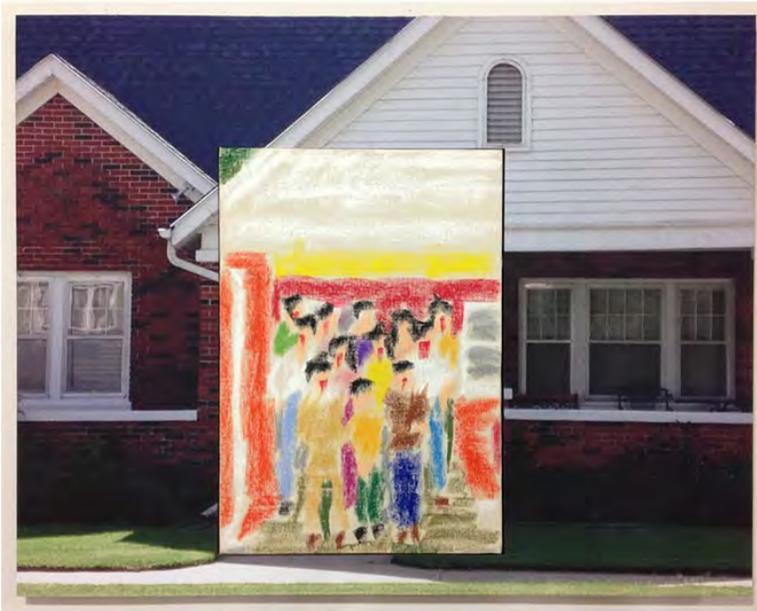
**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***John and Hieu, Tallahassee circa 1980*** from the series ***The Leavers***  
2015, oil pastel on canvas  
30-1/2 x 42 inches



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Family, Beach, circa 1960*** from the series ***The Leavers***  
2014, oil pastel on canvas  
46 x 61 inches



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Family, circa 1962*** from the series ***The Leavers***  
2014, oil pastel on canvas  
51 x 39 inches



**Trong Gia Nguyen**

Clockwise from Top Left:

***Enid, Pine Street (1975-2014)***

2015, Oil pastel on canvas, mounted inkjet print, wood frame, 25 x 37 inches

***Saigon, 4 Loc Vinh, Phuong 6, Tan Binh (circa 1980-2015)***

2015, Oil pastel on canvas, mounted inkjet print, 32 x 40 inches

***Enid, 519 West Oak (circa 1980-2014)***

2014, Oil pastel on canvas, mounted inkjet print, 31-1/4 x 39-5/8 inches

These works combine coloring book paintings (with the outlines left out) made from old family photographs depicting all the houses the artist's family has lived in. Nguyen re-photographs the houses in present day from the same vantage point of those images, integrating past and present.



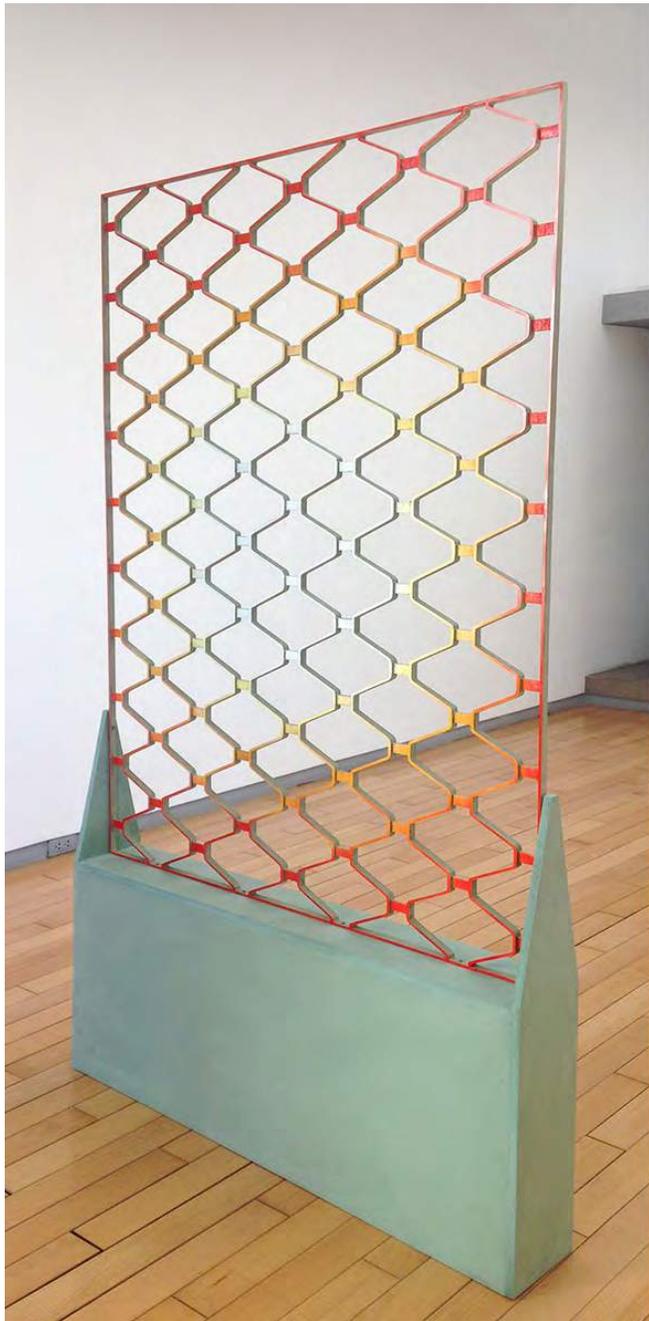
Trong Gia Nguyen  
TOP: ***Here Comes the Sun Again (Beep Beep)***  
2016, halogen light,  
acrylic  
paint on wall  
244 x 277 cm  
(dimensions variable)

BOTTOM: ***Yellow Picket Fence***  
2016, wood, paint  
100 x 360 x 20 cm  
(dimensions variable)



Trong Gia Nguyen  
CLOCKWISE:  
*Who's the Whitest of Them All?*  
*L'étranger*  
*Sản xuất tại Việt Nam*  
*Tôi là con người*  
*Fool's Gold*  
*Ceci n'est pas un Selfie*

2016, mirrored acrylic, wood, Edition of 3  
Each 94.6 x 74.6 x 3.5 cm



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Here Comes the Sun***

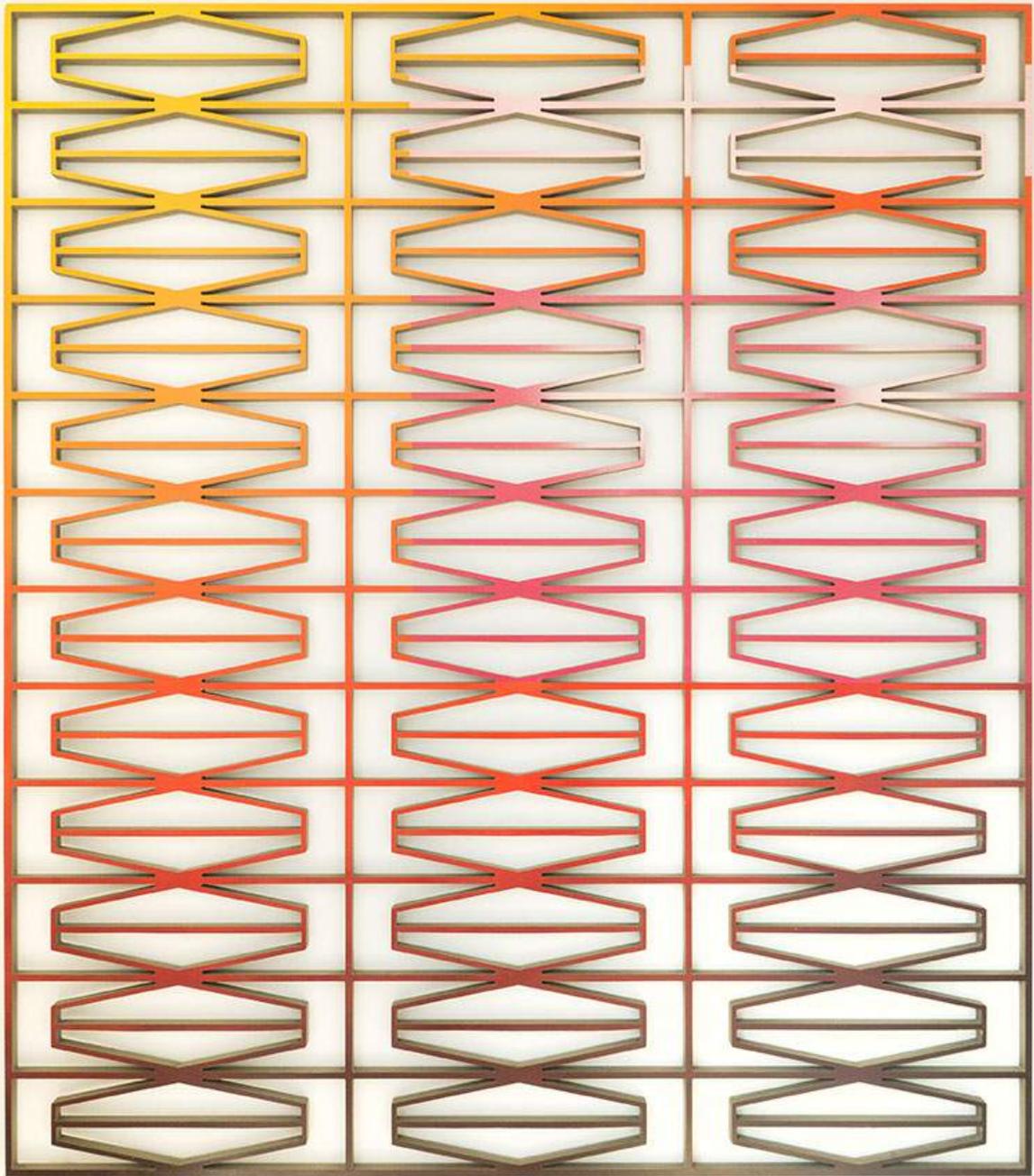
2015, MDF wood, spray paint  
80-3/4 x 48-1/2 x 7 inches

*Here Comes the Sun* is a wood replica of an iron security window grate, which vary in pattern and is found in older colonial homes in Vietnam. From the front, one initially sees the work as a monochrome structure (MDF is a "natural" green color in Vietnam). Walking around to its backside, the "imprint" of a sunset can be seen spray-painted on the surface, revealing parts of the sunlight one does not see when actually looking through from the other side. Hence, the window represents an interruption, while also recording what is missed. Made of thin wood, it is incredibly fragile and unable to serve any purpose of security.



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***La lune***

2016, HDF wood, acrylic spray paint, oil paint  
198 x 119 x 18 cm / 78 x 47 x 3/4 inches



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Bruno's***

2016, HDF wood, acrylic spray paint, oil paint  
135 x 118 x 18 cm / 53 x 46-1/2 x 3/4 inches



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Yellow Picket Fence (My Equal, My Other)***

2015, Wood, paint, metal  
38-3/4 x 24-3/8 x 39-3/4 inches

*Yellow Picket Fence (My Equal, My Other)* is a variation of the white picket fence, that symbol of the American dream. It is updated here in the form of a hashtag, and painted different shades of yellow. Its shadow is the exact replica of the fence's shape – an impossibility with real shadows. The work hints at racial dialogues in America, which often are characterized in solely black/white terms while dismissing the shades of yellow, red and brown in between. The shadow acts as an unwavering anima, the dark reflection that accompanies all footsteps and whispers.

Like other domestic objects made by the artist, *Yellow Picket Fence (My Equal, My Other)* is completely useless, as one segment does not keep anyone out or in.

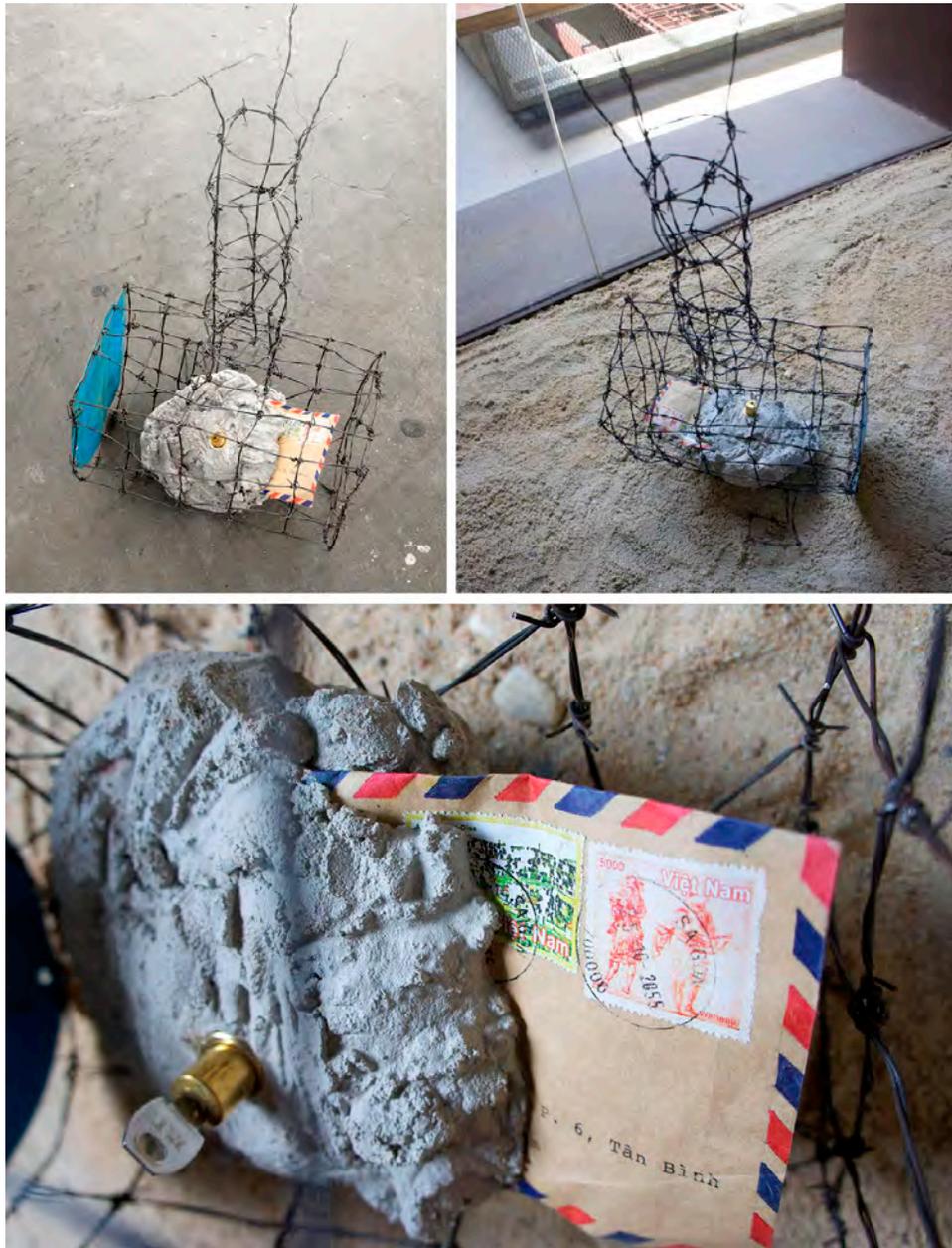


**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Wash in the Rain***  
2015, Canvas, wood  
67 x 57 x 19 inches

*Wash in the Rain* is a bastardized version of a rain poncho and aluminum clothes rack that one finds ubiquitously in Vietnam. It has been shortened and made anthropomorphic to suggest something inhuman yet elemental. Its shape is reminiscent of a kimono display, and might also allude to passages of Abu Ghraib or the KKK, at least to outsiders looking in.

Materially, *Wash in the Rain* comprises the basic ingredients of a painting – wood stretchers and canvas. It is a blank slate, capable of being “painted.”

Unlike rainproof ponchos made of nylon, this version serves no utilitarian purpose because it is porous.



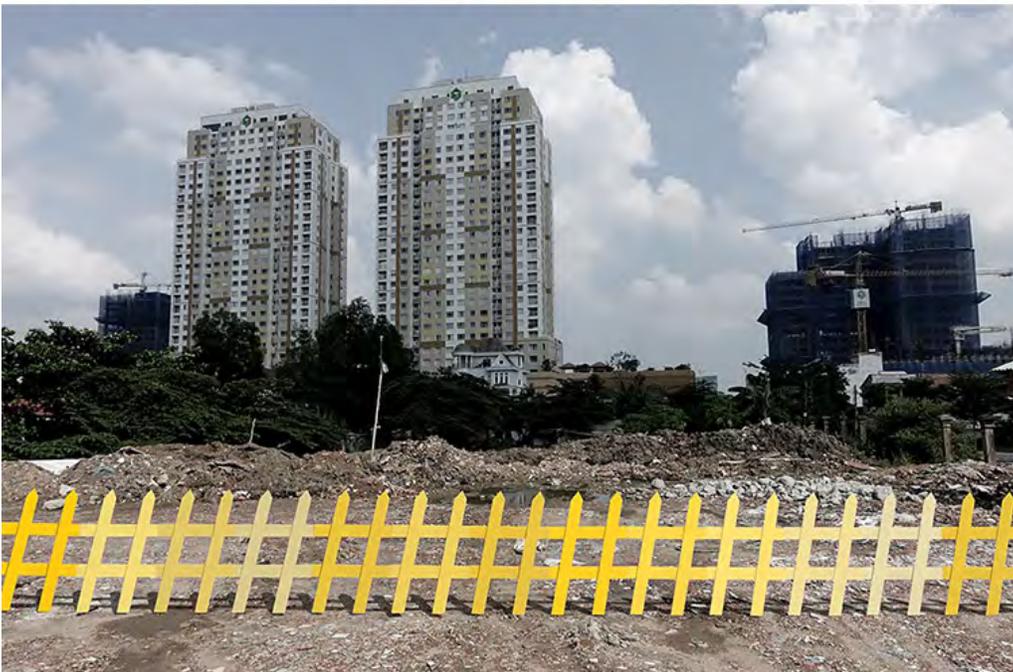
**Trong Gia Nguyen**

***The Last Letter Writer's Last Love Letter***

2015, Metal wire, cement, tin, lock, hand painted envelope,  
fake stamps, ink, spray paint, sand, love letter  
25 x 12 x 7-1/2 inches / 64 x 30 x 19 cm

*The Last...* is a convoluted, broken mailbox made from the same materials found at the entry gate of the artist's home and studio in Ho Chi Minh City – a blue metal door, barbed wire, cement, and a useless lock. A handmade envelope contains a translated love letter scribed by Duong Ngo, the 85 year old, last public letter writer in Vietnam, who has worked at the post office in Ho Chi Minh City his entire life. The letter is dated 40 years into the future. The stamps hint at loss. The contents encased in cement and resolved to never be revealed.

Like a message in a bottle tossed out to sea only to wash ashore on an empty island, *The Last...* is a pathetic monument to absurdity.



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Hashtag Yellow Picket Fence***  
2015, Modular painted wood fence,  
Each module painted a unique shade of yellow  
Each module 38-3/4 x 25-3/4 x 1 inches

#ModularYellowPicketFence #HNH2015 #YellowLives\_\_\_\_\_



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
**Ex Votos**  
 2015–, gouache on acrylic sheeting  
 Each 8-5/8 x 13-1/2 inches

Inspired by the vernacular “miracle paintings” of Mexican tradition, these small gouache works depict everyday “minor miracles” encountered in the day to day of the artist’s life in Southeast Asia. They are updated using hashtags, the social media metadata labeling standard.



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
**Ceiling Cakes**

2010–15, acrylic paint, styrofoam, wire, readymade cake stands  
Varying dimensions



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Win, Win***

2013, wood, paint, mirror  
Each table color unique.  
84 x 60 x 54 inches

Trong Gia Nguyen's *Win, Win* consists of one half of a ping pong table, placed flushed against a wall mirror, that reflects and completes itself. Positing a slight existential dilemma, the viewer/player competes solely against himself. The ball always comes back. Like other works by the artist, *Win, Win* is a sculpture that employs "the look of interaction," imposing upon the viewer a certain measure, literally, of accountability.



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
**St. Sebastian**

various versions (clockwise): **Botticelli, Bellini, Reni, Messina,**  
2012 -, cork, wood, aluminum wire, acrylic paint  
Varying dimensions, Lifesize



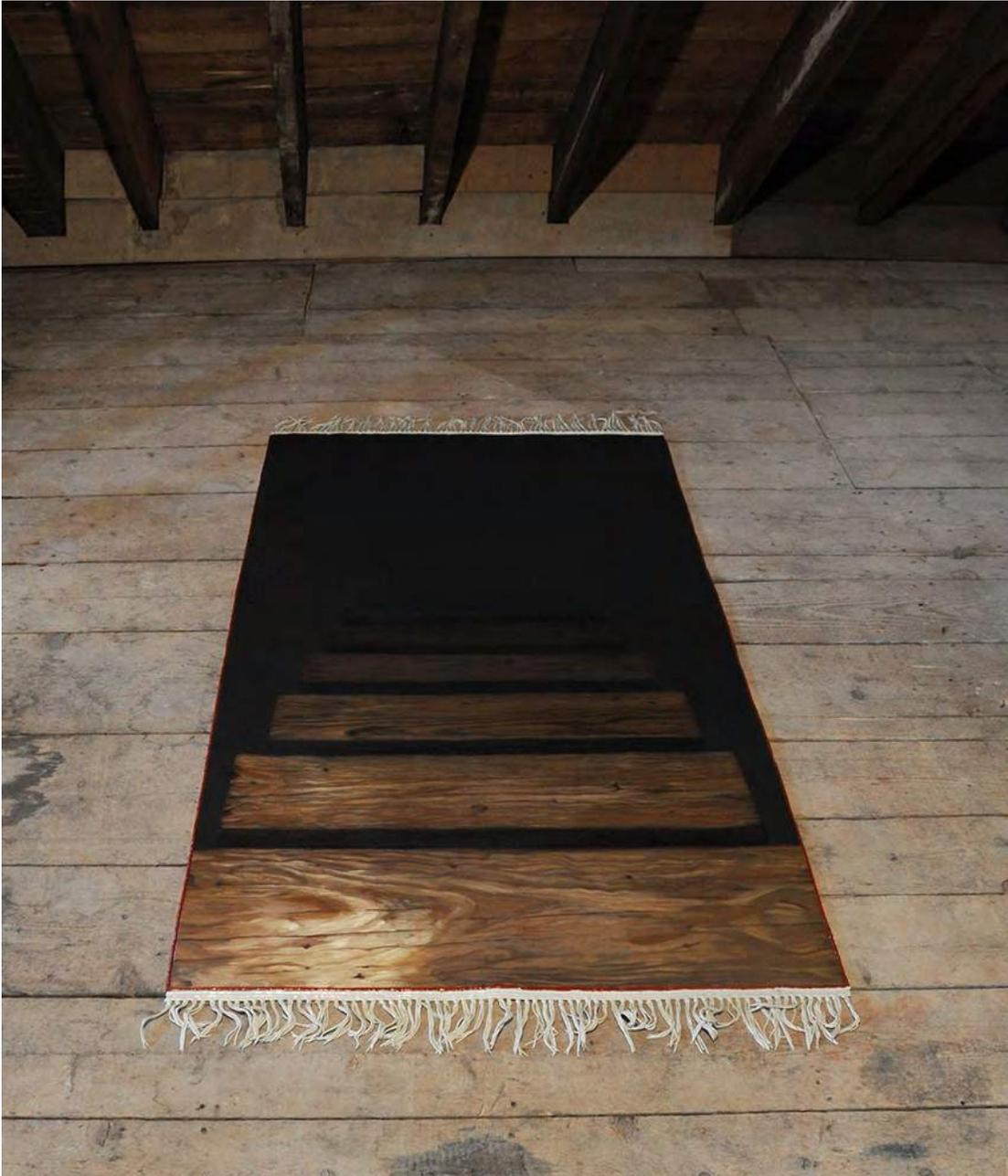
**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Portable Confessionals***  
2012, Handcut paper grocery bags  
Edition of 10  
Each 17 x 12 x 7 inches





**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***The Once and Future...***

2008, acrylic paint, styrofoam, silver foil, wood, and sword (steel, leather, bronze)  
48 x 42 x 42 inches



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Orphic Rug***  
2011, Acrylic paint  
60 x 36 inches

This work is made 100% out of paint, with no supports.



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Iron Man***

2011, Linen, oil paint, burn, antique wood ironing board  
40 x 48 x 11-1/2 inches



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Marcel Duchamp Versus Bobby Fischer***  
 2009, Performance and Video installation projected on  
 pedestals cut to shape of the projection

Two individuals play chess, while channeling the spirits of Marcel Duchamp and Bobby Fischer. Best two out of three.

ABOVE (clockwise from left):

- Video installation of the three matches, projected on pedestals.  
 INSTALLATION VIEW on Governor's Island (NY) as part of No Longer Empty's *The Sixth Borough* exhibition, 2009.
- Nguyen as Duchamp and actor Tomas Lemarquis as Fischer.  
 Dwarf Gallery, Reykjavik Iceland, 2008, as part of *Sequences: Real Time Festival*
- Bobby Fischer (*Time* magazine photo from 1962)
- Marcel Duchamp (1950)



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Artists Commercials***  
2009-, 3-channel HD video  
Varying durations

These are short spots of artists in their studios promoting themselves like real commercials, except that they deliver irreverent and sarcastic monologues that I write. Toeing the line between truth and fiction, they serve as a critique on the economy, art market, gallery system, identity and socio-political issues, etc.

Think of this project as an update of the Renaissance biographer Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*.



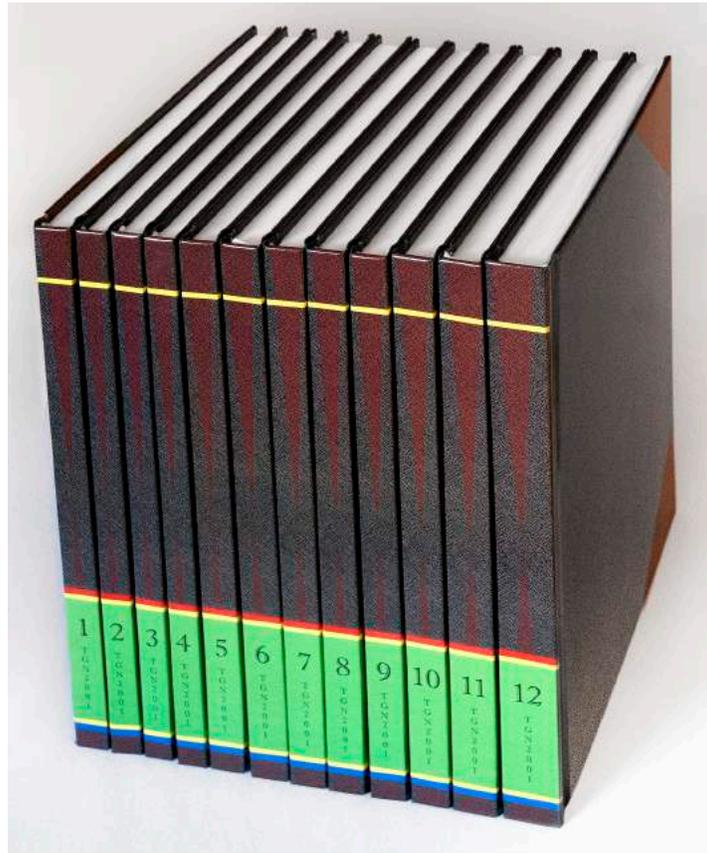
**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
***Oz Slippers***

2007-10, sequined slippers, Swarovski crystals, supermagnets, plexi shoebox  
Size 5-1/2

In Salman Rushdie's *At the Auction of the Ruby Red Slippers*, bidders at an auction vie for Dorothy's shoes. The winner inherits a genie that, when tapped three times together and iterating "There's no place like home," has the power to transport its owner anywhere. In a world of ever-shifting borders and tenuous identity, the question and crisis posed by Rushdie is of course, "where is home?"

Wherever home is, you're not getting there in this pair of shoes. Embedded at the heels, beneath the sequins are repelling supermagnets that render the task of clicking heels, and thereby "going home," nearly impossible. Or at least without twisting an ankle.

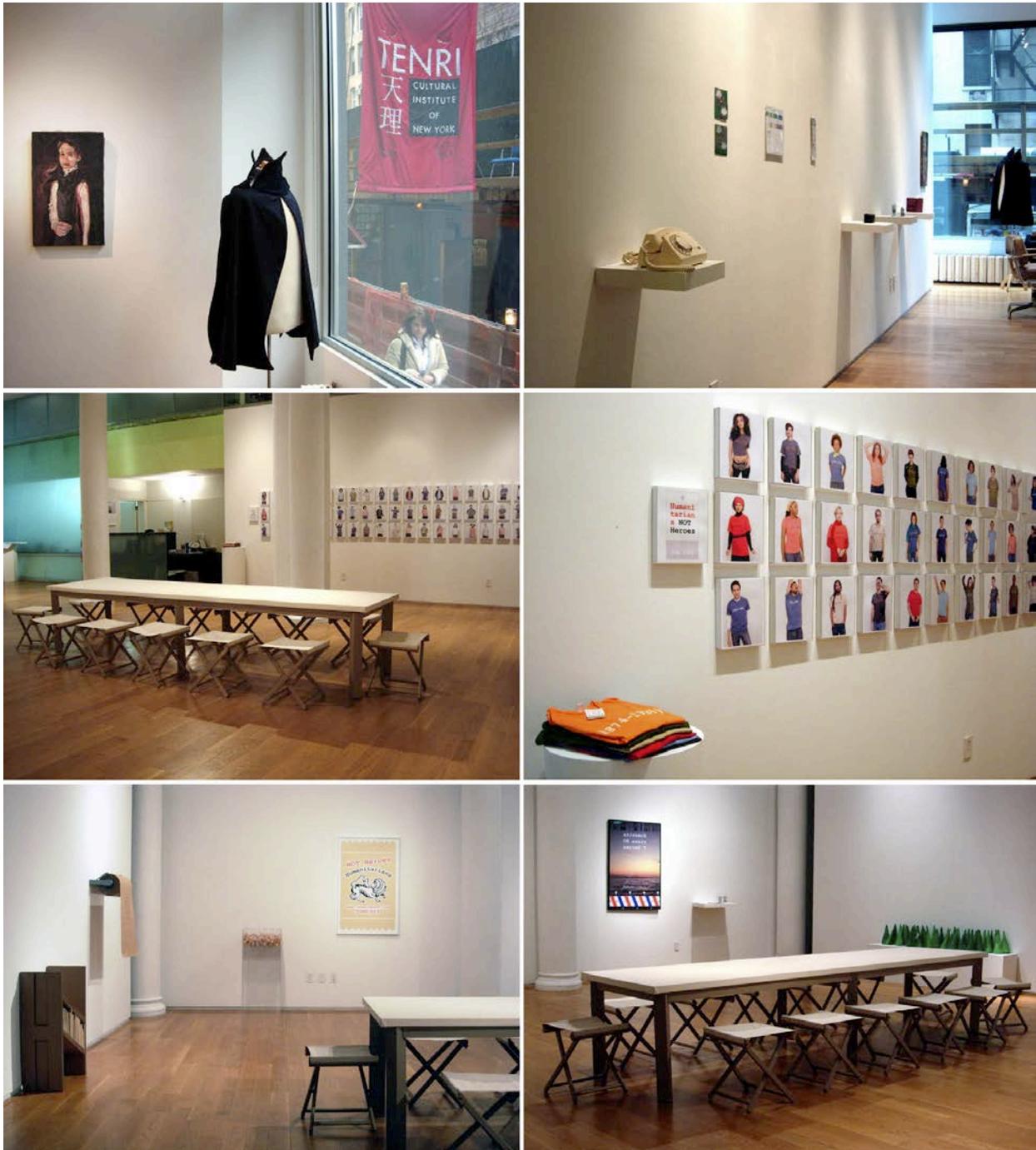
Nonetheless, what we long for may we always find a way...



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
**TGN 2001**

2001-12, Twelve volume set of auction results, photographs  
Varying dimensions  
Edition of 12, photographs unique

*TGN 2001* was a yearlong web-based performance and mixed media project inventorying every object in the artist's Brooklyn studio/apartment in 2001. Multiple side and experimental projects were embedded in the work, including a daily photograph taken each day and auctioned off shortly after (365 photographs in all). 1001 auctions total.



**Trong Gia Nguyen**  
*Humanitarians Not Heroes*

2002-ongoing, Mixed media installation (view at Tenri Cultural Institute, 2006)

*Humanitarians Not Heroes* is Trong G. Nguyen's "artist-as-company" project, initiated in 2002. Established under the umbrella of a legitimate business, HNH markets one type of product a year intended for wide consumption and distribution. The project occupies traditional and alternative spaces to sell and disseminate concepts that intersect art, fashion, design, and socio-politics. Examining the valuation of objects whose complex functions follow simple form, HNH's mission operates at the perimeters where art and capitalism converge.

HNH

**Trong Gia Nguyen**

*HNH Ladder*

2013, Wood

24 x 16 x 2-3/8 inches

One rung at a time. One rung all the time.





**Trong Gia Nguyen**

***Book Shelf***

2006, cardboard, glue

36 x 23 x 12 inches

Brand new to the HNH line is the 2006 *Book Shelf*. A companion piece nineteen years later to the 1987 *Book Cover*, this object is likewise made from a brown paper material. From DIY hobbyists to Frank Gehry, cardboard has been used in all possible ways, usually to an aesthetically surprising end. There isn't anything unusual about this piece of furniture, other than the slant of the shelf, which formally completes the HNH monogram in the design.

The shelf is sturdy enough to hold any book, though we highly recommend covering them in brown craft paper to complete the overall look, which is, well, crafty.





**Trong Gia Nguyen**

*HNH 1986: 200 Year Calendar*

2004, Paper calendar and flip book depicting a killer asteroid striking the earth

7 x 7 x 1 inches

A calendar and flip book in one.

According to several irreputable forecasts, a great asteroid will hit or miss the earth in the year 2185. We are not certain we will be around long enough to test this prophecy.

What we do know is that Time is not to be messed with. Whether speeding forward or seemingly backwards, it is always on the move.

The HNH calendar turns pages slower than snail's pace over space and time at amazing velocities nonetheless. We are told that some of the distant flickering starlights in the sky belong to stars that no longer exist, so unimaginably far away their light has traveled to salt our nights.

Thank you.

