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Debra Herrick

Art installation examines Vietnamese refugee history

Those arriving at Terminal 5 of O'Hare International Airport in Chicago will pass by a window box glowing with a phrase written in red neon — a hybrid of English and Vietnamese — "*gặp nhau at the chân trời* foot of the sky," which can be translated as "meet together at the horizon." Stretched between two-way mirrors and illuminating four photographic panels of archival images of refugees, the artistic installation reimagines the concepts of citizenship and safe passage.

"An airport passageway has the potential to signify a home left behind for unfamiliar territories or to create a space in which belonging is claimed as a common good," said Hương Ngô, a visiting lecturer in art at UC Santa Barbara. "While we might reach a physical destination, citizenship based on the authority of the nation often feels like a forever moving vanishing point upon the distant horizon."

Ngô created the work with her longtime collaborator, artist Hồng-Ân Trương, a professor of art at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Playing with light, mirror and text, each layer in the installation draws from their research on immigration history and sanctuary movements of protection, while summoning the poetic complexion of the Vietnamese language and the boundless possibilities of reflections and refractions of mirrors.

“It is a metaphor that connects landscape to the body and shows the poetic aspects of Vietnamese as a language,” said Ngô. “We were thinking through the space of the airport as both a space where you can welcome people in and make them feel comfortable, but also provide a space to critique the construction of the state and all that entails.”

Making up the four black and white panels are two different types of photos, taken at Vietnamese refugee camps at Camp Pendleton and Guam. In one, children play in a circle, while in the other, there are lines of people. “And then we have them merged together so it’s hard to tell that they’re actually two different photos from different sites,” said Ngô, who draws from her own background as a Vietnamese refugee. “It highlights moments of physical connection, agency and radical joy while also pointing to the disciplined body under state authority.”

Additionally, the two-way mirrors disrupt, fragment and echo parts of the image and text, “suggesting both the power of state surveillance and the possibility for our collective evasion.”

Unveiled in November 2023, “*chân trời foot of the sky*” was commissioned by O’Hare’s Terminal 5 Expansion Project in partnership with the city of Chicago’s Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events and the Chicago Department of Aviation, as part of the city’s largest single acquisition of works by Chicago artists in the last 30 years, including 19 commissions featuring over 20 artists in a $3.5 million investment. Ngô and Trương’s installation is exhibited in “Del Otro Lado/The Other Side,” curated by Behar X Schachman.

An interdisciplinary artist and educator, Ngô’s work attends to refugee epistemologies, expanding concepts of time and knowledge to those that are generational, ecological, ruptured and reconstructed.

Often beginning with research in national and personal archives, she realizes her work through installation, works on paper and performance. “Through her art practice, she gives form to individual and collective narratives that might otherwise be lost — inviting the past to haunt the present — sculpting a future within the ruination,” she said in her artist statement.

Ngô's artistic practice has been recognized and exhibited at institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the New Museum in New York, the Renaissance Society in Chicago, and the Racial Imaginary Institute for the City University of New York James Gallery, among others. She was awarded the Fulbright U.S. Scholar Grant in Vietnam in 2016 and her work has been described as "deftly and defiantly decolonial" by New City and "what intersectional feminist art looks like" by the Chicago Tribune. Ngô's achievements also include being twice recipient of the 3Arts Award and being featured in the Prague Biennial in 2005 and Prospect.5 Triennial in 2021.

She was recently an assistant professor of contemporary practices at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she helped to institute the school's first department-wide anti-racism committee, which inspired the school-wide ARC.

Ngô is currently a visiting lecturer at UC Santa Barbara, where in the spring quarter, she is teaching Public Practice Arts: Digital Intermedia.

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