

Richard Streitmatter-Tran: to Work and Live in Length and Width and Height and Depth

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Written by **Naima Morelli**

I play an audio file buried in the depths of my computer. It's in a folder labeled "Interviews Paris Art Fair". The filename is rst.mp4, and it starts with my own cheery, heavily accented Italian voice asking the interviewee to introduce himself. A low, slightly nasal voice with a distinctive American accent replies: "My name is Richard Streitmatter-Tran. I'm an artist from Ho Chi Min City, Vietnam."

The file has been dormant for over a year. It's part of a report on "Secret Archipelago", a survey exhibition of art from Southeast Asia. Recently I met Richard again – this time in Rome where he was attending a sculpture workshop. His work was evolving toward the goals he had set for himself a year earlier. Thus, I resurrected his interview.

While he was in Rome, Streitmatter-Tran's work was featured in "Odyssey: Navigating Nameless Seas" at the Singapore Art Museum. His piece, "A Short History of Man and Animal" consisted of a wooden boat with a set of bones placed inside its hull. It's an example of Streitmatter-Tran's fascination with the skeleton as an underlying structure upon which everything else is built. This particular piece shows how man borrowed the physical structure of whales to build fishing boats.



Drawing parallels between disparate fields is a leitmotiv in the artist's practice. His interests are wide ranging. He connects, for example, the structure of mandalas with particle accelerators. He compares the lives of Vietnamese writer Vũ Trọng Phụng and Korean writer Yi Sang via performance. "I like those things where you take something from opposite ends and mash them together and not force it," he says.

This concept is also applicable to the life of the artist himself. Richard Streitmatter-Tran is a man of seamless contradictions. He is a former soldier and an artist; American and Vietnamese; introverted and yet eager to communicate; completely absent and intensely present. His face looks like that of an adolescent, a high school history teacher, an old lady at Rome's Termini station, or Salomé in Gustave Moreau's Apparition – all at once.

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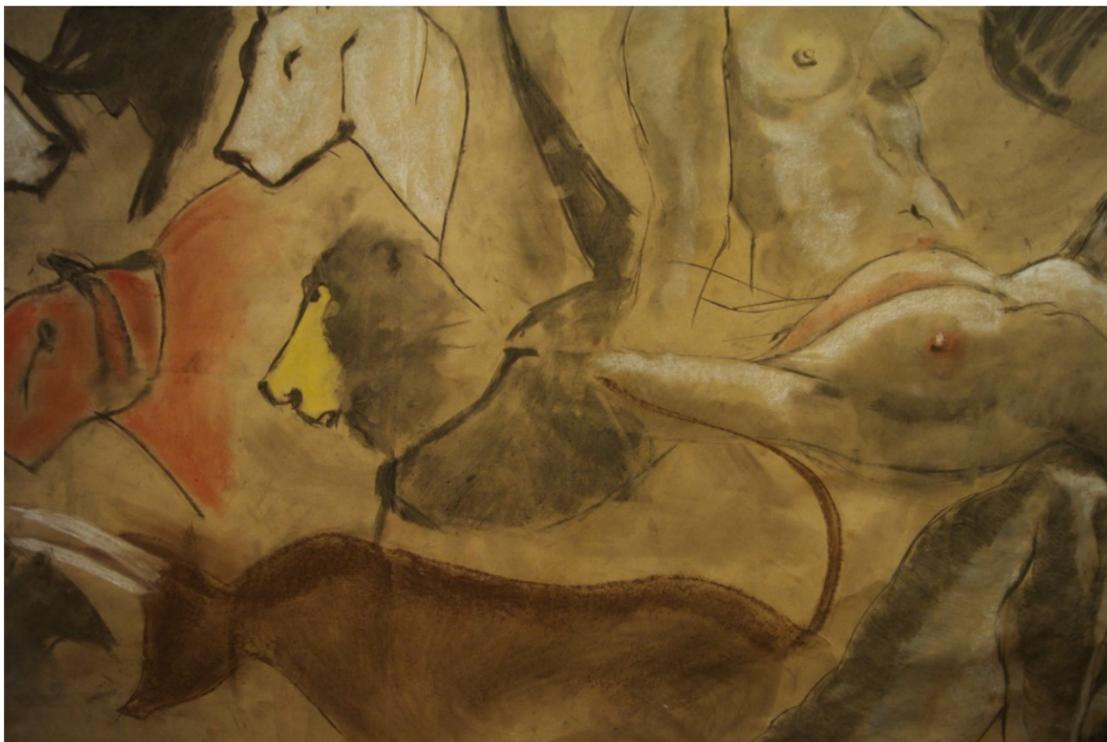
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He is physically fit for a contemporary artist, and it isn't surprising that he has turned to classical sculpture in the past few years. He explores the dualism between mind and body in the physical struggle with the material. Like other artists taking this route, he continuously tries to understand how the classical Western tradition fits into contemporary art.

As an artist, he never stops questioning his assumptions. Streitmatter-Tran is a Sisyphus moving through extremes to get to some illusive whole. He clearly enjoys the process. To me, he seems to be very alive.



You started out in performance and conceptual art. How did you move to a more traditional practice?

My degree is in media art. Now I don't do much technical electronic stuff – I'm mostly into the material. I'm putting a lot of time into really learning anatomy and the body and learning sculpture. This happened because when I went to art school I took a lot of theory courses. I had a lot of ideas, but I couldn't make anything with my own hands, so I would have things made for me. I think over time I became dissatisfied with producing work that way. So I started developing my own skills. It's a much slower process, and I enjoy seeing myself improving slowly – instead of jumping from idea to idea. If you look at all my projects, you can't tell it's the same artist. But I hope that over time more consistency will show in the work.

In this sense, has your approach to a new project changed?

There is an Almodovar movie in which his protagonist is a film director. In the morning, every day, he cuts out all these articles from tabloids, even trashy newspapers. As the pile stacks up, of all these images and articles, he decides "Okay, that's my next movie." So that was the way I used to work before. I just collected things. Now it's different. Now I just really work with materials and try to figure it out as I go along. But I run the risk of not being contemporary at all.



What do you mean by "contemporary"?

Well, I think I have so much to learn, so I'm willing just to take some time out and stay in the studio and really concentrate on painting, drawing and sculpture. I just want to be really classical – use the sight-size method and spend some fifteen hours on

a drawing. There is something to be learned in that. And also in Vietnam and

Cambodia, there is a lot of traditional craft that I can observe – try to learn something from and later try to bring into the contemporary realm.

Your path to art wasn't so straightforward. Before studying art you joined the US army?

Yeah, I wasn't one of those artists that as a child knew the way I would go. I wanted to do a lot of things, and I came from a very working-class family in which nobody went to school. So I had to find a way to pay for college and the only way for me to do that was to join the military. Hopefully, I don't come off as a military person, but it allowed me to go to college. I did a lot of different things. Even my twenties sucked because I didn't know what I was doing, and I was working a lot of manual labor jobs. There were a lot of setbacks – financial things, relationship things. So it was a mess until I finally got into school and double-majored in design and art. But I didn't want to work for design companies producing Coca Cola ads or something, so I decided just to go for art and, after school, I moved directly to Vietnam.

You have been living in Saigon since 2003. Were you familiar with the art scene in the US already or was it your first experience of the contemporary art scene?

I was born in Vietnam during the war – it was 1972. I lived in an orphanage, and then I was adopted by a German-American family. After art school, I didn't want to stay in the US. As an artist, I felt I had to see much more of the world to be a better-informed person. I went to Vietnam with my school, sort of an academic trip, and when I went to Saigon I felt it was a city I could possibly live in. And I met other artists. At that time I was concentrating on performance art. We started up a performance art collective. I only intended to stay six months to a year. But then I just felt it was a good place to start and I stayed. Developing a network in Asia was quite easy. I felt comfortable there. I don't really have any experience in America as a professional artist. Now I've been there twelve years, and I can't see myself returning to the US to work.



You have greatly contributed to the development of the art scene in Vietnam – founding the art and community space Dia Projects among other things, yet you didn't grow up there. Have you ever felt the need to reconcile your identities?

It's hard to say because from the very start I knew there was something different about me. I'm always sort of out of place anyway. When I came to Vietnam, I didn't speak any Vietnamese. The ideas in my work don't really deal with Vietnam. I don't really want to be identified as a Vietnamese artist. So I do feel a little outside in some ways, but it doesn't bother me. I think I just have to

make good work. I'm even moving away from Asia as a region, and I'm really interested in science and philosophy – mostly from continental Europe. But I've always been based in Asia, so yes, I'm always trying to reconcile something.

So far, you have mostly worked with institutions rather than commercial galleries. Was this a conscious decision?

A lot of my work is ephemeral. It falls apart. No one can buy it. So I might have to change my practice to make things that are more durable and work more with elements that I'm not so familiar with – dealers, collectors, and the commercial aspect being part of it. I'm aware that the most important thing with institutions is that the work is always documented. It is published in books, so that after I'm dead the stuff is still there. So that is the important part – the legacy and the access to the work and the information. There is some sort of life longer than my own.

