

Mind over Matter

NOTORIOUS FOR HER CONTROVERSIAL PERFORMANCES, MULTIDISCIPLINARY VIETNAMESE ARTIST LAI DIEU HA ASKS US TO LISTEN, CONNECT AND LOVE TO OVERCOME SEPARATENESS.
BY NAIMA MORELLI

Categories, limits and boundaries are necessary tools for us to make sense of the world. But then we tend to forget that these are man-made instruments in a temporary working framework, and we start taking them as truths. We run into trouble when a single system is taken as the only valid one, and we become incapable of switching to different modes of thinking.

Once again, artists are the ones called upon to restore a sense of plurality. In her work, Hanoi artist Lai Dieu Ha continuously challenges the concept of separateness in her multidisciplinary practice. To her, the role of artists is precisely to bridge cultures and bring people together.

Ha was born into a household of artists in the late 1970s, at a time when labour and production were central to Vietnam's narrative. She says, "Art was always part of my childhood. I remember struggling to draw everything I saw. I'd draw



beards on the faces of former Soviet leaders like Mikhail Gorbachev or Lenin in my father's magazines."

When she was 17, she read an article about a "weird woman" (so-described by the media) who broadcast her plastic surgery live. This was the controversial French artist Orlan, who famously used her own body as a tool for a series of "performance-surgeries" known as 'The Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan'. "There was something there which caught my attention," remembers Ha. "Although I was very young back then, I immediately identified the gesture as art and it stuck with me. I still think Orlan forced her way to a new level of challenging herself and the public."

Not surprisingly, after graduating from Hanoi Fine Arts University in 2005 and learning the history of performance art from Swedish curator Christofer Fredriksson, Ha started performing herself. "I also started learning about psychology, psychopathology, sociology," she adds. In the period between 2005 and 2012, she applied the concepts of these diverse disciplines in extreme and obsessive performances, where the public was as much a part of the work as the artist herself.

Her 2010 performance 'Fly Off' was extremely controversial in Vietnam and beyond. In the hour-long performance, Ha, naked with blue feathers glued to her body, applied hot irons to a mass of fresh pig bladders. She then rubbed them all over her bare face, arms and legs and pressed the irons to her own arms until the skin blistered.

"Between 2008 and 2010, the Internet started booming in Vietnam," says the artist looking back on the episode. "In 'Fly Off', I wanted to represent the advent of a more complex society, where the many different narratives could no longer be hidden. In the work, I tried to personally be a voice for a change towards freedom." While expressed in a very personal way, the performance voiced the concern of the wider community. "The work was the first step of a series of works regarding gender, sex and freedom of speech. It was about the control of the government, cultural censorship and general scepticism," she notes.

In Ha's oeuvre, female identity and sexuality are very strongly expressed. She says, "I feel that the situation regarding gender issues, especially in Vietnam, is unacceptable. These themes are



still considered sensitive even in the cultural arena."

From 2012 to 2016, she veered away from the most extreme form of performance art and started experimenting across a variety of mediums, from painting to installation to video. Psychological blurriness became the focal point of her artistic exploration, culminating in the series 'Mind, Flesh, Matter', exhibited at San Art, an artist-initiated, non-profit contemporary art organization, in 2014. In background research conducted with doctors and patients, she used the methods of psychodrama to understand if suffering is determined by human genetics or social circumstances.

Her latest series of work, recently showcased at CUC Gallery's booth at Art Stage Singapore 2017, was just as strong. Pieces of pork skin, a staple of the Vietnamese diet, were delicately embroidered with beads and thread and trapped by metal wires. In this unlikely association with the fashion world, we begin to see food not simply as an alimentary item for quick consumption, but also as a delicate and fragile ornament to be decorated. Once part of a living animal, pork rind has become an inanimate object.

Science is again the point of departure for her aesthetic exploration. The series was in fact inspired by Ha's observation of a microorganism called hydra oligactis, belonging to an almost invisible world and yet at the base of every living thing. In Ha's mind, the hydra has come to be identified with freedom, for its characteristics of asexuality, regenerative ability and openness to change. Already the subject of a previous performance 'Clinging Hybrid', at the Goethe Institute in 2012, it was the inspiration for her latest solo 'Conservation of Vitality' at CUC Gallery.

In her current artistic enquiry, the artist is returning to experimentation with psychodrama therapy and performance art. Indeed, this is a continuation of her exposing the flimsiness and fictional nature of categories. "We understand that the world, generated from chaos, has an overarching order. We obviously still have a limited knowledge of the universe, so the only thing we can do is to listen, connect and love," she observes. "Everything is indeed the reflection of its opposite: male and female; yin and yang; day and night. To love other people in all their complexity and contradictions is the physical expression that opposites can coexist." ■

This page, above: 'Collecting Skins - Kungfu by Time', 2015, Lai Dieu Ha. Facing page, from top to bottom: 'Guidelines 5' (detail view); 'Biological Pattern Illustrations' (detail view); 'Landscaping Map' (detail view); 'Guidelines 4' (detail view). All artwork Lai Dieu Ha, 2015.

More information at san-art.org and cucgallery.vn