GALERIE QUYNH CONTEMPORARY ART

Đỗ Thanh Lãng

fluorescent fog
mù dạ quang

curated by Arlette Quỳnh-Anh Trần

22.12.2020 - 10.02.2021

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fluorescent fog

Arlette Quỳnh-Anh Trần

I am noting down some personal musings I've had over the past six months on painting, art, the zeitgeist, and philosophy to serve as the exhibition essay for Đỗ Thanh Lãng's *fluorescent fog*. Reading and thinking, and at the same time viewing Lãng's paintings, have helped me forge connections that at first seem farfetched, but on second thought became logical, as though a predestination even before any brushstrokes sweep the canvas. Every time Lãng sends me a picture of his works or when I visit his studio, my nerve plexuses, like rhizomes, vibrate. What was once difficult to understand now gradually unfurls as I look at Lãng's paintings.

> An imaginary scenario: the artist frees his body from Alberti's Frame – a geometric instrument that determines perspective. He shoots himself into the Void, where neither logic nor horizon nor light nor shadow exists. His body is floating, stretching, thrashing, bouncing, his buttocks hoisting in the air in an attempt to touch the surfaces of his surrounding environment. He utilises the sensorium to feel his flight through space–time. A fog appears as soon as he escapes that blindfold of a Frame, when he is yet to reconstruct a sense of stability. In that ambiguous space, he learns to lay out new horizons by simulating surfaces and having his subjects interact with those surfaces. They do not follow the principles of the convergence point. They follow his random rhythm.

Initially, I was embarrassed and had to hide my confusion when viewing Lãng's paintings, as if I was lost. Fumbling through the artist's constructed space, I held onto a feeling of having 'misstepped'. I interrogated that feeling, and was suddenly awakened: it wasn't that I was lost inside a maze; the paths to get lost in did not even exist. My senses could not locate the distance between me, the object, and the happenings that occurred on the picture plane. Often, non-abstract visual art will guide its viewers by creating conventions on how to perceive space: that is, through the depth and distance between objects, and between the entire composition and the eyes of the viewer. Playfully, Lãng breaks free from that guide.
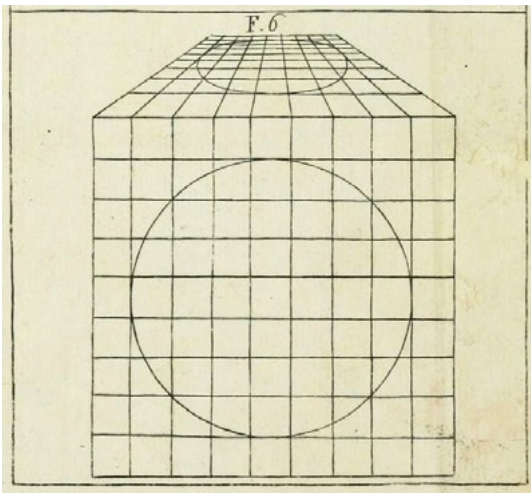
Alberti's diagram showing the perspective transformation of a circle to an ellipse
(source: archive.org)

In 1450, with his treatise *De Pictura* (On Painting), Leon Battista Alberti laid the foundation for an important theoretical framework on representative realism. Through the conventions of spatial geometry – the relationship between the object, the horizon and the convergence point – the Renaissance painter outlined the rules of linear perspective in order to scientifically and thus most authentically represent the object. The painting's depth is an authentic visual truth, helping us perceive the order of appearance, our distance from the objects, and the evolution of those objects. From there, we are able to grasp the nature of visual representation.

Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has critiqued this concept of artistic Idealism, where painting becomes a tool to preserve the form of objects. At that time, painting represented the façade of objects, which, through reasoning, one perceives and categorises to arrive at a set of immutable and self-evident definitions for those objects – a 'conceptless universality'. With the support of a rigorous scientific background, painting directed human knowledge towards metaphysics. This is typically seen in works such as da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, which aspires to universalise the concept of what is 'human' without specifying any particular human. The ultimate goal of painting was to provide countless symbolic images for our cognitive faculties to categorise and grasp the world.

What happens if human perception is corrupt, and detaches itself from universality? If the laws of perspective deviate from the axis of convergence, are we still able to comprehend the world? Do artists only abide by convention to cater to reason? Of course, the history of art has cleared up these questions with movements such as Post-Impressionism or Cubism. Yet what excites me most is when the curtains of these seemingly unshakeable conventions are drawn, when the 'Missteps' in Lãng's paintings are no longer unfathomable. Accepting those 'Missteps' allows me to stretch my visual amplitude, betray the dimensions, see what was previously invisible, and appreciate the mutlidimensional relationship between things and landscapes. On the other hand, the visuals shift not just for the viewer – an outsider not privy to the process in which the artist experiences reality and reimagines that reality on canvas; the visual experience goes hand in hand with the eyes, and by extension the body of the artist.

'It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.

'[…] The enigma derives from the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. […] It is a self, not by transparency […] but a self by confusion, narcissism, inherence of the see-er in the seen, the toucher of the touched, the feeler in the felt – a self, then, that is caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future…'

– excerpt from *Eye and Mind* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Painting connects sight and touch. When we capture an image of an object belonging to the world in front of us and project its shape into our mind, it is not only the object's form that is being mirrored into our retina. Our sight has to examine the context and atmosphere that contains it. By inspecting the object's enveloping atmosphere, while at the same time visualising it based on the experiential reference of touch – structure, contour, material, dimension, and temperature – our eyes can touch the object. Objects exist because we can touch/see them. That is the substance of the object.

> A referential scenario: the artist covers that indeterminate sphere of fog with countless layers of fluorescent paint. These layers – part opaque, part translucent – allow light to pierce through. They coalesce. The subjects Lãng lets emerge from his new horizons are now filled with excitement. They hug, dance, sprawl across those fluorescent layers of paint like citizens of the New, Modern, Twentieth Century World. In those years, thanks to the Industrial and Technological Revolution, the entertainment industry focused on exploiting methods of illumination/projection, and the illusions from which it came. Synthetic substances, colours, and artificial lights relentlessly stimulate the senses, prompting the inhabitants of the Twentieth Century to endlessly notice and perceive their world. That perception, glaringly luminous, blends reality and illusion. When the body reaches its limits of endurance, when the senses refuse to take in more signals, they are paralysed.[1] The artist instantly freezes them in their postures, 'static to the extreme'.

This territory created by Đỗ Thanh Lãng, comprising off-kilter horizons and atmospheres dyed fluorescent, is void architecture. Void architecture lends a feeling of space but is not material. Material architecture exists statically, containing an atmosphere of definite form, so that touch guides sight towards the object. Lãng's void architecture is animate, yet frozen within the confines of the painting. Though in a state of stillness, due to our bodily experience we can still imagine the rhythm and movement of the subjects, whom Lãng has placed inside his territory of void architecture. The painting lies at the threshold of movement and paralysis. What is interesting, though, is that this threshold is also not static in the domain of time. Usually, the movement of objects from the back- to middle- to foreground lets us decipher time and progress. Here, void architecture allows the entire 'paralysed' threshold of the object to slide off in any and all directions. We cannot tell if, by approaching the foreground, the objects are nearing the end of their expedition or borning back into the past.

> A re-produced scenario: the painter slides his fingers across a smartphone touchscreen. He is hunting for floating objects in the world of data in order to replicate them in his fluorescent Void. He whispers to Facebook's algorithm: 'Decode the reading of data in my eyes!' Needless to say, with its sophisticated ability to track and surveil, the algorithm has of course been constantly decoding him, trying to identify the object/subject/scene implied by the movement of his fingers. He whispers to a world constructed by predictive algorithms: 'Slide along with what my eyes see!' Characters/Things/Landscapes, as a result, replicate their own images in the vault of data – the virtual morgue – and slide from the glass screen to the shiny surfaces of resin, of negative film, of PVC sheets.

The works of Đỗ Thanh Lãng do not completely deny the symbolism of objects in reality: the objects still capture and re-constitute reality. The question is: where does a point of view come from, if today's reality cannot escape the algorithimic gaze? At any given moment, the images that appear on our phones result from the countless contexts in which we are interested. Aren't these images what created what Walter Benjamin always referred to as the 'aura' – the quintessence of the original, the convergence of history, and the specific place whence it came?

[1] This description references Susan Buck-Morss's essay *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics.*

'[...] a digitalized image or text appears always in a new form, according to the formats and software that a particular user applies when he or she causes the digital data to appear on a screen. [...] In the case of mechanical reproduction, the original is visible and can be compared to a copy – so the copy can be corrected and any possible distortion of the original form reduced. But if the original is invisible, no such comparison is possible: Every act of visualization of digital data remains uncertain in its relationship to the original; one could even say that every such performance itself becomes an original.'

– excerpt from 'Modernity and Contemporaneity: Mechanical vs. Digital Reproduction',
in *In the Flow* by Boris Groys

Through painting, Đỗ Thanh Lãng renders off-kilter the 'aura' of the digital age. The images he takes from Facebook's algorithm releases that quintessential 'aura' to the eyes of the artist as well as the surveilling eye of the software. Lãng pulls the subject out of the 'algorithmic perspective' that is binding it to a chain of personal context/image source/ surveillance policy – and releases it into the Void. The subjects of Lãng's paintings now have a distinct aura. What was once copies of digital data – the culmination of the artist's clicks and slides on the screen – now slide off into a sphere of fluorescent fog. I call this sphere the 'Off-Object', based on and inspired by what Svetlana Boym calls the 'Off-Modern':

*'"Off" introduces a moment of chance; it is both distancing and defamiliarizing, but also casts a short shadow next to the outlines of things. [...] Off plays optical tricks with nearness and distance, belonging and straying off. Off doesn't enter into a clear binary opposition with anything [...] Off is not transcendental or transgressive, but mysterious and impro*bable.'

– excerpt from 'On *Off*', in *The Off-Modern* by Svetlana Boym

A scenario to 'let them fly': The artist's virtual morgue now lies at the heart of the lantern. The reveling artist of course need not wait until the mid-Autumn to project his figures (rendered in cellophane pink, red, green, blue) which freely slide back and forth. The lantern illuminates, the subjects wake up, climbing one after another out of the warehouse towards the layers of fluorescence. If classical painting uses spatial perspective to structure its narrative, then Lãng's paintings use lights and lanterns to provide that structure. The lights rapidly swirl, then slow all of a sudden – a derailing. One layer of narrative hops atop another. Personal memory overlaps breaking news. Inexplicability is the new explanation. After some time the swirling lantern transmutes as disco lights. It flashes as it sings:

'When will our fate (oooh!) catch fire my sweet,
Paper elephant (oohwahh) paper horse (ooh) running off (oohwahh) to the distant distance'

– Vietnamese folksong

Edited and translated by Thái Hà

About Đỗ Thanh Lãng

Approaching art practice with a rare instinct – visible through the craggy edges of his canvases, or the occasional insect fossilised by his resin pour – Đỗ Thanh Lãng is aptly positioned to extract lightness from a dire situation. Dreamlike in all their hazy strangeness, his artworks are akin to pieces of a memory – a visual journal of altered consciousness.

Born in 1986 in Ho Chi Minh City, Đỗ Thanh Lãng studied painting at the Ho Chi Minh Fine Arts University. His work has been shown in a number of group exhibitions in Vietnam and regionally, such as *Salt of the Jungle*, Korea Foundation Gallery, Seoul, Korea and Vietnamese Women's Museum, Hanoi, Vietnam; *Modern Wind*, HCMC Fine Arts Association, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; *My Eldest Sister*, San Art, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; *Fall*, Café Tram, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; *Out of Nowhere*, Sao La, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; *Art Walk*, numerous venues in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; and *Lunar Breccia*, *Alluvium*, *song of the cicada among summer poppies*, *Hopscotch* and *NGUCHONOBAY* (curated by Sao La) at Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Đỗ has also participated in Spot Art Singapore 2014 (ARTrium @ MCI, Singapore) and undertaken the residency program Brown Movement at Heritage Space in Hanoi.

Đỗ lives and works between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City

exhibition views
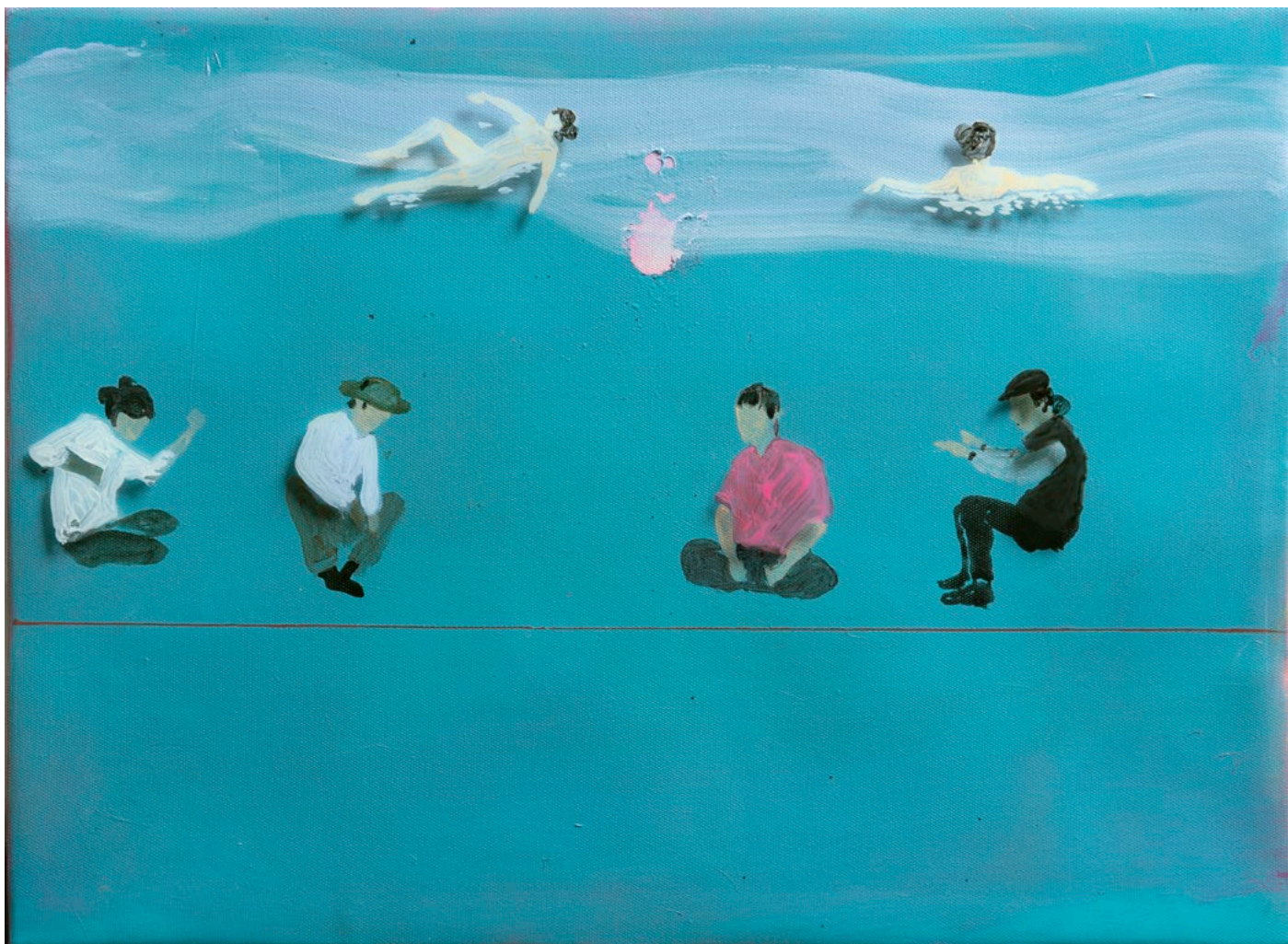
works

Note 3 | Ghi chú 3
2019
acrylic on canvas and PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic trên toan và tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
31 x 40.5 cm

Note 5 | *Ghi chú 5*
2019
acrylic and oil on canvas and PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu trên toan và tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
30.5 x 40 cm

Note 7 | Ghi chú 7
2019
acrylic and oil on canvas and PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu trên toan và tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
40.5 x 40.5 cm

Note 8 | Ghi chú 8
2019
acrylic and oil on canvas and PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu trên toan và tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
30.5 x 40.5 cm

Note 12 | Ghi chú 12
2020
oil, acrylic, and epoxy resin on canvas
sơn dầu, sơn acrylic và nhựa epoxi trên toan
120 x 120 cm

Note 13 | Ghi chú 13
2020
oil, acrylic, and epoxy resin on canvas
sơn dầu, sơn acrylic và nhựa epoxi trên toan
60.5 x 120 cm

Note 14 | Ghi chú 14
2020
oil, acrylic, and epoxy resin on canvas
sơn dầu, sơn acrylic và nhựa epoxi trên toan
60.5 x 120.5 cm

Note 15 | Ghi chú 15
2020
oil, acrylic, and double component resin on canvas
sơn dầu, sơn acrylic và keo AB trên toan
60 x 80 cm

Film 1 | Phim 1
2020
acrylic, oil, and cyanotype on PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu và in cyanotype trên tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
21 x 28 cm (170 x 40 x 2 cm with plexiglass frame)

Film 2 | Phim 2
2020
acrylic, oil, and cyanotype on PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu và in cyanotype trên tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
21 x 28 cm (170 x 40 x 2 cm with plexiglass frame)

Film 3 | Phim 3
2020
acrylic, oil, and cyanotype on PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu và in cyanotype trên tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
21 x 28 cm (170 x 40 x 2 cm with plexiglass frame)

Film 4 | Phim 4
2020
acrylic, oil, and cyanotype on PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu và in cyanotype trên tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
21 x 28 cm (170 x 40 x 2 cm with plexiglass frame)

Film 5 | Phim 5
2020
acrylic, oil, and cyanotype on PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu và in cyanotype trên tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
21 x 28 cm (170 x 40 x 2 cm with plexiglass frame)

Film 6 | Phim 6
2020
acrylic, oil, and cyanotype on PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu và in cyanotype trên tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
21 x 28 cm (170 x 40 x 2 cm with plexiglass frame)

Film 7 | Phim 7
2020
acrylic, oil, and cyanotype on PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu và in cyanotype trên tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
21 x 28 cm (170 x 40 x 2 cm with plexiglass frame)

Film 8 | Phim 8
2020
acrylic, oil, and cyanotype on PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu và in cyanotype trên tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
21 x 28 cm (170 x 40 x 2 cm with plexiglass frame)

Film 9 | Phim 9
2020
acrylic, oil, and cyanotype on PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu và in cyanotype trên tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
21 x 28 cm (170 x 40 x 2 cm with plexiglass frame)

Film 10 | Phim 10
2020
acrylic, oil, and cyanotype on PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu và in cyanotype trên tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
21 x 28 cm (170 x 40 x 2 cm with plexiglass frame)

Film 11 | Phim 11
2020
acrylic, oil, and cyanotype on PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu và in cyanotype trên tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
21 x 28 cm (170 x 40 x 2 cm with plexiglass frame)

Film 12 | Phim 12
2020
acrylic, oil, and cyanotype on PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu và in cyanotype trên tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
21 x 28 cm (170 x 40 x 2 cm with plexiglass frame)

Untitled | Không đề
2020
oil, acrylic, and epoxy resin on canvas
sơn dầu, sơn acrylic và nhựa epoxi trên toan
120 x 120 cm

Untitled | *Không đề*
2020
oil, acrylic, and epoxy resin on canvas
sơn dầu, sơn acrylic và nhựa epoxi trên toan
120 x 140 cm

Untitled | Không đề
2020
acrylic on canvas and PVC transparent sheet
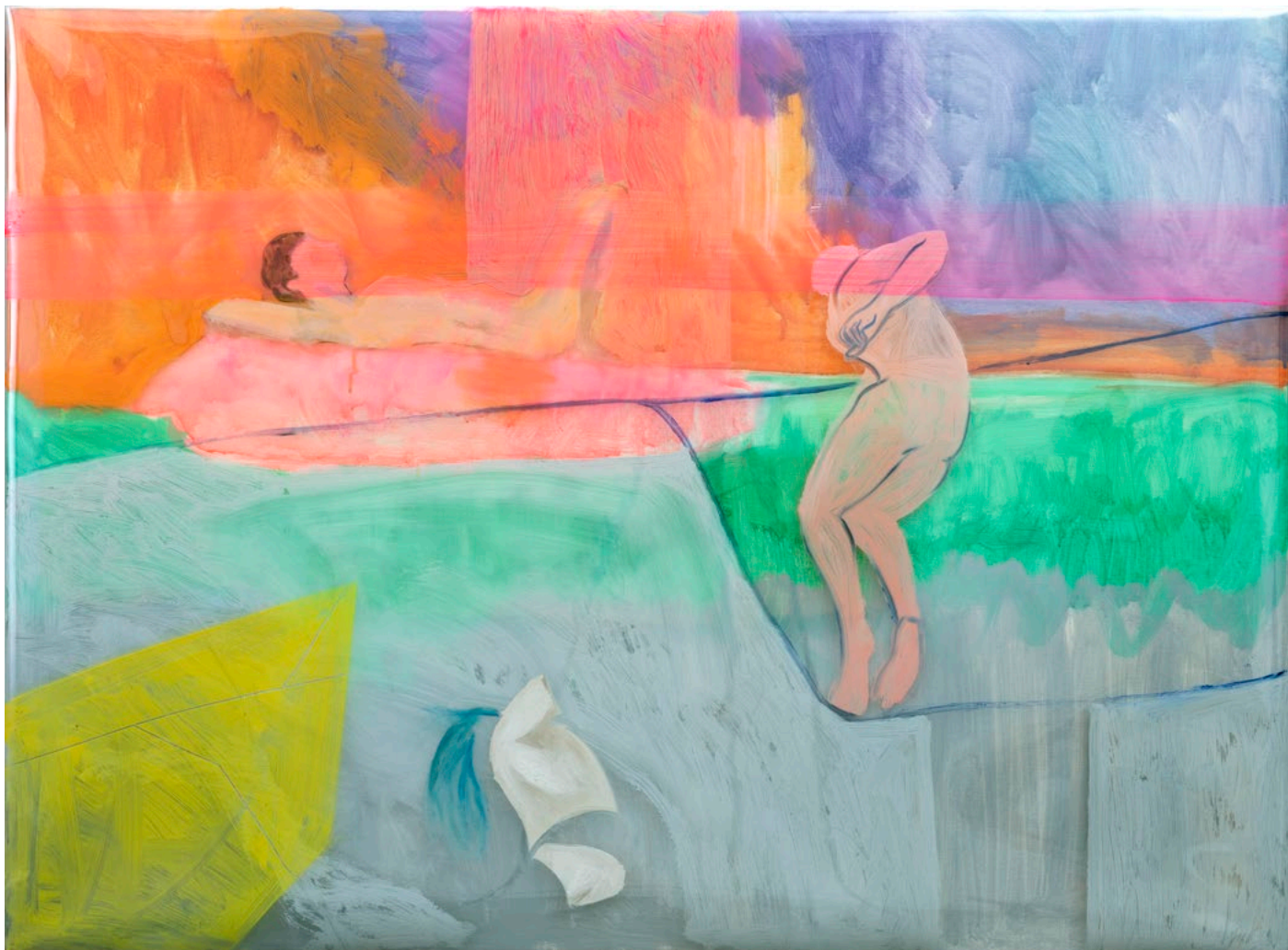sơn acrylic trên toan và tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
115.5 x 145.5 cm

Untitled | Không đề
2020
oil, acrylic, and epoxy resin on canvas
sơn dầu, sơn acrylic và nhựa epoxi trên toan
140.5 x 120 cm

Untitled | *Không đề*
2020
acrylic and oil on canvas and PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu trên toan và tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
91.5 x 126 cm

Untitled | Không đề
2020
oil, acrylic, and epoxy resin on canvas
sơn dầu, sơn acrylic và nhựa epoxi trên toan
120 x 120 cm

Untitled | Không đề
2020
oil, acrylic, and epoxy resin on canvas
sơn dầu, sơn acrylic và nhựa epoxi trên toan
120 x 120 cm

Untitled | Không đề
2020
oil, acrylic, and epoxy resin on canvas
sơn dầu, sơn acrylic và nhựa epoxi trên toan
120 x 120 cm

Untitled | Không đề
2017
oil, acrylic, and epoxy resin on canvas
sơn dầu, sơn acrylic và nhựa epoxi trên toan
70 x 95 cm

Untitled | Không đề
2016
acrylic and oil on paper and PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu trên giấy và tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
144 x 144 cm

Untitled | Không đề
2016
acrylic and oil on canvas and PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu trên toan và tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
110 x 110 cm

Untitled | Không đề
2015
acrylic and oil on paper and PVC transparent sheet
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu trên giấy và tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt
144 x 145 cm

Untitled | *Không đề*
2015
acrylic and oil on canvas and PVC transparent sheet, wood frames
sơn acrylic, sơn dầu trên toan và tấm nhựa PVC trong suốt, khung gỗ
170.5 x 263.5 cm

biography

Đỗ Thanh Lãng

Born in 1986 in Ho Chi Minh City
Lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, Vietnam
Member of Sao La Collective, Co-founder of Cù Rú

EDUCATION

2011   Graduated from the Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts

SOLO & TWO-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2020   *fluorescent fog*, Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2016   *Hopscotch* (with Hoang Nam Viet), Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2020   *Lunar Breccia*, Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2019   *ASIA NOW – Paris Asian Art Fair*, Paris, France

            The Show, Manzi, Hanoi, Vietnam

2018   *Alluvium*, Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

            Salt of the Jungle, Vietnamese Women's Museum, Hanoi, Vietnam

            Song of the cicada among the summer poppies, Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2017   *Salt of the Jungle*, Korea Foundation Gallery, Seoul, Korea

            NGUCHONOBAY – curated by Sao La, Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2016   *Out of Museum*, Sao La, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2015   *Art for You II*, Manzi, Hanoi, Vietnam

            Art Walk – curated by Sao La, various venues, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2014   *Spot Art*, ARTrium@MCI, Singapore

            Chung, PongDang Gallery, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

            Out of Nowhere, Sao La, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2013   *Exhibition of Budding Painters Club*, Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

            Erasable, Experimental Stage Project, Saigon Outcast, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2011   *Fall*, Café Tram, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2010   *My Eldest Sister*, San Art, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2008   *Modern Wind*, Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

SAO LA ACTIVITIES

2017   *NGUCHONOBAY*, Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2016   *Out of Museum*, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

            Cu Ru bar project, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2015   *Art Walk*, various venues, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2014   *Out of Nowhere*, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

RESIDENCY

2015   *The Brown Movement*, Heritage Space, Hanoi, Vietnam

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2020   Devi, Nirmala, "Your Guide to Asia-Pacific Exhibitions: Destiny Deacon, Danh Võ, Yokohama Triennale and More," *ArtReview Asia*, July 2020

            "*Lunar Breccia:* a group exhibition of emerging and established Vietnamese artists – GALERIE QUYNH," *aura-mekong-art-project.com*, May 2020

            "*Lunar Breccia – Dăm kết mặt trăng* at Galerie Quynh," *blisssaigon.com*, May 2020

            Diệp Anh, "Cá tính nghệ sĩ trẻ 3 miền," *tienphong.vn*, June 2020

            "Cuộc hội ngộ của các nghệ sĩ trẻ tài năng 3 miền Bắc-Trung-Nam," *anninhthudo.vn*, June 2020

            "Bữa tiệc thị giác trong thành phố," *đẹp.com.vn*, August 2020

2019   "Asia Now 2019: Bệ phóng ra thế giới cho nghệ thuật châu Á," *oaoarchive.wordpress.com*, Nov 2019

2018   Út Quyên, "*Muối của rừng* không dành cho người vội vã," *hanoigrapevine.com*, July 2018

            "Triển lãm Muối của rừng," *Cafe sáng với VTV3*, July 2018

            "Triển lãm Muối của rừng," *VOV.vn*, July 2018

2016   "Hopscotch, a duo exhibition by Do Thanh Lang & Hoang Nam Viet," *thantuong.tv,* September 2016

            "LO CO – trien lam tranh ton vinh tu do va pha cach," *luonbencon.com*, September 2016

            "Hopscotch, art exhibition – Gallery Quynh HCMC," *blisssaigon.com*, October 2016