

O fair maiden Come let me tell you the songtale *Inverted Life*¹

Nguyễn–Hoàng Quyên

Will,

There’s a song that keeps vibrating in my head when I look at your paintings. It’s called *Ngược Đời*, and the performer was the xẩm² songstress Hà Thị Cầu, the grandma of sidewalk art who lived and died in poverty. When something is seen as backward, incongruous, idiotic, paradoxical, nonsensical, it’s derided as *ngược đời*, a life inverted. Hà Thị Cầu sang of uncanny inversions. The lyrics present a picaresque countryside turned upside down, where normal relations between the hunter and the prey, the aggressor and the aggressed, the law and its subjects, are all folded backward. The upturned occurrences ironize and highlight the norms of straightforward life. There’s something rhythmic about this comical lament that refracts the cycles of satire and malaise somersaulting in your works. Couplets from the xẩm melody will be shuffling along the margins of my meandering letter. As I wander about looking at your pictures, I hear the peripheral, echoing music of a so-called outsider artist who condensed the buoyant stupefactions of life into sweetbitter poetry.

¹ The couplets in the margin are extracted from a transcription, among many variations, of the xẩm song *Inverted Life* (poor translation mine).

² Xẩm is a type of North Vietnamese folk music, often performed by impoverished or visually impaired artists who sing in public places, like a wet market or bus station.

1

Wherein an apple snail bites a duck in the neck And young grasses maim and gnaw at a buffalo's snout

“Change your direction”

In 1951, Adorno published *Minima Moralia*, a sequence of aphorisms on the “damaged life” of industrial consumer society. If that book could be painted with a comic aesthetic, a visual language that is de-Adorno-ed, non-didactic, less bookish and more demotic, it might, sort of, look like your darkly funny and hardly categorizable body of works. You call your pictures life paintings. I view them as nomadic segments, a string of pure-edged reflections on human life, its extremes of alienation and excitation in particular. It’s a paradoxical and allegorical space you paint, with neat candy-box colors, austere lines and grim imagery. The stories are enacted by a diverse cast—soldiers, bureaucrats, cops, vagrants, lunatics, fluttering atmospheric phenomena, all kinds of animals caged and autonomous. The cartoonish figures are rendered with consistently irregular biometrics: slightly distended heads; atrophied limbs; faces now phlegmatic, now dyspeptic; ungainly bodies that look simultaneously thick and flaccid, robust and infirm, manlike and creaturely. No foreshortening, no perspectival depth, no anatomical lessons here. The characters embody a hybrid disfigured breed, flatly animate. Every thingbody looks uncomfortably alive in their petrified postmodern incoherence.



Just sit it out

2017, oil on canvas, 180 x 200 cm



Event
2020, oil on canvas, 130 x 160 cm

2

Wherein a chick strangles a hawk And a frozen dead tilapia swallows a longtailed lizard's skull

A climate of madness bubbles across the paintings. Mordant humors and morbid routines spill out from the allure of comedy. Construction projects and surveying cameras abound, drifting alongside jet fighters, police helicopters and other war materials. Scattered here there are small fires—could be the traces of a futile arsonist crime, could be the dripping flames of an inchoate fanatic ideology. You don't explain the clues in the pictures. But one gets the giddy impression that bad news is spiraling in the air. A diseased civilization unfurls in the form of farces filled with scenes of torture and punishment. Many animals are casually kept on a leash in a slapstick routine that recalls the events at Abu Ghraib or some other perverse prison. Every entity in the paintings has a victim to fasten with fresh fetters, perpetuating a chain of everyday dominance and subordination.

Your scenarios, stylized and codified, show a ruthless society of discipline and control burning itself out. While commercial buildings keep growing and container ships keep transporting excessive commodities, guns go on getting mass produced. Anti-terrorist airstrikes carry on claiming the holy validity of war. The levitating bulldozers, sinking ships and trucks rolling through the sky are signs that the instruments of productive transportation have become so overworked and drained they have gone mad. The self-shattering bridges and auto-crashing vehicles are going their own limp, downward, deadly way. These orientational changes, sporadic and disastrous, generate an interruption in the pleasant daily flow of consumer society. Across the paintings, rifles and pistols still multiply like the bad infinity of global capitalism. Recording devices and hidden algorithms still proceed to monitor all behaviors. And yet, your repeated visions of breakage and wobble make space for systemic errors, jams and interferences to be imagined into existence.

3

Wherein you, mouse, bite the cat in the neck And a swarm of grasshoppers chases and kicks the chickens

Otherwise, the violent infrastructures would remain ever in order. The fittest continue to survive, as reported by Kafka in his little fable:

“Alas,” said the mouse, “the world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into.” “You only need to change your direction,” said the cat, and ate it up.³

³ Franz Kafka, “A Little Fable,” *Collected Stories*, edited by Gabriel Josipovici, translated by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman's Library, 1993).



Mr. Rat holds up un-expecting World
2019, oil on canvas, 130 x 130 cm

4

Wherein a spiny eel bites a softshell turtle in the neck And a woman mob grabs the breasts of men

Play

Life flows on. Day by day, within the quarters of your urban planning, the creatures survey each other, tease and terrorize each other, hit the gym, get hospitalized, get birthed, behold each other or stand there doing nothing. They pursue odd lines of flight, often without leaving home, like lying in bed and telephoning an ancient Egyptian deity to discuss mortality and the afterlife. Then they slip away and turn up again in another frame, another enclosure. Each demarcated picture could be a playground of possibilities. The characters stay with the military-industrial bedlam in a vital mode of play. Just like how some hares box for fun, or how ants stage mock-wars in jest,⁴ the biomorphic modules in your paintings might be playing for no apparent utilitarian purpose. It's common to operate within scientific or economic paradigms and ascribe a rational function to every single behavior. But let's run with a less transactional and more ludic

principle that animals and humans periodically play just for the thrill instead of being tethered all the time to motivations related to reproductive survival. So one might derive weird pleasure from watching your impish creatures keep their hooves in the game—a game filled with time-squandering, irrational impulses that could also be cruel. Your characters stay committed to an absurd spirit of play. They refuse to narrate and package their lives into a classifiable logic, into mere products to be grasped and sold. They communicate among themselves in self-fashioned codes, bypassing the tyranny of meaning.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion on play, Darwinism, capitalist logic and the complexity of human consciousness, see this article by the late anthropologist and political activist David Graeber. David Graeber, "What's the Point If We Can't Have Fun?" (The Baffler, 2017). <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/whats-the-point-if-we-cant-have-fun>.

*Trappings of distant voices and other calamities
included in the spectrum of machines and ocean transport*
2018, oil on canvas, 180 x 300 cm





5

Wherein a human lies down for a pig to dehair And ten persimmons swallow a lady at eighty

Weathers

There is always some other current in your works that keeps the playfulness on edge. Somewhere in the series of paintings called “Weather Dictates,” a black crow stands against a white sky. Faint traces of wind swirl all around. You copy down the bird’s murmur onto the canvas, “Nó có thể tùy vào thời tiết,” as it observes and speculates with changeable weather in mind. Mutations of mental climate are also absently present in the smeared brushstrokes that haunt the scrupulous order of the paintings. Chaotic patches of plotless paint are now accrued to a protruding thickness, now scraped to a violent excision. Like the arrival of forbidding birds, the floating paint marks augur or commemorate a nervous feeling, an unnamable calamity, a blurred wound or some shadow-bearing commotions that come and go, leaving the creatures in the playground with an uneasy watchful silence.

Opposite:

Weather Dictates (3)

2019, oil on canvas, 65 x 50.5 cm

It Already Happened. You Can't Stop It

2020, oil on canvas, 130 x 130 cm

6

Wherein a sticky rice ball swallows a boy ten years of age And a chicken plate and wine bottle swallow a staggering man

Descents

The percolating images of anxious birds, defunct cars and foreshadowed doom remind me, elliptically, of a work by another self-taught artist, Vũ Dân Tân. In Oakland in 1999, he transformed an old white Cadillac, donated by a Pick-n-Pull, into a prescient installation artwork. With some help from artist friends, he manually sliced open the car, grafted a pair of wings onto it, painted it gold and named it ‘Cadillac-Icarus,’ transmuting the vehicle into a fine metaphor. America was summarized as a gilded, wasted machine bearing a mythical name and vain wings. After the West Coast premiere, the Cadillac-Icarus soared across the ocean to visit Hanoi, its maker’s hometown. The car successfully landed on a former revolutionary moon that was now orbiting around free-market prosperity and accelerated progress. Vũ Dân Tân divined an ill-starred fate for the red optimism of market-economy-oriented socialism—a fate that would eventually harbor junkseas of outdated luxury vehicles. To create the title of his Oakland exhibition, *RienCarNation*, the artist made a conceptual switch between the first two vowels of *reincarnation*, twisting the possibilities of rebirth into a perpetual present of autos and nothingness. The alphabetic inversion economically captured the inescapable destiny of consumerist subjects, who live not once, but again, and ever again, in a country brimming with Icarusian contraptions. In your recent paintings, the groovy, cheerless repetition of plummeting vehicles belongs to an imagined time when all the wings of desire of capitalist circulations have melted away. What remains is the sting of human hubris, the desolate rubble of burned-out engines and splintered roads.

7

Wherein an eel lies there waiting for the trap to swim inside And a swarm of rice grasshoppers chases and chomps a tilapia’s skull

Quote

Speaking of splinters. Some of the stories you inscribe on canvas read to me like fragments of the local news. Recorded in a handwriting that is a bit knobbly and wobbly, the textual splinters sometimes replay a mundane misfortune:

Ghost

Sáng 7.1 tất cả ngư dân trên tàu gặp nạn đã được lực lượng chức năng đưa vào bờ an toàn. *On the morning of Jan. 7 all of the shipwrecked fishermen have been safely carried to shore by functional forces.*

Here’s another example

1 giờ 15 phút [...] tại trại gà của ông Hiền [...] phát hiện một đối tượng vào bắt trộm gà [...] xảy ra vật lộn xô xát [...] ông Hiền cầm 1 con dao [...] khoảng 20 phút sau, đối tượng đã chết do suy hô hấp, mất máu. *At 1 hour 15 minutes [...] at Mr. Hiền’s chicken farm [...] a chicken-stealing subject was discovered [...] Mr. Hiền took a knife [...] 20 minutes later, the subject was found dead due to respiratory failure and blood loss.*

The tragicomic Việt village incidents are reproduced in the state’s bland newspeak, including even mentions of the bureaucratic security guards known by their clichéd title as ‘functional forces.’ Once cut out and transposed to the medium of painting, the stories sound foreign as if the words themselves have malfunctioned. The sensationalist phrasings of reportage are reduced to strange textual bits. Scattered among

these shreds are the traces of poor folks, from traumatized fishermen to petty thieves, who go on getting stranded, rescued, slaughtered, featured in the news, sweetly forgotten or remembered in artworks they hardly have the leisure or cultural capital to see. Your paintings cite, instead of exhibiting, the banality of anonymous misery.

Each citation is a ghost, as proposed by Marjorie Garber, “a revenant taken out of context, making an unexpected, often disconcerting appearance—the return of the expressed.”⁵ And each ghost is a benign bandit, as Walter Benjamin wrote, “Quotations in my works are like robbers by the roadside who make an armed attack and relieve an idler of his convictions.”⁶ In a similar way, the quotes, or the texts that look like quotes, in your works arrive like unseasonal and unsettling winds. The words on the surface or in the title of the paintings, sometimes just one laconic word—like the verb “vấp,” or “studder” in your spelling, leap out like sudden specters with guns. Short thoughts, abridged dictionary entries and cut-up tales of small-town misadventures return, without notice, in bits and scraps. The disassembled texts disturb, by making strange, the way normative syntax has homogenized experience and flattened language. Your stabbing, hobbling gait of speech archives the peculiar force of each stray word, each pedestrian mishap.

⁵ Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare’s Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (London: Routledge, 2010), 70.

⁶ Ibid.

8

Wherein the rice seeds
hold a mouse hostage in a
bamboo basket
And the gold garbs pick a
stork, causing a stir

March backward

I return to the series of fleshless beings that you often paint with thin rough black outlines, sometimes on bare canvas. A flickering substantiality quakes in and out of their frayed contours. The characters rendered this way, whether a hailing cop or hailed subject, have an effaced and heightened presence about them. Their deformity and unfinishedness draw attention to a negative way of being, similarly to how stammers show a strange underside of language. You have these voided bodies mirror the full ones. Gunmen in one painting are resurrected in another as distorted, clouded, hollow versions of themselves. Abruptly turning up next to robust sunlit high-rises are the low recessive houses of the poor, or the dead. As an empire of bloated development collapses, an underworld of thin apparitions arises. The empty forms mimic and mock the pathologies—and puncture the certainty—of their positive, visible counterparts. Your tactic works not unlike the wayward dance of the song *Inverted Life*. In the folk melody and in your paintings, indestructible laws and inalienable rights are momentarily reversed. There's no lucid moral to be extracted from these mischievous subversions. But the ludic play of verbal and visual negation compels one to slow down, to re-examine the silent rationale of power at play and to wonder about the hazy, disorienting possibilities of another mode of being.



Studder
2020, oil on canvas, 130 x 130 cm



Newness
2020, oil on canvas, 180 x 200 cm



Through the Door Stands a Dream
2020, oil on canvas, 185 x 300 cm

9

Wherein you, cutting board, carry on pressing the knife And a knot of toads bites an old male star off of heaven

Dream, again

I won't pretend that I can tie together the many meanings, or the many moments of non-meaning, in your works. I can merely—longwindedly, unsystematically, blindly—study them from afar and admit the endless digressiveness of your persistent obsessions. The elements of play and caprice could be your arena of resistant imagination against the proper, euphonious and decorous. They could exist for the aimless delight of painting—that itself is a modest act of refusal before the stagnant laws of common sense and the cultural market's demand for bombastic statements and predigested interpretations. On your canvas, shadows of mental cages, grotesque wars and malignant growth are mixed with tacit signs of strobefike skies and concealed turmoil. The different torques of your everyday critiques together twist into a surface tension that spreads across the paintings, where all the minor details and nonsensical disclosures hang together, carrying the awe, boredom, stasis and lightness of damaged life.

And then the works keep turning sideways, and sideways, and fold elsewhere toward undertows of menace and mischief that nobody could name. In a world of pervasive, routinized unfreedoms, each gesture of your characters seems immobilized, petrified, as soon as they're activated. And yet, any second now, a frenzied event or a delirious string of words might jump out and interrupt structural rules with random suspensions and funny descents. And the order of things is briefly upset once more. Now and again, pale suns and red moons sprout side by side, jabbing their cool mute streaks across yet another

fever dream, yet another bout of upheavals within a day or a night. Each painting, in Beckett's words, is another round of "stirrings still," another stack of stark dreamtales. The tales' restless repetition of jarring diction and minimal density fatigues and urges the viewer to search, or to wait, day and night, for a newness that might not come. It is with this black optimism that the vagrant, locked-up dreamers of your pictures still stir:

One night or day then as he sat at his table head on hands he saw himself rise and go. First rise and stand clinging to the table. Then sit again. Then rise again and stand clinging to the table. Then go. Start to go. On unseen feet start to go. So slow that only change of place to show he went. As when he disappeared only to reappear later at another place. Then disappeared again only to reappear again later at another place again. So again and again disappeared again only to reappear again later at another place again.⁷

To disappear again only to reappear again later at another place again,

Q.

⁷ Samuel Beckett, "Stirrings Still," *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989*, ed. S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 259-260.



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