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Vân Thúy Lê

Dưới (2019)

Tributaries of Typography: Reconstituting Language, Memory and Self in Postcolonial Vietnam

What gradually becomes indiscernible becomes precisely visible. What is noticeably vague fosters certainty. What expands negotiates congested spaces, and what blurs manifests equivocal transparency.

Vân Lê's five-print series *Dưới* (2019) moves through focused and unfocused spaces. Blurred transitions and expanding typography overlap with one another underneath acrylic sheets that envelop the prints, washing over the comforting hues illuminating a domestic scene. The image displayed is a photograph of the artist's extended family playing a game of cards, a candid moment captured by Lê during her trip to Vietnam last year. Centred on the surface hovers the alphabetic character 帶下, "Dưới" written in Chữ Nôm (Vietnam's original language) and Vietnamese proverbs written in Chữ Quốc Ngữ (the popularly-used Romanized alphabet) laser-cut onto the acrylic sheet. As the viewer's gaze shifts from left to right, the suspended script and laser-cut proverbs diminish in the prints' foreground, whilst the background becomes increasingly hazy. The distortion that successively matures over the prints cultivates ambiguity, eventually manifesting itself into obscured and milky forms shown in the final print. Only the Chữ Nôm character and the Chữ Quốc Ngữ proverbs retain their clarity amid this blurring process.

Dưới investigates Vietnam's complex linguistic history as reflected by its Chinese rule from 111 BCE to 938 CE, and its French colonization from 1887 to 1954. Underneath these two respective regimes emerged Chữ Nôm, "old Vietnamese" based on classic Chinese typography, and Chữ Quốc Ngữ, "new Vietnamese," the Latin script introduced by the French. Lê abstractly links these two Vietnamese languages together, uncovering the many foreign attributes that consequently shaped and influenced Vietnam's current social, political and cultural structures. Language becomes a multi-faceted tool in this series, an "image-language"¹ used to enlarge and condense colonial and postcolonial narratives onto the prints' surface, leaving behind remnants of an incisive colonial past.

Themes of past and present critically inform *Dưới*. "Dưới", meaning "under" in Chữ Nôm, references the past speaking underneath or through the present, a "sub-altered"² language that persists within the modern writing script Chữ Quốc Ngữ. Now almost extinct, Chữ Nôm is alternatively presented as continuous and stable within Lê's work. Linking the past with the present, the two laser-cut Chữ Quốc Ngữ proverbs read, "Ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây" ("Eat the fruit, remember who planted the tree") and "Chết vinh còn hơn sống nhục" ("Better to die on your feet than to live on your knees")³. The first proverb reminds us never to forget history, while the second refers to revolutionists' efforts in twentieth-century Vietnam.⁴ The layering of these two proverbs on top of the Chữ Nôm lettering elucidates the hybridity of the Vietnamese language, demonstrating how the past continuously runs in parallel to the present.

¹ Vân Lê, "Artist Interview," interview by Kari Valmestad, USE Exhibition Catalogue, June 26th, 2020.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Lê's inclusion of the image of her family acts as another layer encapsulating the conflicting forces that make up these postcolonial dialogues. This small moment of joy captured in the photograph contradicts the complicated history brought forth by the proverbs and the alphabetic character in each of her prints.

In addition to navigating the history of Vietnamese linguistics, *Dưới* also functions in gauging 'postcolonial Vietnam' in the context of Lê's own identity, mapping out her preconceived constructs and memories of these complicated discourses. Referring to her prints as "windows," Lê looks into them, her gaze passing through these preceding histories of colonial violence and aggression, while also allowing for a reversed perspective, positioning herself within the work.⁵ Similarly, she discusses her prints as mirror-like, as her combination of the proverbs, the Chữ Nôm character and her family serve in "[mirroring] generational memory."⁶ Each print thus exists as a fragment of a deeply-rooted colonial past that continues to linger on the surface of her memories and those of a shared public history.

Lê's work is typically guided by an internal question posed to herself, which subsequently leads her on a path forged by a postcolonial lens. Questions such as "what is postcolonial Vietnam?" and "what are my constructs of it?" continue to critically shape and guide her artistic practice, as evidenced by *Dưới*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Works Cited

Lê, Vân. "Artist Interview." Interview by Kari Valmestad. USE Exhibition Catalogue. June 26th, 2020.