

Lovecore
October 29th 2021 — November 25th 2021
Curated by Bill Nguyễn

“Look at this trove
Treasures untold
How many wonders can one cavern hold?
Looking around here you'd think
Sure, she's got everything”

And so it goes, one of The Little Mermaid's most memorable moments, where we see Princess Ariel swirl around in her secret grotto, excitedly singing about the mundane objects she has collected during her exploration of shipwrecks and caves under the sea - objects that perhaps have been discarded, lost or forgotten by those living above the surface of water. In the exhibition ‘Lovecore’ by artist AP Nguyễn, a similar sense of sweetness and strangeness, of wonder and puzzlement, emerges. For here, the artist also welcomes us into her personal treasure trove which has been accumulated over the years, and openly displays - for our viewing pleasure - the objects of her own desires and dreams, in all their brilliance, vulnerability, and honesty.

Hòn non bộ. Áo dài. Hạ Long Bay. Picture frame. Bikini bottoms. Karaoke. ‘Việt Nam Quê Hương Tôi’. Appearing in this exhibition are but a few objects, phrases and images (or rather, subjects of enquiry), selected from AP's ongoing project which started in 2017 when the artist left Vietnam to study and live abroad. Embracing her position as someone twin-cultured, having always been fascinated by both the kitsch and camp (*), and to all things “quintessentially Vietnamese” (**), AP makes art that takes inspiration from, brings together, and at times, sits uncomfortably between personal memories and public imagination. Borrowing from popular cultural phenomenon, utilizing the aesthetic of mass-produced souvenirs, as well as their well-known and over-exhausted iconography, AP playfully subverts the conventions and expectation of such objects and images - by altering their properties and functions, or by weaving in her autobiographical reflections and experiences. Thus, her work teases with what we think we know.

Crisscrossing the space, a group of small rock-like sculptures stand. Their translucent ceramic skin is coated in various shades of off white, brownish yellow, smoky blue, and pale purple, provoking a sense of frailty, sickness and decay. Inspired by the sites that have become symbols for Vietnamese tourism such as Hạ Long Bay or Ninh Bình, and by the long-standing local art form of hòn non bộ, this series of sculptures acts as portals through which we can look into AP's private world. Originating millennia ago, hòn non bộ is a miniature mountain and pond structure, a material representation of the locals' imagination of the universe and their respect towards the power of the elements. Traditionally displayed in temples and pagodas, hòn non bộ can now easily be produced, purchased and used as decoration in one's home. On the surface of AP's sculptures, however, in place of details usually seen on a conventional hòn non bộ (such as live plants and ceramic models of pagodas, humans and animals) now grow palm trees, starfish, flip-flops and bikinis - alluring visuals often associated with the illusion of ‘tropical holiday’ escapism. Next to them, the phrase ‘Việt Nam Quê Hương Tôi’ (‘Vietnam My Country’) appears as fragmented, separated, singular words. No longer standing together, no longer whole, which ‘Vietnam’ is AP referring to? Which one(s) is she claiming to be hers? The one existing in mythology and beliefs; or the one turned into a touristic commodity - packaged, sold and bought, to service others' fantasy of a heaven on earth?

Tucked away, inside some of AP's ceramic sculptures, we see videos of the artist herself in different situations, playing different characters. In one instance, she is dressed in a traditional áo dài, wearing heavy make-up, floating on top of an oversaturated still image of a landscape with lush greenery and majestic waters. In an awkward, detached, but nonetheless playful manner, AP lip-syncs to the song ‘Cát Bụi Tình Xa’ (roughly translated ‘The Dust of a Love Long Gone’), written by the much-celebrated, late composer Trịnh Công Sơn, originally sung by the Việt kiều singer Khánh Hà. The somewhat amateurish lip-syncing and dancing of the character who AP embodies is intriguing - is she camera-shy, or intentionally doing it out-of-sync? As the video continues, we see her body language starting to change, as she gently flips her hair and flirts with the voyeuristic lenses of the camera, as if claiming her control. At certain points, AP breaks out of both the song and character, deliberately moving her lips out of sync with the tune and leading

her gaze elsewhere off frame, and eventually casually gets back to performing. It is as if the music, people and moments of the past have been discarded, erased of their context, forgotten, and become a tune one can conveniently select, play and turn off.. Or, is it that the weight of history is so significant and dense, that one has to - from time to time - ignore its existence? Like it is often said, 'Ignorance is bliss.' Elsewhere in the space, another sculpture made of several ceramic parts hangs on the wall, depicting what looks like a pair of underwear or bikini bottom, broken into pieces and tied to a chain. No longer putting on makeup or costumes, in this work AP deliberately takes off her façade, confronting us with the most intimate item of clothing, usually seen by loved ones or oneself. The act of revealing something so close to the skin of the female body and female identity becomes twisted, for across the shiny surface of the ceramic, the word 'Privilege' faintly appears. What privilege? The privilege to own and touch one's body? The privilege to share and change one's identity? Who has this privilege? Can this privilege be earned, or taken? Here, the artist also points at a different kind of privilege - her own - which has provided her with a better education, given her the opportunity to travel and see the world, and essentially the freedom to choose how to live her life. Ironically, to have this freedom there might be a price to pay, as the symbol of the chain suggests. For is it not true that 'You win some, you lose some'? Just like in the much darker ending of the original, far more tragic fairy tale, The Little Mermaid has to sacrifice her voice and ultimately her life, only then to be denied by the prince of her dream. She is thus stuck on Earth with a curse: to do good deeds for mankind for 300 years, in the hope that one day she will rise up to Heaven and become immortal. One may wonder, 'What price is AP willing to pay?'

Taking on the character of a tourist traveling her own country as if for the first time, AP skips and scans her everyday surroundings and reality, making a personal journey through the different sites, cultures and stories that Vietnam has to offer. At first glance it seems that the artist, in a child-like manner, randomly picks out whatever references (whether visual or historical) that feed her imagination, freely turning them upside down and inside out, innocently meshing them together to make her art. Underneath it all, however, with consideration and intention, AP bravely embraces both the possibilities and the problematics of her subjects, and also herself. She does so with sincerity, an open heart, and most importantly, with a yearning to learn about the world around her, and to question her own position in that world.

And so, her journey continues...

(*) Traditionally, kitsch is associated with Western culture, especially with the post-industrial revolution when society started to grow affluent and more people had more time for entertainment and recreation. As "cheap imitations, humble religious art objects, vulgar souvenirs, and kinky antiques", kitsch is mass-produced, faking up and combining stylistic conventions of vastly different periods, countries and cultures. Often used as mere ostentatious decoration, kitsch is popularized and adored by many because of its accessibility, affordability and what scholar/critic Matei Călinescu referred to as "instant beauty" – pleasing to the eyes and easy to understand. Often hard to distinguish from kitsch, camp "cultivates bad taste... as a form of superior refinement," and is at times consciously used by artists to "subvert the conventions of a "good taste" that eventually leads to sclerosis of academicism." For a detailed study of kitsch and camp, refer to Matei Călinescu's book 'Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism' (1977). Indiana: Indiana University Press, USA.

(**) Taken from AP Nguyễn's artist statement, November 2020. Here, the phrase "things quintessentially Vietnamese" refers to the ideas, images and locations that have come to symbolize an imagination of what constitutes 'Vietnam'. They themselves have been turned into mass-produced souvenirs one collects as they go on holiday (i.e. keychain, fridge magnet, picture frame, postcard etc.), or interior decors one displays in their home.