

Pain as Sonorous Dimension, Post-Imperial Healing and Spectral Counter-Narrative in *a sentimental dissidence*

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Life in any diaspora is one of innate perplexity, with the struggles to weave and dissect oneself from a heritage strangely distant yet intimate. As a consequence, a purgatory-like emotional space can form, where temporality becomes fluid, the self is thrown into an existential drain, and questions of belonging, recollection, future, and belief arise. These are, thus, some of the themes central to Gabi Dao's exhibition *a sentimental dissidence*. Poignant and contained, *a sentimental dissidence* elucidates a complex yet heartfelt dissection of the pains of diasporic identity, the complications of memory, and growth beyond colonial loss. Deftly done and intimate, it finds grounding in her family's forced migration to Canada following the Vietnam War. Offering a well-fleshed-out, soulful glimpse into the complications of a nation's imperialist past and the integrality of counter-memory in community healing, Dao's works function as a means to traverse and reconcile such fractured landscapes of identity. Located at the artist-run centre grunt gallery on East 2nd Avenue in Vancouver, this solo-artist show ran from November 1 to December 13, 2019. Dao, who completed her BFA at Emily Carr University in 2014, utilizes film, sculpture, and sound to craft a fluid, mesmeric dream sequence of a space. This Vancouver-based artist draws on her familial roots—as well as research along the vast rivers and islands of the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam—to craft a fragmented, yet potently moving narrative of displacement, and, as the exhibition's eponymous phantom narrator, Coco, puts it, “haunting.”



Photographed by Dennis Ha, courtesy of grunt gallery.

Within the modest gallery space, an enclosed rectangular room, the ambience is set immediately by soft incandescence and continual, gentle background audio. Soft hums and excerpts from “Foreign Accent Improvement” cassettes—used by Dao’s immigrant parents in the 1980s—allow for sensorial immersion, as the instructional nature of the audio requires a willing listener. In this space, the willingness is made void, and the faint, mechanical fragments of accented audio make for an eerie, unsettling experience. Viewers become acutely aware of their own bodily presence, as the noise permeates the entirety of the isolated room, functioning as an illusory blanket of sorts. Dimmed by UV-reducing window vinyl, meagre sources of light in the space include the warmth of two key “somatically activated” sculptures, one entitled *you and i* and the other *i and you*, each standing near the gallery walls. Located on opposite ends, these freestanding human-sized models incorporate aluminum, tempered glass, and transducers in the shape of two intertwined faces accompanied by lavender, red, and mustard beaded curtains. The sculptures are placed strategically under yellow-toned spotlights to cast hypnotizing silhouettes of the faces, along with the viewer’s physical form on the walls. Ghostlike mirrored surfaces in their centres complete the works, forcing the viewer to confront their appearance while entwined with those of the crafted faces. A lucidly intimate ordeal, the intermingling of shadows in this deliberate interactivity prove captivating. Although the two sculptures appear nearly identical, a sole contrast between the two is the inversion of the central

tempered glass faces—in one, the two faces appear to be enveloped in each other, while they are conversely turned away in opposite directions in the other. A striking choice on Dao's part, this subtle juxtaposition highlights the ever-shifting nature of a corporeal self that exists while entangled within two physical places. Thus, the audience is invited into and embedded within both her narrative space and the conversation around the variability of constructing identity. They become participants whose physical forms fittingly transpose with movement.

At the centre of the exhibition, both spatially and conceptually, is the focal, engrossing work *coco means ghost*, a 25-minute, 24-second single-channel video projected fittingly on a wall between the sculptures. The impact of this exhaustive work is further augmented by how sound is key in the viewer's experience of it: throughout the film are ambient and swelling background music, bird noises, the sloshing of river water, and the deep whirl of a boat. Coming from speakers ingeniously situated on empty Canadian-produced coconut water cans, the set-up and audio allow for an intensified intimacy with Dao's stories, emphasizing the fluid boundary navigation between nations. Viewers are invited to watch the work on folded wooden chairs, made more comfortable with strewn earth-toned pillows, all inducing an ambiguous feeling about the cultural origins of their craftsmanship. One then embarks on a hypnotic three-part sequence accompanied by the pained, reverberating voice of Coco, a spiritual presence that takes the form of a coconut—its disembodied vocal source Dao herself. A sleek, yet nostalgic combination of personal photographs, archival material, and first-person commentary make for a compelling visual treat. Rich with brilliant vivid imagery of Southeast Asian past and present, the film immediately strikes with its opening shots of clouded green water and a faint voiceover of the Vietnamese alphabet. What follows is an immersive, emotional experience of humanity, scenery, and burden. "To whom does nationhood belong in a place filled with ghosts?" Coco poses evocatively. Enamouring shots keep the viewer transfixed on this earnest journey through space and time: lush rural Vietnamese scenery, virulent with greenery; men cutting green coconuts, torched in the sun; a sole national flag bobbing in the water. A boat lulls in lavender waves, cellphone towers visible in the gentle luminescent light; sun-kissed women work in rice fields, interspersed with bustling metropolitan streetscapes. "We waited a long time for this chance to move beyond imperial conquest," Coco narrates over the seamless shifts between landscape and personal testimony. "This is the version that begins with two eyes and a mouth ... 'and' is the word between worlds ... purgatory is a place where memories come, here eyes and ears wipe off dust." These notions of disjointed, cloaked memory and human presence concretize in the forms of Vietnamese locals recounting their harrowing experiences of U.S. invasion, following years of French and Chinese colonization. In a concurrent lighter vein though, featured memories include those of Ong Dao Dua ("Mr. Coconut"), a monk who founded a self-sustaining anti-war community in the mid-twentieth century on Con Phung, an island colloquially known as the Coconut Kingdom / Phoenix Island.

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It is Dao’s exploration of the question “how do you remember the past the most?” that drives the melancholic soul of this work. Odd, almost cartoonish, overlays of memories in the same location and sudden bursts of heavily accented Vietnamese narration assert the film’s unabashedly personal implications of Dao’s ethnic roots. Coco’s wishful lucid voice speaks of being from the “edge of the water” and how “in conversation between worlds, a ghost is not supposed to ask questions ... the experience of haunting is an implication because of the inheritance of the weight we shoulder.” These powerful proclamations are thought-provoking, encapsulating the harshness of a post-imperial, diasporic existence where distance from the spatiotemporal experience of homeland—whether forced or native—may indeed feel like being at the edge as a spirit. While physical distance complicates ascertaining actualization of personhood, there is still an intense pull towards a sense of belonging. Violent history can result in a unique pain that functions as an intergenerational burden, as evidence of the past lingers in the forms of memory and lost time. An individual like Dao, being a first-generation immigrant, carries this pain, and her struggle to reconcile with how it complicates identity is evident in her spectral role throughout the exhibition. “Persistence haunts through a self-made narrative; hyphenation is the new form,” Coco offers over shots of a dark river rippling with orange city light. “Subjectivity survives ideology through a sentimental dissidence.” Dao’s art, then, is a form of personal resistance, ultimately demonstrative of her attempt at bridging the anguished gap between personhood and history. Nonetheless, Dao’s painful, grief-filled examination of reconstructing a Vietnamese identity from cultural devastation is not without hope. Casting an encouraging, literal golden light over the film are the lively hued scenes of Ho Chi Minh City—sunlit marble statues of the Buddha and Jesus idle underneath wind-swept trees, vibrant local fruit, and lavish, glittering yellow and blue

jewelled stonework. Themes of rebirth are seen in this recurring visual motif of golden light as well as the emphasis on “Phoenix” Island. The artist dedicates the final section of the film to university students of biotechnology and their work on engineering coconuts “like their grandmother sold.” Polished imagery of lab work and enthusiastic urban youth convey strong messages of the possibility and potential of a future beyond deep-rooted suffering. For a moment, the lines of identity, nationality, and historical experience blur through the meticulous marriage of sound and imagery, and the outcomes are resonant, insightful, and awe-inspiring.

Gabi Dao’s *a sentimental dissidence* is a deep-cutting, wounded memoir that firms its grounding on displaced pasts. The laborious meshing of the contemporary and historical, personal and translocal supplement the stark, personal force of this exhibition. Despite the exhibition’s modest scale, I found it immensely profound, comprehensive, and a clear labour of love. The artist’s investigation of the painfully divisive nature of navigating an identity that is, in ways, caught between two worlds is brilliantly effective. The space moves and invites, and its parting notes of hope allow it to be more than simply critique, but rather a transcendental reclamation of narrative. It is a stirring, thoughtful contribution to ongoing discourse on conflict-driven introspection and post-colonial healing, a true and tender triumph. ■

WORKS CITED

Gabi Dao, *a sentimental dissidence*, grunt gallery, Vancouver, November 1 to December 13, 2019, <https://grunt.ca/exhibitions/a-sentimental-dissidence/>.

coco means ghost: screen and video, 25m24s, followed by a short pause. HD video, 2.1 sound, LED lights, cans of coconut water, photograph, bench and pillows.

you and i, i and you: sculptures and audio, 6m30s, followed by a short pause. Beaded curtains, UV-reducing window vinyl, transducers, tempered glass, aluminum.