

'Only Your Name': On Loss and Longing for Vietnam

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Only Your Name: Vicky Đỗ | Hoa Dung Clerget | Duong Thuy Nguyen, SLQS Gallery, London,
6 June – 12 July 2025



'Only Your Name: Vicky Đỗ | Hoa Dung Clerget | Duong Thuy Nguyen', installation view, SLQS Gallery, London, 6 June - 12 July 2025

'Only Your Name' explores the legacy of migration from Vietnam to the UK, thoughtfully reflecting on diasporic memories through a modern perspective. As Vicky Đỗ, Hoa Dung Clerget and Duong Thuy Nguyen share their journeys, personal and political histories blend seamlessly, highlighting the intricate relationship between shared experiences and personal identity. The title of the exhibition was borrowed from an excerpt in American Vietnamese writer Ocean Vuong's debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. For the gallerist Sarah Le Quang Sang, who opened her space in London's Shoreditch in February 2025, showing these artists of Vietnamese descent, and all from the same generation, is also a homecoming for her as she has Vietnamese heritage, too. The push and pull of a homeland left behind, and the loss and longing for it is a theme of the show.

In the series *If they survive, they are refugees*, Duong Thuy Nguyen's stunning aluminium embossed images, beautifully framed in wax, draw inspiration from late-1980s photographs by the English photojournalist Joan Wakelin featuring Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong's detention centres, part of the V&A's permanent collection. Wakelin had been commissioned by the charity Save the Children, and the photographs were shown at the World Press Exhibition in Amsterdam in 1990 but not allowed to be shown when it travelled to the Barbican art gallery in London. Nguyen approaches this source material with a fresh perspective; as someone from a family of scrap metal merchants she is actively involved in the carving process to create these images, tracing the photographs while also making thoughtful decisions about what elements she chooses to emphasise. For instance, she often brings the people in some images to the forefront, even if they were more background figures in the original where the scenery takes centre stage. Her embossing technique includes tracing from negatives, and the carved wax frames pay homage to altars found in homes such as her grandmother's, where candles are lit next to images of loved ones as a means of honouring and connecting with ancestors. The works are poignantly poetic, their titles such as *What would they be without each other?* and *The sea feeds and kills* lending an air of melancholy. In *You, Loan and Dung*, the images of three children are in closeup and they are wearing nametags, with one of them chewing on his, while in *Go wash yourself*, two children and a woman are the subjects. The woman is about to bathe one of them with water in a bucket in front of them while the other child looks on. The relationship between all three is unclear, the indeterminate nature of what is happening lending an alluring mystery to the work.



Duong Thuy Nguyen, *What would they be without each other?*, 2024–2025, mixed media, dimensions unknown, image by Studio Adamson, courtesy of the artist and SLQS Gallery, London

Hoa Dung Clerget's relief works, which she describes as a blend of painting and sculpture, are crafted using gel polish (acrylic gel polish and nail gel builder). She utilises these materials to honour Vietnamese women in migrant communities, many of whom work in nail salons without adequate protection from the toxic products they handle daily. In discussions with the curator, Hoa recounted her experiences in nail salons in London and Paris prior to creating these pieces. Not only is the material hazardous, but Hoa is also allergic to it, requiring her to wear protective gear in the studio. Her choice to use gel polish highlights the lack of safety for women working in these environments and echoes her assertion in a conversation with the curator that the pursuit of beauty can be highly toxic. The images reference iconic depictions of women in Western art history, and ironically employ a Gauguinesque exotic gaze to critique the Western male perspective on Eastern women. She intentionally uses meticulous glazing techniques akin to oil painting to make the labour of women in nail salons more visible. Reflecting the artist's desire to elevate low nail art to high art within a gallery setting, the layered glazing technique mimics oil painting methods. At an event at the gallery, she talked about one of the works, *Chinoiserie (congai)*, which depicts the indigenous wife of a French coloniser. The term 'congai' translates to 'daughter' in Vietnamese but was commonly used by the French to refer to Vietnamese women as concubines. The work draws inspiration from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *The Turkish Bath (Le Bain turc)* (1862), which has influenced numerous artists – including Pablo Picasso in his *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. K. G.)* (1907), Tamara de Lempicka in her *Femmes au bain* (1922), Robert Rauschenberg in *Revolver I* (1967), and Welsh-born American feminist artist Sylvia Sleigh, who in 1973 created a gender-reversed version of Ingres's work with the same title, challenging the male gaze. In Clerget's version, there are three women; one kneels



Hoa Dung Clerget, *Chinoiserie (congai)*, 2025, mixed media, dimensions unknown, image by Studio Adamson, courtesy of the artist and SLQS Gallery, London

while another is sitting up in the background. In the foreground, the third woman is lying languidly. All three are naked Brown women, but while the face of the one kneeling is obscured by one of the false nails that frame the work, the eyes of the others are shut and they are wearing makeup.

At the heart of the exhibition, there is a life-sized sculpture of a woman dressed in the traditional Vietnamese *Ao Dai*. The stance of Hoa Dung Clerget's *The Worker Figurine* captures a sense of contemplation, almost as if she is in a state of pause. She isn't actively working, nor is she truly resting. Instead, she represents a fleeting moment, an enigmatic presence that invites reflection. This piece powerfully conveys the complex feelings of visibility and vulnerability that Asian female workers, especially those in nail salons, experience as they face fetishising and exoticising gazes. The floor-based sculpture invites viewers into a haunting, suspended moment, creating a unique time-space. The *Ao Dai* belonged to Le Quang Sang, the artist's mother and was worn during community celebrations by the Vietnamese diaspora in the Paris area where Clerget was raised. The figure's face is obscured by a mask crafted from layers of nail UV builder gel, which gives it an armour-like appearance while also providing an ethereal quality due to its pearly white hue. It evokes a ghostly and intangible presence. This artwork embodies an intensity that is often overlooked, representing a worker who is both idealised and fragile, rendered invisible as she navigates the space between cultural expectations and the harsh realities of migrant labour. It has an unnerving stillness and resemblance to a real human being as its back is turned to the viewer entering the gallery. With its very long red fingernails resembling claws, it looks like something from a horror film, a demon in the flesh.



Hoa Dung Clerget, *The Worker Figurine*, 2025, mixed media, dimensions unknown, image by Studio Adamson, courtesy of the artist and SLQS Gallery, London

Vicky Đỗ has an interesting backstory. After studying at Texas Tech University in the United States, she went to Hong Kong to do a Master's degree. She was a curator at San Art, an arts space in Hong Kong (now closed down) and makes films that cannot be easily shown in Vietnam due to censorship. One of Đỗ's films showing in the gallery, *From now on* (2017), is about the refugee crisis in Vietnam that followed the communist takeover in 1975, which led to a lack of various freedoms and reduced access to work.¹ Vietnamese people were dispersed all over the world and the film focuses on the experience of those who found refuge in Hong Kong. Đỗ's film is reminiscent of Stephanie Comilang's film installation, *Search for Life II* (2025), which debuted at the 2025 Sharjah Biennial.² In Comilang's installation, an expansive, shimmering screen is composed of beads meticulously strung together in a vertical arrangement, resembling pearls on a necklace. Comilang's installation captivates observers with its iridescent allure, intertwining documentary footage of Filipino free divers with their Chinese freshwater industrial pearl diver counterparts, alongside a performance by a young Filipino-Emirati woman, echoing the style of K-pop stars. The work overlays conventional TikTok sales pitch recordings, which feature encounters with unusual treasure stones, transforming the art project into an enticing exploration of once-coveted treasures that now carry grave consequences. Comilang conveys her fascination as a bicultural individual with narratives surrounding migration, including how migrants carve out their own spaces, the influence they exert on society, and the reciprocal impact of that society on them. Similarly, Đỗ is concerned with migrant workers and sought out different perspectives in Hong Kong on this issue, from local priests to some of the Vietnamese immigrants who have made a home there. The difficulties, in adjusting to life in Hong Kong, or of getting permanent residency or work there are laid bare. At 33 minutes, it is probably too long to watch in a gallery, so Le Quang Sang generously shares a viewing room link with anyone who wishes to see the film.³ This link offers essential information about all the highlighted works, alongside Đỗ's complete video, allowing viewers to enjoy it at their convenience. Within the gallery space, a simple white plastic stool – often seen in Vietnamese street restaurants and cafes – invites guests to sit and immerse themselves in the film, although one seating stool is not really enough, allowing only one person at a time to sit and watch the film.

This raises a number of questions. Any depth of attention is not possible when you have the distractions of other people also trying to watch the same work in a small space, or your phone beeping, or you have some concerns about sharing the same headsets as so many others have

¹ More information about Vietnamese history and the events around the Communist takeover can be found in 'Vietnam country profile' on the BBC News website, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-16567315, last

² See 'Search for Life II: Stephanie Comilang' on The Vega Foundation website, <https://www.thevegafoundation.com/productions/search-for-life-ii>, accessed 4 July 2025

³ The online viewing room is accessible to anyone who requests access by clicking on 'Request Online Viewing Room' on the SLQS Gallery website, www.slqsgallery.com/exhibitions/9-only-your-name/overview, accessed 4 July 2025



Vicky Đỗ, video still from *From Now On*, 2017, 33 mins, courtesy of the artist and SLQS Gallery, London

done that day. Claire Bishop in her latest book ‘Disordered Attention’ sees the idea of deep attention in spaces dedicated to art as a colonial, upperclass male construct arguing that we now live in a time in which we can document what we see in galleries and live stream it or upload it shortly after, a wonderful way to be a spectator, a brilliant techno-mediated way of appreciating art.⁴ And doesn’t an artist making a film that is half an hour long run the risk of visitors to the gallery, in our period of waning attention, not finishing it no matter how strong it is? Those too shy to ask for the link will not ask for it and thus lose out on watching the whole of this engaging work. I did admire the fact that the gallerist hired a Sony ProFeel Pro monitor first released in 1986, commonly known as the Sony Cube, to show the work; the choice of viewing device helping to transport audiences to the past when the film was shot.

This show is good at highlighting the experiences of Vietnamese in the diaspora while shedding light on an episode of Vietnamese history many will be unaware of. It allows artists with parallel experiences and using different media to engage in conversation with each other and allows visitors to enter that conversation.

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⁴ See Claire Bishop, *Disordered Attention: How We Look at Art and Performance Today*, Verso, London and New York, 2024, p 30