

Phuong Ngo pieces together the past imperfect

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Phuong Ngo understands there are few missions as futile as trying to recreate the past. In 1982, the Melbourne-based artist's parents fled Vietnam. A few years ago he returned to Pulau Bidong, the Malaysian refugee camp that was home to his family before they started their lives in Australia.



Phuong Ngo, with his work, Colony, at the Museum of Contemporary Art. *Credit: Janie Barrett*

However, despite his best intentions, the truth of their experience eluded him,

"I thought that the easiest way to understand them was to retrace their journey, but it was an epic failure on my part," Ngo says. "I stayed at a resort and didn't visit a refugee camp. I visited a tropical island. I was better off not going because I'd had this imaginary closeness to their story without realising how far I was from it."

Ngo is one of eight artists featured in this year's edition of the Museum of Contemporary Art's Primavera.

The annual exhibition, curated this year by Megan Robson, champions some of Australia's most exciting new artistic voices and includes works by Hoda Afshar, Caroline Garcia and Jason Phu.

Ngo, who was born in Adelaide, describes himself as "that weird kid who always got into trouble for hanging out late at the gallery".

He studied politics and Asian studies and briefly worked in Canberra before returning to visual arts in Melbourne. Since 2010, he's built a practice that wrestles with the tension of growing up in Australia as part of the Vietnamese diaspora.

It maps the distance between his own story and his parents' history, one that's also part of a shared historical narrative that shapes the conversation around refugees today. For the past eight years, Ngo has been assembling The Vietnam Archive Project.

The work, which has seen the artist scour eBay for Vietnam War paraphernalia – postcards, old photo albums, slides shot by American veterans – reframes a story that's always been told through a Western lens. It also exposes the fictional nature of these historical perspectives.

"The Vietnam Archive Project is an ongoing process of acquiring work and is a central component of my entire practice – a lot of the works I exhibit are triggered from the archive," says Ngo, who spends years studying the visual patterns that emerge from his archive to unearth hidden resonances and has collected over 20,000 images to date.

"I'm also interested in the value of distance – when you look at that famous photo of the sailor kissing the nurse in Times Square after World War II, it's clear that it's an assault. Eddie Adams' famous image, Saigon Execution actually shows a man accused without fair trial. With context and hindsight, you can unpack so much."

In Australia and the US, the conversation around refugees increasingly lacks context and hindsight. For Ngo, this fear of "otherness" can stem from historical erasure. He attempts to redress this in his art.

In January, Ngo will spend 10 days living at the MCA subsisting on sugar cane, rice and condensed milk – the rations his parents consumed during their passage to Australia – as part of Article 14.1. Viewers will also be invited to make origami boats while listening to the oral histories of refugees

Ngo says the 10-day performance, which takes its name from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and has previously unfolded in Melbourne and Belgium, is another effort to honour his parents' experience. It's also an attempt to show audiences how our stories are interconnected.

"The performance is not designed to change the world, but I want to spark new conversations about refugees and affect people intimately, one-on-one," he explains.

"My parents ask, 'why would people want to watch you be hungry?' But, the trauma your parents go through becomes part of your own trauma. My ability to make politically charged work without being afraid is testament to the fact that they risked life and limb for me. The work might be an inherent failure, but I hope that it is a beautiful and poetic one."

Primavera, Museum of Contemporary Art, November 9 to February 3. Article 14.1 will show January 14 to 23.

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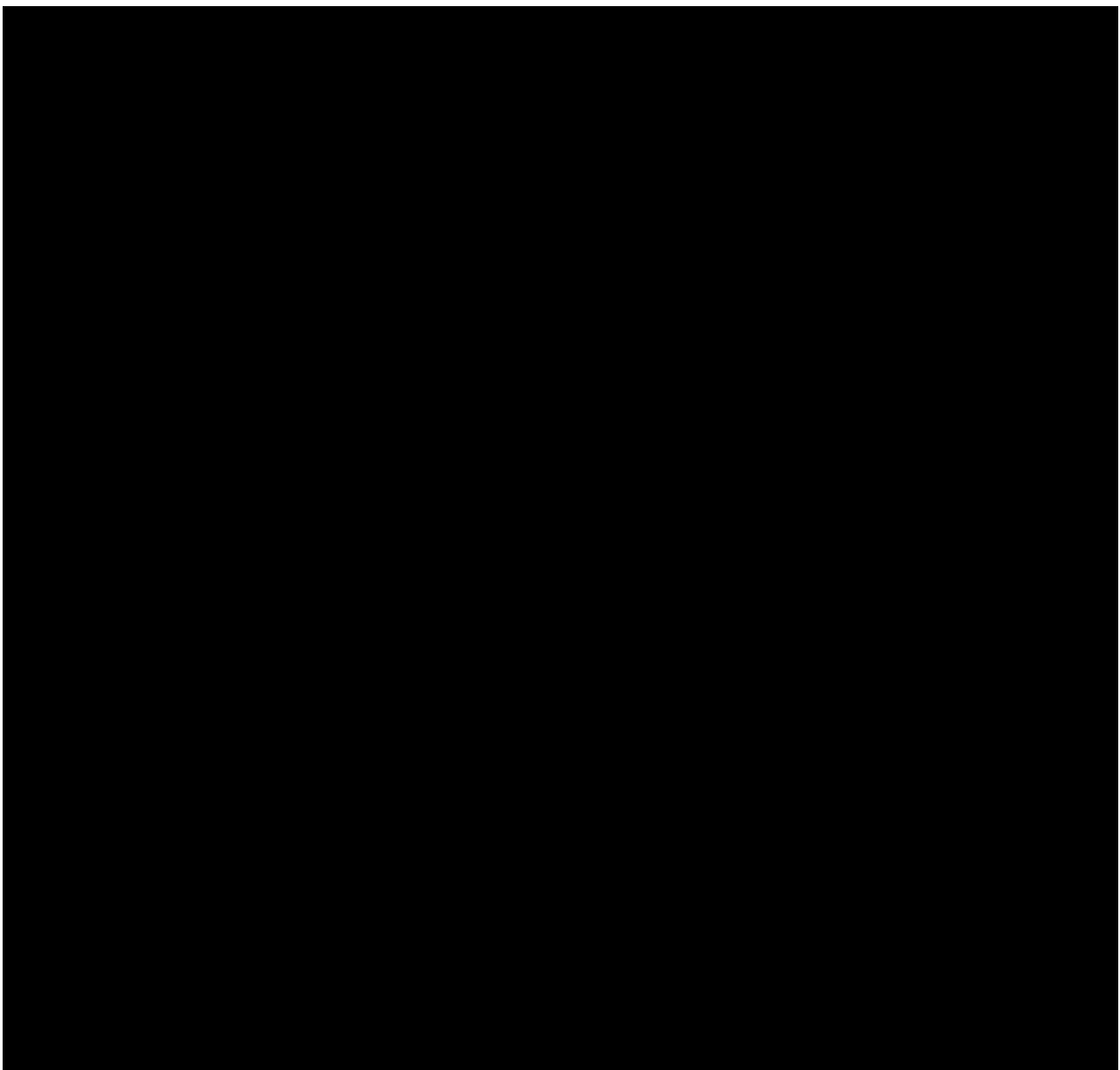
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