

What's new, Hiền Hoàng? Interview by Nadine Dinter

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Nadine Dinter October 10, 2023



Hiền Hoàng was my number one discovery this year. Wandering through the Rencontres d'Arles festival in July, I stepped into Église des Frères Prêcheurs, one of the main locations, where I was immediately captivated by her powerful installation *Across the Ocean*. Bold in appearance yet subtle in its content and message, Hoàng's work makes a strong impression, and she has much more in the pipeline. With two upcoming exhibitions in Budapest and Hamburg, we took the opportunity to catch up with her and sum up what's new.

Nadine Dinter: Since you moved to Germany, your work has gained international recognition with exhibitions around the world. What has your artistic and personal journey been like so far?

Hiên Hoàng (HH): That's right. This has been a period of tremendous growth and exploration for me artistically. I've had the privilege to exhibit my work internationally, which has exposed me to diverse perspectives and cultures. I got to experiment with different artistic approaches, especially across photography, film, performance, and digital media. On a personal level, this journey has been one of adaptation, learning, and self-discovery in a new environment.

2023 has been a busy year for you, with the demands of a big summer event, plus two other shows in October. How are you feeling at the moment?

HH: At this moment, I feel a mix of excitement and anticipation. There's a sense of fulfillment in seeing months of creative effort taking shape. But there's also a touch of nervousness, as I want each project to effectively convey its message and resonate with the audience.

This summer at Rencontres d'Arles, your work *Across the Ocean* earned you a nomination for the prestigious Louis Roederer Discovery Award. How did this opportunity unfold, and what was it like to participate in one of the world's oldest and most esteemed photography festivals?

HH: Showing my work *Across the Ocean* at the renowned Rencontres d'Arles festival this summer was truly a phenomenal experience. Collaborating with Tanvi Mishra, a curator of immense expertise, as well as the highly professional festival team, was integral to bringing my vision to life. Their dedication to art and their support made the entire journey even more memorable. Additionally, it was particularly meaningful for me because I had attended this festival just eight years ago as a visitor. To have my work featured in the main program and nominated for the award felt like a full-circle moment and was an absolute honor.

Your immersive installation got the best and most prominent spot inside the Église des Frères Prêcheurs, in my opinion. The work raises profound questions about stereotypes and the role of women in society. Did you incorporate any of your own experiences into this piece? Did the installation spark meaningful conversations between you and the visitors?

HH: In my installation at the Église des Frères Prêcheurs, I aimed to provoke contemplation on prevalent clichés and the roles assigned to women in our society. This work was deeply personal, as it drew upon my own experiences and observations, including my journey as an immigrant trying to integrate myself and my identity into a new culture. As a Vietnamese living in Germany, I have encountered verbal discrimination and even faced a physical altercation. The physical and psychological pain I've experienced, along with insights from my research, guided me in translating these experiences into the movement and forms within my artworks, particularly the destruction and deformation of plexiglass, as well as the suffocation act in the performance video.

I sought to challenge stereotypes and break free from them through my art. Interestingly, people found the destroyed forms and the depiction of suffocation intriguing, drawing them in to explore my artworks and engage with the underlying message. The tangible and transformative nature of my work served as a bridge, allowing the audience to delve into the deeper messages I tried to convey.

Your upcoming work, *The Treescape Installation: A Walk between Suffering, Dreams and Desire*, is set to be displayed in one of Hamburg's largest parks, Planten un Blomen. What do you intend to present and convey, and what inspired this project?

HH: *The Treescape Installation* at Planten un Blomen marks the premiere of my latest project, *Scent from Heaven*. My inspiration primarily stems from the intricate relationship between humans and nature, exploring how we seek protection, redemption, and even destruction within the natural world.

I aim to harmoniously blend art with nature, creating an immersive narrative that encourages reflection on the complexities of human emotions and our connection to the environment. In this installation, I plan to shed light on agarwood, a rare and valuable wood that comes at a high cost – it is born from the suffering of the Aquilaria tree. I want to use the story of agarwood as a starting point for a dialogue on the fleeting nature of human dreams and desires for salvation or status, sometimes at the expense of nature's suffering.

To bring these ideas to life, I will project videos and performances across the trees in Planten un Blomen. The park is particularly fitting for *Scent from Heaven* because it, too, has a history of destruction and rebirth. This connection between the park's history and my project adds depth to the overall narrative.

Your works often combine beautiful and poetic aesthetics with challenging, controversial content. What is your approach to blending myths and dreams with harsh realities?

HH: I believe that myths and dreams are both a reflection and an extension of reality. Often, the truth can be harsh and painful, and we use myths to cover and sugarcoat it. However, myths and dreams also hold the potential to reveal the truth. What I find truly beautiful is that myths don't just conceal the truth; they enable it to reach a wider audience. Alongside the truth, myths carry a spectrum of emotions – regret, sadness, and anger but also hope and belief.

In my artistic approach, I combine myths, dreams, and striking truths to bring forth the complexity of emotions and the many layers of a subject to the audience. I believe that what connects us most profoundly is not only the truth but also the emotions and dreams that myths have carried all along. My work serves as a vessel to unearth these intricate emotions and facets of the subject matter.

After Hamburg, you will have a show in Budapest at the Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center. What is the concept behind your upcoming VR installation, *Scent of Heaven*? What kind of experience can visitors expect from this project?

HH: The VR installation at the Capa Center is a special extension of my project *Scent from Heaven*. This presentation highlights the concept of seeing and not seeing, akin to the hidden pain of trees. We often don't perceive a tree's suffering, but we do see and desire agarwood, a product born from that pain. To convey this, I plan to create a two-part installation: one in the physical world and the other in the virtual realm. Overall, it will be a garden of absurdity, simultaneously laden with pain and nature, albeit with a somewhat deformed and distorted appearance. Additionally, I will display computer tomography-generated inner images of agarwood.

How do you prepare for your extensive exhibitions? Do you have a team or assistant? What inspires your creativity – music, nature, or something else?

HH: I have the privilege of collaborating with a diverse group of artists, assistants, and, for *Scent from Heaven*, also with scientists. These collaborations have been instrumental in broadening my horizons and enriching my artistic development. Finding the right people who resonate with my work has been truly rewarding.

In terms of what puts me in a creative mood, I find inspiration in thinking and drawing. Whenever an idea strikes me, I sketch it out immediately and continue to refine it. When it comes to music, I typically listen to it while I'm physically working on the art objects in my studio. Instrumental music often provides a suitable backdrop, but I also enjoy listening to Pop and experimental music. I like the ever-changing structure of music.

Is your native Vietnam a source of inspiration for you?

HH: I find inspiration in visiting Vietnam, reconnecting with the local art scene, and recharging my creative energies. The vibrant culture and the rich craftsmanship of Vietnam offer fresh perspectives that influence my work upon returning.

What message would you like to put out to the art world and your fellow artists?

HH: I am still a relatively young artist at the beginning of my career, and I believe I have much to learn and explore. Although at this stage I may not be able to share deep insights with the art world or other artists, I do have a message for my older self who was young, inexperienced, and unsure. I would say that despite the challenges and hardships, it is important to believe in the journey of connecting with the universe, the essence of art and humanity. These struggles are part of the transformation process and stepping stones to a deeper understanding.

Thank you, Hien, for the great insights!

Upcoming & current shows:

13 October 2023
at Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center, Budapest
Until Jan 2024

17 – 24 October 2023
at Planten un Blomen, Hamburg
* Supported by the Ministry for Culture and Media Hamburg, Kunstfond Stiftung and Trevisa CS.

For more information, check out www.hien-hoang.com and the artist's IG account [@hiennhoangg](https://www.instagram.com/hiennhoangg)