

# Line and content

## Craig Thomas

From the beginning of his career as an artist, Pham Huy Thong's work has evinced a preternatural intellectual maturity and seriousness. In *Guardians* (2004), a collection of paintings completed when he was just twenty-three, Thong addressed, among other issues, the criticism that had rained down upon a young Vietnamese writer whose work had dared to show the dark side of rural life in the Mekong Delta. This representation, based on actual events, conflicted with accepted orthodoxy of the happy and virtuous peasant and was subjected to withering criticism from Communist Party officials. Thong's painting "Petit Angel" was intended by the artist as a gesture of support for the embattled author. It caught the eye of the Singapore Art Museum and was included in its 2008 Post-Doi Moi group exhibition of Vietnamese artists. Thong was the youngest artist represented in the show.

After *Guardians*, *Plastic Chairs* (2005-09) focussed on the impact of the *doi moi* reforms on the Vietnamese economy, as epitomised by the plastic chairs that "sprouted like mushrooms after the rain" throughout the country as small restaurants and other enterprises flourished. The series flows out as reportage. Paintings produced in 2006 depict the plastic chairs in luxurious fashion, indicative of the growing prosperity of the moment. Other works made following the 2007-08 financial crisis in Southeast Asia show the chairs in disrepair or inundated with water, reflecting the effects of the economic tsunami on Vietnam's economy.

While he avoids direct criticism of the previous generation of Vietnamese artists, Thong is aware of a widely perceived phenomenon in which many of the country's finest painters become wedded to a single style of commercially successful painting, at the expense of their further evolution. Each of his collections is conceived as if it were a new novel and each painting a chapter therein. The ideas driving each series change distinctly, as does the painting style, although a permeating surrealist and whimsical streak is always present. Thong cites Yue Minjun as among his influences, and his irony-laced work shares an obvious affinity with China's "Cynical Realist" movement that began in the 1990s.

The son of two journalists, Thong counts himself lucky to have grown up in a home that served as a humble salon for his parents' colleagues and other intellectuals who would gather to drink *ruou quoc lui* — the Vietnamese equivalent of moonshine — and discuss the events of the day. As a child, he was allowed to sit with the adults during their parties and soak in their wide-ranging conversations. He speaks fondly of the unorthodox but intellectually charged milieu of the late 1980s and early 1990s in which he was raised. "My parents are generous and open people and never tried to keep me out of things. Anyway, houses in Hanoi were pretty small back then. They and their friends would drink and talk not just about politics but all kind of issues. Sometimes they would read poetry. These things were kind of absorbed into me naturally even though I was just a young boy."

Born in 1981 in the northeastern seaside province of Thai Binh, Thong spent his childhood in a period referred to by many Vietnamese as the "dark years". From the end of the war in 1975 until the late 1980s, the country experienced great economic hardship, punctuated by near famine in 1986. The dire conditions prevailing at the time were the precursors to the *doi moi*

reforms initiated in that year. Even though he was only five or six years old, Thong can still recall the sombre tones and the intensity of the discussions taking place around him at this time. This exposure to ideas and conversations continued throughout his adolescence, fostering the creation of the active and engaged mind that enlivens his paintings.

An articulate blogger, Thong is that rare artist who is also expert at verbalising the messages he wants his work to convey. Listening as he describes his process and the concepts behind each collection and painting can be as compelling as standing before them. The paintings of Thong's *Hands* series (2010-12) demonstrate both his knowledge of geopolitical issues pertaining to Southeast Asia and intensive research into ancillary topics like the weapons systems and military vessels used throughout the region. As in most of his series, he employs both English and Vietnamese words and phrases liberally on his canvases in the *Hands* series to help clarify the multiple levels of meaning in the paintings. If he did not paint so adroitly, he could be a strong conceptual artist.

Thong's *Compatriots* series (2009-10) is astounding for both its visual imagery and the provocative content of many of the paintings. The series draws from the conceit of the Vietnamese founding myth that all Vietnamese are descendants of the sea dragon Lac Long Quan and the mountain fairy Au Co, and are hence ultimately born from the same womb. Thong likes this notion of all Vietnamese as being family but is quick to point out that they have often not treated each other as brothers and sisters. He says, "When I researched our history I found that while we did have a lot of foreign invaders, the time we spent in civil wars killing each other has been far greater." The Vietnamese people are represented as foetuses tied together by umbilical cords in the *Compatriots* series. They are often depicted as greedy, callow and even violent. In *Compatriots*, Thong takes iconic photographs from the Vietnam-US conflict — such as the image of the final evacuation of the Saigon CIA office on 30 April 1975 — and adapts them to his purposes. In "The Last Fall", the building is replaced with a pile of money, the fleeing refugees on the narrow staircase to the roof with the aforementioned foetuses carrying attaché cases full of dollars, and the body of the helicopter with a luxury car.

The strength of *Compatriots* and the later *Hands* series cemented Thong's reputation as one of the Vietnam's most accomplished and promising young artists both domestically and with important regional

collectors. Thong was part of a wave of talented Hanoi-based artists who since 2010 have either relocated to live and work in Ho Chi Minh City or who now have their primary gallery representation in the southern capital. (Disclosure: The gallery that I founded has hosted two of Thong's solo exhibitions, and I will be curating the opening of Thong's *Real Estate* series at the gallery in late 2018).

All Vietnamese visual artists who, like Thong, aspire to address social and political issues in their work must try to discern where the lines of permissible artistic content are drawn. This calculation is problematic because, aside from some obviously taboo subjects, there are no clearly defined rules. The government exercises its authority in this realm through the Ministry of Culture — in Ho Chi Minh City, the Department of Culture — which must approve any work that will be shown in a public exhibition. Obtaining approval of material that approaches "the line" often involves a conversation requiring the artist, or his/her gallery proxy, to explain the meaning of the work to the censors. Any objection by the authorities must be assuaged, or approval to show the work publicly will not be granted.

A collection like *Compatriots* was bound to face a certain degree of scrutiny due to its clear allusion to past and present political realities. Most striking of all the paintings of the collection was "The Last Party", Thong's appropriation of Da Vinci's mural masterpiece "The Last Supper", which depicts Jesus and his apostles at their last meal together. In his rendition, the central figure of Jesus is replaced by a foetus with a wispy beard (reminiscent of a certain prominent Vietnamese historical figure) that is roasting on a spit engulfed in flames. The apostles are replaced by greedy foetuses gorging not on food but on girls, land and dragons. In thought bubbles over their heads are phrases like "Is the Party Over?" and "We're Party Animals" in a clear illusion to another type of "party". When seeking permission for the *Compatriots* exhibition, he was surprised that the painting was one of the few for which additional clarifications were not required. He surmises that the people who reviewed the work may not have spoken English at the time, although they likely would today.

Thong says of the process, "We artists who are fighting relentlessly for freedom with our work must also know the boundaries. We have a rule that you push the boundary but you never step over it. When you work in this field, you have to feel where the lines are and avoid the danger. We are engaged in a long-term battle for freedom of expression, but if we go too far we risk being thrown out of the game. Compared to where we were ten or twenty years ago, we have made great progress."

Thong takes a gracious and empathetic view of the officials tasked with reviewing his work: "Many of the people involved in reviewing artistic content are former artists or studied art, and they also love this country. You have to help them by providing an alternative explanation for your work that is acceptable. In some cases where things are quite obvious, it is important to give them a reason not to accuse you or to construe things another way. You survive this through flexibility and by building relationships." □

Craig Thomas is the director of the Craig Thomas Gallery in Ho Chi Minh City

## POETRY

## Two years later

My love, I'd like my death  
to follow yours  
into a companionable night  
with patients talking in their sleep  
an owl outside  
and amiable nurses chatting  
in the corridor. When my time comes  
Will you accompany?

David Chandler



Christian Berg