

MY VIETNAM RESIDENCIES

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AN UNEXPECTED OUTCOME OF MY *Beyogmu* survey show at Wollongong Art Gallery in early 2014 was a resurrected desire to reconcile with one of my several pasts, by reconnecting with the rich cultural heritage of Vietnam.

Thus in September 2014 I committed to two months in Hanoi with the aim of revisiting the art world and revising my neglected language skills. In Vietnam I strived to learn the language as often as I can: it helped me to see, think and feel from an alternative perspective.

As in Australia, project opportunities come through people with aligned visions and circumstances, hence it was important for me to go on this research trip and circulate within the arts community.

I believe 2014's self-conducted residency was critical to the opportunities that arose for 2015 and also set the tone for the kind of experiences I might expect.

At the end of 2014 a ceramics residency invitation came through the Fine Arts Research Institute's Pham Trung and artist Bang Si Truc, the brother of a former teacher of mine at Hanoi University of Fine Arts (HUFA). I was acquainted with Trung through our 1996 Asia-Pacific Triennial work when I was employed as research assistant, guide, interpreter and liaison officer between Griffith University and HUFA.

A second 2015 residency invitation, ECOart, came through independent curator Nguyen Anh Tuan and Muong Studio. Both offers were extremely attractive to me.

My first residency was in Bat Trang, one of the most active pottery production sites in northern Vietnam, and only 15km from central Hanoi on the opposite side of the Red

River. Bat Trang has a long record of production, famous since the 14th century. With a history closely aligned with that of the country, it is currently experiencing a resurgence of activity, modernising techniques and competing in tough export markets.

My Bat Trang residence overlooked a canal. The dirt access road had such huge potholes few taxis would traverse it. I arrived to a spacious Vietnamese adaptation of a four-storey French villa rendered in 1970s simplicity, alone but for what looked like a farmyard of animals I was not sure what to do with!

Truc set my work station up with artisan and company director Pham Anh Duc at Bat Trang Conservation and Tourism Development, a busy six-storey private ceramics company at 67 Giang Cao Street, around 3km from home. This vertically expansive green building with grand winding staircases integrated retail, permanent exhibition of significant contemporary and historic pieces, production and a teaching program with a school for the vision impaired.

Since I had never worked with ceramics I was apprehensive. My main interest was hand-building as an extension of my previous work with papier mâché sculpture. Duc encouraged me to learn from every employee, each of whom had specialised skills. The incredibly intricate ceramic painting techniques of my colleagues particularly impressed me.

A daily lunch of rice with fatty pork or tofu, clear soup and vegetables was cooked onsite by colleagues. There were also a few special feasts which included duck blood soup and other venturesome treats to celebrate occasions such as Vietnamese Women's Day (20 October).

Each day my colleagues worked from 8am to 5pm, seven days a week, later if deadlines were pending, with days off in rotation. There was also a midday siesta. I followed this schedule bar Sundays.

My working days were coloured by an intense scrutiny of my every move. It seemed any mark or form made generated comment. The group consensus was that I was making ghosts. In the spirit of amicability I agreed, but by the end of my time there I realised it was largely true.

Although I'd like to believe otherwise, I was an outsider, but my status progressed. To one colleague, I graduated from being "skinny old lady" to "clever professor". When offered a tip by an American tourist I felt unexpectedly proud that I was perhaps mistaken for a local! At 67 Giang Cao Street, goodwill, humour and industriousness prevail.

While my colleagues were making refined uniform ceramic forms, I questioned such mass perfection. I prefer the rustic village art aesthetics of 16th- and 17th-century Vietnamese communal house carvings. Consequently I injected my hand-shaped pieces with a deliberate fallibility. When working on company forms, I carved holes in one, painted the innards I'd been served for dinner on another.

Opposite page clockwise from top left: Chien drawing fine lines on bowls, photographer Mai Nguyen-Long; Sick, 2015, glazed stoneware, 8 x 7 x 5cm; Identity, 2015, glazed stoneware, 21 x 16 x 16cm; Loaded kiln trolley, photographer Mai Nguyen-Long; Cohabitation, 2015, glazed stoneware, 16 x 12 x 12cm; Exposed, 2015, glazed stoneware, 14 x 7 x 7cm; Un/civilized, 2016, glazed stoneware, 19 x 19 x 19cm; Extraordinary skills, photographer Mai Nguyen-Long.





My introduction to ceramics away from my art studio norm was unexpectedly provocative.



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I hand-formed 11 pieces and painted on 11 company moulds. On leaving I gifted some as an expression of my extreme gratitude for overwhelming hospitality. In 2016 I was able to return to 67 Giang Cao Street and make additional ceramics.

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My second residency, at Muong Studio in amongst the limestone mountains, and collocated with Muong Cultural Museum in Hoa Binh Province, 75km from Hanoi, was very different.

Nguyen Anh Tuan's ECOart project hosted eight core participants, four of whom were international, with on occasions a total of 20 residents. During the day we participants worked on our personal projects in fluid, open studio spaces. Evenings were reserved for presentations. Sleeping quarters were in a traditional Muong stilt house – everyone together in the same room with basic electricity supply. I was spooked by wasp nests in the showers but disappointed not to encounter the ghosts so strongly believed in, while the silence of the night was broken by termites steadily munching our building.

My new interest in nature spirits and the ephemeral saw me working with cotton, tree branches and bamboo, but my main work was constructed from rat wire. The rigid wire square grid patterning reminded me of the mirrors featured in my mongrel installations 'Pho Dog' (2006) and 'Aqua Mutt: an Installation with Dag Girl' (2007), reflecting the push-pull of conflicted forces. My 147cm tall rat wire work, 'The end the beginning', an apparition-like dog form, was installed in the surrounding bamboo forest and left to be consumed by the climate. Bac



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Au, our bamboo expert, was baffled as to why I could not use natural materials like everyone else. I was at a loss to explain. For me there were too many unanswered questions.

My residencies immersed me deeply into different arenas of Vietnamese art and social cultures. My introduction to ceramics away from my art studio norm was unexpectedly provocative. The ECOart experience was rewarding on a very different level. As a result of my experiences I was able to introduce Muong Studio as a Host Partner to Asialink. Vietnam has so much to offer.

This "small" country has a powerful spirit I feel compelled to explore further. ■

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- 02 Speak, 2015, glazed stoneware, 24 x 24 x 25cm, photographer Mai Nguyen-Long
- 03 Un/civilized, 2016, glazed stoneware, 22 x 16 x 16cm, photographer Mai Nguyen-Long
- 04 Mai Nguyen-Long at work in Bat Trang, 2015, photographer Nguyen Danh Tu
- 05 Meal, 2015, glazed stoneware, 13 x 13 x 6cm, photographer Mai Nguyen-Long

Courtesy the artist