

DIFFUSION

Nguyen-Long's *Diffusion* body of work is comprised of two series of drawings: *Diffusion: Objects*, and *Diffusion: Unanchored Narratives*. The *Diffusion: Objects* drawings are an intense reflection on a set of figures of spiritual significance that the artist has assembled throughout her life. Each object is studied two or three times over, with the manner of the drawing ranging from a restrained, almost classical, sobriety – in which the objects' iconic features are more faithfully rendered – to a freewheeling, expressive mode, where personal and associative connections are transposed onto the represented objects. In a set of drawings of Quan Am – the name of the bodhisattva of compassion in Vietnam – one representation recalls the multi-armed, cinnabar-red lacquered statues that occupy Vietnamese Buddhist temples. Yet in another version of the figure, Quan Am appears almost visceral: extended hands become like the branching of arteries, the enigmatic hollows of the figure's crown become ventricles and atria, with the whole muscular mass of the figure reminiscent of the messy intricacy of a human heart, as if creating an anatomical rendering of Quan Am's infinite compassion. Another interpretation of Quan Am emphasises gesture, where the bodhisattva's customary prayer pose has been reimagined as a forceful, repeated silencing motion, perhaps suggesting that Quan Am compels submission and acceptance in exchange for grace. Nguyen-Long encounters each figure in *Diffusion: Objects* with intellectual inquisitiveness, as well as – seemingly – some trepidation, as though recognising the magnetism of the icons, but at the same time wanting to deconstruct their authority.

Nguyen-Long's drawings also suggest historical and cultural relationships between the objects. The bodhisattva, for example, is shown both in its Vietnamese iteration, as well as in the Chinese form of Guan Yin. Guan Yin's polymorphic qualities are emphasised, as Nguyen-Long represents differently figured and gendered manifestations of that deity. She also draws a visual and iconographic parallel between Guan Yin and the Virgin Mary: a comparison that has real historical roots in the region, as some Ming dynasty statues of Guan Yin resemble images of the Virgin and Child.¹ By emphasising the interconnections and transformations of the deity figures, Nguyen-Long's drawings contest ideas of cultural purity and moral absolutism. She uses the figures as vehicles for the exploration of her characteristic themes of

metamorphosis and hybridity. In her past work, Nguyen-Long created the character of the *Pho Dog*: a friendly mutt that is both an alter-ego and a familiar, the representational product of a personally constructed mythology and cross cultural encounter. Vestiges of the “mongrel dog” character also linger in the *Diffusion: Objects* drawings – emerging from the Virgin Mary’s billowing draperies or snarling at the feet of Guan Yin – suggesting that the diffusion of the religious icons is also functioning as a metaphor for human diasporic experience.

This point is made even more clearly in the parallel series of smaller, more intimate, drawings displayed in administrative binders. These drawings, called *Diffusion: Unanchored Narratives*, are “internalized and more immediate responses” to the themes of the exhibition. In these images, the artist’s alter-ego characters appear to undergo a traumatic journey through the subconscious, which is at times also represented as a physical journey by sea. In the *Diffusion: Unanchored Narratives*, the undercurrent of fear and anxiety implicit in the *Diffusion: Objects* drawings is made manifest in an outpouring of agitated and disturbing forms, some of which resemble, or even parody, the visual qualities of the larger drawings. Thus, a sense of profound ambivalence toward the authority of the religious icons is coupled with the suggestion of physical and cultural movement, and the related traumas of displacement. Taken together, the two series of drawings blur the public realm of culture with the private realm of the psyche, and ultimately suggest the historical contingency of belonging and belief.

Phoebe Scott - Art Historian *September 2012*

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from *Diffusion: Unanchored Narratives 001-078*; ink, pen, acrylic pen on paper; variable measurements: 21cm x 15cm; 15cm x 10.5cm; 14.5cm x 15cm; 9cm x 11cm; 7cm x 8cm; 15cm x 15cm; Mai Nguyen-Long 2012.



¹ For an example of such an image, see Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, *Guanyin*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004, pp. 64-65.



Diffusion: Object (Guan Yin 1); Diffusion: Object (Guan Yin 2); Diffusion: Object (Guan Yin 3); 122cm x 80cm charcoal & pastel on Hahnemuhle; Mai Nguyen-Long 2012.



Diffusion: Object (Virgin Mary 1); Diffusion: Object (Virgin Mary 2); Diffusion: Object (Virgin Mary 3); 122cm x 80cm charcoal & pastel on Hahnemuhle; Mai Nguyen-Long 2012.