

NHU XUAN HUA. HUG OF A SWAN

Note on the curatorial concept of NHU XUAN HUA. HUG OF A SWAN in the FFF

The exhibition is structured into five thematic "rooms". For the 2022 premiere at the Huis Marseille photography museum, the exhibition was created by the artist in response to the original architecture of the museum building (from the late 17. century) and its interiors. "Huis" resonated as an echo to the familiar, the concept of home and the tribute to memories of childhood which are themes running as a thread in Nhu Xuan Hua's narrative.

For the exhibition at Fotografie Forum Frankfurt (FFF), curators Celina Lunsford and Esra Klein and Nhu Xuan Hua have created this particular room atmosphere through stylistic quotes, such as wall shelves, wall panels, colours and patterns. In addition, the artist invites the visitors to dive into a sound experience: each room has its own soundtrack (hand picked music and recorded sounds), which can be accessed via QR code.

Bel Etage

The park bench on the grass reminds Nhu Xuan Hua of the house and garden in suburban Paris where she spent the first years of her life. Shelves make her feel at home. "At ours, the shelves were filled with objects with sentimental value: souvenirs and prizes. All material references to memories."

The fans, on the other hand, are referring to hot Vietnam, where they are everywhere. If you look closely, there is a manifestation of wind to be found in every gallery devoted to Hua's exhibition. Softly-rustling fabrics hint at the invisible movements of memory. In the swirling, contradictory movements of this pair of fans, Hua saw a married couple simultaneously venting – without listening to one another.

The series Vows, oysters and tangerines also focuses on love relationships. The vows concern the marriage vows that couples try to keep, and Hua's most important example: the relationship between her parents. The oysters refer to her father, with whom she eats oysters every New Year and who uses the shells as an artist's palette. Her mother appears in the form of tangerines, based on a Lunar New Year celebrations tradition. Every temple visitor is given a tangerine for good luck, but Hua's mother always takes many to distribute as much fortune as possible to others.

Celebration Room

This room's installation seems to make the visitor part of a birthday party – a theme that recurs in the Tropism works on the wall. For Hua, celebrating a birth also means celebrating motherhood. This can be seen, for instance, in the work Good morning her, part of a series that was originally going to have "breakfast in bed" as its theme. At the beginning of this project, a shooting spree at several spas in Atlanta resulted in the death of eight people, six of whom were Asian female employees. In light of this tragic event, Hua decided to dedicate the series to hard-working Asian women and mothers who never allow themselves the luxury of breakfast in bed, including her own

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mother: "She was a waitress, a cashier, a canteen lady – and someone who put herself aside to care for her children, but the one thing she would allow herself to have were her beauty products." The work can be seen as a reminder to take good care of yourself, as well as others.

In Be a super, the model's eyes playfully light up to become laser beams – a visual hint to supernatural powers, which can take many forms and which we can all discover in ourselves. It is also an indirect reference to Hua's brother, called "Man" (which means "accomplished" in Vietnamese), who has been called after superheroes throughout his life.

Of a more downbeat nature is the work I'm home late, don't you care where I have been – from the series Honey baby – inspired by films about love relationships. This particular image echoes a moment in the Taiwanese film Tapei Story (1985) by Edward Yang. The protagonist tentatively lays her head on her husband's shoulder, a gesture of rapprochement and hope in a hard world and a strained relationship. Despite the lonesome and vulnerable feeling the viewer might feel through the photograph, there is a sense of strength that you can mainly read through her gaze and posture. By placing this work in a festive environment, Hua is honouring our valiant attempts to make something of life.

Courtyard

The series Tropism, consequences of a displaced memory runs as a common thread throughout the exhibition. Images taken from Hua's family archive have been digitally manipulated by an algorithm so that people or their surroundings dissolve into abstract lines and colours, without ever vanishing completely. What appears at first sight to be an altered present is actually a dialogue with the past, and a representation of the perpetual movements of memory: changing and disappearing over time.

Hua took the title of her series from the 1957 book Tropisms (fr. Tropismes) by Nathalie Sarraute, which describes the barely perceptible feelings of attraction or repulsion residing in the subconscious. These stirrings of the soul are prompted by instinctive associations or, perhaps, by an inherited memory. Several of the photographs in the Tropism series were taken before Hua's birth, but she feels that this past continues in her. "In the archive photos I see patterns that recur, unconsciously, in my own life. They evoke strong emotions, even though I have never experienced them in person." For instance, Hua sometimes finds herself buying the flowers that often appear in the backdrop of group portraits in Vietnam. "A story is passed on by repeating it, whether verbally or visually. My work is also about the importance of not losing these kinds of family memories."

Red Room

Upon entering this room, Hua draws similarities with a Vietnamese temple through the original late 17th century room at Huis Marseille, where the exhibition was first shown. The colours, patterns and lavishness are stylistically reconstructed in the FFF version. She further accentuates the temple analogy by giving it a strongly symmetrical layout and by adding gold. "It shows the madness of perfection and, at the same time, the obsession for harmony and balance that I think

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is also present in our culture and my family. “A flow of air brings stalks into a gently rocking movement, creating the impression that you are walking outside, through a field. The documentary A.K. about the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa shows set designers painting a battlefield gold for a scene in Ran (1985). They are warned: “Don’t damage the ears.” These words and images lingered with Hua: for her, they refer both to her father’s deafness and the tea field that her mother’s family possessed before they fled the country in 1978.

The wooden structure on the pedestal supporting the Tropism work is a construction inspired by the poem Chacun sa chimère (To every man his chimaera) by Charles Baudelaire. The poem describes a cortege of men, each bowed under the weight of a mythological monster. They do not know why they are carrying them, or where they are going, but they carry on nonetheless. Hua’s construction carries a family photo taken at a wedding, bringing together all the exhibition’s central themes.

Wedding Room

Festivity and tristesse come together perfectly in the elegant apparition in Singer “How much love can be repeated?”. Is the singer wearing a dress, or chain mail? For the usually cheerful activity of karaoke, the picture looks empty and desolate. Similarly, the ties in “Good boy” no more sway around the two figures like serpentine streamers, and seem to offer the man and woman – with their taut expressions and rigid postures – little liberation.

Perhaps the room’s layout can offer solace for this muted melancholy. The iridescent paper of the prints has a typical Vietnamese aesthetic and the jade stone is also known as a bringer of harmony and protection there; that is why jade bangles are often passed on from mother to daughter. Its green colour recurs throughout Hua’s work, in the background, or the figure seen in Jupiter likes karaoke. Tables, too, occupy an important role. They are an invitation to sit down, to reflect or enter into conversation with other visitors, but they also refer to the fact that sharing a meal – certainly in Vietnamese culture – is an expression of love.

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Intro-Text (wall)

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War (1955–1975), **NHU XUAN HUA**’s family fled to Belgium and France, where she was born. After she left her parental home she felt a growing separation from her roots; she asked family members about their past in the hope of closing this gap and, in so doing, learning something about herself. **HUG OF A SWAN** is effectively Hua’s artistic response to this research, presented in installations, specially designed for the exhibition: altars full of personal and associative artefacts.

Family history as the foundation of an oeuvre

The series Tropism, consequences of a displaced memory runs as a common thread through the exhibition. Hua took the term “tropism” from Nathalie Sarraute’s book of the same name, which described barely perceptible feelings of attraction or repulsion residing in the subconscious, which may be prompted by one’s history. In the series, Hua digitally manipulates images from her

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family archive using an algorithm that dissolves figures or their surroundings into abstract lines. It is a visual representation of memories gradually disappearing or distorting over time.

Artistic cross-pollination

In the exhibition, assignments and autonomous work are intermingled. It reveals how closely these seemingly separate forms of photography are connected. Hua's fashion work can also be seen as a form of tropism; image details refer to personal moments and central figures in her

life. With a passionate desire for perfection – an urge to prove herself to her parents who questioned her career choice – Hua devotes attention to every smallest detail. The language barrier with her deaf father has translated itself into a closer focus on body language. This results in exciting compositions that linger with you.

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Oysters refer to her father and tangerines to her mother, but the swan in **HUG OF A SWAN** stands for the artist herself. When Hua moved to London she often suggested that people use the word "swan" as a way to correctly pronounce her name. "It reflects my lifelong struggle with my identity: how can you know yourself if your name, the most fundamental way of identifying yourself, is mispronounced by others?" With HUG OF A SWAN Hua embraces her visitors but also her own past. Accordingly, the title is a distant reference to the "swan song" – the song that announces a closure. An acceptance of ambivalent feelings about the past, opening Hua to the possibility of a new project.

Désirée Kroep (Junior Curator, Huis Marseille)

Biography

In 2011, **Nhu Xuan Hua** (*1989, Paris) completed the photography course at the Auguste Renoir art academy in Paris. A year later she moved to London working as a photographer for large fashion companies such as Kenzo, Maison Margiela, Dior and Levi's. Her works have been published in Vogue, Dazed Beauty, and the Wall Street Journal. One of her most famous shoots was the cover of TIME Magazine in 2018 whose theme was 'leaders of the next generation', for which Hua photographed the K-pop band BTS. In 2022 her first monograph Tropism was published by Area Books, Paris. Today the artist is based in Paris.

Fotografie Forum Frankfurt (FFF) presents **NHU XUAN HUA. HUG OF A SWAN** in cooperation with Huis Marseille, Museum for Photography, Amsterdam (HMA). There, the work of the artist was shown in 2022 for the first time in a museum. The exhibition was curated by Nhu Xuan Hua with Nanda van den Berg and Désirée Kroep. The FFF show was curated by Celina Lunsford (artistic director, FFF) and Esra Klein (Curatorial Assistant, FFF) together with Nhu Xuan Hua.