

Tammy Nguyen

Four Ways Through a Cave

July 9 - August 20, 2022



Tammy Nguyen's storytelling expertise shines across her multidisciplinary practice which encompasses painting, drawing, artist books, prints and zines. Seamlessly fusing together a diverse set of sources ranging from geopolitics, to philosophy, to religion, to her own subjective experience, Nguyen's layered compositions defy traditional narrative structures. *Four Ways Through a Cave* consists of five new miniature paintings on paper stretched over wood panels and four new leather bound artists' books which weave together a complex, multi-dimensional tale about a country in the wake of war, the human search for truth, nature's hunger, and the colonial legacy of Christianity. This is Nguyen's first exhibition with the gallery.

Titled *Four Ways Through a Cave: 1 - 4*, Nguyen's artist books were conceptualized following a trip to Phong Nha, a cave widely recognized as being one of the most spectacular in the world. Phong Nha is located in Phong Nha-Kẻ Bàng National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Quảng Bình Province, Vietnam, composed of over sixty miles of caves and underground rivers. Located along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the caves of Phong Nha-Kẻ Bàng were used as a meeting place and hiding spot during the Vietnam War. Nguyen was drawn to these caves as a research site both for their primal allure and their historical significance.

Nguyen reimagines the caves of Phong Nha-Kẻ Bàng in this series of artist books which map four different ways of navigating a cave. Photocopied pencil and pen drawings make up the contents of each book giving each page a characteristic flatness. A fundamental tool for Nguyen and a throughline in her work, this flatness collapses hierarchies in her diverse subject matter.

In each book, Nguyen repeats a rich set of symbols and references including the letter O, the same laser cut tropical flora and fauna multiplied and collaged again and again, snippets from the comic book *The Nam'*, and lines of music which form a sort of geological terrain. The O stands in for song, the sun and the open mouth of the cave; the tropical flora and fauna act as an alphabet creating

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an entire world with only a few elements; *The Nam'* was a Marvel comic book series from the 80's which Nguyen often references to point at the mythologization of war; the musical notes form the full orchestral score of the Southern Vietnamese anthem, a song only sung by a disappearing generation in diasporic Vietnamese communities. As each book unfolds, flecks of metal leaf begin to appear with increasing density eventually forming a disc mimicking the passage from darkness into light experienced by a person making their way out of a cave. With Plato's *The Allegory of the Cave* in mind, Nguyen wonders if this passage into light is in fact a passage into truth. If truth lies only in the light as Plato suggests, what is known by inhabitants of the dark?

Nguyen has long been fascinated with and created work about the presence of Christianity in Vietnam. Brought over via multiple colonial campaigns, Christianity has shaped much of Vietnamese culture despite the dominance of Buddhism in the country. Nguyen continues her exploration of this subject in this series of miniature paintings titled *Angels and Saints No. 01 - 05*. Extracting imagery of saints from a book by Millard Meiss titled *French Painting in The Time of Jean de Berry*, Nguyen positions Meiss's saints in a world consumed by its lush, tropical environment. Tiny gilded helicopters circle in the background of each work. Nguyen draws on the writing of the Christian philosopher Origen cited by Eliot Weinberger in his book *Angels and Saints* which describes fallen angels as swarms of insects appearing as the dust floating in the air illuminated by light streaming through a window. In these miniatures, Nguyen imagines helicopters, icons of the Vietnam War, as fallen angels reduced to the size of a mosquito.

In both Nguyen's paintings and artist books, nature looms large, provoking a central question across her work: who is the protagonist? By abandoning traditional structures in favor of flat, collaged compositions, Nguyen confuses the relationship between figure and ground and actor and environment. This confusion allows Nguyen to avoid didacticism, instead asking the viewer to wade in the center of the cave or the thick of the jungle and delight in the mysteries of the dark.

Tammy Nguyen (b. 1984, San Francisco, CA) lives and works in Easton, CT. She received her B.F.A. from Cooper Union in 2007, and her M.F.A. from Yale in 2013. Recent solo exhibitions include Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY (2021); The Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL (2017), among others. Nguyen has been included in numerous group exhibitions, including Greater New York 2021, MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY (2021); Face of the Future, The Rubin Museum, New York, NY (2018); and Bronx Calling: The Third AIM Biennial, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, NY (2015). Nguyen's artist books are in many notable public collections, including Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT; The Center for Book Arts, New York, NY; Clark Art Institute Library, Williamstown, MA; Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Mayer Library, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York, NY; the New York Public Library, New York, NY; Philadelphia Museum of Art Library, Philadelphia, PA; Wesleyan University Library, Middletown, CT; The Rennie Museum, Vancouver, Canada; the ICA Miami, Miami, FL; and the Whitney Museum of American Art Library, New York, NY. She is currently Assistant Professor of Art at Wesleyan University.