Abstracting Ambivalence

An interview with Anh Trần

by Eloise Callister-Baker

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When Anh Trần was nineteen, she left Vietnam to study fine arts at Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland. Although Trần made a lot of paintings and drawings as a child, her schooling, which prioritised STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and English (to serve the country's purpose of economic globalisation), gradually occupied all her time. If Trần had not chosen fine arts, she would have studied business, which she says, coming from a socialist country where everyone studies Marxism and Leninism from year one, is “an extremely common route for young Vietnamese Generation Y”.

Trần’s move was a multi-faceted culture shock – New Zealand’s weather, food, language and politics all starkly contrasted with what she was used to. While adjusting to this unfamiliar environment, Trần established her artistic practice. Over the past eleven years, her practice developed from a ‘painterly’ one interested in aesthetics to one that, in recent years, involves creating gestural, vibrant and huge abstract paintings that interrogate her insider-outsider status as a Vietnamese artist working within a Western paradigm.

Last year, Trần was the first artist from New Zealand to be selected for the two-year-long Rijksakademie residency in the Netherlands. Trần moved to Amsterdam at the end of January

2020 to take up the residency, putting her Doctor of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts on hold.

During her residency, Trần continues to consider the concept of a new painting practice within a global postcolonial context, as she had for her DocFA research. Trần is also grappling with feelings of isolation and loneliness, which were exacerbated in March when the Netherlands began implementing physical distancing and lockdown measures as a result of Covid-19.

ELOISE CALLISTER-BAKER The Rijksakademie is an independent, not-for-profit art institution funded by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences, the Amsterdam Fund for the Arts, Amsterdam City Council and private donors. Between 1,000 to 2,500 artists from around the world apply for the residency each round, but only twenty or so are selected. Out of the 23 artists selected this year there are only a handful of painters (you are the only abstract painter).

Each artist receives a studio, the equivalent of approximately $25,000 NZD per year for living expenses (including rent for accommodation that the residency provides) and a budget of just under $3,000 NZD per year for production. In return, artists are expected to contribute a donation of approximately $27,000 NZD for the Rijksakademie for each year of the residency. During the residency, artists meet advisors from around the world. They also have access to technical advisors who work in specialist workshops and who can assist residents with the practical aspects of their work.

Why did you apply for the residency?

ANH TRẦN I applied for the residency because I see international opportunities like this as part of having an artistic career. The Rijksakademie is unlike most residencies as artists participate for two years. At first this seemed very long, but then I thought it would be a chance to take a break from the normal cycle of applying for funding, grants and residencies throughout the year in order to survive as an artist without having a full-time paid job.

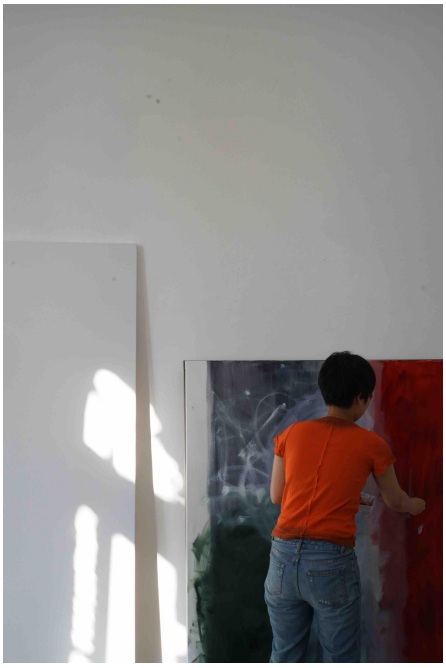
The residency has worked out this way for me so far. There is more freedom – from constantly making work as well as applying for opportunities in time with institutions' and galleries' calendars. I feel like I can try something totally different in my practice without financial or reputational risk.

I wanted to go to Europe for a change of environment and institution, which is what I felt like my practice and personal perspective needed at the time. I have always admired the painterly traditions of European countries, and being in Europe also allows me to see more contemporary artists I like such as: Monika Baer, Jana Euler, Charline von Heyl, Isa Genzken, Cosima von Bonin, Michael Krebber, and Oscar Murillo. There are limited opportunities to see art by these artists in New Zealand. Also, there are a lot more funded opportunities for artists in Europe than anywhere else.

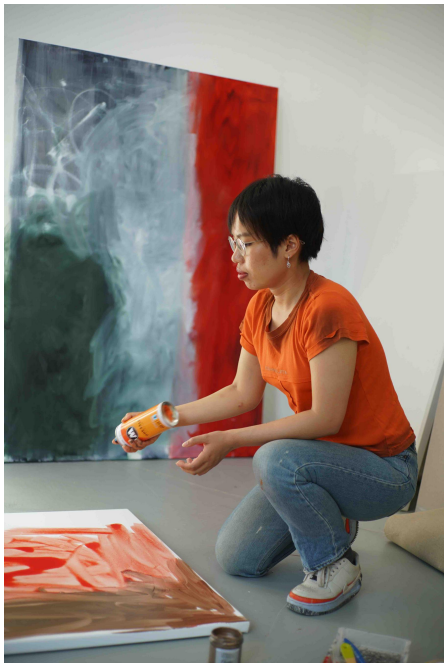
I completed the application for the Rijsakademie online and was shortlisted in April last year. I decided to attend the interview in person in Amsterdam. It was my first time in Europe. It was quite a challenge travelling across the world with my paintings enclosed in a container nearly as tall as me but it was worth it. One of the people who interviewed me was Gabi Ngcobo who put together the first all-black curatorial team for the 10th Berlin Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2018.



Anh Trần, *When Doves Cry*, 2019. Photo courtesy the artist.



Anh Trần in her studio at Rijksakadamie, Amsterdam, June 2020. Photo: Donghwan Kam.



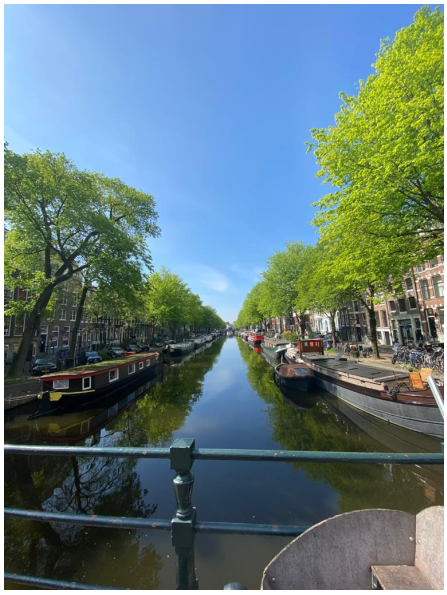
Anh Trần in her studio at Rijksakadamie, Amsterdam, June 2020. Photo: Donghwan Kam.



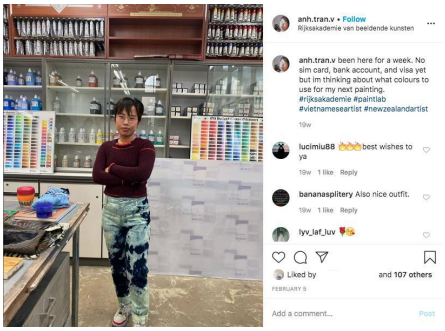
Rijksakademie canal view. Photo: Anh Trần.



Jordaan, my neighbourhood. Photo: Anh Trần.



View along one of Amsterdam's canals, 2020. Photo: Anh Trần.



Instagram post by Anh Trần, February 5 2020.

ECB Why do you think you were selected for the residency?

AT The residency's management encourages people from different parts of the world to apply. Their goal is to be international and avoid being exclusive. I'm the third Vietnamese artist at the Rijksakademie. I heard there was an artist from Vietnam in the 80s, when they did interviews through fax machines.

I explained to the interviewers step-by-step how I made two of the most recent paintings I brought with me. *Your true heart lives in your memory* and *When Doves Cry* were both made in 2019 with a set of experimental painting techniques such as different speed of marks making, spontaneous surface treatments, a combination of brushstrokes and pouring and squeezing paint directly onto the canvas.

They asked what I thought of New Zealand and Vietnam, I answered honestly and they laughed a lot. I told them I thought there was something missing in my practice within the New Zealand art context so I wanted to try living in Europe, where the environment was different and more challenging. The frequent emphasis on identity and diversity of artists in exhibitions in New Zealand feels overwhelming. It sometimes even undermines and distracts from the conceptual or artistic ideas of the art itself, which should be the main focus. I have not felt this way in Europe so far. I don't make art explicitly about being Vietnamese, or Asian or a woman. All of these aspects of my identity are important and contribute to my artist persona, but they shouldn't be used to reduce my whole practice into a singular outline. I think my paintings should have more depth than that.

I believe that if you have a compelling idea and a firm belief, the Rijksakademie might give you a space to realise that. In my case, it was using painting as a medium to challenge Western abstract painting ideas about in/visibilities within a contemporary context. There are more and more women artists who are emerging from Western painterly traditions. In my research, successful abstract painters often have a male Euro-American identity – they never

seem to go too far from these traits. I'm interested in making paintings influenced by these artists, mimicking this canon model but without the privileged background that these artists benefit from.

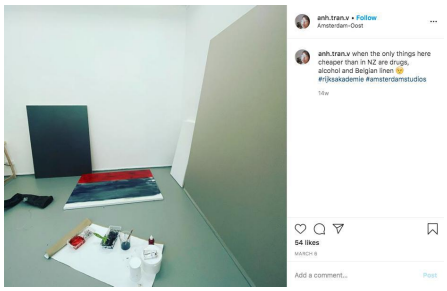
The selecting panels seem to choose people who need time and space to figure things out about their practice. I think this is part of the reason they chose me.



Instagram post from Anh Trần, June 26 2019.



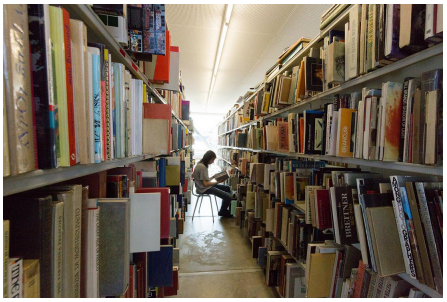
2020 Opening dinner at Rijksakademie. Photo: Anh Trần



Instagram post by Anh Trần, March 7 2020.



Instagram post by Anh Trần, March 25 2020.



Inside the library at the Rijksakadamie. Image courtesy of Rijksakademie.



Sunset over the Rijksakademie, in Amsterdam. Photo: Anh Trần.

ECB What does the residency involve and what resources does the Rijsakademie have available for the residents?

AT It's quite different from the art school model I was used to in New Zealand. During my postgraduate studies at Elam I

had only one or two supervisors for a whole year who got to know my practice very well. Here, we meet the main advisors maybe three or four times a year, and only have one-off meetings with the guest advisors. It is hard to have an in-depth conversation about my work with anyone because most meetings require introducing my practice again. I also noticed there is a lack of advisors who have painterly practices, so I have suggested a list of artists I like to the school.

I have a nice sunlit studio at Rijksakademie, looking out to the main street called Saphartistraat. The main library is small but very functional, accommodating the residents' needs, and we can suggest new books to buy. I've been reading a mixture of theory that I'm still in the process of researching, and fiction such as *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong, *How to be Both* by Ali Smith, and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfegh. They are all about mother-child relationships and how they shape the characters' lives in adulthood. The mothers are dying or dead in these stories.

The technical workshops here are gems. You can make anything using all sorts of technology, and previous residents have used robotic and high-tech digital elements in their installations. I use the paint workshop, which sells materials and has a technician who can help me with things like stretching my canvases. Another resource is access to a network of people, including the staff, the resident community and the advisors.

ECB In the year before you moved to Amsterdam, your work was shown in several exhibitions in Auckland, including: *The Canals of Mars* at Window Gallery in February; *136m3* at Demo gallery in February, at the Auckland Art Fair in the artist-run-space play_station's booth; and the annual new artist exhibition at Artspace Aotearoa in September. It was very clear that there was a rapidly growing interest in your work in New Zealand.

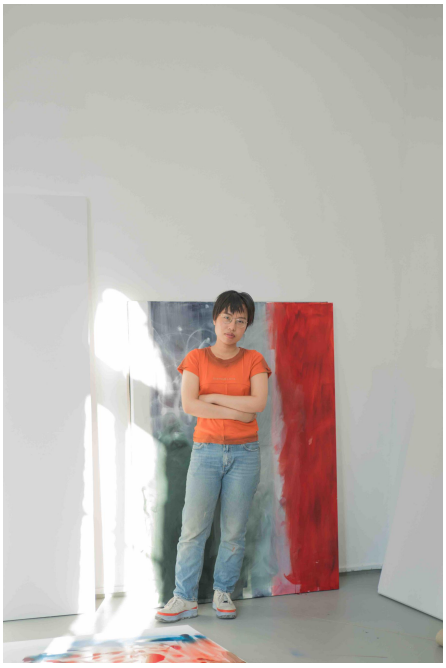
How did you come up with the name for your recent project *And then, one day, my love, you come out of eternity* (2019)?

AT The title is from a line in French film director Alain Resnais' movie *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). The film is based on a book with the same title by French novelist Marguerite Duras, who was born in Vietnam during the French Indochina period. The film is a love story between a French woman and a Japanese man who are separating after a very long conversation about memory and the effects of the Hiroshima bomb in 1945. This event relates to the Japanese military invasion of French Indochina, the end of French colonial occupation, and the beginning of the American war in Vietnam.

I am interested in this historic conflict as it relates to my identity as a Vietnamese person who holds New Zealand citizenship. Even though I am not a direct subject of the British coloniser in Aotearoa, I am from a country with a history of colonisation. My interest in hybridity in language and culture arises from my experience of using the English language every day, despite the fact that my mother tongue is Vietnamese. Although I eat Vietnamese food at home, once I am in the studio or gallery space, I follow a set of manners and perform a task of painting as a Pākehā New Zealander (my entire tertiary education is from New Zealand).



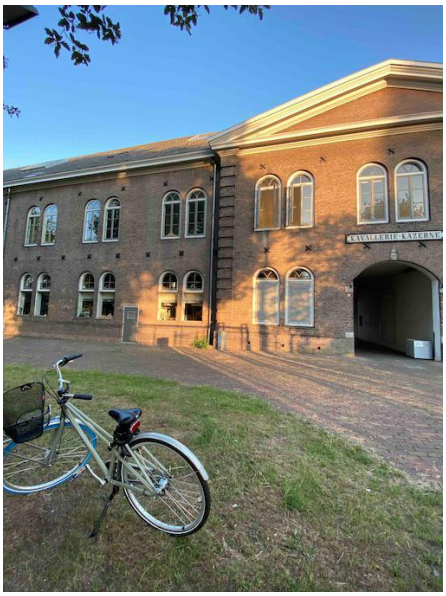
Lindergracht market, where I buy my grocery every Saturday. Photo: Anh Trần.



Anh Trần in her studio at Rijksakadamie, Amsterdam, June 2020. Photo: Donghwan Kam.



Anh Trần in her studio at Rijksakadamie, Amsterdam, June 2020. Photo: Donghwan Kam.



My bike in front of the Rijksakademie. Photo: Anh Trần.



Reading by the canal at Rijks. Photo: Anh Trần.



Dam Square, Amsterdam-centrum, on my way home from Rijksakademie. Photo: Anh Trần.



Residents playing in the courtyard at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam. Photo: Anh Trần.

ECB The titles, symbols and words in your recent work, including the paintings in *And then, one day, my love, you will come out of eternity*, such as *Your Thin Red Line* (2019), or the use of the word 'CLOUD' in your painting *The Imaginary* (2019), feel like they are alluding to personal experiences, ideas and/or jokes. Can you tell me more about this, as well as other formal elements of your work?

AT I like to play around with the titles. They're semi-fictional. They sometimes allude to my personal experience or a theory I am researching, but they are also products of my imagination. People who see my paintings can choose however they want to interpret them. For me, the abstract motifs don't have to be the sole reading.

In the last year, I've been thinking about texts (rather than abstraction) in paintings. Text provides a more instant effect. Even though I'm not interested in the representation of the human body on canvas, which seems to be having a resurgence in painting at the moment, I think about how my work conveys the language humans share. I want my paintings to be like letters, but not necessarily about any one person in particular.

I still often use spray paint as I have done in my paintings for the last few years. It seems less bold now because I am using more paint in general, like oil, Flashe and acrylic. I always wonder how much is too much. I try to balance it out by employing underpainted areas on the canvas. It's essential that I know when to limit myself and when to go full out.

ECB We have previously talked about your motivation to work according to the Western conventions of abstract painting you learned from your fine arts education in New Zealand. You have this motivation even though it challenges aspects of your Vietnamese identity in the sense that you are not a Western artist and these conventions contrast with the socialist realist ideology of representation predominant (even required, as you have described to me) in Vietnamese art. There is also Vietnam's history – of French colonisation, American military presence – that must contribute to this challenge. Has practicing in the Netherlands, a country with a long history of colonial conquests, added another axis of reflection to your practice? How are you grappling with your identity and ideological conflict in the work you are making now?

AT In this residency, my cultural identity is not limiting my work, there is no pressure from the outside art world (which also means residents have to find their own motivation for self-discipline). I don't feel that I have to constantly prove myself as an artist AND figure out my identity at the same time. Everyone comes from different countries and we understand how to respect each other's identity, so I don't feel like a foreigner. Only you know what is predominant where you're from and it's your call whether you keep following that or step outside and explore something else. In my case, it means I have pursued a non-representational practice, where my paintings could go 'beyond' my cultural identity.

What this has meant is that there is less comparison, judgment and competition between what I make and what others are making or have made in the wider art canon.



Anh Trần, *self-portrait*, 2019. Digital Inkjet print, 540 x 420 mm frames. Image: Andreea Christache.



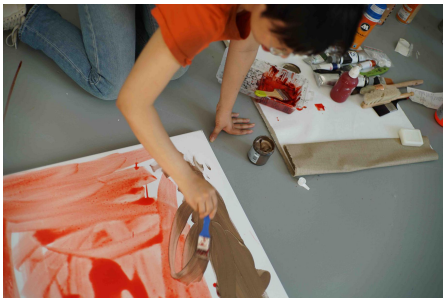
Anh Trần, *Killing Me Softly*, 2019. Photo courtesy the artist.



Anh Trần, *The Canals of Mars* installation at Window Gallery, Auckland, 2019.



Paintings by Anh Trần exhibited at Artspace Aotearoa in the exhibition *4/4*. Photo courtesy the artist.



Anh Trần in her studio at Rijksakadamie, Amsterdam, June 2020. Photo: Donghwan Kam.

ECB You are an active user of Instagram, where you often share photographs of paintings in progress, musings about the art world and art theory, and personal updates. How do you think your online presence affects your paintings?

AT It doesn't necessarily affect my paintings directly, but it's a way to communicate what I'm looking at and finding interesting, such as selfie culture and the desire to be desired, male and female sexuality attention, etc. It's interesting how narratives change depending on who you listen to and what you choose to believe, and I like to share my own stories. My online presence provides me with an instantaneous way to reflect on these things.

Instead of pouring milk (Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* 1658), painting egoist Dutch merchants (in Rembrandt's various paintings), or strolling in the wheat fields (Van Gogh) like the old masters, I stay connected online. Sometimes it feels like my online world has nothing to do with making paintings, but it's more about how daily life and networks materialise themselves online. The internet helps me live in a way that I can continue being isolated in my

studio and make paintings. It's uncanny because I have only known my 'oldest' friend in this network for less than five years. More so now than before, living in this disoriented present, I wonder what I want attention for? What kind of relationships will remain from afar?

ECB How has COVID-19 affected what you're making?

AT What makes staying in Amsterdam bearable is that I can go to my studio at the Rijksakademie. I've always worked alone, now everyday is like a quiet Sunday in the studio. The sudden change has resulted in the shift of a set of parameters (such as verbal communication, physical contact, infatuation, deadlines being postponed or cancelled). It has slowed everything for me, including art production.

The residency will be extended by five months, which means finishing in May 2022. That is a lot of time and gives me a sense of groundlessness, which I'm trying to work through in my paintings. I could have continued making paintings like my earlier ones, but my paintings change according to my present. My present is disorientated at the moment. I find it hard to address any particular painting without them blending into each other, so I'm allowing them to have some space and time so that they may become more defined and distinct from each other. I hope I can make more sincere work during this period and that there will be powerfully imaginative work from other artists.

Recently, it has started to become clear that I have a strong desire for love – 'love' as defined by bell hooks in her book *All About Love*. I've recently discovered that part of my struggles in adulthood comes from my upbringing in a communist country, where there is a situation of communal love. I'm really longing for it in this quarantine. While there might be a lack of that kind of gratification in person, I focus on the paintings because they're a bit easier to reach than people right now. I'm trying to get used to the fact that there is no deadline, no exhibition, and no public event coming up. I don't know yet how to make painting function as a social screen like I want it to, since most of my social connections have been

shut down. It's strange to imagine that people won't see my paintings in person. I could put them on Instagram, but then they become just circulating pictures – they're not paintings anymore. I'm grateful I have been able to think about these issues in my practice and still engage with painting.

Biographies



Anh Trần was born in Bến Tre, Vietnam in 1989. She graduated with a Bachelor of Visual Arts from Unitec Institute of Technology in 2014, and a Master of Fine Arts with first-class honours from Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland in 2016. Anh's Doctor of Fine Arts at Elam School of Fine Arts is on hold while she undertakes her two-year residency at the Rijksakademie. Anh's recent exhibitions include *And then, one day, my love, you come out of eternity.*, Artspace Aotearoa (2019); *The Canals of Mars*, Window Gallery, Auckland (2019); *136m3*, Demo gallery, Auckland (2019); *I Understand if You're Busy*, RM Gallery, Auckland (2018); *Here and Now*, Malcolm Smith Gallery, Auckland (2017); *A trip to the beach*, play_station, Wellington (2017); *Painting: A Transitive Space*, St Paul Gallery, Auckland (2016)



Eloise Callister-Baker is a writer, producer and lawyer. She has an LLB, BA in Visual Culture and DipLangC (endorsed in Chinese) from the University of Otago. Eloise has written various features on exhibitions, controversies and news in the art world and conducted interviews with artists for *Pantograph Punch*, *The Spinoff*, *Art New Zealand*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space and the Physics Room's publication called *Hamster*. She has produced and written for documentaries, including a documentary called *Pig Politics*, which was filmed on Great Barrier Island for NZME's *WatchMe* and *NZ Herald*. Eloise is currently practising as an employment lawyer at a mid-size Auckland law firm.

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