

LE QUANG HA
ALTERED FACES

SHIREEN NAZIREE

GEORGINA HÄ

ALTERED FACES

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FOREWORD

Jørn Middelborg
Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure to present the art exhibition *Altered Faces* by the Vietnamese artist Le Quang Ha. He has over the last decade created some of the most interesting contemporary art in Vietnam, offering a personal perspective on contemporary Vietnamese society. Thus this publication aims at profiling his new works, which will be shown in the exhibition, in a wider context.

The text has been written by the art historian and independent curator Shireen Naziree. She has written extensively on the contemporary art and culture of Southeast Asia and her curatorial practice has included working with some of the region's most important artists. She has served two terms on the Board of Trustees of the National Art Gallery of Malaysia.

I take this opportunity to thank Le Quang Ha for his collaboration with Thavibu Gallery, and I thank Shireen Naziree for her contribution.

I also thank Pham Long and Adrian Jones for their assistance and collectors for giving us access to their works.

ALTERED FACES

PORTRAIT - LE QUANG HA

The reverie of romance and the applied cliché generally associated with Vietnamese artistic practice is certainly not part of Le Quang Ha's visual vocabulary. More critical to his intentions is the associative power of his art, which has been a crucial instrument of his expression. Although Le Quang Ha creates very rich visual worlds through his paintings, his works require us to use our imaginations in order to read into the unnoticed worlds that are described. And it is this leap of faith on behalf of the viewer that adds to the richness of his art and allows us to share in Le Quang Ha's subjective and often very potent descriptions.

For almost two decades, Le Quang Ha has quietly produced one of the most coherent and nuanced bodies of artwork in Vietnam. Very singular and single-minded, Le Quang Ha's art has evolved through a practice that provokes the tension between his own individual concerns and social expectations. He is noted for the extreme expressions that upon introduction may appear as enigmatic but instead within the richly worked layers are statements and messages that ring out as a result of the changing parameters of his social environment.

Le Quang Ha has engaged himself with a specific social context that raises questions relating to the rapidly changing profiles of traditional values that have been the essence of society, not necessarily only in Vietnam but also in most of Southeast Asia's rapidly developing economies.

Because art frames both critical and social practice as well as questions of aesthetics, emotion and human experience are dependent on this framing to communicate meaning. Inscribed within the Vietnamese history of artistic expression is its own nostalgia for a time when culture held a privileged place. For Le Quang Ha, painting is understood as a social practice with a critical function. Thus he has embraced the loss of mainstream cultural currency as a source of the new realism that his society now has to negotiate and from which he illustratively extracts his pictorial language. His movement between personal subjects and those that exist in the public realm speaks of a practice that has become fully social. This distinction in his art suggests not so much attention to any form of realism but to a way of dealing with current history.

Le Quang Ha was born in 1963 in Hanoi. Like many Vietnamese of his generation, he

was exposed to art from an early age and in 1970 was enrolled at the Young Pioneers Club, one of the many children's art institutions initiated by the Vietnamese government under the auspices of the Children's Culture Palace at the time. Ha has described his childhood as solitary. Unlike most of his peers in Hanoi, he chose to initially study art at the Ho Chi Minh City Branch of the Hanoi University of Industrial Fine Arts from 1986 until 1989. He eventually enrolled at the Hanoi Industrial Arts College from where he graduated in 1992. He participated in his first exhibition while still a student in Ho Chi Minh City in 1987 and since then has participated in numerous exhibitions in Vietnam and abroad.

The implementation of *Doi Moi* in 1986, with its economic reforms that transformed the socialist economy from rigid central planning to an "open door" market orientation, signalled new developments for Vietnamese contemporary art. The art of the years preceding *Doi Moi* had been restricted to socialist realism, which had left the art scene somewhat impoverished and staid. But with a renewed vigour, artists were once again free to create artworks that would be acceptable to a wider audience. From this vantage, artists were able to look in several

different directions. For instance, they could begin to examine and express the current relationship between art and the social environment. However, despite this liberalization of policies, most artists chose not to intensify such exchanges, flirting instead with nostalgia



Country Girl, 1995
Oil on canvas

and the romance of their cultural past. Layers of Vietnam's rich cultural history and the French colonial experience appear to be part of the reason for this nostalgia and sentiment.

What changed the artistic landscape was

the return of artistic genres that had been displaced by the revolution. The success of Vietnam in making a place for itself in the world of art was firmly linked to showcasing such idealism, attractive to Western audiences with views of a romanticized past.

It was within this cultural milieu that Le Quang Ha embarked on his artistic career. Like many of his peers, the characteristics of his art represented the typical array of philosophical and literary standards. Visual symphonies of beautiful women, amorous couples engrossed in intimate conversation and still life compositions richly embellished with colour were nevertheless already more nuanced than those of his contemporaries, such as in *Country Girl* (1995). He was already demonstrating the individuality of his style. However, this lyrical language would not last long, for soon Le Quang Ha's aim was to remove his art from the pedestal of the stereotype in order to challenge perceptions that Vietnamese art was somehow only embedded in the romance of a past idealism. His return to content meant that

his art could provide an extremely effective platform for social views that would otherwise go unheard in other circumstances. In *Power* (1996), his keen observation of society resides not in the nostalgia of the past but in the new realism that would have to be negotiated.

With a curious mixture of views that combined radical egalitarianism with his concerns for the mysticism of his Vietnamese heritage and his mission to cleanse society through his art, he was actually creating a situation in which contemporary art became a vehicle of critique. This return to content placed his art closely parallel to that of other artists practicing in the larger global arena even though his actual means of expression were very different from those who assumed a moralist stance largely due to their own self censorship. Le Quang Ha's desire to shock and possibly to destabilize the established order was a gradual slide from one dimen-

Power, 1996
Oil on canvas
80 x 310 cm





The Pianist, 2002

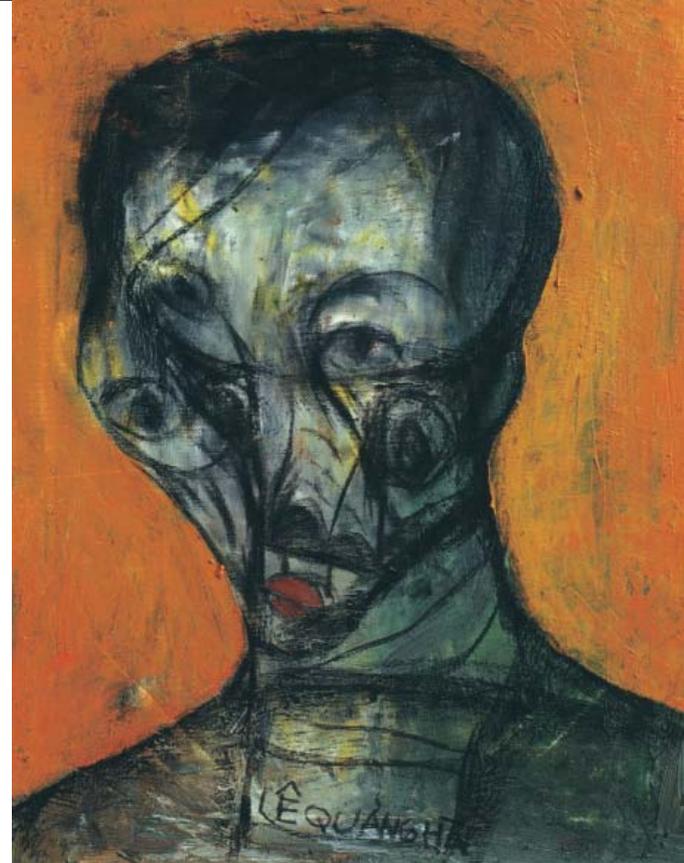
Oil on canvas
123 x 153 cm

sion to another. His early works were not necessarily shocking for their actual content, but rather for the way in which they challenged established ways of seeing. In his understanding, art meant acknowledging the multiple perspectives of his subjects, whether formally, spiritually or socio-politically, and importantly acknowledging that everybody has his or her own interpretation of truth.

This acknowledgement led to the questioning of the nature and identity of Le Quang Ha's art. As powerful as it was, it was also problematic for those holding the cultural batons of power, for art becomes political when it intertwines with social relations,

economics and a wide range of related issues. However, Le Quang Ha refutes suggestions that his art is political and offers an antidote to the literalness of his art, which is really about extending the identity beyond the ego to other levels of transpersonal approach. Every artist feels more satisfied with certain choices in that he or she paints for the sheer pleasure of it, remaining unselfconscious and unapologetic.

While his works transcend the tradition and culture to which they belong, his grammar stands out even more in contrast with other artists, particularly of his generation, working within traditional psychological conventions and allowing for a distinction between a



Self-Portrait, 1999

Oil on canvas
40 x 50 cm

culturally accepted subject and the achievement of deep content. Another relationship present in Le Quang Ha's art is the way his subjects subvert the exterior narratives that surround them and endeavour to circumscribe them. At times the fluidity of meaning makes it notoriously difficult to pin him down to any particular critical discourse, as he demonstrates in his painting *The Pianist* (2002). This is an example of the way in which societies avoid or gloss over issues that it is really their responsibility to question. It is from this vantage that Le Quang Ha examines the relationship between politics and contemporary art.

In Le Quang Ha's art, there is always an unexpected link between his assertion of emotional statements and the figurative. There is often a tendency amongst painters searching the ideal, but Le Quang Ha enjoys making paintings of people that are certainly not idealized in the conventional sense.

As in all his paintings, he exercises a deliberate imagery in a satirical rather than in a nostalgic manner, which are often executed through the meticulous layering process of traditional lacquer painting. And what results are images that relate to various moods or states of mind of his subjects. Like many of his paintings *Lady Blue* (2006) mirrors a social context, in this instance authority and dominance. He believes in capturing his subjects in a natural state which allows him to penetrate the personality's deceptive surface. His ability to peel back this surface in order to reveal representations of reality is further articulated in *Lady Lust* (2006) (p.23) and in *Lady Vixen* (2005) (p.23) through which he emphasizes the changing perspectives and wants of his society through the alterations of military and official dress as well as the demeanor of his subjects in present day Vietnam.

Although the effects of his works are far from straightforward, at times there is a recurring craving and fear of isolation throughout, whether in the messages that ring out from his solitary figures or from the enigmatic signs within his paintings. *Self-Portrait* (1999) is an example. But somehow the more Le Quang Ha varies his work, the more the really unusual and unsettling consistency of his work becomes apparent.

Le Quang Ha views the rapidly changing socio-economic climate of Vietnam as crucial for understanding the nature of artistic debates due to the connection between cultural and ideological positions that have little place within the new order of society. Maybe it is for this purpose that he cites Picasso as one of his artistic heroes. *Hang*, a painting that was executed in 1995, is characteristic of this admiration, although the painting clearly expresses the artist's own statement that is steeped within his own Vietnamese identity. Another hero is Francis Bacon, known for his austere, bold and often grotesque imagery. While his art might draw parallels with that of Bacon, Le Quang Ha's model of "realism" is clearly focused upon a sense of contingency embodied within an evidently painterly process.

Although clearly one of Vietnam's most profiled artists, Le Quang Ha does not attest to such a status. Anyone who knows Le Quang Ha mainly from his art or the generalized perception of an impetuous eccentric may be surprised by his degree of focus upon his memorable way of observing humanity and the world around him. Whereas in his earlier works, he was seeking to define some underlying theme of an *oeuvre*, his meanderings around the rich reflections of life have resulted in art that treats the rawest instincts of humanity as worthy of endless reflection about life experience. Perhaps it takes a more relaxed space beyond the restrictive urgencies to appreciate and understand his truly monumental art.

Lady Blue, 2006
Lacquer and dyes on board
80 x 100 cm

Hang, 1995
Oil on canvas
60 x 80 cm



ALTERED FACES

Le Quang Ha actively straddles two very different disciplines in his artistic practice. At one end are his paintings on canvas in which he expresses vibrant, articulate and modernist colour effects, often rejecting academic contouring in favour of bold strokes that show strong parallels to Western contemporary art practices. At the other end, there is the traditional Vietnamese art form of lacquer painting that is embedded in centuries-old history, but made contemporary by 20th century artists such as Nguyen Gia Tri (1908 -1993) and which has become

a hallmark of Vietnamese contemporary art. These are two distinct fields of intensely artistic discipline, which Le Quang Ha has managed to balance without losing sight of his larger aesthetic vision. He does this by maintaining conscious boundaries between these two disciplines. For Ha, there is no contest between working with oils or with lacquer. The ability to change media at will and according to idea and circumstances is considered liberating. Nevertheless, this dialectic has shaded into a cross-fertilization. Painting on canvas is a certainty, whereas the organic applications of lacquer painting depend on a series of complex layering in order to pin down either the literal or the

raw information so as to reshuffle and bring into line the more complex realities of picture making – a practice that he has mastered as displayed in his lacquer paintings. In lesser hands, such adaptation could tend to compromise lacquer's innate strengths. The importance of Le Quang Ha as a contemporary example lies in his simultaneous adoption of both media and his refusal to grant either a monopoly on his representation of truth.

Although this privileging of narrative might be deliberate, Le Quang Ha does not concern himself with it consciously, for what matters are the energy and the expediency that are

The Three New Abundances, 2006

Mixed media
Height 70 cm



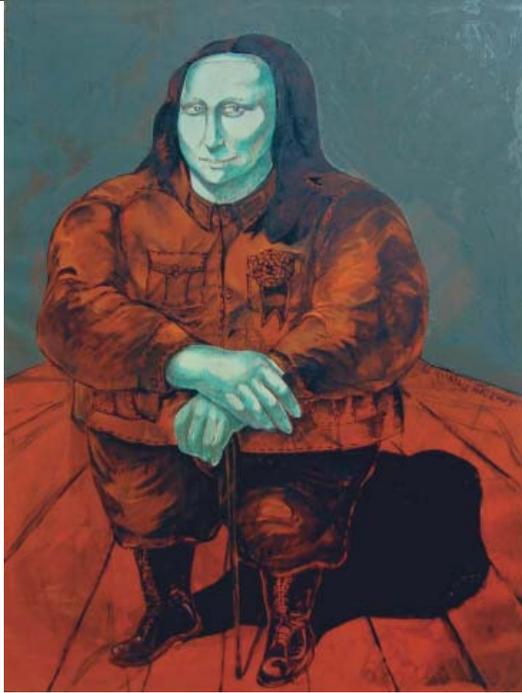


The Spokesman, 2001
Mixed media
Height 175 cm

embedded in his pursuit for aesthetic independence from context. As he explains, "My art does not originate out of any angst or anger. I am inspired by the life that evolves around me." This degree of freedom allows him to keep his mind clear so as to develop other aesthetic forms, such as sculpture.

While *The Three New Abundances* (2006) could be perceived to carry a political message, they are better termed as social sculptures that refer to the Vietnamese tradition of belief and worship of the three abundances: happiness, wealth and longevity. Though his expression is surprisingly telling, what is clear is that Le Quang Ha possesses both an extraordinary degree of skill and an acute sense of what is expressive and dramatic. Generally, he works with found objects collected from "rag-and-bone men" and from industrial garbage. With these objects, which once had a life of their own and are no longer of use to society, he draws parallels with cultural icons of the past that have also become without value. Le Quang Ha loves to infuse his works with a sense of humour that is visible in both *The Three Abundances* as well as *The Spokesman* (2001) a life-size figure that is programmed with audio-visual equipment, thus implying the notion that a person speaks with others' words. To add to the construction of this narrative, Le Quang Ha used *The Spokesman* to inaugurate and deliver a speech at one of his exhibitions in Hanoi.

As much as Le Quang Ha's work represents an important contribution to Vietnamese contemporary art, we need to understand



Dai Can 2, 2005
Oil on canvas
90 x 110 cm

the meaning of the play of cultural icons in his current practice lest these icons of reality that remain within the circuit of Vietnamese socio-cultural exchange be perceived merely as vulgarity or vandalism. *Dai Can 2* (2005) is typical and central to such understanding. By portraying the iconic Mona Lisa as a Communist official, he pushes the idea that art can be radical and entertaining at the same time. This desire to heighten the tension between the political and rhetorical significance of his images and icons is evident

Ten Years After, 2001
Oil on canvas
125 x 155 cm





Opera, 2003
Oil on canvas
200 x 240 cm

throughout Le Quang Ha's work, although it is embedded in an investigation of the consequences of global capitalism and its effects on traditional Vietnamese values.

Le Quang Ha is very much a son of Hanoi and views his city as more than a place in space. He takes note of the continuing narratives and the drama that constantly unfold within this contemporary metropolis. This cluster of activity is interesting because it reflects the broader revival of questions concerning cultural values and aesthetics that had been occurring for a very long time, particularly in Hanoi, a city renowned as a cultural capital of Southeast Asia. *Ten Years After* (2001) is a portrait of himself and his wife poignantly set against a backdrop of Hanoi, reminiscent of Bui Xuan Phai's (1920 - 1988) romantic renderings of the streets of old Hanoi.

This dynamic inevitably has propelled him to consider whether the economic forces that have allowed for such blossoming have also resulted in the continuing burgeoning of a new wave of economic pioneers. These individuals have become pertinent to the rapidly changing social environment of Hanoi, for humanity does not reside in the new grids of the city but in culture where their voices can be heard. In *Opera* (2003), Le Quang Ha sways between the rich history of Vietnam with its strong link to cultural presentations and the idea of the uncom-



No God - This is My Land, 2007
Oil on canvas
155 x 195 cm

promising perceptions that continue to linger in social modernity.

For Le Quang Ha, this concern is bound up with making his art speak of his world and his history, which are grounded in Hanoi. In *No God - This is My Land* (2007), he considers the contrasts between the socialist resonance of authority and individual choices. The general pace of the painting is grounded in the raw energy of the narrative. Typically crass officials with the Statue of Liberty perched on the back of a motorbike speed through the streets of a dark Hanoi. The contrast of the clear blue sky makes the message dense and opaque in terms of political theory.

In *Our Sky is Not Blue* (1997), Le Quang Ha indicates resonances of social discontent by exploring the relationship between consciousness and the new social environment. He makes a good case for alignment with the struggles and unbalanced liberalism that have resulted from the dominant power of authority. While there might be some debate about such abstraction and the relationship between the privileged and the silent majority, in this instance the blankness of the orange sky does not signify absence but is rather a gesture made more dramatic by threatening the viewer to experience the same discomfort.

Our Sky is Not Blue, 1997
Oil on canvas
110 x 125 cm



Many of Le Quang Ha's works appear to address the general penchant for acquiring wealth and the hidden links that weave the superficial composites needed for the implementation of power. Although many struggle to escape this polarization, objectively speaking it is not always possible. Seeing his world in terms of such a climate created by the ideological position of power has resulted in disparity and discontent. Outrage, as in *The Dogs* (2005), enters Le Quang Ha's objective obliquely, as if unleashed through the recognition of the repression that lurks in the background as the corrupted are soothed by money. This strain of realism may be streamlined, but is vividly pictorial as the icons repeat themselves continuously, as in *Dai Can 3* (2005).



Dai Can 3, 2005
Oil on canvas
90 x 110 cm

The Dogs, 2005
Oil on canvas
155 x 1195 cm



LÊ QUÂN HÀ 2005



Terrorists or Terrorized?, 2002

Oil on canvas

155 x 195 cm

The political engagement of contemporary art has been intense in eyeing the global wars, terrorism and geopolitical crises that have affected our modern history. Le Quang Ha sees these events as crucial to understanding the nature of artistic debate due to the influence of such phenomena on his own cultural position. *Terrorists or Terrorized?* (2002) is an earnest visual essay of human nature and the human possibilities of mechanization with its desire to remain out of sight rather than test the boundaries of free speech. His visual text here is both subtly allusive and not easily transferable.

Le Quang Ha constantly mines Vietnamese contemporary life and revels in the uncanny and grotesque, which he serves up with unmistakably apocalyptic overtones. *Flying* (2006) is a representation with a satirical edge that incorporates a number of familiar memories of Vietnam's stormy modern history.



Flying, 2006
Oil on canvas
200 x 240 cm



The Dictator 3, 2004/7
Oil on canvas
110 x 125 cm

In all his works, Le Quang Ha toys with our need to take notice of the underlying tensions of society. Discovering the organizing details becomes an absorbing game. Rarely subtle, his aesthetic underscores the fact that taxonomies can be subtle and subjective. The bright surfaces of the painted images belie their hidden messages, allowing them to work their way into the viewer's consciousness. The tone in *The Dictator 3* (2004/7) is both powerful and distinctive. Le Quang Ha has ruthlessly observed the exploitive mannerisms of a propagandist. The masked face, the clenched fist and the light bulb are images that bring out the deeper ideological implications of his subject.

Le Quang Ha is careful to avoid the pitfalls that commonly cloy sentimentalism and factual didacticism by negotiating relationships between a rich cultural past and an identity that represents modern economic power. *Police 1*, *Police 4* and *Police 5* (2007) are lacquer paintings that relate to those shifting cultural conditions. By adapting a contemporary narrative, he has desentimentalized the emotional pitch of this art form that is the epitome of traditional Vietnamese artistic values. Where once the boundaries between painting on canvas and lacquer painting were rigid, they now exist at either end of a non-hierarchical axis on which his narrative can variously overlap and merge, resulting in contrasting qualities.



Police 1, 2007 | Lacquer and dyes on board | 80 x 100 cm



Police 4, 2007 | Lacquer and dyes on board | 80 x 100 cm



Police 5, 2007 | Lacquer and dyes on board | 80 x 100 cm



Police Taking a Shit, 2007 | Lacquer and dyes on board | 80 x 100 cm



Lady Lust, 2006
Lacquer and dyes on board
80 x 100 cm

Lady Vixen, 2005
Lacquer and dyes on board
80 x 100 cm





Gangster, 2004
Lacquer and dyes on board
80 x 100 cm

These studies have a robust counterpart in *Police Taking a Shit* (2007) where there is also a liberating rejection of realism.

Le Quang Ha reframes his subject in this series at will according to circumstance and non-conformist intelligence, thus avoiding image fatigue by emphasizing the mechanical nature in which low-ranking authorities exercise their duties. *Gangster* (2004) is another protest directed at his contemporary environment, showing that his art is able to speak across the barriers of knowledge directly to people about their lives. In many ways, this series of images represents a parallel reality to his own experiences. It is from this parallel world that he has constructed a contemporary language of transformation and fragmentation.

Le Quang Ha's experiences have been bound together by his socio-political history and the common currency that makes his lacquer paintings unique in the broader considerations of art. Along with his non-conformist intelligence and his artistic practice that ranges over diverse cultural contexts, Ha has set up an unavoidable tension that may be interpreted either as liberation or as forced internment.

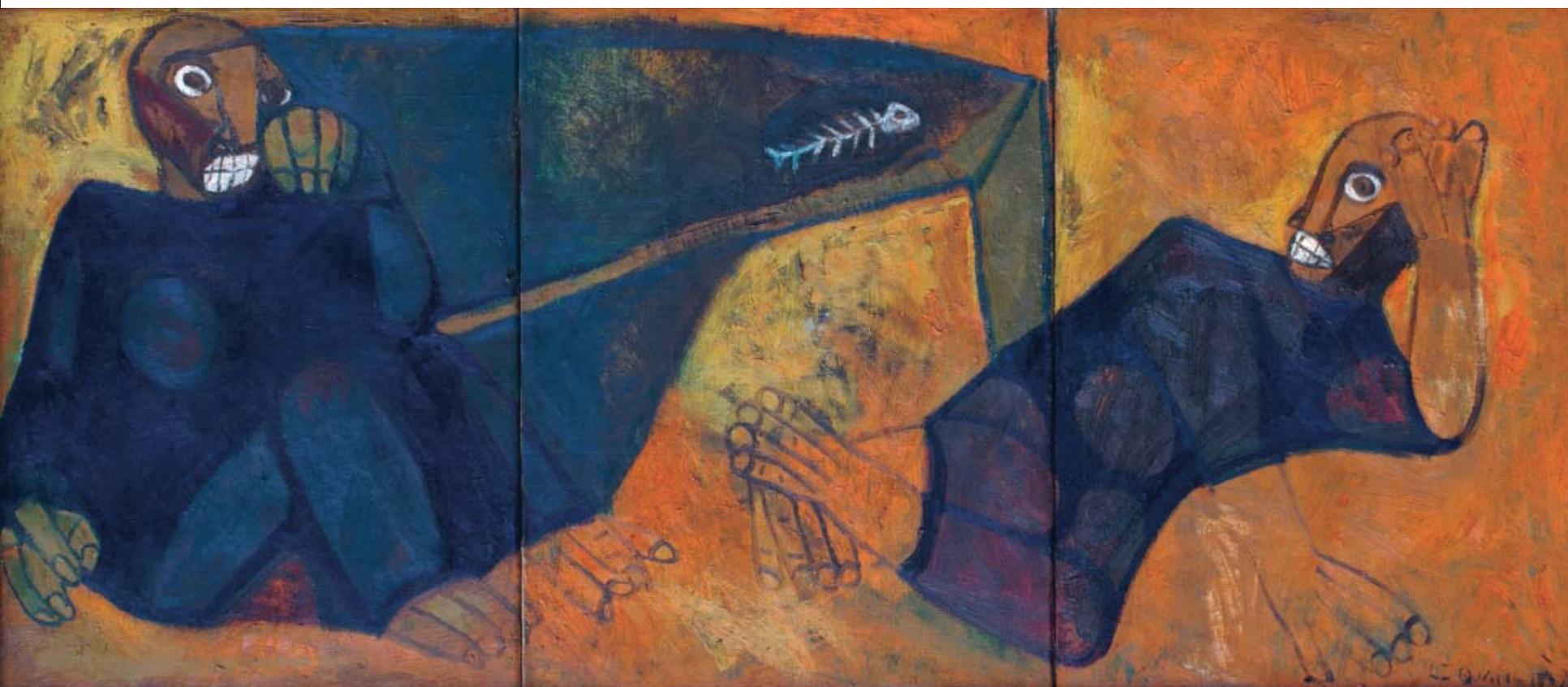
Prison 3 (1997), a three-dimensional work, offers a credible explanation of his personal journey. Confrontational and dramatic, this shift is symptomatic of the obvious encounters he has experienced during the course of his career. With a sophisticated grasp of the relationship between his practice and his humanitarian passions, his meticulously thought-out narrative is typically circumscribed in a restrictive environment replete with iron barred windows. This is a rhetorical device in the service of interpretation; it acts not only to frame the conditions of his experience but in helping the viewer to look and see as well.



Prison 3, 1997
Oil on canvas mounted in a wooden box
64 x 77 x 10 cm



Sexual Power, 1998
Oil on canvas
110 x 125 cm



End of the Party, 1998
Oil on canvas
60 x 160 cm (triptych)

But while the artist remains committed to bearing witness to the political and social costs of dependency, his art is simultaneously shadowed by an anxiety and a need to place himself in the frame, as exemplified in *Prison 3*, but more explicitly in *Sexual Power* (1998). This voluptuously structured arrangement of overlapping body parts is a suggestion of his ironic humour and a very specific illustration of his sense of his own sexuality. Essentially, Le Quang Ha has integrated traditional figurative art with many of the new basic intellectual ideas of modern art movements. But in conservative Vietnam, the nature of his art is still widely misunderstood and difficult to grasp.

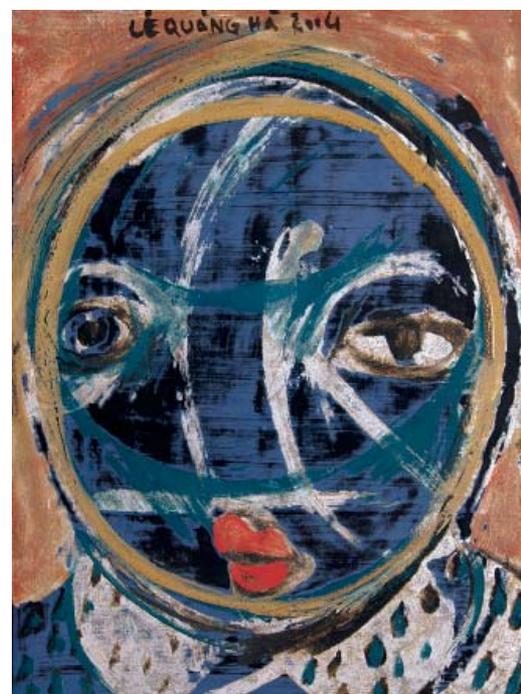
End of the Party (1998) shares the same fundamental qualities, though his attitude to this source of material has obviously been filtered to include his own experiences once again. Le Quang Ha's construction of a party scene allows a large space for ambiguous elements. He invites the viewer into a world of hedonistic excess and in the same vein he stresses a world of harsh reality that is tinged with a certain melancholy. As is the case when we view other of his paintings, we are conscious of the extreme complexity of his own personality and a personal vulnerability.



Visitor, 2004
Lacquer and dyes on board
30 x 40 cm



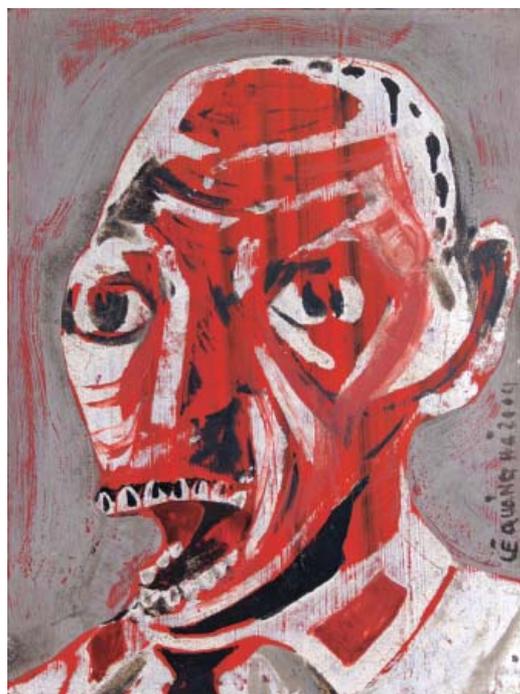
The Official, 2004
Lacquer and dyes on board
30 x 40 cm



Lady in Blue, 2004
Lacquer and dyes on board
30 x 40 cm



Big Mouth, 2004
Lacquer and dyes on board
30 x 40 cm



Culture Producer, 2004
Lacquer and dyes on board
30 x 40 cm



Ech, 2007
Lacquer and dyes on board
30 x 40 cm

Portraiture is one of the most powerful art forms in the history of Western art. Le Quang Ha readily gives form to the emotional states of his portraits through the allegory of physical experience. In the series of portraits for **Altered Faces** he has examined his subjects with both humour and grace.

Visitor (2004) is a portrait in lacquer of a traditional Vietnamese woman from the countryside. He combines strong pigment with emphasis on the woman's typically blackened teeth, traditional headgear and unexpected sunglasses. The physical presence in *The Official* (2004) is less literal but more mysterious. Fearlessness and perversity come together in his portraits. In *Big Mouth* (2004), manic attention to detail and personalization underwrites his observations on the people who impact his culture. The expressive facial gestures of *Culture Producer* (2004) situate his palette in a framework that is defined by an often eccentric rendering of specific features with disturbing and cynical overtones. His palette is so strong that we can almost hear him talk.

At an opposite end, *Ech* (2007) and *Lady in Blue* (2004) are both presented as finely rendered portraits, which may seem as straight forward depictions at first. However, the monotonous in *Ech*, and the muted tones and the gentler strokes of *Lady in Blue* lend each of these lacquer paintings a very different personality: The stillness in *Ech*

relates to a strong personality, whereas *Lady in Blue* reflects a softer and gentler tone, filled with melancholy. But what remains clear is Le Quang Ha's ability to capture the deeper essence of his subject and interpret it with a deeply felt understanding. A similar dimension of understanding and observation is seen in the portrait drawing of the artist *Dang Xuan Hoa* (2007) whose quiet and calm spirit became the visual analogue of their friendship.



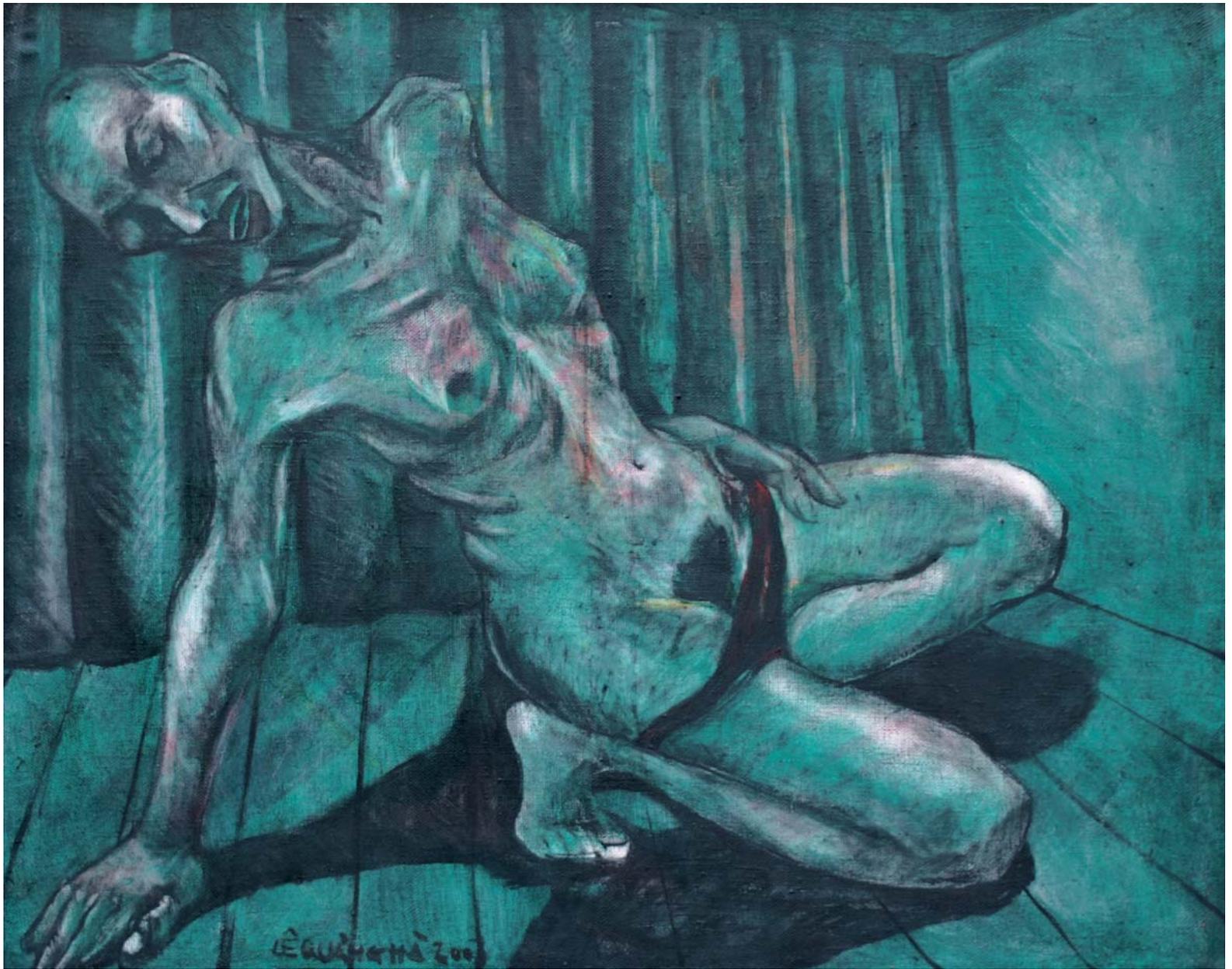
Dang Xuan Hoa, 2007
Pencil on paper
26 x 38 cm



Dreaming, 1999
Lacquer and dyes on board
80 x 100 cm

Art for Le Quang Ha is a tradition to be questioned and explored as part of an exercise in self-definition. As is the case for artists who work across different artistic disciplines,

his challenge is to make art that is at once both deeply personal and broadly meaningful while addressing the issues and experiences of the different worlds he lives in.



Desire, 2003
Oil on canvas
80 x 100 cm

Le Quang Ha's work is often rife with classical allusions. *Dreaming* (1999) is a study of a nude, voluptuous in its physical experience. His use of thick and vibrant brushstrokes emphasizes her rubbery flesh. In *Desire* (2003)

the mood is different. This time round, the focus is on the model's nimble skeleton. Her body is full of life and shares some of the same defiance as the artist does in his own ideology.



Ech: Faraway in Thoughts, 2007
Pencil on paper
26 x 38 cm



Ech: You Cannot Fly Away, 2007
Pencil on paper
26 x 38 cm



Ech: In Repose, 2007
Pencil on paper
26 x 38 cm



Ech: A Heart's Desire, 2007
Pencil on paper
26 x 38 cm

This relationship between the body and the unconscious demonstrates how the body itself experiences emotion and the liberating power of imagination. In another series of nude drawings, Le Quang Ha once again casts a sharp eye and is particularly good at capturing the emotional essence of his subject. The model's pensive gaze in *Ech: Faraway in Thoughts (2007)* is an example of his association with the vitality of life. *Ech: In Repose (2007)* is another example of his gestural expressionism, whereas *Ech: A Heart's Desire (2007)* is a slightly more vigorous and spontaneous depiction that exudes a freshness and spontaneity when compared to traditional academic nude studies.

As a response to his ongoing fervent commentary on contemporary society, he has commented that "the greatest forces in life are love and fear" and "I am always looking at each individual with the eager hope of finding there something of the dignity

of life." In *Ech: You Cannot Fly Away (2007)*, Le Quang Ha once again challenges the social terms of Vietnamese contemporary society in that he underlines control and dominance over society, as suggested by the mechanical wings and the downward glance of the model.

Le Quang Ha has his roots in Vietnam, a world that is changing dramatically. His work operates in a unique and metaphorical space fraught with the tensions and contradictions that characterize developing nations today. By not denying the importance of being Vietnamese nor confining himself to the stereotype, Le Quang Ha resists definition. His ambivalence and occasional scepticism further complicate any easy reading of his work. But each of his artworks offers us a unique way of looking at his world, one that is deeply felt through his visually moving works of art that are as provocative as they are engaging.

CHRONOLOGY



Photo by Le Nhat Khanh

Le Quang Ha

Born 1963 in Hanoi

1986 - 89: Ho Chi Minh City Branch of Hanoi Industrial Fine Arts University

1989 - 92: Hanoi Industrial Fine Arts University

BA from Hanoi Industrial Fine Arts University

Member of Vietnam Fine Arts Association

SELECTED ART EXHIBITIONS

1987: - National Exhibition of Young Painters - Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

1990-91: - Fine Art Exhibitions in Hanoi, Vietnam

- 1992: - Group Show of Young Painters in Berlin, **Germany**
- Group Show of Ten Vietnamese Painters at the French Cultural Centre - Hanoi, Vietnam
- Bronze medal at Hanoi Fine Arts Association Exhibition
- 1993: - Group Show in Beijing, **China**
- Bronze medal at Hanoi Fine Arts Association Exhibition
- 1994: - Group Show: *War and Revolution* at the National Fine Arts Exhibition
- Bronze medal at Hanoi Fine Arts Association Exhibition
- 1995: - Solo Show at Galerie Vinh Loi - Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
- Silver medal at Vietnamese Fine Arts Association Exhibition
- 1996: - Group Show - Zurich, **Switzerland**
- Group Show - Berlin, **Germany**
- 1997: - Group Show: *The Changing Face of Hanoi* - **Hong Kong**
- Group Show - Berlin, **Germany**
- *Rencontre* with Olivier Passieux - Hanoi, Vietnam
- 1998: - Group Shows in New York, Boston and California, **USA**
- Group Show at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum - Fukuoka, **Japan**
- 1999: - Group Show - Seoul, **Korea**
- Group Show - Boston, **USA**
- 2000: - Second Prize Winner in the National Fine Arts Exhibition
- 2001: - Solo Show in the Vietnam Fine Art Museum - Hanoi, Vietnam
- Group Show - Zug, **Switzerland**
- Represented Vietnam at the ASEAN Art Awards - Bali, **Indonesia**
- 2002: - Launched website www.lequangha.com
- 2004: - Solo Show: *Le Quang Ha* at L'Espace - Hanoi, Vietnam
- Group Show in at Hotel Arte - Olten, **Switzerland**
- 2005: - Group Show: *The Ten Courts of the Kings of Hell, Vietnam Past and Present* at Bankside Gallery - London, **UK**
- 2006: - Group Show at the Fielding-Lecht Gallery - Austin, Texas, **USA**
- 2008: - Solo Show: *Altered Faces* at Thavibu Gallery - Bangkok, **Thailand**

Le Quang Ha lives with his wife and two sons in Hanoi.

MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Singapore Art Museum
 Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan



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