

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, Mr and Mrs Dang Xuan Hoa, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this opening of Dang Xuan Hoa's residency exhibition at Temenggong, "Living Tropics."

It is my privilege and great pleasure to introduce the artist and the exhibition to you this evening. Bac Hoa is an important front-runner in Contemporary Art from Vietnam. He is well-known as one member of a group of graduates from the Hanoi Ecole des beaux-arts who came to be known as the "Gang of Five", regarded as one of the earliest groups of artists pushing the boundaries of artistic practice in the 1990s, with the economic liberalisation of Doi Moi in the backdrop.

In introducing the exhibition, I would like to take as a point of reference an online forum convened fifteen years ago, in 2002, on the Talawas platform, with the title "Contemporary Vietnamese art in the international context".[1] Concerns were expressed about a perpetuation of "ethno-national notions" in identifying and promoting Vietnamese Art, rather than giving it some universal value; and questions were asked about "where [Vietnamese art was] and what its place was on the world art map"

This, in 2002, was when Vietnamese Contemporary art was in its relative youthful popularity. On hindsight, it might have been premature then, to apply an expectation of *historical* or art historical maturity on something that, only 10 years after *Doi Moi*, was still developing and evolving.

The "impatience" of that forum in 2002 holds a hint to what Hoa is expressing in this series of works presented here this evening. The world is impatient for results. Those of us who live and work in Singapore perhaps feel this keenly: we are result-oriented. This was necessary in the days of nation building and national development: by circumstance, we had to create industries and jobs overnight, to ensure the economic survival of this country. That has perhaps given rise to what Hoa observed about Singapore, during the period of his residency at Temenggong: we are always in a hurry, there is an air of urgency and impatience.

Often even those of us working in the arts - art historians, curators, critics - sometimes forget that "production", "craft" or technique, takes time. In our expectations of art produced in emerging nations, we occasionally lose sight of the fact that the standards of critique, the standards to which emerging cultures are held to, have had much longer histories of evolution. It takes time to grow, movements take time to gain momentum, and expression of identities shift and evolve. This evolution is also much less revolutionary than we would think it: as with the ceramics and objects Hoa paints - everything is connected with history, with people, things and ideas that have come before us.

The title "Living Tropics" was proposed by Hoa: and to the question of the 'place' of Vietnamese art, Hoa's intention is to locate this series in this tropical region we call Southeast Asia. In the Talawas forum there was also the occasional criticism that Vietnamese artists were presenting their art with "ethno-national" themes. But the label again is one that is externally imposed, and not entirely fair, even if it mainly refers to genre paintings made for the tourist or expatriate market then. Hoa paints self-portraits: sometimes his colour palettes make reference to Vietnamese art forms such as Dong Ho woodblock prints or temple sculptures. The self identifies as Vietnamese, culturally, historically and by nationality, but that is what gives his art its signature. What he sees however, is not insular: The word "living" in the title - signals a common human base, at least in this 'tropical region' we call Southeast Asia. In his own words: When you are born in a Southeast Asian Country, you will be influenced by the culture there ... As a Vietnamese artist I cannot escape that mould." Through this

series in “Living Tropics”, we see that “communion” which he shares with the inhabitants of Temenggong - right down to the resident cats. In the works you will see this evening, we discover that, without giving up his cultural identity as Vietnamese, Hoa’s paintings have an appeal that speaks to each one of us, regardless of our origins.

Amongst arts practitioners, in our haste to develop critical frameworks in our academic or historical approaches, we forget that art is to be enjoyed. This is not to advocate an unintellectual approach to art. But “the Whole is greater than the sum of its parts”, and the occupational hazards of curators, writers, scholars sometimes can be that we miss the woods for the trees. The voice of the artist is important, and art can provide a prophetic voice, a foil against the currents of the mainstream. “Tropical Living” invites us not merely to look at the works: but also to pause and take the time to look around us, at the environment, the objects that surround us, to see the histories, to share in the the accumulation of human experiences that have brought us where we are today. On that note, I wish you all a very enjoyable evening, and may I join the artist and the team at Temenggong Artists-in-Residence Project, to warmly invite you to view the works in Tropical Living with your hearts.

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[1] <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=769&rb=06>, last accessed 19 April 2017