

This is a repository copy of *A Feminist Approach Through Nature: Reviewing Tate St. Ives's Modern Conversations interconnected with Thao Nguyen Phan*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/192219/>

Version: Published Version

Article:

Yang, Louise Yu-Jui (Cover date: 2022) *A Feminist Approach Through Nature: Reviewing Tate St. Ives's Modern Conversations interconnected with Thao Nguyen Phan*. *Aspectus* (4). pp. 54-58.

<https://doi.org/10.15124/yao-q5gn-8h87>

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

A Feminist Approach Through Nature: Reviewing Tate St. Ives's *Modern Conversations* interconnected with *Thao Nguyen Phan*

Louise Yu-Jui Yang

'Modern Conversations,' Display at Tate St. Ives, Cornwall
July 20, 2020—Ongoing

'Thao Nguyen Phan' at Tate St. Ives, Cornwall
Curated by Anne Barlow assisted by Giles Jackson
February 5, 2022—May 2, 2022

Louise Yu-Jui Yang is a PhD candidate in History of Art at the University of York. She holds master's degrees in History and Philosophy of Art from the University of Kent and Museum Studies from the Taipei National University of Art. She has published in journals, anthologies and quarterly columns covering museum studies, art history, heritage conservation, and material culture studies.

In July 2020 Tate St. Ives opened the display *Modern Conversations*, highlighting several female and queer artists such as Marlow Moss, Barbara Hepworth, Jane and Louise Wilson, Donna Conlon, Louise Bourgeois and Zanele Muholi. The display emphasises their engagements in the double sides of nature's simplicity and complexity and how they are mirrored by human culture, bringing together contemporary humanitarian issues beyond the conventional modernist frame of formalism.

For a few months, Thao Nguyen Phan's solo exhibition was juxtaposed side by side with *Modern Conversations*. Thao's artworks illustrate the nature and history of the Mekong River, the most important transboundary river in Southeast Asia, which travels across the borders of China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. This operation proposes a new mode of engagement with Nature, turning *Modern Conversations*'s postmodernist space into an extended post-colonial landscape, which destabilised modernism more radically. Thao's works are a playful synthesis of various media, namely painting, filmmaking and ready-made installations. Watercolour transparently dominates Thao's art language to convey a mature process she called "a new metamorphosis." It is a poetic situation where different kinds of materiality (or voices) can co-exist, not without its conflict, but possessing a poetic confusion, opening up the potential for seeking the tangible in the intangible, the real in the illusory and the illusory in the real.¹

Thao's language shows a kind of interchangeable wetness, demonstrating coexistence "not without its conflict" through film-like paintings and painting-like films. The ambiguity of her works blurs the boundaries between history and mythology, folklore and fantasy, as well as document and memory. Cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis explored the "wet matters" of a natural body as a "constant process of intake, transformation and exchange," which she identified opposite to disconnected "discrete individualism"—"a rather dry, if convenient, myth."² Thao's approach of wetness is an embrace of material ambiguity, converting the relationship between human and nature into a synthesis of media, transcending these media's once sharp-edged, independent substances. Defining the relationship between human and nature as a rather dynamic, perpetuating and interchangeable process instead of discrete and individually framed structures, Neimanis aimed to recover the non-dualistic domain through rebuilding "watery relations" as a challenge to the "masculinist logic of sharp-edged self-sufficiency."³

The juxtaposition of *Modern Conversations* and Thao's work implies the emancipation of artistic expression in modern art by freeing formal concepts from "discrete individualism's isolated aesthetic norms." Instead of interpreting modern art as a normative, abstract language—as "ideas of beauty and simplicity" in forms of painting, sculpture, photograph and video—*Modern Conversations* demonstrated an expressive landscape in



Aspectus, Issue 4, Fall 2022
DOI: X
ISSN X
Pages 54–58
University of York

“relationships with the natural environment from science to politics, music or beliefs.”⁴ The interconnected display context embodies a visual narrative based on concrete subjects, precise incidents and issues of human history, encompassing the coexistence of repetition and multivalency in modern forms.

Figure 1. Zanele Muholi, *MaID*, c. 2015, Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 29.7 x 21.7 cm. Brooklyn, New York. Tate Museum. Author's photo.



An example of this narrative from *Modern Conversations* is the self-portrait *MaID*, Brooklyn, New York (Fig. 1, 2015) by Zanele Muholi, where the artist manipulated the boundary between daily objects and modern forms to exaggerate the darkness of their skin tone. The title embodies the double meanings of their self-presentation—the coexisting concepts of “MaID (My Identity)” and, if read differently, “maid,” the “quotidian and demeaning name given to all subservient black women.”⁵ Both formalist and narrative, Jane Wilson and Louise Wilson’s *Biville* (Fig. 2, 2006) photographs the architectural space of an abandoned Second World War bunker on the Normandy Coastline. This decaying structure is filled with graffiti, provoking emotional reactions toward a historical moment that extends beyond the individual human life. Expanding to non-human subjects, Donna Conlon explores human-like complexity in ants’ social structure. In *Coexistencia* (Fig. 3, 2003), Conlon painted national flags and symbols of peace onto leaves subsequently carried by a troop of ants, referring to worldwide anti-Iraq War protests happening then.⁶ These three artworks represent the plurality of modern art, which is not in a well-framed, sharp-edged and self-sufficient aesthetic formulation ruled by conceptual abstraction or dualism between formative matters and subject matters. Instead, Modern art happens in dynamic relations and conversations, rather than in any standalone aesthetic rule.

Figure 2. Jane Wilson and Louise Wilson, *Biville*, c. 2006, Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, mounted onto aluminium, 180 x 180cm. Tate Museum. Author's photo.



Figure 3. Donna Conlon, *Coexistencia*, c. 2003, video, colour and sound, 5:26 min. Author's photo.



Opening another conversation, Thao's resourceful use of moving but discontinuous images, paintings and objects symbolises the collapse of absolute truth, which has been replaced by ambiguity and "illusions of modernity, equality and progress." She described modernity as "a radical and enlightening, but also an extremely violent and unforgiving process."⁷ Her *First Rain, Brise Soleil* (2021) reveals the double sides of modern progression. First rain marks the significance, and capriciousness, of the monsoon season's downpour, which brings both agricultural fertility and flooding and disruption.⁸ In the form of a metaphor, Thao interweaved her "subtle criticism" of modernity through an "ambiguous version of truth" with her interrogation of colonialism.⁹ In *Voyages de Rhodes* (Fig. 4, 2014—2017), she painted on book pages of *Rhodes of Viet Nam* (1653) written by Alexandre

de Rhodes (1593—1660), who is known for transliterating the Vietnamese language into the Roman alphabet. In 1910 and under French colonial rule, the Romanised system was officially applied as the standard writing system of Vietnam. Her *Mute Grain* (Fig. 5, 2019) refers to the devastating famine in northern Vietnam in 1945, resulting from forced changes in agriculture to plant high-value inedible crops under Japanese occupation.¹⁰ An installation of jute stalks symbolises the once widely propagated dictum, “uproot rice, grow jute” (Fig. 6, c.2019).¹¹ Recording humanitarian catastrophes, Phan revealed the consequence of the imbalanced relationship between humans and nature, which is a lesser-recorded, or even absent, part of modern history’s celebration of progress.

Figure 4. Thao Nguyen Phan, *Voyages de Rhodes*, c. 2014—17, Watercolour on book pages. Author’s photo



Figure 5. Thao Nguyen Phan, *Mute Grain*, c. 2019, video, high definition, 3 projections, black and white, sound, 15:45 min. Author’s photo

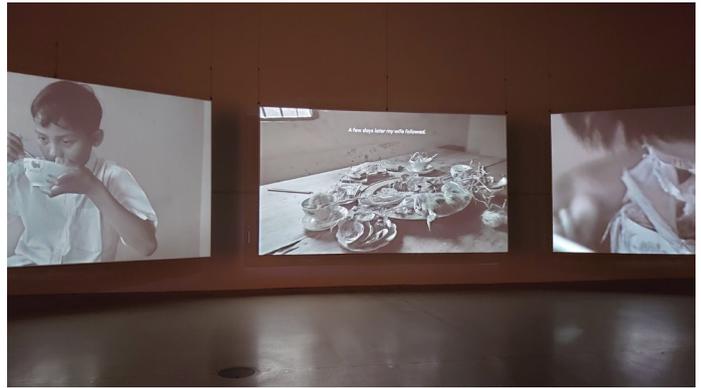


Figure 6. Thao Nguyen Phan, *No Jute Cloth for the Bones*, c.2019, this version 2021—2022, Watercolour on book pages, raw jute stalk. Author’s photo.

As a response to the *Modern Conversations*, Thao’s engagement in post-colonial history embodies the ambiguity of modernity. Through the “wetness” in her expressive use of media, she problematises the artificial order of the world. She said, “I would prefer all elements to be considered non-hierarchical, to coexist in harmony.”¹²

References

- 1 Thao Nguyen Phan and Zoe Butt, “Imprinting Parallel Histories: Thao Nguyen Phan in Conversation with Zoe Butt,” *Still 2* (2021), accessed June 22, 2022, <https://still.inbetweenartfilm.com/en/imprinting-parallel-histories/>.
- 2 Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 2.
- 3 Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, 3.
- 4 Display text “Modern Landscape.” In display *Modern Conversations* at the Tate St. Ives. Seen on March 20, 2022.
- 5 Object label for *MaID, Brooklyn, New York*, 2015 by Zanele Muholi. In display *Modern Conversations* at the Tate St. Ives. Seen on March 20, 2022.
- 6 Object label for *Coexistencia*, 2003 by Nonna Conlon. In display *Modern Conversations* at the Tate St. Ives. Seen on March 20, 2022.
- 7 Thao Nguyen Phan, interviewed by Tate. “Empathy not Erasure,” *Tate Etc.*, Issue 54 (Spring, 2022), accessed June 22, 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-54-spring-2022/empathy-not-erasure>.
- 8 First Rain, Brise Soleil, exhibition booklet *Thao Nguyen Phan*, (Cornwall: Tate St. Ives, 2022).
- 9 Phan, interviewed by Tate. “Empathy not Erasure.”
- 10 Tate St. Ives, *Thao Nguyen Phan* (Cornwall: Tate St. Ives, 2022).
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Phan and Butt, “Imprinting Parallel Histories.”