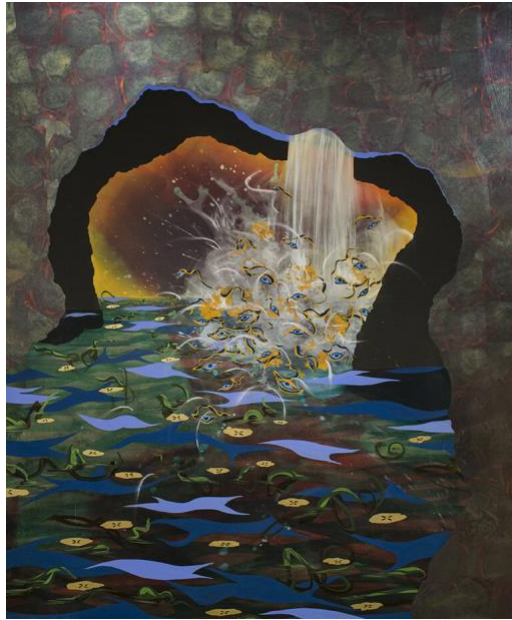


*Speaking with Ghosts in Paint:
Tears Living Forgotten Desire*



‘Deep down, deep down inside somewhere, the eye would be destined not to see but to weep.’ So writes Derrida about the painting and drawing exhibition *Memoirs of the Blind* at the Louvre.

I want to talk about two texts: the first, Trinh Thi Minh Ha’s avant-garde intersectional history project entitled *Lovecidal: Walking with the Disappeared*; the second, Ocean Vuong’s first novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*.

Throughout this talk—and acting as a kind of ethereal visual interlocutor—a collection of 12 paintings and sculpture from Viet Kieu artist Tammy Nguyen called ‘*The Gazing Pool for Who and Ai*. Her work, an example on the screen here titled *Ai Ai Ai Ai Ai Ai*, as in Vietnamese words, repetition, for Who (a person, a character, a whom). The works were first exhibited in Saigon 2019 at the Factory Contemporary Arts Center.

A few questions follow first here guide us into my thinking...

How do the works of these two writers speak silently within a parallel cosmos of trauma and breadth?

Other issues associated with violence and memory also, too, emerge—things like the stakes of haunting and liberation? The ghosts of communal Suffering and the privacy of redemptive beauty?

I want to explore these types of aftermath (afterlives) and historic residue in the dual literary forms noted above, ALL the WHILE keeping the potency of words, gestural motion of walking and

Ordinary acts of love close at hand. “With every step,” writes Minh Ha, “the world comes to the walker and the disappeared live on...”

More straightforwardly (albeit a bit theoretical and with the visual assistance of Tammy) I propose that a way into these ostensibly disparate texts is through Tears.

Poetry and painting (words and images) as built upon a landscape of tearful encounters.
Elemental and robust.

The labyrinth of Crying. Nước mắt... eyes beside water make tears in Vietnamese.
Or is it country? Đất nước, or mất nước—a country lost, land lost. A nation. No. It's
tears. Nước mắt

Rơi Nước mắt ; chảy Nước mắt ;

Những Giọt Nước mắt cứ tuôn trào ra

Running tears upon cheeks. A drain.

Nước mắt ngập mi rồi xuống má

Flooded eyes. On a gushing surface.

Tears. Nước mắt. Perhaps A gate to the soul where the whole eye, the entire organ weeps.
Filled, saturated and fulfilled.

Tears of both Joy and desire. Longing and mourning—each their own inimitable world of
tears. Profound patterns of wept sadness.

‘Tears are a gift,’ writes Ha **FIGURE**. ‘The giving of tears sets in motion the flow of *heartfelt*
links and connections. As the eye weeps, *feeling* surreptitiously erupts to the surface, and the call to
come closer to see for oneself powerfully draws all witnessing presences into a binding core.’

What this means I hope will reveal itself through this short talk.

Let me start then, with *Lovecidal: Walking with the Disappeared*, Trinh ‘Thi Minh Ha (the elder,
by some thirty plus years of the two writers, and more seasoned artist.

Her 2016 project is a meditation interspersed with her own photography and unusually plush
sensibilities. **FIGURE 3**

A treatise of love on war; a rereading of *The Art of War*;
photographically insightful like Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* (a book written in the wake
of 2001, 9/11’s falling towers);

Lovecidal, a word-storming meditation on both beauty and grief,
collectivity and repose in the philosophic tradition of Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty* or *The Body in
Pain*;

Lovecidal an imagistic work of phenomenology in the long wake of Bachelard’s poetics of
flame, corners of space.

Ha’s word offers witnesses (readers and viewers) a new kind of UnHistory; a tale of Nonsites
and erasure (from Tibetan nuns in Chinese prisons to 1991-night-vision imagery of Desert storm oil
fields ablaze--‘a sort of in-house TV war’; from disposed and dispossessed Ninth ward communities
in New Orleans 2005 Katrina to the forty-year ongoing march of Las Madras in Argentina—
mothers walking in solidarity around pink governmental palisades for justice). The specters of
Vietnam. War and ghosts. haunt throughout.

In short, Ha’s world is a Sebaldian world of silvery fractured pictures

FIGURE 4

Roland Barthes writes ‘tears are signs, not expressions. By my tears I tell a story.

In this photograph, we see a mode of how her ideas about Quote ‘the transient line between
winning and losing’ in War seems to shimmer across bodies and skin—

erotically charged and graphically vulnerable, the wounds of the world slip beside the crevices underneath these figures.

In sum, I think of *Lovecidal* and the walking solemnity in her words as a house of sounds. The book is a kind of dwelling that rhythmically meanders, solitary In quietude. And in this Silencio of Lone wandering we together find—or is it make—a world of likeminded souls.

Friendships formed within one's own preciously interfolded blossom of tears.

Words like steps. Từng cái chữ mà bước lên

Words that nhớ.

Remember and miss. Yearning and longing.

Nhớ. That special Vietnamese crossover of meaning. Affect and sentience. Feeling and experience.

Words made together into blocks and sentences, Cái chữ mà tạo ra những các cái câu...

Words Resistantly melancholic in their own howled retelling of lost time.

Ha, the vanguard film maker, musician and artist of multimedia memory construction, offers us a one-of-a-kind (duy nhất) gift in *Lovecidal*.

A romance of desire with ghosts and tears; a palimpsest text instilled with fierce hope and unwavering courage. **FIGURE 5**

Text and skin alike, in Ha's words, a Quote 'layering of scented threads.' Có nhớ chứ. Do you remember

Tất cả kinh nghiệm đó không..? all of those experience

ai có thấy quá khứ của ta của tôi không/ ai có biết hết về lịch sử cá nhân mình như thế nào.

Does anyone see her past, our histories, does anyone know how our private memory goes

Lovecidal. And in this vessel of auratic strangeness, the text becomes a choral resuscitation—a quasi-confessional account and diaristic-like inventory of History, capital H.

The often-anonymous realm of 'public' is seen from inside out, a skin exposed of its own foggy, private eyes. Breathing tears to life.

A Tear-Scape. A space of tearful encounters. **FIGURE 6**

She writes last, 'Sadness may be state-mediated, as writers in Vietnam readily concede, but tears are a gift. When asked about the current situation of Vietnamese literary production, they note with quiet laughter that they have at long last 'gained permission to be sad,' and can now weep without being gagged.

Like the right to freedom, the right to sadness is to be earned.' 151

SLIDE SHIFT

Let me shift, and briefly interject with a few words about **FIGURE 7**

Tammy Nguyen's 2019 painting *I see you, You* (one of 12 from the series *The Gazing Pool for Who and Ai* before addressing Ocean Vuong's novel.

Consider the lone character stem of leafy foliage and watery mesh of singular **Cyclops**-like eyes in the aquatic background at right.

Here, a primordial confrontation with uncanny forms. Slashes of painterly presence.

The melancholy and vegetal life of paint and plant alike cry in the somber gestures of this tilted yellow flower crown; behind, perhaps a disembodied face, is composed of only waterfall tiering vertical shards of icy glass.

Estranged, it is as if up close this micro-Eco portrait is a land of frozen tears.

Tears. Always so human. Anthropocentric.

The remoteness and deep inwardness of a grieving sigh. So real. Visceral. So true. And yet, In the painting *I see you, you* an overt disquietude and shift; in this gothic nest, our imaginarium of creaturely Life is likewise too an homage to suffocating tears.

Neurotic tears. Plant tears of dew.

Water buried inside the eyes, that is a tear. Or is it the other way around.

Us buried inside the waterworks; Nuero-bio-optics submerged within the retina, cornea and iris, tear ducts and optic nerves; liquid repressed beneath a surface within a membrane...

I turn mt my attention now to

Vuong's 2019 *On Earth We are Briefly Gorgeous*

This poetic dream of a text is a slippery tour-de-force of privacy: wet queer love and familial trauma, individual fracture and intimate suspensions of introjected eros create Ocean Vuong's fraying, motley tapestry.

Whereas Ha's *Lovecidal* project—albeit obliquely and sensuously askance—addresses the pragmatic violence and media saturation of our contemporary global scene, the miasma of war and breathing afterlife of soldiers in battle for Vuong in *On Earth We are Briefly Gorgeous* takes its Form in the unusual domain of Love.

Ocean, as a self, is a forceful trans-conglomerative vector of dislocated 1980s/90s post post-modern culture (as in Viet Kieu, gay Hartford CT poet, a 50cent rap listening Vietnamese American). An adrift gothic dreamer. A lover. An elbow inside a mouth of desire.

And this debut novel is a masterpiece

Where words of grief and poetic pace elevate ordinary actions into humming echoed chants of internal affirmation:

On the surface, the story is a naked confession. An autofiction and story of redemptive displacement. Immigrants and movement.

A love letter to his mother who can't read English—

It is a story about first loves,

a dead Trevor boyfriend overdosed and gone,

two misunderstood teen misanthropes

fucking in barns during late summer midnights—landscapes drenched in sweat, bathing in moth light, tiptoeing in transgressive rain gardens

a latent grotesque sensual presence of a white grandfather Ong ngoai once an American soldier today imprisoned

--and as Vuong tells us the bio in his 2016 collection of poetry *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists. / Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me.

In *On Earth*, however, it is the bleak demise of that farmgirl we see.

the final purple dying of his Ba ngoai grandmother, Lan. A flower. Hoa Lan.

it is the story of a young man who tells his mother to stop. *Đừng làm như vậy nữa.*
to Stop *the* domestic violence, the abuse. The silence and intergenerational abuse no longer
abled

or disabled, to Go on

A mother (me oi, ma oi, u oi) who loved deep enough to earnestly remark, 'I am not a
monster, I'm a mother....' The same woman who would soon ask 'do I look like a real American,'
that lost afternoon as Vuong recalls a sliver of time when both son and mother, together in their
public discomfort and visible disarray, pushed a Goodwill shopping cart overbrimmed with
secondhand clothes. **Hàng SiDA**

It is in the gravitas of the opening pages and familial description's that Vuong writes: 'You
once told me that the human eye is god's loneliest creature. How so much of the world passes
through the pupil and still holds nothing.'

The chapter concludes with this brave proclamation:

"You're a mother, Ma. You're also a monster. But so am I—which is why I can't turn away
from you. Which is why I have taken god's loneliest creation and put you inside it."

The tears of readers and writer alike, witness and perpetrator, hunter and prey in unison
press into the tactile fabric of the page.

A few Things We note straight away and direct about these two projects...

Each are Works of experimentation. true art (questions of Form resound)

Moreover, as Creative acts of independence,

the work thinks beyond simplistic binaries; any tertiary telos of narrative and conquest,
wholeness and competition, completion legibility and meaning dissolve.

Vuong himself has repeatedly spoken to his issues with genre and narratology. The western
construct obsessive with confrontation and plot as antithetical modes for his own aesthetic
uncovering.

Ha and Ocean are kindred freedom strollers.

Last, let us all we together walk *ai cung vay tat ca moi nguoi o day* to form words into picture life
and painted paragraphs into cells of resistance.

In order to think finally through the tears, grief and anguished cry of *Lovecidal* and *On Earth—*
I return to Tammy Nguyen's 'The Gazing Pool for Who and Ai'

FIGURE 10

The thematic subject matter concealed behind the veil of Nguyen's painting cycle is Ovid's
myth of Narcissus: FIGURE (on the left) Caravaggio's 1599 rendering.

desire and mirrors, longing and reflection; the gaze within the hydrosphere.

→ as myth goes: in the end, his deep narcissism and reverence for only his unwaveringly still
icon—an apparition seen in the obsidian watery mirror—transforms.

His tears indeed are the force that break the water's double gazing spell

And the man becomes into a flower

The picture at the right is a view inside the 2019 gallery in Saigon. The mirror fragments on
the ground reflect Tammy's sculpture and painting together—somehow in harmony yet discreet.
Slivers atomized yet brilliant in their lifelines of jagged aloneness in step.

And so, we see in juxtaposition,
Life bathed in the divine tears of Narcissus. Terror and lust. Pain and realization. Blindness and ecstasy.

--these Tears **divine**, Not the demonic; pathological weeping or solipsistic and self-obsessed; the male gaze that becomes Zombie and can only hear the 'Echo' that follows as disruption; The 'Who's There' repeated *ad infinitum* mãi mãi như vậy.

The tears are likewise neither drenched in vampiric saturation; a ghoulish Narcissus feeding its own simulacra, a desirous possession of ownership, image and body.

--No, instead.

I want to imagine Tears here as a Bathing

An epiphonic Washing over; a lightness, a watery privacy and a well of life; of salt.

Of Birth and rebirth.

FIGURE 11 *Weeping Weeping*

Look closely at the gash from the well at center.

This is the nexus of our world's weeping story today. A bejeweled cascading of foam and flame, detritus and spit, liquid and filaments. And around the telescopic watering hole, an inverted cave mirror of fractal geomancy, repetitive markings scar the surface. A divine waterscape of fright. Tears living ubiquitous--inside a matrix geologic walls, across watery planes and vegetal seedling spores.

In Tammy's cycle of Narcissus, the myth has been inflected; the hetero-normative and dominant whiteness, the singular man's gaze and masculine obsessions with a reflected self (possession and bodily ownership) is transformed into an ecological phantasm of weeping paint

The Anthropocene toxicity of the contemporary global scene and its creaturely disruptions find new voice.

In subterfuge of the planet, diverse ecospheres and animal plant lives breath with tears afresh.

FIGURE 12

In this superb picture, *Passing By and By* Tammy shows viewers the limits of recognizability, perhaps even sanity. The epiphanic lyrical domain of levity and brashness; contours and vision is our topic.

Edges and movement; debris and gestation. A cosmology of Tears floats sideward and forward. Gold leaf lacquer, red slits and variegated composite spatial blocks configure the otherworldly nautical scene.

Let me cite *Lovecidal* a final time here, our space of tears made luminous most when she writes from her own voided, prophetic space of truthfulness. **FIGURE 4**

"It is in the veiling of sight, the welling up and the very coursing of water, that an essence of man's eye is said to reveal itself.

Through the action of tears, the eye's essential function is that of causing what lies buried or forgotten—that is, the truth of the eyes—to surge up...

Thus, rather than darkening vision, tears' veiling induces a form of blindness that, neither seeing nor not seeing, 'implores' so as to open the eye of eyes."

In other words, tears present a freedom, an imploration to new voice in their holy act of release.

Emotive, visceral and soulful
They see through salt.
The blurred eye of tears shows more than says. Showing and showing.
The whole eye weeps. Subsumed and consumed. An encounter with flesh and material
embodiment made urgent.
Unmediated and direct.

Liquified frames and bleeding wet are our Tears. N
their disclosed-Ness and vulnerability is a blurred engagement and inflicted blindness;

Dovetailed anew, Vuong Ha and Tammy together reveal the eye to be itself: a foggy vessel,
an inundated porous wound that emits falling salty ropes.
Tears 'ripe for healing.' 156
Thank you.