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Lê Phổ and Lebadang: Kindred Spirits Apart

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This paper considers the work of two mid-20th century Vietnamese painters, Lê Phổ (b. 1907) and Lê Bá Đảng (b. 1921). The lives and works of these unrelated two painters with kindred surnames intertwined in France: aesthetic trajectories, educational pedigree, and an uncanny visual strangeness imbue their disparate pictures with an alike set of *trans-identifiable* sensibilities (materiality, subject matter, *place-ness* most especially). Moreover, for each Vietnamese-born artist, the French imagination, history of perspectival pictures in Western Art, and the larger archive of Old Master paintings would come to greatly inform the arc of their respective oeuvres.

While Lê Phổ's attenuated Catholic portraits (Fig. 1) have been canonized as an early contribution to international visual discourse across 'Indochina' and the French empire, I am most captivated by his 1937 painting *View from a Hilltop* (Fig. 2). Not only did this year mark Phổ's more permanent resettlement in France, most importantly the electrifying picture shows a radical visual departure from his more provincial, restrained portrait work. *View from a Hilltop* is a fractured landscape scene of kaleidoscopic colors and shapes, a cosmos of perspectival slippage and eddying organic forms. We focus closely on this one painting, and ultimately ask what this single picture may unveil (if anything at all) about the world of art, life, and imagination in that tense anti-colonial moment. Next, and to further negotiate the stakes of Lê Phổ's 1937 *View from a Hilltop*, I juxtapose the alchemic lifework of Lê Bá Đảng.

A generation behind Phổ, the illustrious and queer work of Lê Bá Đảng is case study in peculiarity and tactile embodiment. His penultimate 1985 project *Spaces* (Fig. 3) is our initial avenue into his palimpsest world. Ultimately, I suggest the artist's recently constructed (2019) museum in Huế ([museum, Huế](#)) is not only a manifestation of his own singular artistic vision—a cosmos replete with trans-material objects and pictures together archived in a palatial architectural space—but also too presents to viewers beholden of *Lebadang* a thick phenomenological conundrum in theatrical glitz and drama.

To accomplish the difficult task at hand, I consider the literary accomplishments of Trần Đức Thảo. A phenomenologist and anticolonial Marxist, Thảo offers us a critical framework to interrogate our two chief protagonists. Fundamentally committed to both national Vietnamese liberation (a first imprisonment in 1945) and rigorous phenomenological articulation of the world, the Vietnamese (French writing) philosopher developed a radical conception of 'Lifeworld.' Reading Husserl's concept *Lebenswelt*, Thảo's subterranean analysis produced a synthesis between phenomenology and Marxism, suggesting the singularity of 'Lifeworld' as a living project not rooted in choice, "but necessarily rooted in a '*monde de la vie*,' by which he means the material world as it

is already filled with human meanings, an infrastructure supporting a superstructure (Renault 110).”¹ Although today oft-disregarded in the canon of both Marxism and phenomenology, I posit Trần Đức Thảo is the ideal interlocutor to both illuminate and reveal our two painters, Lê Phổ and Lê Bá Đảng.



Figure 1. Lê Phổ. *Vierge à l'enfant*, 1935.



Figure 2. Lê Phổ. *View from a Hilltop*, 1937.

1 Matthieu Renault, **Fanon and Tran Duc Thao: The Making of French Anticolonialism**. Nottingham French Studies 2015 54:1, 107-118.



Sau đó Lebadang lồng ghép vào các tác phẩm Không gian (Spaces) những phần khắc nổi được nhấn mạnh bởi màu nước. Vào năm 1995, các tác phẩm Không gian trở thành những tác phẩm được vẽ cả hai mặt và treo lên.



Figure 3. *Spaces* (one example). 1985

Conor Lauesen is a Ph.D. from Stanford and writes about photographs, painting, and poetry. Fluent in Vietnamese language—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—his scholarship explores the shadows spaces of history through a lens of phenomenological engagement.