

MINH LAN TRAN

COMMUNICATION GROUNDS

Parliament is pleased to present “Communication Grounds,” a solo exhibition by Minh Lan Tran, from March 2 to April 13, 2024.

The image is dubious. We can only consider it partial, often suspect of seduction, manipulation, and deception. Scientific imagery, which has presented itself as a window to the world since the Renaissance, has shown its epistemic ambiguities and the limits of its positivist ambition to be free from human interference. Developing a science of seeing and discernment capacities would thus be necessary to maintain trust in the image. However, this idea also encounters limits as our eyes are linked to objective intelligence without determination and connotations. We are facing a double aporia: the idea of the image as a transmitter of information and our gaze as a neutral extractor of information.

Minh Lan Tran approaches with caution the idea of image as a representation—a transparent surface revealing an external, prior reality. The artworks in ‘Communication Grounds’, her first solo exhibition in France, resist our attempts to decipher. There is nowhere to rest our eyes, no secure grip on the canvas to extract a clue to its structuring principle. Even what appears as a *sign* refuses to make sense. The ideograms of Buddhist prayer books integrated into *No heart bone but let it break* and *Incorp*, which Minh Lan Tran does not read but finds familiar, as well as the inscriptions, such as those that cross extensively *Reversed Entropy* and *Fervor*, refer more to a graphic mode of existence than to the assertion of an unambiguous meaning. Words, as José Bergamin writes, ‘words are also things and not only letters’; before being fully grasped by the intellect, they are ‘illiterate... reality’¹. By defusing the graphic convention of the sign, the series of numbers in *Structure of Passage*, a coded message for which a key may not exist, or a key without a message to decode, undermines our presuppositions about what interpreting well would entail. As for the figurative representations of votive papers, crossed out or defaced, they are now irreducible to individualities. The composition does not arrange itself on the surface of the canvas. It arises from the overlaps and openings of layers—whether light veils or screens of opaque matte—concealing a mystery akin to a rood screen or an iconostasis.

Freed from the demand for intelligibility and the weight of meaning, Minh Lan Tran's works exert—like visual litanies—a hypnotic attraction arising from the indistinct. Thus, *No heart bone but let it break*, named after Dylan Thomas's poem *Visions and Prayer* (1945), unfurls an ascending column of prayer sheets, punctuated by the regular succession of pages, as the unvarying sequence of stanzas of Thomas's poems. However, the vibrancy of a yellow tinge that asserts itself in the exhibition distances us from a state of pleasant unclarity—instead pushing us to the brink of unease.

We are facing a fluorescent yellow standing out of the canvas, glaring and captivating to the blind. In this unbearable exchange, Minh Lan Tran's works paradoxically allow us a first encounter: our imperious desire to know, our impatience to dissect, our intolerance of not understanding, and the vanity of knowing it all. As an invasive experience of the intimate, this reverse of light turns

¹ José Bergamin, *La Décadence de l'analphabétisme*, trans. Florence Delay, La Délirante, 1988, p. 14. Translation ours

dazzlement into a revelation about oneself: sudden, complete, and definitive, possibly channeling a transformation.

Thus, the canvas not only shields its secret against our explanatory assaults: through a reversal, it rays against the eye that sought to pierce, burning the retina, the incisions revealing a physical kinship between the paintings and our eyes. The repairing sutures and glues do not seal the two banks of the same open plan but create adhesions between the canvas layers, revealing its essence not as a surface but as a depth. The upturned edges of certain cuts even seem to signal other possibilities of joining—to our unsealed eye, perhaps, as a proposal for common healing.

Indeed, the stripped planes reveal the canvas as depth but also as contact: they expose the distance that separates the eye from the canvas as a non-breaking space. Against the regime of transparency imposed on images, Minh Lan Tran proposes a rematerialisation of vision, the gap presumed to be made of nothing. It is more of a crosswise path traced by the junctions and impregnations of the layers, a wiring that revives the haptic qualities of the eye and sends us back to our own thickness—the one of our body as an extension. As opposed to being an instrument to dissect reality, vision becomes an operation of reincarnation.

This molecular communication between layers of reality that we believe are separate, from our inner space to the depths of the canvas, implies that the paintings only exist in their physical relationship with the viewer. In other words, the artist's work never ceases to begin to exist, renewing itself when it touches a new environment. There is neither a preassigned meaning to find nor an afterthought: meaning hits in the present, the very moment when the work catches our eye. The hit, the catch, is the hammering that also imprints matter, be it canvas or retina. However, more than a reference to a time that has passed, the imprint turns its disappearance into presence. Minh Lan Tran's canvases are thus spaces of capture, the reservoirs of each experience in which they have been taken—and therefore, a bringing together of the temporalities they traverse.

Each work contains and makes us feel much more than it shows, starting with the impact of the artist's intervention, who works on her pieces on the ground. Our face-to-face is, therefore, charged with a *corps à corps*, a bodily hold. This latter does not allow the artist (and, by extension, the viewer) to take the 'right distance' that converts painting into an image. For the artist as well, there is thus no possible afterthought: as Barthes writes, 'the sketch and the regret, the *manœuvre*, and the correction are equally impossible, because the stroke, freed from the advantageous image that the writer would like to give of himself, does not express, but simply makes exist.'² This face-to-face also integrates the vertical essence of votive papers, by virtue of their dual nature: indeed, once they have been burned, the fallen ash testifies here, in the strongest sense, to a matter gone beyond, carrying with it the intentions of the living. Finally, the uncertain glow of reflections and gilding—modulated, through the varnish, by the juxtaposition of contrasting colors, the room's lighting, and the viewer's position—are distributed, illuminated, and eclipsed without it being possible to see them all together. And yet, on the surface of *Reversed Entropy*, a small golden square captures a light that is as much the property of the surface of the painting as of its environment, grasping them, according to the tradition of the icon, in a unity of time and space. Each work thus brings into the narrow talon of our eyeball what it cannot embrace in one glance. To imagine the process by which the world enters the eye of a needle, we can think of Thomas's poem's helical form, alternating between compression and release.

² Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des signes*, Éditions du Seuil, 2005, p. 100. Translation ours

Minh Lan Tran's works are held on a tension that puts the gaze and meaning into crisis: that of the tactility of the eye, the materiality of memory, the shift of light from white to yellow, distance as a binder, the tear as a weld, becoming as return, the point as infinite expansion. A tension until bursting, yet it only exists through surfacing, and through the thread that holds to give way.

Estelle Marois

Minh Lan Tran's (b.1997, Hong Kong) practice encompasses painting, writing, and performance.

Her work has been exhibited in venues such as Jan Kaps, Cologne; Francis Irv, New York; HOUSE, Berlin; Harlesden High Street, London; Museum of the Home, London; Nicoletti, London. Her performances have been shown at Sadie Coles, London, and the Museum of the Home, London. She studied art history at the École du Louvre, Paris, and Oxford University. She holds an MA in Byzantine Studies and Visual Theology from the Courtauld Institute of Art, London (2020) and an MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art, London (2023).

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