



doesn't work Phung-Tien Phan

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If there is a beginning to the exhibition, it is the video *dog* (2025). Shot in Phung-Tien Phan's typical method, with a hand-held smartphone, it begins with the clanging rhythms of a Kodak Carousel projector, heard over charts and graphs comparing the under/development of various countries, city populations and book sales by genre, amongst others. *What are we learning?* The data shown is not what is important. Rather it's the very concept of *difference*, of interpretation and translation through comparison, via a projection of other/ness. Snowy, Hergé's cartoon character and TinTin's loyal companion, a remnant of a colonial intellectual past, pops up. Conducted by Phan off-screen, the stuffed toy roams an uninhabited home filled with the normal medley of a young family. It jumps up on the kitchen counter, pisses on house plants and a family altar, chews on shoes, in general, *misbehaves*. At one point, it takes a nap. Towards the end, the dog turns around and sees that Phan was following behind all along; it attacks her with jubilant frenzy. The camera mimics the excited fervour of the reconciliation, and for a brief second we see the artist, before the film ends.

Much has been said about the role of the domestic in Phan's work. Not to negate its centrality, but to reduce an understanding of her practice to the domestic replicates the reductive adage that a female artist is limited to her autobiography. Rather, the domestic appears as a working studio, a platform for play when the family is away. What Phan brings up time and again is the deep contradictions of inhabiting the present in all its current saturations. The exhibition's title refers to the role of labour, especially female creative labour, in the context of patriarchal capitalism, the slippages between the domestic and the professional, the violence of the everyday, and the general pressures of survival. To not work is not an option. *Make it work*.

At the centre of the exhibition space, around the pillar, is a typical wood working trestle split apart. Resting on opposite sides are two halves of a figure made of cellophane-stuffed clothing and wood. The clothing is the artist's own. Hidden in the trousers are a box of paracetamol and tampons. Top and bottom gesture towards a sangfroid sensibility. The enterprise suggests the classic magic trick of a half-sawn person, which is also known as "Sawing a Lady in Half". *If there is any magic left, it disappeared with the magician*.

Volkswagen (Romeo and Juliet) (2025), part of an ongoing series of sculptures, takes its structure from a portable home shelving unit. The middle shelf is decorated with a miniature, handmade model of a living space, like a dolls house. On the top shelf is a home altar, this one dedicated to the celebrated Japanese actor Takeshi Kitano. An Italian coffee maker/flower vase lies on top. An image from Gregg Araki's iconic 1995 road movie *The Doom Generation*, itself an appropriation of Romeo and Juliet, is attached to the plant. *Life is lonely, boring and dumb*, the film's character Amy says. On the side, a wooden board half-conceals a shirt. The attached shirt is performing a gesture like smoking. *Sangfroid+*.

doesn't work is framed by olive green canvases hung low, as in wall panels for a nouveau Victorian design trend, yet another set decoration. Some paintings are completely abstract, while others depict monochrome mock ups of the current exhibition, working blueprints painted directly on canvas. They have a Kippenberger-ian "bad painting" quality to them. They are about the process of experimentation, of thinking, revealing the mundanity of creative labour. *I'm just so sorry*, the artist writes in one painting, as if embarrassed by the whole process.

Combined, they all seem rather random, but Phan's experimental incongruity, if not irrationality, could be interpreted in another way. Amongst the information saturation of the exhibition seen as a whole—an intensity this text mimics, with love—there is a focus, the likes of which one may experience after taking a little too much anti ADHD medication: a laser sharp concentration on some scenes, a liquid fuzziness in others. Overwhelming and nonsensical, but also moments of deep clarity. It is better than being bored, exhausted, indifferent, Phan seems to counter.

List of Works

Clockwise From Entrance

sorry, 2025

Acrylic and varnish on canvas

80 x 100 x 2 cm (31 1/2 x 39 3/8 x 3/4 in)

Panel 1, 2025

Acrylic on canvas

80 x 100 x 2 cm (31 1/2 x 39 3/8 x 3/4 in)

girl thoughts, 2025

Acrylic and varnish on canvas

80 x 100 x 2 cm (31 1/2 x 39 3/8 x 3/4 in)

sketch 1, 2025

Acrylic and varnish on canvas

80 x 100 x 2 cm (31 1/2 x 39 3/8 x 3/4 in)

girl smoking, 2025

Acrylic and varnish on canvas

80 x 100 x 2 cm (31 1/2 x 39 3/8 x 3/4 in)

dog, 2025

Single-channel HD video

3 mins, 39 secs

Panel (Hook), 2025

Acrylic on canvas and wood hook

94 x 101 x 7 cm (37 x 39 3/4 x 2 3/4 in)

Panel 2, 2025

Acrylic on canvas

80 x 100 x 2 cm (31 1/2 x 39 3/8 x 3/4 in)

Panel 3, 2025

Acrylic on canvas

80 x 100 x 2 cm (31 1/2 x 39 3/8 x 3/4 in)

special sketch, 2025

Acrylic and varnish on canvas

80 x 100 x 2 cm (31 1/2 x 39 3/8 x 3/4 in)

Floor

Volkswagen (Romeo and Juliet), 2025

Wood, glass, Perspex, found coffee machine, artists clothing, photograph, marble, acrylic, dolls house furniture, incense sticks, found branch, ribbon, flowers and light

186 x 82 x 48 cm (73 1/4 x 32 1/4 x 18 7/8 in)

Figure 3, 2025

Wood, cotton, artists clothing, cellophane, paracetamol box and Tampax

106 x 299 x 90 cm (41 3/4 x 117 3/4 x 35 3/8 in)

Phung-Tien Phan (b. 1983 Essen, lives and works in Essen) has previously presented solo exhibitions at Kunsthalle Basel, Basel; Édouard Montassut, Paris; CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux; Goethe-Institut, Cyprus; Schiefe Zähne, Berlin; Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Hamburg; Drei, Cologne; Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn. Her works have been included in group exhibitions at Times Museum, Guangzhou; Kunstverein Bielefeld, Bielefeld; G2 Kunsthalle, Leipzig; Kunsthaus Glarus, Glarus; Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Dusseldorf; amongst others.