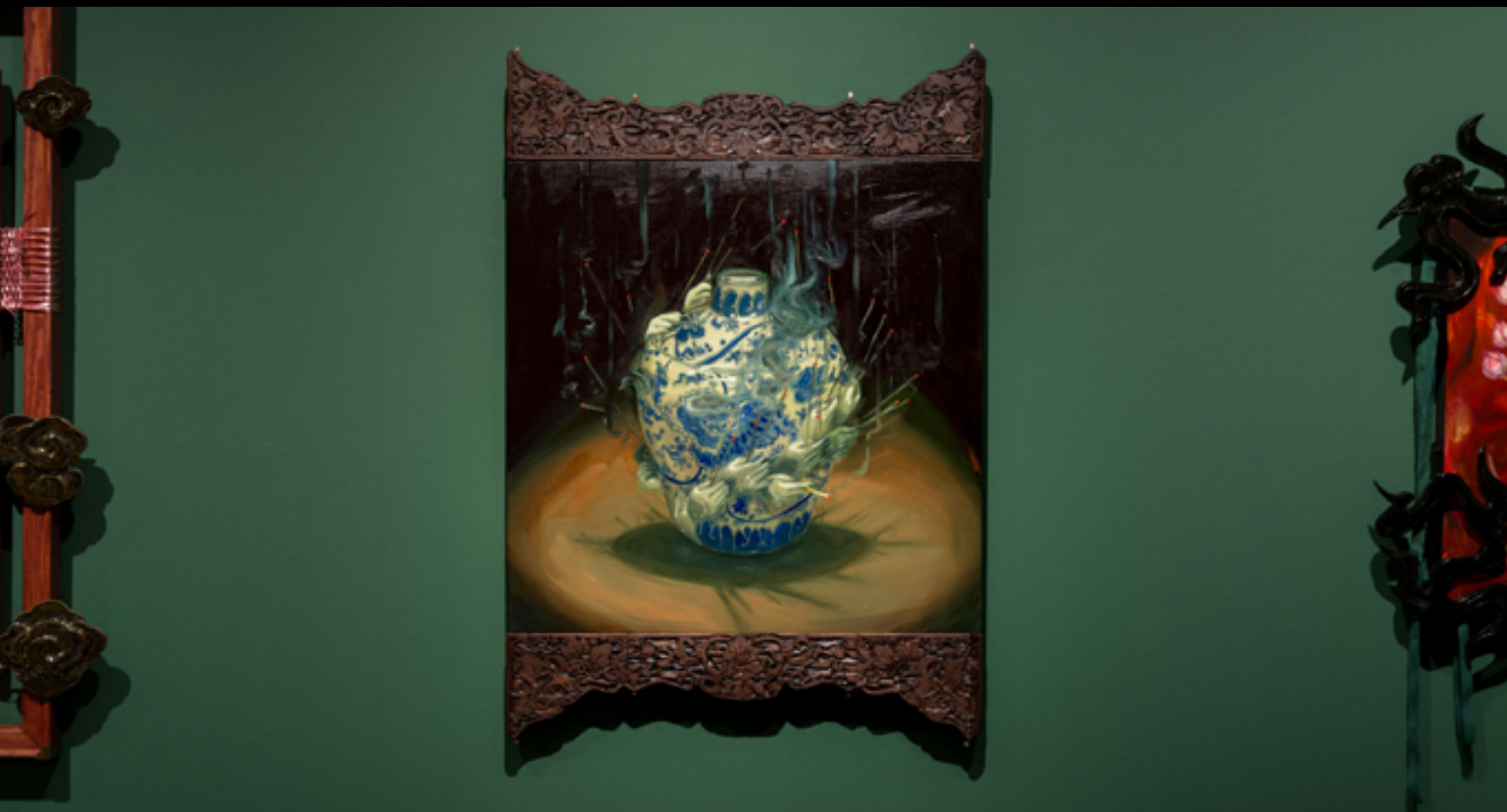


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“SHE DIED *A* DEATH *BY* *A* THOUSAND CUTS”



Phuong Nguyen’s exhibition *she died a death by a thousand cuts* confronts the troubled archive of *L’Art à Hué* (1919), a French colonial-era publication, reimagining and reclaiming the porcelain vessels represented in her mixed-media paintings. (Photos: Darren Rigo)

Phuong Nguyen
January 31–
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Art Gallery of Burlington
—
Review by
Lan “Florence” Yee

When you walk into Phuong Nguyen’s solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Burlington, there is already a conversation underway—one between the history of porcelain’s contact with European imperialism and the beings that still bear its insidious impacts.

Near the entrance of the gallery, a display of eighteenth-century earthenware sits under a glass case. The artefacts on loan from the Gardiner Museum’s permanent collection face a wall of Nguyen’s chimerically framed oil paintings of porcelain vessels. Although instantly recognizable as the white-and-blue opulence of Chinoiserie, the brushstrokes in Nguyen’s renderings only gesture at these patterns of glaze, inviting us to fill in the rest in our minds.

We know them already, or at least, we think we do. The painted vessels are obfuscated by the clashing haze that forms when incense smoke meets rain, as one fights to rise while the other falls, wisps slipping off the vases. Around them are milky, manicured hands, lustrous like the porcelain, vaporous like the incense. Hands that grab, that prod, that probe. Other hands that hold, that lead, that relax. They give the vessels an embodied desire, but one that knows it is fraught.

The imagery found in Chinoiserie promotes an archetypal fetishization of East and Southeast Asian femininity dating back to European colonial expansion. The obsessive collection of these shiny vessels (termed porcelain sickness) created visual motifs out of available feminine bodies and—or as—

unfurling flowers, sumptuous meals, and lavish landscapes. A frenzy to possess, appraise, and classify porcelain made its imagery ubiquitous, shaping Asian women’s perception from the Eurocentric gaze.

It is felt repeatedly in history through the manifestations of sexual violence during imperial contact and wartimes, as well as in mundane interactions today. A man at a bar once took a picture of me, and said that he wanted to take me home to put me on his mantle. The familiarity of these stories echo in the title of the exhibition, “she died a death by a thousand cuts,” a prolonged pain and now-abolished

practice known as lingchi that is slow and difficult to perceive. Building over centuries of dehumanization, these cuts are collective. They burn. And in that fire, Nguyen repairs.

The transformative force of fire in her work is the key to this exhibition’s dialogue, in both symbolism and technique. In Vietnamese spirituality, fire has the ability to ward off evil and invite good fortune. Smouldering incense establishes a path to ancestral communication. Sculptural flames lick the edges of the wood panel paintings. As porcelain objects are hardened in the fire of a kiln, here they return to a new fire. They are not destroyed, but rather remade.



Chinoiserie sits in a glass case, on loan from the Gardiner Museum, which artist Phuong Nguyen included to signal to their displaced meanings, forgotten labour, and fractured cultural narratives. (Photo: Darren Rigo)

This ceramic-on-ceramic exhibition plays with its materiality: making the frames also necklaces, the stretchers also looms, the twine also weft, the mounts also architecture, the wood also carved. The hybridity responds to historical material as a result of the research behind the artist’s work, traversing theories of Ornamentalism (Anne Anlin Cheng), Orientalism (Edward Said), and Monstrous Beauty (Iris Moon).

Most of the paintings are named after image plates found in the colonial-era encyclopedia of Vietnamese arts and culture, *L’Art à Hué* (1919). The patterns found in the archaic publication are rearranged as the ceramic frames that adorn the paintings. If the flattened imagery in *L’Art à Hué* was stripped of its kin and its context, Nguyen’s work creates a new home for these wandering spirits. She manages to alchemize the pain of a thousand cuts to repair these objects’ relationship to themselves for an imperfect new path. •

Toronto-based artist Phuong Nguyen explores ornamentalism and the relationship between exoticism and violence. (Photo: Greg McCarthy)

