



VANGHOUA ANTHONY VUE

Vanghoua Anthony Vue is already gaining international attention for his work exploring the peripatetic journeys undertaken by members of his Hmong community across the globe. Vue explores Hmong writing systems, together with Hmong textiles that's so often been misinterpreted as simple patterns, and reinterprets these as monumental graphics for ersatz graffiti markings. For this project Vue will work with the Hmong community in Cairns to develop new work exploring Hmong journeys across various bodies of water and land, and the 'shipping' and translation of home from South East Asia to far north Queensland.

I was born in Sydney, the seventh of eight children. We only lived there for a year. My parents had arrived there from a refugee camp in Thailand where they'd been waiting for Australia's approval of their refugee status for over a decade. My mother and father are Hmong, a minority cultural group with no country of their own. Hmong peoples are found throughout South East Asia, southern China and beyond. They met each other in that refugee camp after the interrelated wars in Laos and Vietnam.

During the French colonization of Laos, the French government had supported the Royal Lao family to stay in power. After the French left, the American CIA continued the support of the Royal Lao family and their government, recruiting among the Hmong to resist both Lao and Vietnamese communists during the

conflicts. There were also Hmong who sided with the Pathet Lao (Lao Communists), which stemmed from divisions formed during French colonization. My father and my grandfather were part of the CIA-backed force; my father was recruited when he was around 12-13 after his parents were killed by Vietnamese communists who raided their village. After the Pathet Lao gained government control of Laos in 1975, the Hmong who had sided with the CIA fled the country. In fear of his life, my father trekked across the country to get to the border of Laos and then swam across the Mekong River in order to make his way into Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, located in Thailand's northeastern district of Pak Chom. Like a few others in the camp, he continued to risk his life by going back and forth between Laos and Thailand, acting as a guide for new groups of refugees.



On the other hand, my mother hasn't spoken much about her time before and after the war. I know that she was orphaned at a young age, which she talks about with a lot of sorrow. I'm not entirely sure how she arrived in the refugee camp, but it was with relatives. Her brother, her only family member who survived, immigrated to the USA soon after arriving.

In the refugee camp my parents gave birth to my four oldest sisters and my oldest brother. Dad did a lot of odd jobs to get the family by during that time. Fixing shoes, teaching at the makeshift schools, helping the Thai's with construction work, and even working as a family planning consultant. Whatever was necessary to obtain some money to buy necessities for the family.

The next leg of the family's journey – getting from the Thai refugee camp to Australia – was difficult in all kinds of other ways. The Australian government was not interested in recognizing the plight of the Hmong, but help arrived from members of a small group from the Hmong community who were already in Australia. Prior to 1975, the Colombo Plan had sponsored six Hmong students to study in Australia, with two other students sponsored privately and by the church. After the war, that small group of eight people began the slow process of sponsoring Hmong families. They fought the argument on cultural grounds, arguing to the Australian government that unless more Hmong were allowed into the country, Hmong cultural traditions and language would die. Slowly, year by year, the community of Hmong refugees gradually grew in number on the basis of extended family connections. According to some sources, a number of those families had changed their name in order to claim relationship status to the ever-spreading branches of the family tree.

Contrary to the popular imaginary of refugee arrivals into the country, my parents and my siblings did not make their way here via refugee boats; they flew into the country via QANTAS. For a few months we stayed with the Hmong family that had sponsored us in Sydney, and during that time a few Hmong families travelled to FNQ (far north Queensland) to check out the potential for farming areas. They returned with reports about bountiful areas of country well suited to Hmong farming.

We moved up to Innisfail first, lured by the promise of banana farming. While in Innisfail my youngest sister was born. For the first couple of years there, Dad focused on making a living while learning English, and Mum looked after the children. With Dad's previous experience in construction work, he was able to find a range of jobs in residential construction. We moved to Cairns where he took up positions in a range of trade areas. Over time, my parents and other Hmong people who had settled in pockets all across FNQ started small stores at Rusty's Market in Cairns, where many continue

to sell fruit and vegetables they'd grown in backyards and from farms around the surrounding towns. Some of my fondest memories growing up are of the weekly drives to Innisfail to visit other community members, and of the drives to farms around FNQ in search for produce to sell. Long hours were spent staring out the car window, watching mountain after mountain pass. Income wasn't great, so we rented until 2004 when my parents were able to afford a house on a small plot in the Cairns southern suburb of Edmonton.

Straight after my high school education in Cairns I moved down to Brisbane to enrol in the Queensland College of Art at Griffith University. While I was growing up I was interested in the Japanese cartoons like Dragonball Z, Pokémon and Digimon I watched on TV – I drew all the characters repeatedly, so I guess popular culture was my real entry point to visual culture. I'd only visited the Cairns Regional Gallery once as part of a high school activity and the only other art I'd been aware of while I was growing up in Cairns was touristy kitsch art. But of course, Hmong art, or 'cultural traditions' was *always* there in its many forms.

Before I entered the art college, I guess I'd had a vague idea in the back of my head that I'd continue to develop paintings that drew from the anime/ surrealist-inspired images I was already interested in. But after moving there, Hmong cultural references started to creep into my work. My first painting in undergraduate was about Hmong history – this was the first time I can remember openly acknowledging the importance of my heritage to myself. I can remember exactly when it happened: during a project focused on the HMAS Diamantina, the war frigate docked in the Maritime Museum adjacent to the QCA, I made the decision to link the subject matter to the recent history of Hmong peoples in Laos.

By the end of my undergraduate majoring in painting, although interest in my Hmong background had continued to grow, I was still repressing full acknowledgement of my attachment. Instead, I was working through the materiality of the paint, addressing formal concerns like colour, form, texture and working through the processes of painting rather than referencing any concerns beyond those of art for art's sake. After I graduated, I turned away from art for a while to embark on a double degree in international politics and communication at the University of Queensland with the expectation that the information would provide a way of feeding my art practice and also make me more 'employable'. But I pulled out after six months, feeling that I had taken on an excess of theory that I wouldn't really need as an artist.

I returned to Cairns for 6 months, where I focused on rebuilding my portfolio and submitting my application for Honours. I was accepted and moved back to Brisbane before quitting, feeling that the art world



wasn't for me. A great deal of the art I was seeing and the art conversations I was hearing didn't seem to speak to me in connected or relevant ways, and at the time I was more interested in setting myself up financially, career-wise and relationship-wise.

I made sushi every day for two years in Brisbane. The monotonous routine of rolling sushi and over flavouring everything with mayonnaise from 9am to 11pm made me realise I had to make art to be happy. Even so, during that time I hadn't given up my curiosity to learn, and enrolled in a range of different courses. The entire process was a bit like moving in and out of a series of revolving academic doors that included a few months each in architecture, graphic design and engineering drawing. I kept quitting each of them as soon as a sense of deep underlying dissatisfaction with the work they entailed descended. In the back of my head the image of being in a studio making art kept haunting me.

In 2013 I returned to Cairns – this time interested in pursuing a Bachelor of Sustainability – but instead I took on a range of jobs and redeveloped my portfolio for submission. At the end of the year I backpacked through South East Asia from October to January. It was an amazing, eye-opening time during which I met many people and visited many communities. To this day I still want to re-make connections with some of those communities.

In 2014 I finally returned to QCA to undertake my Honours. This time I had a research focus I could commit to: my thesis focused on reinterpreting and reinventing Hmong textile traditions through a more-or-less auto-biographical approach. At the end of what was a very productive and successful year I was offered a scholarship to further my studies as a PhD.

Since then, I've increased my experimental approach to art making; a key to the development of my work has moved towards the role community plays in the conceptual and material development of the work. Over the course of my doctoral studies I've undertaken a number of residencies and projects locally and overseas including at the Minnesota Museum of American Art, USA; in Tokyo, Japan, and in Hobart, Cairns, Brisbane and Logan. At the moment I'm looking forward to getting into regular studio production focusing on the links between historical records and personal photographs collected by members of my family.

What makes where you live and work different? (to a metropolitan area/to other regions you've experienced)

For me, staying in FNQ has been about keeping the connections with my family. The decision to not be

there right now is driven by my studies and work: I'm towards the end of my PhD now and I also need to find further work, and feel metropolitan cities offer more opportunities for that. I've also come to enjoy the lifestyle in Brisbane – I cycle, and the pathways and bikeways here are more expansive than those in Cairns. But I still want to return permanently to Cairns.

Growing up in Cairns offered me less distractions, and that contributed to the long hours I spent drawing, and also long solitary hours walking or riding my bike through the sugar-cane fields thinking – which was quite terrifying, especially on pitch-black nights, but it was really peaceful. I do miss that quite a lot, but those sugar-cane fields I rode through near my house are now gone, replaced by suburban houses, shopping centres and sporting facilities. A lot of that time growing up I was sullen and resentful of my family and the wider community, like many teenagers, and I guess that part of the FNQ landscape – and its moodiness – will always be a background to my consciousness.

What might make it difficult?

Despite the fact that Cairns is associated with a multi-cultural environment, my experience there was much more culturally one-dimensional. While I was aware of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultural groups, I wasn't aware too aware of many Asian sub-groups. I was aware of the Hmong community through my family, but I went through a period where I suppressed my connection with that part my cultural heritage. Perhaps I was just young at the time, but I felt the place stifled who I could be. I had to conform to certain roles or risk being an outcast.

The greatest difficulty in terms of my art practice and development has been the lack of visual art programs in Cairns universities. When I graduated from high school in 2006, there was no visual art program at James Cook University in Cairns. Although it was available in Townsville, I decided to enroll at the QCA instead – also wanting to experience the bright lights of 'Brisvegas'. Since then it's been a process of going back and forth between Cairns and Brisbane, mostly for art study purposes.

And where do the other challenges lie? But are these challenges worthwhile? And what kind of benefits are there?

The heat is a challenge – long hot summers make it difficult to work for long hours in the studio – especially if there isn't any aircon. But the rain is always a welcome respite. As I've said earlier, the real connection to place in FNQ for me is through family and community. It's also been because of the community there that I've been invited back to make some work there that directly engage and address the community.

Do you think that galleries and the artistic communities around them (the artists, designers, arts workers, volunteers) have shaped the local community? To what extent?



KickArts Contemporary Arts, Cairns Indigenous Art Fair, UMI Arts and some other local initiatives are making a growing impact, adding to the culture and image of FNQ beyond tourism.

For myself, because so much of my work has been focused on local Hmong communities, I've had to travel to their particular destinations, and to spend time in consultation with them before planning and making projects. My own work is often focused on reawakening cultural pride and connection within a range of Hmong communities. As Hmong people have traditionally never had one single homeland, they've had to make connections with whatever place they've been permitted to settle on. That's been a strong part of my own art practice too.

Did you ever envision yourself living and working in a place like this?

At the moment I'm living between Cairns and Brisbane. I've always imagined myself as being more fixed to one spot, but the fact that I grew up there making art there (in Cairns) and the fact that my family has more-or-less always been there meant that it's home to me. But it feels completely natural to make art wherever I am.

How does it feel now?

I still hold an image of the possibility of me living and working in Cairns – I just haven't worked out how yet. The picture I have is of me working on my veranda surrounded by cane fields, lush vegetation and mountains. In the wet season the rain is so soothing. That's very appealing to me – also the fact that it's halfway between South East Asia and Brisbane makes it seem somehow perfect. It's a home-away-from-many-homes for me.

What relationship does 'your' place have to the general scene in metropolitan-focused art in Australia?

Because the focus on my work is essentially on diaspora – and specifically the Hmong diaspora – my work and 'place' are connected in a global as well as a specifically local way. Over the years of the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (at QAGOMA, Brisbane) I've grown increasingly interested in the work of a number of contemporary artists who also deal with these issues.

Is it cheaper to live in the regions?

Not really – but the travel between places is very expensive. The costs to fly between Brisbane and Cairns a few times per year can add up.

I've yet to really consider buying a house, but I do think it is cheaper to buy in Cairns than in Brisbane. In terms of art, some materials can be a challenge to get in Cairns and require purchase and shipping from elsewhere. But that doesn't happen too often – and it does encourage you to be adaptive and resourceful.

Do you think it's important to 'get out' from the regions and come back in again?

Yes - diversity of experiences is important. Also, it's become increasingly important for me to maintain contact with a range of regions both in Australia and in South-East Asia. Growing up in Cairns has made me aware of other places – of wanting to be elsewhere. But once I am elsewhere, I've always felt the urge to return – for family and for nostalgia.

How important are region-to-region contact and relationships?

In terms of the Hmong community in Australia, that kind of communication has been instrumental in assisting their initial exit from refugee camps. As the Hmong Australian population is also small and widely dispersed, maintaining region-to-region relationships has also been crucial for economic, social, and cultural assistance across the community.

And in my own experience, region-to-region contacts have helped build networks for future possible engagements. At the moment I'm hoping that these contacts will provide a basis for new ones in the future. But aside from work purposes, it has also been about sharing and exchanging experiences, and about feeling connected to others of shared history, culture and identity.

Do you think place still matters...or do you just think that the importance of place has been dissolved by social media, international marketing and the onslaught of the multi-national conglomerates (Facebook; Apple; Amazon; Netflix; Google etc)?

I think it's still important in terms of a feeling I can get from a place when I'm actually there. In terms of making art, I don't feel that not being at a certain place makes too much of a hindrance to my production – I use a lot of social media and online research to make my work. Nonetheless, nothing compares with the experience of spending time and making connections in a particular place and with the people there.

What is the role of your work?

Connecting people and connecting stories and histories to people. I think that work can give people – individuals and communities – a sense of connection – of counteracting that feeling of being adrift. Also, it's about making use of the opportunities that make my life worthwhile – doing work that makes a difference to others in terms of opening up opportunities and making their presence felt – the importance of feeling listened to and acknowledged. A lot of it comes down to the feeling of not feeling overlooked. It might have something to do with my experience being the seventh child in the family ... maybe not? But a lot of that motivation also comes from the Hmong experience, which like many minorities, is often neglected and disregarded.

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