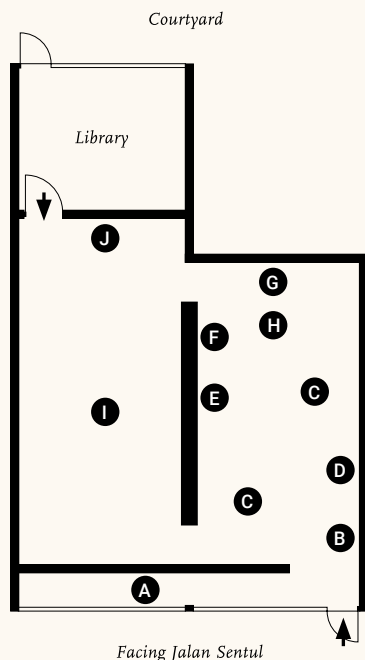# HÀ NINH PHAM

RECURSIVE FABLES

CURATED BY VAN DO   8 OCTOBER – 5 NOVEMBER 2022

EXHIBITION INTRODUCTION

A+ WORKS *of* ART is pleased to present Hà Ninh Pham's solo exhibition, *Recursive Fables*, curated by Vân Đỗ.

In various fields such as mathematics, programming and system building, 'recursion' could be understood as when a system refers to itself. This 'recursive' nature has always been a prominent feature of *My Land*, a fictional world that takes self-referentiality as one of its core values: "This territory does not correspond to any known culture in human history. It has its own systems of logic, language, and metrology that are functional only within themselves" (from Hà Ninh's artist's statement for *My Land*). Hà Ninh Pham's solo exhibition, *Recursive Fables*, sheds light on the invention of a new language called 'Loop Script' that Hà Ninh has been working on since early 2022. 'Loop Script' is a language that was born out of *My Land* and is capable of self-documenting its own history. Through an array of works spanning drawings, sculptures, and video games, Hà Ninh also ponders over the constructedness of language and its capacity to reveal differing realities.

Courtyard

Library

J

G

H

F

I

E

C

D

C

B

A

Facing Jalan Sentul

D **The Planet [0.2.1]**
2022
Graphite and ink on paper mounted
on PVC panel
diptych 57.5 × 40 (each)

E **The School of Croaking Frog Section 1
and 2**
2022
Graphite and ink on paper mounted
on PVC panel
diptych 57.5 × 40 cm (each)

F **Ms. Turtle and Mr. Peacock Section 1 and 2**
2022
Graphite and ink on paper mounted
on PVC board
diptych 67 × 17 cm (each)

G **Array of Void at 5 × 7, 7 × 10, 9 × 13,
13 × 18**
2022
Graphite and ink on paper
104 × 146 cm (each)

H **Slip Generator**
2022
Graphite and ink on paper mounted
on PVC board
50.5(H) × 62(W) × 3(D) cm

I **Checkpoint 1–5**
2022
Graphite and ink on cotton paper
230 × 104 cm (each)

J **Loop Script – English Dictionary version
0.1.0**
2022
Single player video game
User-defined duration

A **Territorial marks**
2022
Graphite and ink on wall
Dimensions variable

B ^LEFT **Syntax Noun Loop** (2020–ongoing)
^RIGHT **Time & A Priori** (2017–ongoing)
Sketch books
14.5 × 21 cm (each)
Artist's Collection

C **One, Two, Many**
2022
3D printed plastic
37(H) × 33(W) × 32(D) cm (single)
24(H) × 23(W) × 21(D) cm; and
24(H) × 21(W) × 20(D) cm (group)

2

ARTIST
STATEMENT

"For the past year, I have been constructing a language named "Loop Script". I want Loop Script to be the language that functions in a space where time does not exist, similar to the space in my imagination and memory.

Loop Script starts as a visual component in the *Mothermap* series, which is part of my long-term world-building project titled *My Land*. In the project, I make up maps, tales, scientific research, and video games about an imagined territory that exists outside of time and, consequently, outside of human history. I consider it a hypothetical environment where any viewer must abandon their cultural legacy and learn how to navigate a world built from scratch.

I did not start Loop Script with a clear reference in hand. I invent and learn the language at the same time, without the burden of forcing it to make immediate sense. Loop Script shows up as both drawing and writing. In Loop Script, a word can be formed in two ways. On one hand, it can start as a visual form from which I find suggestive meanings. On the other hand, it can start as a symbol to which the meanings are assigned, and I will find out if those meanings stand up over time.

I cannot remember all the words. This is why each time I look at Loop Script writing, I feel that I am reading both myself and another person. The writing is meant to be both a monologue and a discourse. I don't want Loop Script to have any phonetic properties so that it can be written and read, but not spoken.

Loop Script is written mostly by applying graphite powder on paper, erasing the shapes, and shading them. There are three basic elements. Subject 0 is the voice of the void, it is put on paper using the blackest ink I have. Subject 1 is the voice of the speculator, drawn by re-shading the erased parts on the paper. Subject 2 is the voice of the believer. It looks similar to Subject 1, but has a cast shadow, indicating that it touches the "ground" and never "moves".

Besides drawings on paper, the language can take other forms. I have created an 8-bit video game that reveals the definitions of some of the words in Loop Script, and 3D-printed sculptures influenced by Loop Script's vocabulary. Working with different mediums for Loop Script, I hope they allow the language to evolve into different forms. In this way, I can communicate with familiarity and strangeness at the same time."

———
Hà Ninh Pham

ONCE UPON A TIME...

In a land far away, there was a kingdom where not a soul lived in there, save its King. Day in and day out, the King spent his waking hours building the vast and varied infrastructure that would support his thriving realm. Thanks to his diligence and a natural-born talent for planning, the Kingdom expanded both in size and scale: the perspex fortress that protected the kingdom was a paradigm of defensive architecture; the sea urchin farm's production knew no limits, its ponds becoming home to the largest urchins ever seen, some that could even leap clear of the water and cartwheel across the kingdom's streets; the institute of astrology churned out endless reams of research and statistical analysis that aided the King in his nation-building, and the wind farm generated clean high-powered electricity for all the engines that worked through the night.

In this way, the King spent his youth, chasing after his dreams and ambitions, filling up the sky and the land with his own kingdom. Strangely, despite all the buildings, factories, and temples that were being built, not even one other person came to live in the Kingdom. The King had no soulmate to confide in, about his secret hopes and difficulties in building up a whole empire.

Since nobody else ever lived in this kingdom, no language came into existence. The loneliness gradually became too enormous for the King to bear. So he decided to invent a language, that he might document the history of the kingdom, and communicate his thoughts and feelings in letters to be sent off to other lands that were within his knowledge. The King codified this language he invented into three shades of color: white shades referred to his speculations and guesses, gray shades were for real-life events or facts, and black shades for mystery, or complex emotions even the King could not decipher.

No sooner had this language come into being than the King took eagerly to writing, for months on end, about the prosperity of his kingdom. It was not long, however, before he began to lose his vision. As his eyesight declined, he stopped being able to differentiate between the shades of color. On the scrolls of paper on which he wrote, his script became foggy scribbles, blurring white, gray and black incomprehensibly. As his eyes started to fail him, his mind could not no longer make sense of what he'd written. Afraid that those who received the letters would not understand him, he tried hard with the last dwindling light afforded him to fill up the paper with as many gray and white shades as possible. As much as he fought and struggled, the black shades grew ever larger, slowly consuming the gray and white shades.

Whether the nighttime had truly taken over, or his vision had lost itself to amnesia, he no longer knew.

Many days hence, an archeologist, sailing across the skyline, discovers some scrolls of scribbles carefully rolled into a glass bottle. Drawing on the table of conventional signs encrypted at the top of the paper, he and his colleagues are able to identify some historical facts and significant milestones of the faraway kingdom. Only its location is still a myth. Over the years, however, the black shades become deep-dyed fabrics with darkly ombre hues. None of them can decipher the enigma of the black shades that mesmerize any and all who spend the time to look at them.

In a lone palace elsewhere, the King fights on with his own black shades. Time goes by, and the history of this kingdom becomes an enigmatic night sky that exists only in the ever splintering versions of oral histories, just as the rare clear night's sky would have the single stars be condensed into a milky wave."

CURATORIAL ESSAY

Three years ago, Hà Ninh introduced his long-term project *My Land* for the first time in Vietnam, in an exhibition titled *Necessary Fictions*[1], at The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam), where I then worked. In the artist talk that accompanied the exhibition, he laid out four different entry points into the project, where he wore multiple imaginary hats: as a poet, as a scientist, as a painter and as a cartographer. The following year marked a significant turning point for *My Land*, as it transitioned from a map-making to a world-building project[2], in which the fictional land conceived and utilized by the artist gradually became an organic entity with its own life and growth, independent from him. Those who follow Hà Ninh's artistic practice will be familiar with his [*mothermap*] series. However, in parallel with the fictional maps,

he has been concretizing the structure of *My Land*, by creating a lot more supporting infrastructures that fall into his four categories, temporarily termed *[mothermap], My Land Ltd., Loop Scripts* and *Logs*.

In various fields such as mathematics, programming and system building, 'recursion' could be understood as when a system refers to itself. This 'recursive' nature has always been a prominent feature of *My Land*, a fictional world that takes self-referentiality as one of its core values: "This territory does not correspond to any known culture in human history. It has its own systems of logic, language, and metrology that are functional only within themselves" (from Hà Ninh's artist's statement for *My Land*). Hà Ninh Pham's solo exhibition, *Recursive Fables*, sheds light on the invention of a new language called 'Loop Script' that Hà Ninh has been working on since early 2022. 'Loop Script' is a language that was born out of *My Land* and is capable of self-documenting its own history. Through an array of works spanning drawings, sculptures, and video games, Hà Ninh also ponders over the constructedness of language and its capacity to reveal differing realities.

Loop Script first came into being with three simple elements: "Subject 0", "Subject 1" and "Subject 2". Each concept can be written using these three elements. "Subject 0 is about the emotions and underlying attitude of a speech; it is all flat, written using brushes and ink. Subject 1 is about guesses or opinions; its forms are shaded using graphite pencils. Subject 2 is about firm beliefs or facts; its forms are shaded using graphite pencils and its shadows also shaded to make it appear grounded."[3] At the beginning of this series, only a limited number of words were created using these three subjects, which were then encoded

into an old-school video game called *Loop Script - English Dictionary version 0.1.0* that resembled a vocabulary-building application to help children memorize new words. In the beta version of the game, players play a black bipedal creature (a then-coloured character also appearing in Hà Ninh's previous video game *Institute of Distance*[4]) to "learn" the English references of the Loop Script words. When clicking on the characters, the player is transported to a screen with interlocking square loops. In a conversation with Hà Ninh, it became clear to me that the closer the square is to the character, the more literal the meaning becomes; the further away, the more metaphorical and symbolic the meanings. Some words have more than one meaning: this is the beginning of the development of the later Loop Script multi-meaning vocabulary system.

A body of works, consisting of four drawings of equal size called *Array of Void at 5 × 7, 7 × 10, 9 × 13, 13 × 18* — each made up of 35, 70, 117 and 234 identical squares consecutively — and a Venn-like diagram called *Slip Generator*, constructs a so-called alphabet of Loop Script. The four drawings make up a collection of letter combinations to visualize all the words possible for "Subject 1" and "Subject 2"; while the Venn-like diagram assembles the letter combinations for all words possible for "Subject 0". These letters on their own have no meaning; it's the process in which they are put to use, or in this case, being used as symbols in the final artworks, that they become meaningful. If such words continue to be meaningful after several uses, only then will they be registered into the official lexical system of Loop Script.
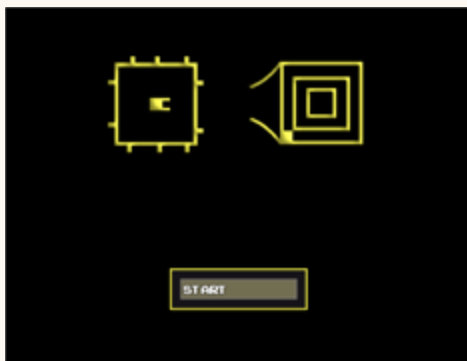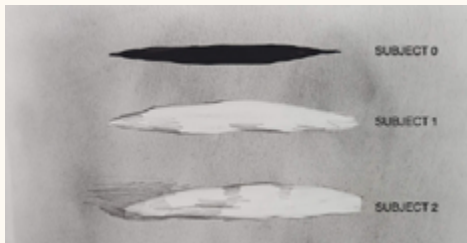

Loop Script Subjects 0 - 1 - 2 (top); *Loop Script - English Dictionary version 0.1.0* (bottom)


Array of Void at 5×7, 7×10, 9×13, 13×18 (2022) and *Slip Generator* (2022)

Among the language's first applications is to "translate" the already-existing stories written by Hà Ninh in English into Loop Script. Besides being a visual artist, Hà Ninh is also a natural storyteller (though he might not like me to refer to him this way). In *Recursive Fables*, his stories take the form of three diptychs using graphite and ink on paper mounted on PVC panels. The first story (visualized in *The Planet Section 1 & 2 [0.2.1]*) is about sixty-four nations fighting over plots of land and the naming of their shared planet. The other two stories belong to the series about the *Croaking Frog School*, more specifically the Green Well in the school, Mr. Turtle who sells tea at the school gate and her son, Peacock, who tries so hard to pass the entrance exam into the Croaking Frog school.
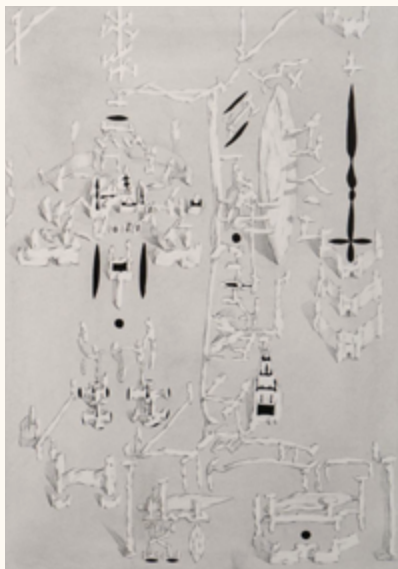
The Planet Section 1 & 2 [0.2.1] (2022)
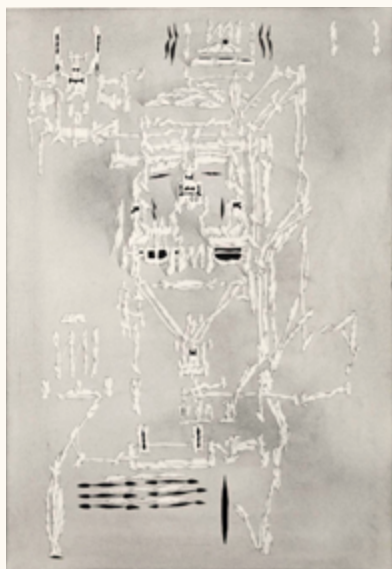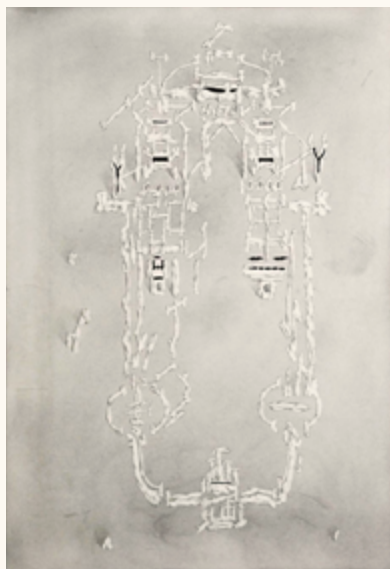
The Croaking Frog School series (2022)

Reading Hà Ninh's stories, I was reminded of one of my own literary heroes, the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges, whose short stories also read like fables. In one of his notable short stories, *Funes the Memorious*, Borges describes a character Ireneo Funes who develops an extraordinary memory after falling off a horse, and whose mind becomes surfeited with details. There is no categorization and no hierarchy attached to things and events: "it was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term dog embraced so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms; he was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front)."[5] Hà Ninh's art-making resonates with Borges as both utilize a circling strategy whereby a story is told within another story, both of which revolve around a singular theme. For example, in *Funes the Memorious*, the first half of the story has the narrator reflecting upon his own short-term memory and his uncertainty of recalling Funes, which then leads to their encounter that reveals Funes's capacity to remember and his exacting, acute memory.

Hà Ninh's stories are also rich in detail, and there is a meticulous approach to the description of things. Above all, his choices of subject are highly specific: it cannot be just any insect but must be that exact kind of flea that lives on the bodies of dogs; it cannot be any kind of school but must be a school that bears the name of Croaking Frog[6]. Those who are aware of Hà Ninh's personal histories and idiomatic expressions in the Vietnamese language can guess the metaphors and his attitudes to such allegories, while those who are not can still enjoy the stories as fables or parables. For me personally, such literary qualities (though these actual narratives are hidden from the public view because of Hà Ninh's choice to display only pure form), give *My Land* inherent characteristics that breathe with imperfection and peculiarity. In contrast to rule-making, where the reader is more or less in the position of the judge, narrative-making invites us to play the role of the characters and decide for ourselves how we would like to view the story, and is precisely what makes it seem that much more livable, as it leaves room for different interpretations and for imagination—what lives it could be to live in *My Land*—to flourish.

My Land was born on the 30th September 2017, and so this year marks the fifth anniversary of the project. In this exhibition, Hà Ninh celebrates this milestone by using 'Loop Script' to reflect upon and to document the history of *My Land*, which was first materialized in the series *Checkpoint 1-5*. Five works of graphite and ink on paper line up in two rows in reverent silence, as the guards of *My Land* who welcome visitors onto the time travel that journeys through the unfolding of the land's history. The spatiality that is a signature of Hà Ninh's drawings also blurs the ordering of the eye movements we would naturally make to read, from left to right, top to bottom, and to process the information as written text. All symbols must be registered in one go or be appreciated in their visual forms. Time here does not correspond to the linearity of the calendar. One work can be in the present and the past tense simultaneously, and portray a spectrum of emotions and attitudes towards a conceptualized version of several events (while "events" documented in *Checkpoint 1-5* also do not correlate with his real-life events). More than a historical timeline that details the key events, the locations where they take

Checkpoint 1-5 (2022)

place and their consequences, *Checkpoint* portrays a mapping of Hà Ninh's shifting worldviews in a specific order unknown to anyone but the artist himself. Standing in front of the works, it feels like time stands still, that a layer of dust covers the surface of the bronze shields, and that should we reach out to brush clear the dust, it would all quickly crumble into ashes. There is a sense that we are standing in front of relics unearthed from a bygone land, in front of the lingering shadows of a civilization long since sunk into oblivion.

Similar to the diptych series, the *Checkpoint* series is made first by covering the background with graphite powder (each work with different shades), then by erasing or using black ink to draw on it, and then using graphite to trace lines or create shadows. In order to create a completely new language strange to him, Hà Ninh has defamiliarized and revisited the basics of the "language" he learnt at a very young age, and that he knows well: drawing. In this body of works created for *Recursive Fables*, the monochrome takes over the whole stage: the color palette—white, gray, black—and the materials in use—graphite, ink, eraser—are among the basic elements that any art student who learns to draw would use. His definition of aesthetics may change over time but his belief in drawing is unshakeable, seen in his intimate relationship to drawing. He once told me that you cannot hide yourself in your own drawings, regardless of how conceptual you want your works to be; it must be seen through your brushworks, color palette and composition.

One, two, many (2022)

One, Two, Many, the only sculptural element in *Recursive Fables*, communicates something different from the other components: it proposes a numeral system for 'Loop Script'. Made of 3D printed plastic sticks and glued together into an object resembling either a tower or a hill, *One, Two, Many* materialized four numbers: 0, 1, 4 and many, the only numbers in existence and currently in use in Loop Script. Hanging above the sculpture is its own two-dimensional reflection. Informed by a DIY, model-making approach, Hà Ninh's sculptures always bear a resemblance to drawings that are rendered beyond the paper surface, drawings that set their feet in the real world, that can be thought of as drawings in space. Whether the numbers are physical or metaphysical is another philosophical dimension Hà Ninh subtly asks us to contemplate with him.

What I find interesting in Hà Ninh's invention of Loop Script is that he blends the mind of a logician who likes to build and optimize systems with the mind of a pure formalist who can spend as much time with their aesthetics, shapes and forms. With this approach, he's staying true to his unconditional belief in drawing as an artistic medium, while also satisfying his conceptual drive to build a world where he's in total power. The result challenges our perception of the work; is it a drawing or a piece of writing (or perhaps, as a "text" in much broader terms, referring to "a coherent set of signs that transmits some kind of informative message"[7])?

I had tried to learn the rules of Loop Script to decipher the meaning of his works, but I was lost in its world. It is nothing like any natural language that I use, for what I understand to be three reasons. The first reason is that this language is at its early stage of development, it has a long way to

go with myriad possibilities for growth and I am confident in any path it may take. The second reason is that it is created to be read and written but not spoken, and especially it is not meant for human communication outside of *My Land*. The third reason I think is the most important one, that Loop Script mirrors the mind of Hà Ninh far better than any other languages he uses, and corresponds more precisely than any other tools to his own spatial, linguistic, and visual logics. If that's the case, for better or worse, how can I not be lost in such a world?

————

Kuala Lumpur, 4 Oct 2022
Vân Đỗ

1. Co-curated by Zoe Butt and Bill Nguyễn, *Necessary Fictions* is a duo exhibition by Hà Ninh Pham and Tammy Nguyễn at The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre from 16 August till 27 October, 2022. More information of the exhibition can be found here: https://factoryartscentre.com/en/event/necessary-fictions/

2. For further information about the project transition, please refer to the conversation between Hà Ninh Pham and Michael Lee in the catalog published by A+ Works *of* Art in conjunction with *Institute of Distance*, Hà Ninh Pham's solo exhibition curated by Michael Lee for S.E.A Focus 2021 (S.E.A Focus Digital and S.E.A Focus Curated: *hyper-horizon*) from 20th to 31st January 2021.

3. Hà Ninh's early notes on *Loop Script* found in his Miro mindmap.

4. Hà Ninh's video games, *Loop Script - English Dictionary version 0.1.0* and *Institute of Distance*, are available to download on Google Play and App Store.

5. Borges, Jorge Luis. *Funes, the Memorious from Ficciones.* Translated by Anthony Kerrigan. Grove Press, 1962.

6. In Vietnam, there is an idiom about a frog that sits at the bottom of the water well, which is to criticize someone who judges the surroundings by his ignorance.

7. Lotman, Jurij. *The Structure of the Artistic Text.* University of Michigan, 1977.

BIOGRAPHIES

Hà Ninh Pham (born 1991, Hanoi, Vietnam) is an artist and educator from Hanoi, Vietnam, who works primarily in drawing, sculpture and game design. His work explores the way in which we construct an understanding of territories from afar. Hà Ninh Pham is an alumnus of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2018), he earned his MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (2016–2018), and his BFA from the Vietnam University of Fine Arts (2009–2014). His work has been reviewed by John Yau and Jamie James on Hyperallergic, and included in New American Paintings. Hà Ninh has been in Artist Residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts (Paris, France), ASEAN Secretariat (Jarkata, Indonesia), Corporation of Yaddo (New York, US), Wassaic Project (New York, US), Marble House Project (Vermont, US), and PLOP (London, UK). He received the Silver Medal for Young Talents of Vietnamese Fine Arts Universities in 2015 and the Murray Dessner Travel Award in 2018. His work has been shown in New York, London, Philadelphia, Bangkok, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. Hà Ninh currently lives and works in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Vân Đỗ (born in 1995, Hanoi) is a curator and writer currently living and working in Hanoi, Vietnam. She is a former member of the curatorial team at The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre in Saigon, Vietnam (2019–2021) and has recently been appointed the Artistic Director of Á Space, an independent artist-run space for experimental art in Hanoi, Vietnam. Her writings have been featured in Art & Market, Măng Ta Journal, Curatorial Xà Quần, Like the Moon in A Night Sky, and Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival among others. Selected exhibitions include: *IN:ACT 2022* (Nhà Sàn Collective & Á Space, Hanoi, 2022); *Till Later Letters* (Á Space, Hanoi, 2022); *Tò he learns how to swim* (Bình Quới, Saigon, 2022); *Virtual Private Realm* (Manzi Art Space, Hanoi, 2021); *Within / Between / Beneath / Upon* (The Factory, Saigon, 2021); *An Ode to the Microscopic* (DCINE, Saigon, 2020); *Silent Intimacy* (The Factory, 2019).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A+ WORKS *of* ART is a contemporary art gallery based in Kuala Lumpur, with a geographic focus on Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Founded in 2017 by Joshua Lim, the gallery presents a wide range of contemporary practices, from painting to performance, drawing, sculpture, new media art, photography, video and installation. Its exhibitions have showcased diverse themes and approaches, including material experimentation and global conversations on social issues. Collaboration is key to the ethos of A+ WORKS *of* ART. Since its opening, the gallery has worked with artists, curators, writers, collectors, galleries, and partners from within the region and beyond, and continues to look out for new collaborations. The gallery name is a play on striving for distinction but also on the idea that art is never without context and is always reaching to connect — it is always "plus" something else.

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