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ART • WEEKEND

Out of Vietnam, Drawings of Displacement and Repression

In Hà Ninh Pham's drawings, a building could be a prison or a torture chamber, but there is nothing about the edifices that might indicate their function.

John Yau   June 30, 2019

Hà Ninh Pham, "E4.1 [Institute of Depth]" (2019), graphite, acrylic, and pastel on paper, 56 x 44 inches (all images courtesy Passenger Pigeon Press / FRONT Art Space, unless otherwise noted)

One of my favorite books to dip into is *Pocket Atlas of Remote Islands* (2010) by Judith Schalansky, translated from the German by Christine Lo. Schalansky started researching and writing the book, subtitled *Fifty Islands I Have Not Visited and Never Will*, in the Berlin National Library. As she states in her introduction, "Land in Sight":

> I have invented nothing. But I have discovered everything; I have found these stories and made them mine, just as the explorer makes the land he discovers his. All the text in this book has been researched; every detail has been created out of these sources.

And yet, as Schalansky well knows, a map is an interpretation. It is her interpretation that creates the stories, all of which are true.

Take, for example, the island known as Tromelin, and the moment in its history that lasts 15 years. In 1761, a ship sets sail from Bayonne, France, and picks up slaves to sell at Mauritius, its final port of call. It runs aground, however, on a strip of sand two kilometers long and barely 800 meters wide. The 122 surviving sailors build a boat from the wreckage and set sail, promising the 60 surviving slaves (out of 160) that they will return. Fifteen years later, on November 29, 1776, a ship finally arrived, but the only ones still alive were seven women and a baby not yet weaned.

Hà Ninh Pham draws maps that lead to more maps. In his first New York show, *Cheat Codes*, at FRONT Art Space (June 22 – July 3, 2019), which was organized and curated by Passenger Pigeon Press (under the direction of Tammy Nguyen), the artist presents five mixed media drawings and a wood sculpture. According to the gallery press release, the drawings are part of a long-term project *My Land*, which he started in 2017 while he was an MFA student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

Hà Ninh Pham, "[mothermap]" (2019), graphite, paint marker, acrylic and pastel on paper, 48 x 46 inches

How the artist, who was born in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 1991, ended up studying in America is the subject, in part, of his drawings. In a conversation I had with Pham, I learned that his father was a soldier in the North Vietnamese army and fought in the Vietnam War. He was a communications expert and his primary job was to lay radio wires connecting the command posts of the various units advancing through the tunnels from the North to the South. Later, his father was instrumental in bringing the Internet to Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Pham – whose mother died when he was young – showed an early interest in art, which his father encouraged, which led to a BFA in Painting from Vietnam University of Fine Arts. In our conversation, Pham said that his art education consisted primarily of learning how to draw from plaster casts, an outdated holdover from the Colonial era.

When Pham was trying to decide whether to open a coffee shop in Hanoi or continue studying art, his father offered to pay his tuition as long as the school was in the United States, the very country he spent many years fighting.

This is how he ended up in Philadelphia, which is more than 8000 miles from Hanoi. I mention these details because I think that the information enters into his drawings, but not in any literal way. There is nothing overtly autobiographical about his work, but I get the feeling that it is all grounded in experience.

Done on a squarish sheet of paper, the drawing "[mothermap]" (2019) is divided into an eight-by-eight grid, with the vertical row numbered 1 through 8, while the horizontal row receives the alphabetical designations of A through H.
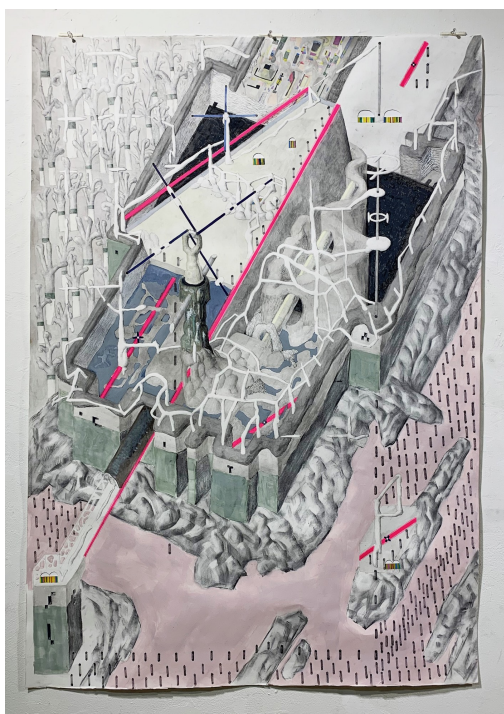
Hà Ninh Pham, "A6 [Pink headquarter]" (2019), graphite, paint marker, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 51 x 36 inches

This iteration of "[mothermap]," in which Pham depicts an aerial view of various architectural structures in a hilly terrain, is the third version of the generating source for the drawings that follow.

When I asked Pham about the impetus behind the "[mothermap]," he said that it enabled him to bring together competing ideologies. I don't think that these ideologies have only to do with growing up in Vietnam, a communist country, and studying in the US, the bastion of capitalism, though that is there.

They have to do with his education – from drawing plaster casts to earning an MFA and spending a summer at Skowhegan. They have to do with competing languages, such as the graphic markings often found in maps – topographical signs, symbols, and other visual indicators. Given Pham's biography, we get the sense that his drawings have to do with feelings of displacement and disruption – and that drawing a map can give him a sense of control.

Pham's topographical drawing has its roots in his education, but clearly set to a different purpose. With "A6 [pink headquarter]" (2019), the ambiguity suggested in the title is really one of the strengths of the work.

This particular structure seems to have been inspired by medieval fortresses and science fiction movies, as well as the work of Paul Noble and his multi-year drawing project creating a fictional city, *Nobson Newtown*. The difference is that Pham's *My Land* feels sinister, a sensation that was confirmed when I asked the artist about two of the buildings in "[mothermap]." One, he said was a "prison"

and the other was used for "torture." And yet, there is nothing about the edifices or even the titles the artist gives his drawings to indicate their function.

What adds to these works – gives them further power – is their resistance to complete interpretation; we can only partially read them. Why is the soil pink in "A6 [Pink headquarter]"? What are the rows of vertical marks meant to represent? Pham has opened a space – or perhaps it is more accurate to say, place – that is his alone: he both discovers and creates it. And it seems that it can remain open for a long time, becoming a diary of his discoveries.

Hà Ninh Pham, "B5.1 T [theodolite]" (2018), tracing paper and painted pine wood, 9 x 30 x 8 inches (image courtesy of the artist)

At the same time, in the sculpture, "B5. 1 [theodolite]" (2018), which Pham made while he was in Skowhegan, the title offers a clue as to what is on his mind. According to Wikipedia, "A theodolite is a precision optical instrument for measuring angles between designated visible points in the horizontal and vertical planes." It is a surveying tool, which is necessary to determine the relationship between the structures and the landscape they are set into. Pham's sculpture is DIY theodolite, which he sees as being similar to a camera obscura. There is a compartment for a lens and a space where the image can be projected, along with a protractor and a stick to measure the direction of the sun.

Instead of relying on a factory-produced thedolite, Pham has made one that does not rely on the conventions of measurement found in its commercial counterpart, reflecting his innate distrust of standard devices as well as his need to create an alternative world.

There is a visionary impulse running through Pham's undertaking that has more to do with conflict and repression, at least as suggested by "prison" and "torture," than with the utopianism more often associated with the drawings of visionary architects such as Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. In a world stricken by competing ideologies constantly jockeying for the upper hand, Pham's fantastical structures – at once inviting and off-putting – strike a chord.

Hà Ninh Pham: Cheat Codes *continues at FRONT Art Space (118 Chambers Street, #2, TriBeCa, Manhattan) through July 3. The exhibition is organized and curated by Passenger Pigeon Press, under the direction of Tammy Nguyen.*

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