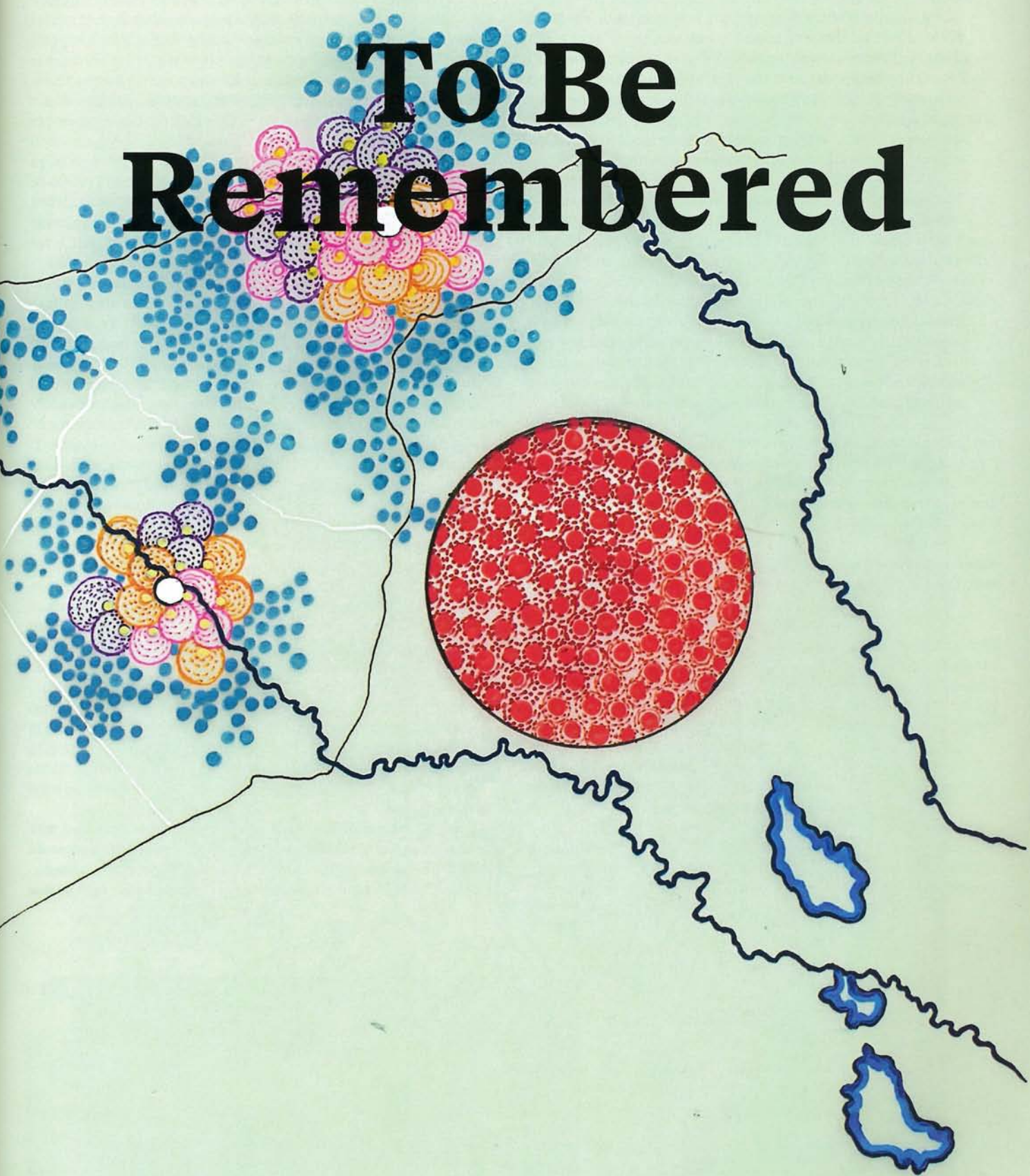




**Tiffany**  
**Chung**

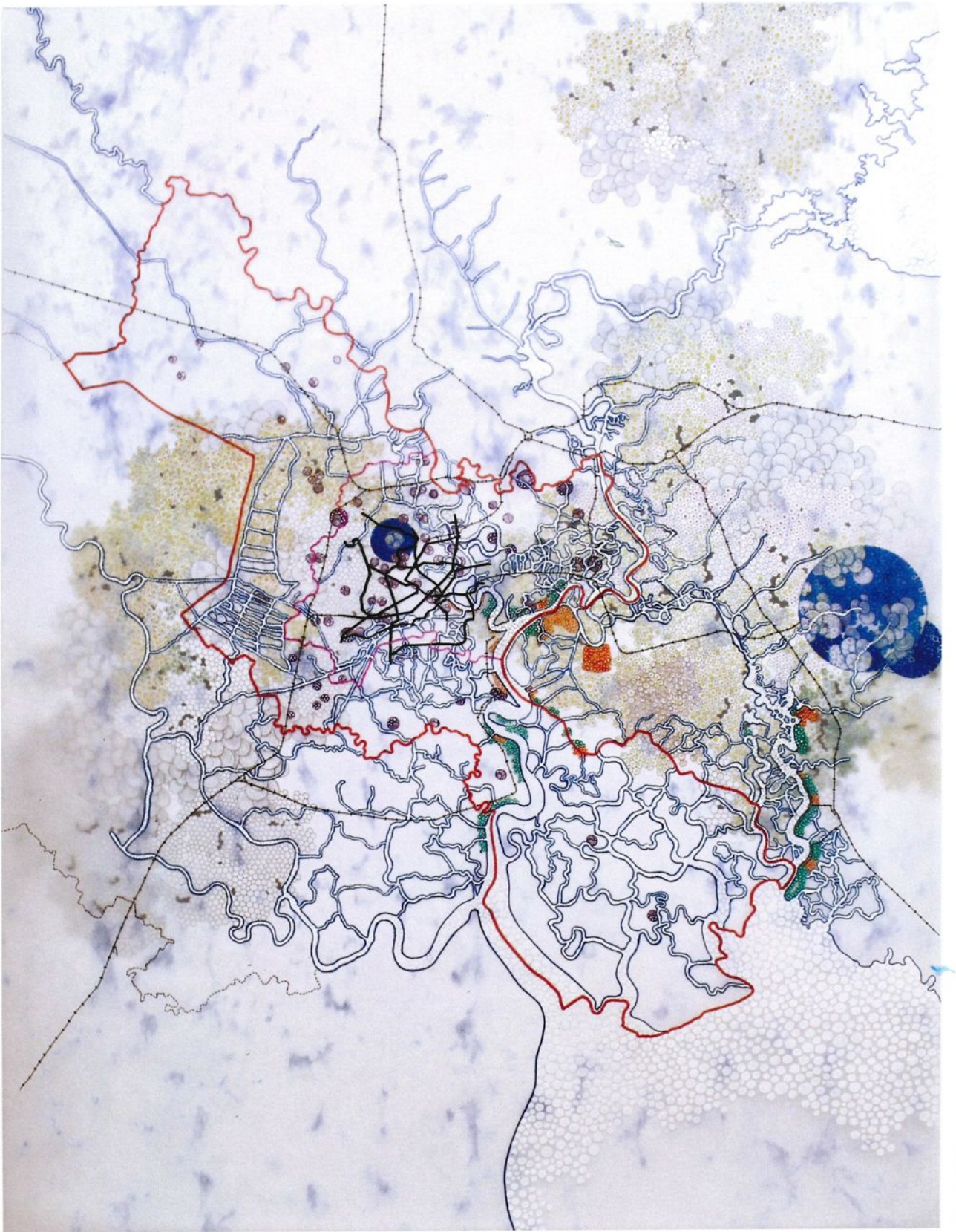


# To Be Remembered



BY SYLVIA TSAI







**Though Tiffany Chung's art practice involves exhaustive** research, statistical and comparative analyses, and fieldwork into political traumas, natural disasters and humanitarian crises around the world, her works can be surprisingly beautiful. Chung is best known for her maps—delicately rendered with oddly serene colors—that visualize painful events, drawing upon her own lived experiences and the data she has gathered. These cartographic drawings are designed to initially captivate viewers, who then, upon realizing the subjects, feel both their heaviness and urgency. At other times, her works take shape through photographs, installations, videos and performances, and collectively have examined history not only in Vietnam, where she was born, but in Syria, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Japan and elsewhere.

Chung was born in 1969 in Da Nang, Vietnam. She and her family were among the hundreds of thousands who fled the country during the mass exodus that began in 1975 after the American-led war in Vietnam. They eventually settled in Los Angeles. After studying at art schools in California and several residencies in Japan, in 2007 Chung moved back to Ho Chi Minh City, where she is currently based. That year, she also helped to co-found Sàn Art, Vietnam's leading nonprofit space. In 2016, Chung participated in "Illumination" at Denmark's Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and "Demarcate: Territorial Shift in Personal and Societal Mapping" at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art. Her works will also be at the Taipei Biennial in September and the group show "Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York this October.

I first discussed Chung's practice with her in 2015 in Hong Kong, on one of her many trips to the city, as part of her ongoing research into the stories of Vietnamese refugees, with whom she has cultivated personal relationships. After meeting again during Art Basel Hong Kong this past March, where she debuted the first part of this Hong Kong project, I corresponded with Chung to get an update on her work, "The Vietnam Exodus Project" (2009/2014–). That display includes maps pinpointing correctional facilities, detention centers and refugee camps formerly located in the territory, statistics of yearly arrivals and departures of Vietnamese refugees, and the group's movement around the region. I also took this opportunity to speak about her earlier works and her long-standing interests that have informed a decade of art-making.

**The political reforms and economic development of Đổi Mới, launched in Vietnam in 1986, dramatically transformed the country. What about these changes to the urban fabric inspired you to begin making your cartographic works in 2007?**

I was living between Japan and the United States at the time when I first saw some photos of gigantic, man-made landforms in Củ Chi, a town in the outskirts of Saigon [present-day Ho Chi Minh City], which were signs of rapid urban development. The land in this town (and in many others) was being excavated and the soil was transported to other developing areas in the city for ground leveling. This practice has created phenomenal shifts in the physical landscape of these places and prompted my interest in the way spatial transformations are linked to economic developments in postwar Vietnam.

I decided to move back to Saigon for the second time in 2007 [the first time was in 2000] to examine how such changes were transforming a place, a community and a society. Some of my maps, such as *flora and fauna outgrowing the future* (2010), also explored urban development of Saigon in relation to environmental issues. These works were based on urban planning charts of HCMC 2020, the Ho Chi Minh City's public transportation targets set for 2020 that will include the expansion of the mass rapid transit system, and reports by ICEM [International Centre for Environmental Management] called "HCMC Adaptation to Climate Change Study," which looked at the extreme climate impacts resulting from the development of Saigon.

Juxtaposing ICEM analysis with the reality of urban planning in Saigon, I used colorful dots and patterns to mimic microorganisms and to metaphorically suggest the rapid development as rootless—similar to the microscopic plants of fungi, which thrive in decay and feed off other organisms.

**Has tracing the urban sprawl of Saigon helped you connect with the rebirth of the country you had been away from since your childhood?**

I don't necessarily think about reconnecting to the motherland when I do this kind of work. A fault line within the nation's past, the Vietnam conflict is still used as a universal trope for historical trauma. Therefore, I'm more concerned with how my work can document and discuss the micro, hidden histories to counterbalance the "grand" narratives produced through statecraft.

What compels me more than official historical accounts are the stories of ordinary Vietnamese people like my mother and my father—he was captured in Laos and imprisoned as a POW [prisoner of war] in Northern Vietnam for 14 years, during and after the conflict—and of people who lost their youth or lives fighting in this convoluted war. I'm interested in the stories of the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who were either sent to the "new economic



(Previous spread)  
**UNHCR RED DOT SERIES - TRACKING THE SYRIAN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS: APRIL-DEC 2012** (detail), 2014–15, part of "The Syria Project," 2014, oil and ink on vellum and paper, nine works: 21 x 30 cm each.

(Opposite page)  
**FLORA AND FAUNA OUTGROWING THE FUTURE**, 2010, micro pigment ink, oil and alcohol-based marker on vellum and paper, 109.25 x 70 cm.

(This page)  
**10°45'39" N 106°43'23" E** (detail), 2013, excavated concrete slab with ceramic tiles, 128 x 64 x 30 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City.

Unless stated otherwise, all images courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York.



**“I’m more concerned with how my work can document and discuss the micro, hidden histories to counterbalance the ‘grand’ narratives produced through statecraft.”**



zones” within Vietnam or fled to the sea. I want to preserve their memories and experiences of the war, its aftermath and current development in the name of progress, so that they will not be distorted for certain purposes or erased into oblivion.

With these intentions in mind, I overlay and juxtapose historical and current maps to reveal the connection between past imperial violence and current political motivations—as in my mapping of Iraq and Syria—or to expose contemporary processes of globalization, as in my remappings of Sharjah, Saigon and Tokyo.

***Is there a particular area of Saigon that has stood out in your research?***

A major mixed-media project I made, which traces the development of Saigon, is *an archaeology project for future remembrance* (2013). It investigates a 657-hectare [1,623-acre] master-planned urban mega-project called “Thủ Thiêm New Urban Area,” a land (re)development project with an enormous scale of forced evictions. About 14,600 multi-generation households were removed from Thủ Thiêm, once the most densely populated area in Saigon just across the river from the city center. Many of the displaced residents trace their ancestors back to the area for more than three generations.

Inspired by archaeological discoveries in the 1940s by figures such as Louis Malleret of the Óc Eo culture (1st–7th century CE) in the Mekong Delta, as well as anthropologist Erik Harms’s essay [“Knowing into Oblivion: Clearing Wastelands and Imagining Emptiness in Vietnamese New Urban Zones” (2014)] and book on urban development in Ho Chi Minh City [*Luxury and Rubble: Civility and Dispossession in the New Saigon* (2016)], my work examines the notion of “reclaiming wastelands [*khai hoang*],” a state rhetoric used throughout different time periods in the history of Vietnam’s national land development.

I also seek to preserve the memories of the disappearing Thủ Thiêm by excavating (ahead of time) the foundation of a demolished home and retrieving some artifacts left behind in the rubble of this urban jungle, and to imagine the future ruins of the planned “Thủ Thiêm New Urban Area.” Initially I had hoped to excavate the site of a former military post built on the riverbank of Thủ Thiêm by General Nguyen Huu Canh when he was establishing Saigon in 1698. This military post was called “đồn Cá Trê” or “đồn Giác Ngụ” [subsequently changed to “Fort du Nord” when occupied by the French from 1887 onwards]. However, upon figuring out the exact location, I discovered that it’s currently occupied by a local police station that keeps watch on this contested land. I still periodically visit a temporary shelter and some evicted residents to get updates on their compensation claims and current situations.

***Your maps depict not only areas of urban development but places of war or conflict, where communities have been displaced, and also countries that have been impacted by natural disasters such as the 1906 earthquake and fires in San Francisco and the 1995 earthquake in Kobe. With so many countries affected by these situations at the moment, how do you select which ones to focus on, or which issues to delve into?***

My cartographic drawings and installation works, as a whole, examine issues of conflict, migration, urban progress and transformation in relation to history and cultural memory. At the core of all this are the issues of displacement that I try to unpack.

I usually approach projects with caution and self-reflection. I pay a lot of attention to the current state of the world but find it difficult to articulate the perplexities of conflicts and even natural catastrophes. While some artists were responding to the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake in Tōhoku through art projects, I went to stay in Kobe for a few months to conduct fieldwork on the memories of the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. Often I need to resort to history in order to structure and analyze what’s in front of me.





(Opposite page)  
**AN ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT FOR FUTURE REMEMBRANCE**, 2013, stills from three-channel HD color video with sound: 6 min 26 sec. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City.

(This page)  
**KOBE URBAN PLANNING MAP AFTER 1995**, 2015, oil and ink on vellum and paper, 79 x 100 cm.

Learning from history through preceding conflicts and disasters helps to elucidate the incomprehensible present. So one project usually leads to another, as I keep trying to connect the dots.

***Can you walk us through your meticulous process of research and documentation? How has your process evolved in the past nine years?***

My grueling research process follows a traditional structure of research exploration and methodology as practiced in social sciences. I explore, select questions for investigation and examine published materials (academic studies, expert investigations and media reports) in the area of inquiry. I conduct archival or library research to collect and analyze historical records and documents. For field research, I do empirical data collection of participant observations, individual/group interviews and case studies. In order to make people feel comfortable or not to disturb the conversation flow, I sometimes don't record or take notes during the interviews. I take mental notes and write them down as soon as I get back. People tend to repeat their stories over and over again, so I'm usually able to memorize most details. After collecting data and statistics, I usually input them on spreadsheets for crosscheck and further analysis. With personal stories, after extracting data I'd turn them into something between journal entries and poetic writings. At some point, I have to stop myself from getting carried away in the research process and start to materialize the findings into some intellectual and creative forms.

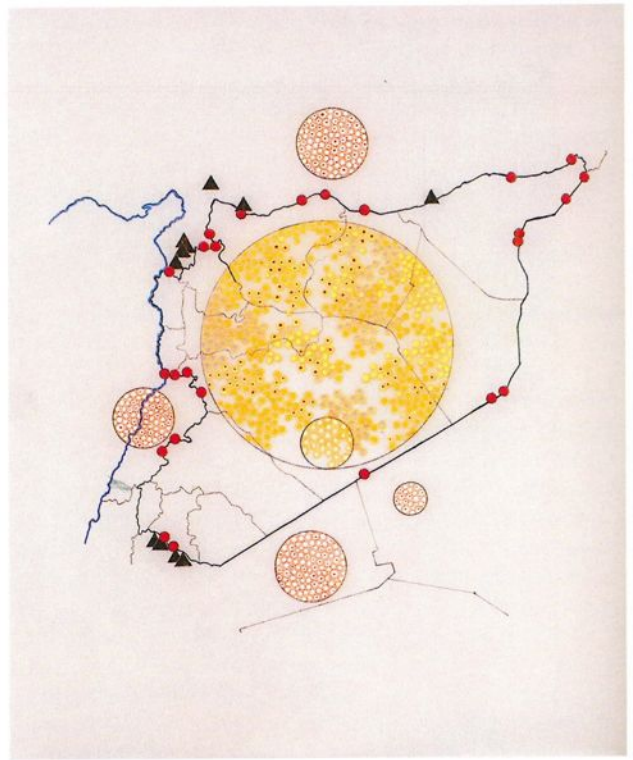
***"The Syria Project" (2014), shown in "All the World's Futures" at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015, was a poignant reminder of the ongoing refugee crisis in Syria. What compelled you to make that body of work for the international event, and were there notable parallels between what is happening in Syria now and***



**what happened to Vietnamese refugees during the late 1970s through the '90s?**

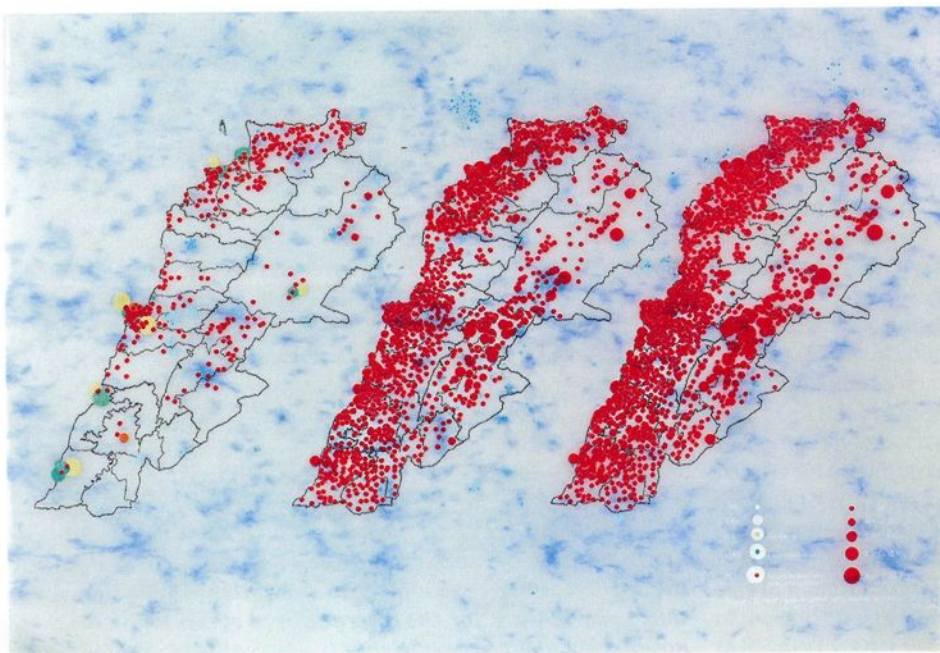
“The Syria Project” is an ongoing tracking of the Syrian humanitarian crisis, which traces back to the colonial partitioning of the Middle East with its politically constructed borders, as seen in the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement between the British and the French to divide the region between their spheres of influence. I started the project long before Okwui Enwezor selected it for the 2015 Venice Biennale. The segment presented at the biennale consists of 40 cartographic works mapping areas of conflict and the growing numbers of refugee camps, tracking statistical data related to deaths, refugee and IDP [Internationally Displaced Person] numbers. In order to make such works, I had accumulated infographics, reports and analyses of the conflict and refugee crisis since 2012, tracing back to their sources for statistical data and further understanding of its current civil war.

Processing traumatic events takes time and distance. However, the urgency of the Syria conflict, with torrents of refugees pouring into the region and crossing over the Mediterranean, really inspired me to delve right into it. After some time, I realized why I was obsessively drawn to this particular crisis. As a former refugee myself, the Syrian humanitarian crisis bears striking resemblances to the Vietnamese mass exodus between 1975 and 1995, still vivid in my mind: the colonial history, the civil war, the influx of refugees into the immediate region, the boat escapes, the makeshift camps, the prolonged detention, the constant shift in asylum policies, the host countries’ domestic resentments and the international community’s compassion fatigue.



**You visit Hong Kong often to conduct fieldwork for “The Vietnam Exodus Project” (2009/2014– ) about the city’s Vietnamese refugees. What specifically triggered your interest in the community in Hong Kong?**

“The Vietnam Exodus Project” is an in-depth study of the post-1975 Vietnamese exodus that focuses on the largest group of the Vietnamese refugees that left the country after 1975, and who were reductively termed “boat people” by the international community—the “flotsam and jetsam” of the Vietnam conflict. This group constituted the world’s largest and most important refugee group in the latter part of the 20th century.



(This page, top)  
**UNHCR/REUTERS SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS—REFUGEES AS OF 02 SEPT 2012: 235,368—IDPS AS OF JAN 2012: 988,275, 2014, part of “The Syria Project,” 2014, oil and ink on vellum and paper, 42 x 30 cm.**

(This page, bottom)  
**UNHCR LEBANON TIME-SERIES SYRIAN REGISTERED REFUGEES—JUNE 2012: 25,411—JUNE 2013: 480,512—APRIL 2014: 1,044,898, 2014, part of “The Syria Project,” 2014, oil and ink on vellum and paper, 79 x 100 cm.**

(Opposite page)  
**HKSAR STATISTICS ON YEARLY ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES OF V-REFUGEES FROM 1975–1997, 2016, part of “The Vietnam Exodus Project—Hong Kong Chapter (1975–2000),” 2009/2014–, acrylic, ink and oil on vellum and paper, 79 x 100 cm.**



The Hong Kong chapter of this history is considered the most complex and unique one. Pillar Point, the last Vietnamese refugee camp in Hong Kong—and Asia—was closed down in 2000. The remaining asylum-seekers from Pillar Point were allowed to integrate into Hong Kong society, in addition to a large group of ethnic-Chinese Vietnamese refugees and Vietnamese asylum-seekers that Hong Kong had already absorbed during the early periods.

I'm interested in studying the current Vietnamese community in Hong Kong because they're a visible embodiment of the emerging conundrum of refugee migration patterns—when the state of being in-transit has shifted to permanent settlement. As the United States was the most desired resettlement destination for most Vietnamese refugees (followed by other Western countries), those who have settled in Hong Kong remain forever in-transit, psychologically. With the in-between and transitory nature of Hong Kong as their first asylum refuge, the Vietnamese who have spent many years in detention—many were born and/or grew up in detention centers and refugee camps—find it almost impossible to integrate into its society as permanent residents. This unusual refugee-migration trajectory topples the long-established narrative of refugees resettling in the West and becoming regular immigrants and citizens there, a disjuncture I've aimed to explore in my work.

**Can you speak about your time with them? Were there particular places that they showed you or experiences they shared that really resonated with you?**

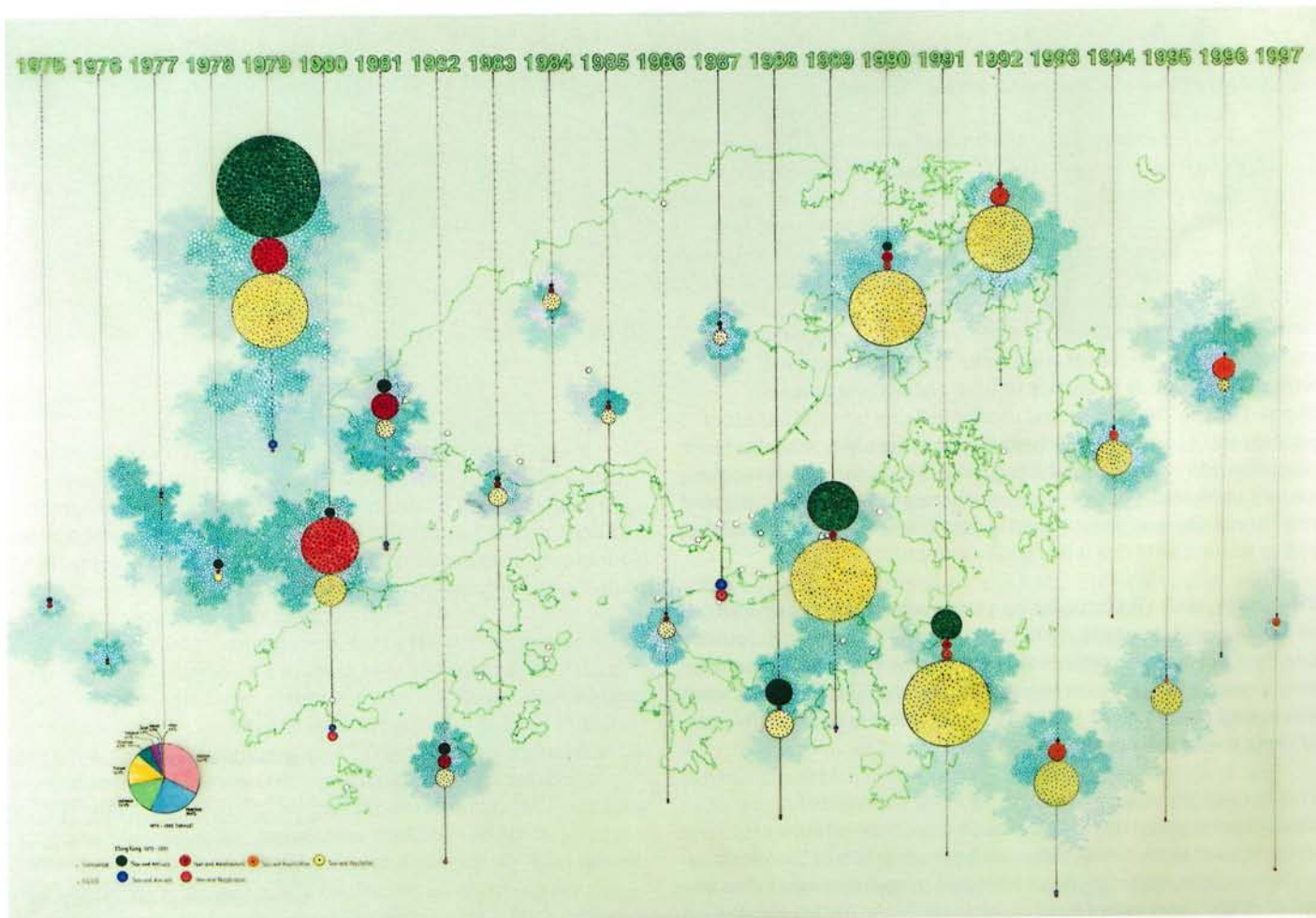
I came to know some of the Vietnamese people in Hong Kong through personal and church connections. I spent a lot of time taking the bus with them around Hong Kong and simply listening

to their stories. We would sometimes go visit our fellow Vietnamese who were homeless and living under the bridge in Sham Shui Po. We would also go back to the sites of the former detention centers and refugee camps together. I just happen to be a person who speaks their mother tongue, shares their collective history and therefore can be trusted.

During these conversations, some have raised profound questions on the meaning and implication of being "stateless." Upon being released from the camps, many of the refugees had been issued a travel document by the Hong Kong authorities with the "stateless" status printed in it. While some of the Vietnamese in Hong Kong were able to become citizens, others continue to carry the "stateless" travel document until today. Learning their stories and struggles has helped to shape the angle from which this study is set to go forth.

***"The Vietnam Exodus Project" is a multipart work, the first of which was shown by Tyler Rollins Fine Art at Art Basel Hong Kong earlier this year. A particularly compelling aspect of the presentation was the work Flotsam and Jetsam (2015-16), for which you engaged a younger generation of Vietnamese artists. Could you tell us about this piece?***

Hong Kong did not turn away any boat entering its waters. However, it was criticized for its inhumane treatment of Vietnamese refugees and "asylum-seekers," such as the confiscation of personal belongings, lengthy detentions, prison-like camp conditions, its closed-camp policy, screening policies and refoulement [forcible returning of refugees to their home country] after the implementation of the UN-adopted Comprehensive Plan of Action of 1989, an agreement that aimed to regulate clandestine





departures and resettle refugees from Southeast Asia. And over in Vietnam, the post-1975 mass exodus is not officially recognized as part of the country's national narrative. It is neither a political nor humanitarian discourse to be examined or debated. People's traumatic, horrendous experience of fleeing in unseaworthy boats—facing death, rape, robbery, hunger, thirst and cannibalism—has been deliberately erased.

My painting installation *Flotsam and Jetsam* examines the impacts of these policies on the Vietnamese refugees and asylum-seekers in Hong Kong during that time: drug abuse, violence, children growing up in detention (and their education or lack thereof), people's mental states induced by asylum policies, and domestic resentments and stigmatization of the Vietnamese refugees within Hong Kong. In an attempt to experiment with how visual art can evoke curiosity and awareness of hidden histories, I commissioned a group of young artists from Saigon to render archival photographs of the Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong—obtained from both the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] archives in Geneva and former refugees' personal collections—into watercolor paintings.

They all did amazing work: these young artists studied the old, faded photographs thoroughly and managed to capture the most minor details. They obsessively observed, pondered and imagined the fate of the people in the photographs. They breathed and painted what seems to be from another lifetime—fragmented stories, lives and experiences of another generation and another history—vignettes they had only vaguely heard about. During periodic critiques that I scheduled to monitor their progress, they asked questions and pursued discussions that led to better understanding of this history. The project has compelled these young artists to acknowledge and confront this traumatic chapter of Vietnam's history. Despite government censorship, I plan to continue this project with new groups of artists within Vietnam, as a gesture of protest against what I call a "politically driven historical amnesia."

**How many more parts of "The Vietnam Exodus Project" do you envision? Will it evolve into other artistic forms?**

"The Vietnam Exodus Project" is structured similarly to that of a book, divided into different chapters. I'm currently working on the Hong Kong chapter while continuously collecting materials for other regions. Subsequent chapters will inevitably cover Southeast Asia and will remap the geographical breadth of the Vietnamese refugees beyond the Western sphere, which will decenter the typical narrative of refugees resettling in the US and Europe.

Together with "The Syria Project," it will form a comparative study of forced migration as committed in different national contexts. I am aiming to unpack refugee and asylum policies imposed on the Vietnamese and to offer insights into the impact of constant shifts in asylum-policy-making on already traumatized and distressed people, so that past struggles will not go unmentioned or wasted but instead, potentially bring positive change to the current and future refugee crises around the world. And who knows, I might end up turning all of this into a book eventually!

**Two works, HKSAR statistics on yearly arrivals and departures of V-refugees from 1975–1997 (2016) and *Flotsam and Jetsam* are now part of the collection of M+ here in Hong Kong. The works mark an important moment in the city's history that may not be well known to the general public. What is the significance of these works staying in Hong Kong?**

The Vietnamese refugee crisis in Hong Kong represented a significant historical moment for the city, not only in terms of humanitarian work. The design and implementation of the various asylum policies at the time were impacted by the immense influx of refugees and the pressure from multiple sides: the British colonial



**FLOTSAM AND JETSAM** (detail), 2015–16, part of "The Vietnam Exodus Project—Hong Kong Chapter (1975–2000)," 2009/2014–, watercolor, ink, acrylic, vinyl, Plexiglas, video and text, 28 works on paper: 30 x 42 cm each; 40 text pieces on Plexiglas panels: dimensions variable; videos and text on electronic tablets: 15 x 26 cm each. Painting illustrations by Ho Hung, Le Nam Dy, Nguyen Van Du and Nguyen Kim To Lan.





government, the international community, the domestic public and mainland China prior to the 1997 handover. A lot of decisions and lessons have gone on to set the cornerstone for Hong Kong's current debates on asylum issues. The truth is that many people of the older generations in Hong Kong still recall the memories of the Vietnamese refugee era. Many people were involved in either helping or protesting against the refugees.

At Art Basel Hong Kong this year, many Hong Kong people came to see my work. They wished to learn, reminisce or share their experiences and memories of the time with me. To my astonishment, some ghosts of the past resurfaced, such as policy makers, human-rights lawyers, NGO volunteers, ex-CSD police [Correctional Services Department] and of course, former Vietnamese refugees. For all these reasons, it was imperative that the works remain in Hong Kong. I might add that an exhibition of these works would not be allowed in Vietnam today. As such, I'm especially grateful that M+ has realized their significance; the museum's acquisition is, to me, a great acknowledgment, and encourages the continuation of this project.

***Your practice, whether in the form of the cartographic drawings, sculptures, photographs or video, is a reminder of how art can bring attention to forgotten histories and urgent issues. Do you see your work as a vehicle to stir social consciousness?***

When one is given a voice and a platform, it is an obligation and privilege to speak out responsibly on behalf of others. When I was a young art student, with a refugee background and the baggage of the Vietnam conflict, I never dreamed I would be doing this kind of work. It's a blessing to be given such opportunities, but that comes with profound responsibilities. I continue to struggle and fumble in figuring out what we can do when confronted by injustice and pain in a world in which only a small group of people holds the power and makes decisions for all of us. So, stirring social consciousness through art is a great thing but not enough, due to the limitations of what art can achieve. I aim for my work to go beyond the realm of art and contribute to international policy-making on issues concerning borders, refugees and asylum, at least for the time being. 🌐