

Fresh Faces: Linh San — Art & Market

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'no longer holding a cloud' at Á Space

By Dan Tran

A&M's Fresh Faces is where we profile an emerging artist from the region every month and speak to them about how they kick-started their career, how they continue to sustain their practice and what drives them as artists. Read our profile on Linh San [here](#).



Portrait of Linh San. Image courtesy of the artist.

When and how did your journey into art begin?

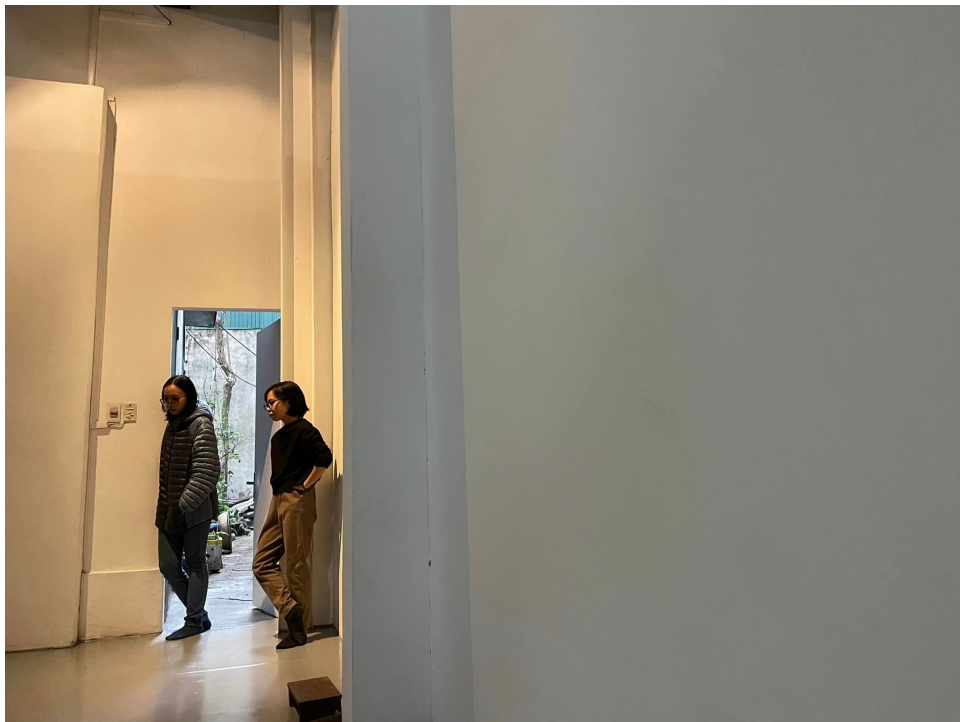
My first contact with contemporary art and alternative art histories was in my freshman year at Hanoi National University of Education in 2016, when I began working for Heritage Space's art programmes. From this experience, I got to familiarise myself with other art groups in Hanoi such

as Hanoi Doclab, Nhà Sàn Collective, DomDom. My relationship with art was cultivated by the projects, exhibitions, and film screening programmes that I worked on and facilitated. After a few years, I was able to forge friendships and bonds with some artists and cultural workers in Hanoi.

I studied literature and wrote poetry, so my background was not in the visual arts. Thus, upon graduation, I chose to work as an editor, librarian, and other roles related to education. Although I made films and performed poetry, I still regarded myself as a mere lover, an appreciator, and an audience of art.

However, after a period of working in such positions, I often felt stifled and sensed something was amiss. Sometimes, between hours of data entry at the library where I was working, I drew in my notebook what I imagined about an exhibition, a film scene, a poetry zine for myself.

When Heritage Space made plans to build an [archive of contemporary art of Vietnam](#), I returned to work as a data collector and processor. As I met artists, collected information, researched practices, I gradually realised that my capacity to make art was greater than I thought. So, I had no choice other than to go into it.



Linh San and Châu Hoàng at the setup of the exhibition 'no longer holding a cloud'. Photo by Vân Đỗ. Image courtesy of the artist and Á Space.

Who has been an important mentor or a significant influence in your practice?

When I started dabbling in ceramics, Richard Serra was an artist who provoked my thoughts about materiality and space. His practice was eye-opening for me as I transitioned from poetry writing and filmmaking to experimenting with more physical material.

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Linh San reciting a poem at the publication launch and exhibition opening [‘i write \(in Vietnamese\)’](#) (2021) at the Goethe Institut, Hanoi. Photo by Bông Nguyễn. Image courtesy of the artist.

You have worked with quite a range of media whose mechanics and artistic qualities vastly differ—from poetry with its literary nature and performativity, film with its audio-visuality, to ceramics with its tactility and physicality. How did this shift come about?

The transition happened very naturally, and was not deliberate on my part. I tend to be lost in interminable contemplation. Sometimes, my stream of thought yearns for linguistic expression. Sometimes, my ponderance covets materialising in an image sequence. Sometimes, my thinking demands spatial manifestation for it to endure.

Poetry is flesh and blood for me because of my propensity for language and education in literature. I was surrounded by my grandmother’s narrative poems and my father’s Confucian way of life, both of which nurtured my aesthetic sensibility and enriched my life with artistic-cultural appreciation. With filmmaking, I was trained at Hanoi DocLab. Their primary approach of independent filmmaking meant that hard skills such as cinematography, editing, sound recording had to be self-learned.

Ceramics differ significantly. To arrive at abstraction or to evoke a feeling, I must examine the material’s properties, such as the types and viscosity of clay, its properties before and after firing, how to operate a kiln, thermal range, chemical additives, safety precautions etc. I carry out all the steps myself, from clay selection, mixing, to shaping and firing. The direct usage of my hands excites me profoundly, as if I were stepping into the world again for the first time.

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Linh San, 'Broken (Note) Book', 2021, ceramics, 12 x 8 x 0.2cm each.
Photo by Bông Nguyễn. Image courtesy of the artist.

In your recent work 'Broken (Note) Book' (2021), words and images appear on card-sized sheets of ceramics. Could you walk us through your thinking process behind this work?

'Broken (Note) Book' is the starting point of my journey working with ceramics. It arose from Nhã Thuyên's proposal and the general conversations among young writers about an exhibition by writers, about how writing could present itself differently. When thinking about an exhibition by writers, I wanted to transplant a piece of my poetry sketches onto a ceramic surface. I utilised ceramic for its brittle quality and as a metaphor for the creative process of a writer.

A poem or any piece of writing can only be complete when its sketches are "broken". I have a penchant for structures, so the word "broken" conveys the essence of my writing more aptly than "erase". To erase is to lose all marks. However, being broken still retains traces of transformations.

I describe the work as sketches of a writer whose words cling to her land. It relates to the period of my writing becoming more concerned with the land and maps. Ceramic villages are generally scattered around river basins, so the choice of the material is also to reflect geographical situatedness when talking about habitats. However, my approach to ceramics after 'Broken (Note) Book' became very different and this can be seen in my first solo exhibition.

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Linh San, ‘nights’, 2022 - ongoing, porcelain, variable dimensions, installation view of ‘no longer holding a cloud’. Photo by Đan Nguyễn. Image courtesy of the artist and Á Space.

Could you tell us more about your solo exhibition ‘no longer holding a cloud’ (2022)? When and how was it conceived, and how did the residency opportunity at Á Space come about?

The initial ideas began with the work ‘nights’, which was made during my two-month residency at Ba-Bau Air in November 2021. I dedicated these two months to studying the material and experimenting with its affordances. The work comprises a number of ceramic letters “written” with physical states of paper sheets. It is by hinging on the sensorial experience of the material that I tell my personal story, restrained simultaneously by aesthetic and confessional proclivities.

During this period, [Vân Đỗ](#) came to visit my studio. She invited me to join the residency program SoloMarathon at [Á Space](#), prompting me to conceptualise a series of works to showcase in an exhibition. At first, the ideas for the additional works were about the Bát Tràng village. However, when I started with production, I sensed neither a compulsion for the form nor a connection between myself and what I wanted to express. During this time, my little sister started university. This event was a reminder of my life responsibility, that I needed to, together with my mother, take care of the tuition fees and living expenses for my sister’s enrollment.

Discarding all ideas oriented outwards to the local landscape of the ceramics craft, I shifted my focus to the personal sentiments that had always incubated in my mind but never been confronted. I kept experimenting and utilising all the space at [Á Space](#). Each time opening the kiln, the curator of my exhibition Châu Hoàng, Vân and I would sit

down, discuss and reflect on the outcome. I continued experimenting and adjusting subsequent rounds of firing, up till the exhibition date.



Linh San's works in her studio at Nhà Kỳ Quái, Bát Tràng, in preparation for the exhibition 'no longer holding a cloud'. Image courtesy of the artist.

Your approach to ceramics is contemporary, which is distinct from or even runs oppositional to the conventions of the country's traditional craft. Is this a point of friction when you practise the craft?

When I wanted to realise my ideas for ceramic works, I tried contacting people with access to a studio. My attempts at two different studios in Hanoi resulted in unsatisfactory outcomes, so I went on to find a studio that could fulfil my technical requirements. Firstly, my works are made from white clay, so they need to be fired on their own, separate from ceramics by others who often use glaze for colouration, which would contaminate mine. Secondly, I wanted to experiment with different firing temperatures, which I had no control of when I sent my works to someone else's studio for firing.

Then, I came to the Bát Tràng village, which proved very hard to navigate around without connections. Unlike the ceramics village Jingdezhen in China that has grown so used to collaborating with contemporary artists, it is not the case for the Bát Tràng village. Most local artists approach ceramics as a material for sculpture rather than deep-diving into its affordances. It was also difficult for me to reach an arrangement with local

artisans because my needs did not fit the parameters of a commercial order. Fortunately, artist Nguyễn Mạnh Đức introduced me to artisan Lê Ngọc Thạch, who had had years of training and work experience in Jingdezhen and was willing to help with my experimentation. I subsequently moved my home studio to the space of Nhà Kỳ Quái in the Bát Tràng village.

When I was working on rendering clay in the shape of paper and discussed this idea with artisans, they immediately shot my idea down as impossible, which also made me doubt myself. I initially employed traditional techniques of rolling clay thin or using a plaster mould to achieve the thinness of paper, but was unsuccessful. I then thought about the process of paper making that entails layering extremely thin sheets, about river erosion and deposition. These associations inspired me to come up with my own methods to achieve the desired thinness and softness.



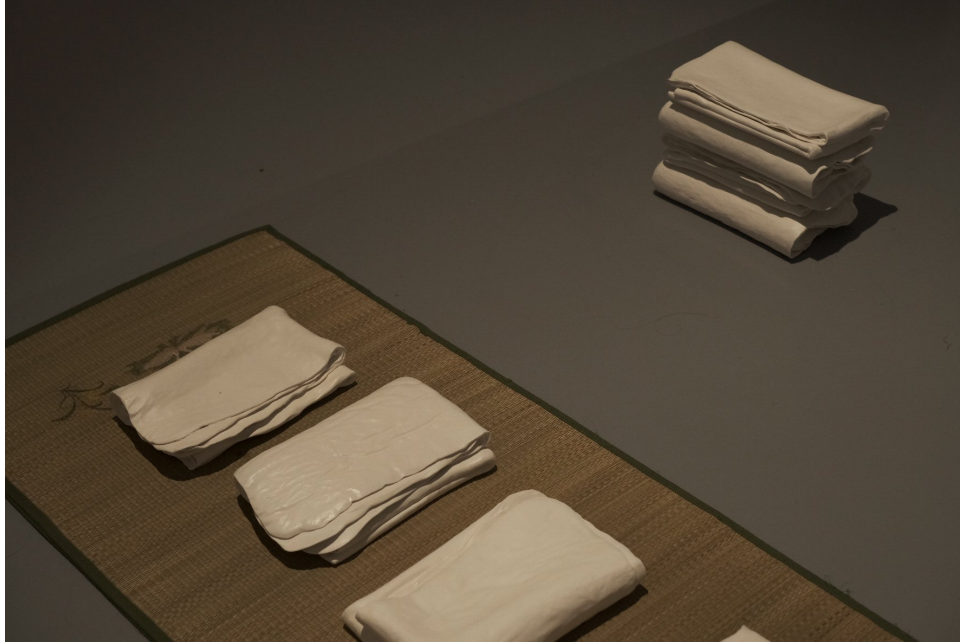
Linh San, 'Embracement #1: This wrist, that wrist', 2022, porcelain, variable dimensions, installation view of 'no longer holding a cloud'. Photo by Đan Nguyễn. Image courtesy of the artist and Á Space.

From my observation, your artistic training has mostly been non-formal and non-institutional. How has this shaped your practice?

I surmise that I would have a wider frame of references for my practice, had I been formally trained. I do hope to study art at a later point in time. So far, the internet proves a useful channel for me to learn effectively on my own time. I often start by searching the most generic keywords. For example, for ceramics, I learnt from videos of ceramics shops introducing their products, followed by websites for ceramics materials in the United Kingdom. I then narrowed the scope of my search to keywords specific to contemporary ceramics.

I already had my own ideas and plans for my works when I tried to

connect with artisans from Bát Tràng village. Hence, when I met them, it was at the last stage of figuring out how to realise my ideas. I think that, regardless of education, it is most important to understand what I want to say and how it should be expressed.



Linh San, 'Embracement #2: Baby Blanket', 2022, porcelain, 12 pieces of variable dimensions. Installation view of 'no longer holding a cloud'. Photo by Vân Anh. Image courtesy of the artist and Á Space.

To end off, what do you hope to see in the contemporary art scene of Vietnam?

Between more established spaces or more capable people, I would hope for the latter. Hanoi now has both independent spaces that nurture emerging artists despite limitations in resources, as well as larger-scale entities that have the means to support more established artists and ambitious projects. I would thus root for more capable artists and cultural workers who could, regardless of the kinds of art spaces they engage with, bring more value to the contemporary scene.

Click [here](#) to read our profile on Linh San.