



Interpreting the Human Condition

MyLoan Dinh's art brings alive some of the most pivotal moments of her life, and life in the world today.

words SUNNY HUBLER *portraits* JAMEY PRICE

IF YOU THUMB THROUGH THE ARTS AND CULTURE SECTION of most any recent publication, you'll see much has been said on the topic of separating the art from the artist—over and over, the question is raised, analyzed, and dissected: Can it be done? When? How? The thing is, when it comes to a creative like MyLoan Dinh, put simply, you just don't want to. The story of her past is woven into the fabric of her present in such an inextricable way that it serves only to make the experience of taking in her work all the more rich.

MyLoan's art that's very much of the world—often socio-political in nature, her mixed-media relics are imbued with new meaning as she deftly places them in different contexts. Look up her work and you'll find thought-provoking installations and paintings, as well.

"I hope my work emotionally moves viewers," she says simply. "Sometimes it happens immediately, and other times it's delayed because the viewer needs time to contemplate the content and message. Time releases art. I love it when viewers continue to discover subtle nuances in the work."

MyLoan was born in Saigon, Vietnam. She and her family fled during the fall of Saigon, landing in refugee camps, then in Camp Pendleton, California, and then in Boone, North Carolina, before finally settling in Charlotte... but more on that from her later. MyLoan's story is told most fittingly in her words.

With an art degree from UNC and a degree in visual arts from Wollongong University in New South Wales, Australia, she has exhibited internationally. She is a member of the Asian American Women Artists Association, and, with husband Till Schmidt-Rimpler, became founder and artistic director of a non-profit project called Moving Poets.

WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR EARLIEST ART MEMORIES?

When I was a child, my parents did not find art important so I was not exposed to museums, exhibitions, or even concerts. When we immigrated to the United States, my parents found work in factories and had very limited means. However, I do remember my mom repurposing things to create beautiful presentations in her flower garden or small decorations in the house. She was resourceful and used materials in creative ways. That certainly influenced me. For as long as I can remember, I have been drawing and making things with my hands.

IT SEEMS YOUR ROOTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA HAVE INSPIRED YOUR WORK HEAVILY—CAN YOU TALK TO US ABOUT THAT?

I grew up navigating between two different cultures—Western and Eastern. My parents were very traditional and we spoke Vietnamese at home. I continue to see the world from different perspectives and find similarities and contradictions which eventually make their way into my work.



"Time releases art. I love it when viewers continue to discover subtle nuances in the work."





MyLoan Dinh's
Freedom Fighter.

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YOU HAVE ONE BEAUTIFUL MIXED MEDIA WORK IN PARTICULAR CALLED ONE NATION... FOR ALL. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT WHAT INSPIRED THIS PIECE?

One Nation...for All is inspired by my family's escape at sea at the end of the Vietnam War. We left with the clothes on our backs and two small bags of belongings that included several packs of noodles, a little bag of rice, and two cans of milk. We got on the "Lam Giang (HQ-402)," the last South Vietnamese Navy ship out, on the last day of the war. That day, April 30, 1975, was the fall of Saigon. It was either escape or years of imprisonment in reeducation camps (forced labor camps created after the war for US sympathizers) for my father. Ship 402 was the last one available, because it was not fully functional. It was an old, rusty, almost broken tin can with one working engine, but it miraculously made its way to the South China Sea. It had been built in the 1950s as an assault ship meant to carry three to five tanks and 54 crew members. However, that last voyage carried close to 1,000 refugees crammed in like sardines. When the sun rose, we realized we were not the only ship out at sea—there were more of us, around 40,000 refugees. After two days, the engine broke down and we started to sink. Luckily, we were rescued by another refugee ship. However, we were not allowed to sail into Filipino waters because the ships officially belonged to the recently defunct South Vietnamese government. We were men, women, and children without a country, floating and waiting for anyone who would let us dock on their shores.



MyLoan Dinh's *One Nation...for All*.

"Led by their moral compass, these individuals went beyond politics and policy. It was about human dignity and innocent lives. This is what inspired the mixed media piece, *One Nation...for All*."

The U.S. Navy wanted to help, but had to wait on orders from Washington. No orders came from Congress to intervene. The situation was so dire that the Naval officers of the USS Kirk decided to take actions into their own hands, so they went aboard to every refugee ship to lower the South Vietnamese flags and raised the American flags, which allowed us to enter into Subic Bay under their protection. Led by their moral compass, these individuals went beyond politics and policy. It was about human dignity and innocent lives. This is what inspired the mixed media piece, *One Nation...for All*, which is made from life vests.

AS AN ARTIST, WHAT KEEPS YOU INSPIRED?

Life. I am curious. I like to explore. There aren't enough

hours in the day. My husband, Till, who is a choreographer, musician, and director of *Moving Poets*, is very important in keeping me inspired. We are always collaborating on new works. Like many visual artists, I work solo in my studio, so it is really different to work with artists from other disciplines—actors, dancers, composers, musicians, writers. These experiences lift me out of my comfort zone and challenge me.

WHAT IS YOUR PROCESS TYPICALLY LIKE?

I create every day, whether I'm at my main studio in Charlotte or my small studio in Berlin. I start with a theme or subject or concept, then let the ideas simmer and develop. I am constantly working on new pieces and usually have several projects going at the same time.



“Being an artist is a lifelong job. Treat it like a job and go into the studio every day if you can. Even if you do not ‘feel inspired’, work at it.”

WHAT PIECE OF ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE WHO WANTS TO BECOME AN ARTIST?

Don't wait to be inspired to go into the studio to create. Being an artist is a lifelong job. Treat it like a job. Go into the studio every day if you can. Even if you do not “feel inspired,” work at it.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW? WHAT'S NEXT?

The next big public presentation is a six-week exhibition at Elder Gallery of Contemporary Art, May 2 through June 15, 2019. I will be creating and showing my newest work with participating artists from Colombia, Mexico, Germany, Syria, and the U.S.

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