

[Weekend](#)

# Portrait of a Young Artist, from New York to Vietnam and Back

The challenge for younger artists — particularly ones of color like Tammy Nguyen — is this: do you accommodate yourself to the marketplace, or do you find another way?



by John Yau  
September 3, 2017



A work in progress by Tammy Nguyen (all images courtesy the artist)

I met [Tammy Nguyen](#) at the Asian American Literature Festival, which was presented by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center at various venues in Washington, DC, over a [three-day period](#) (July 27 – 29, 2017). I don’t remember the circumstances of our first conversation, but she told me that she was an artist and had a small press. She also said that she resided in New York and often worked at the Center for Book Arts, which wasn’t far from where I live.

Shortly after I got back to New York, I ran into her while walking home from the supermarket. We talked briefly. That evening, I subscribed to Passenger Pigeon Press, which she started in Fall 2016, and, according to the website, “house[s] [Martha’s Quarterly](#), Collaborations, Public Domain, and custom projects.” I subscribed to *Martha’s Quarterly* after learning that it is “a quarterly subscription of four handmade artist books a year.” The first two issues were sold out, and I started with the fourth and most recent issue, which includes a reprint of the Preface to *The Novum Organum* (1620) by Francis Bacon. In this paradigm-shifting text, Bacon argued that nature was a domain to be conquered rather than a resource that we inhabited: it existed for our use. Whatever else Passenger Pigeon Press is, *Martha’s Quarterly* is part manifesto, part a gathering of texts, with the intent to examine, contemplate, challenge, and refute.

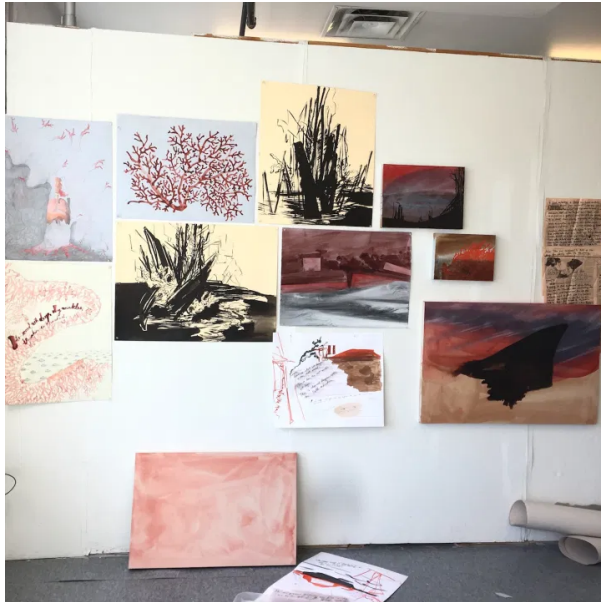


*Martha's Quarterly*, Issue 4, Summer 2017

Nguyen belongs to that vast and nebulous category, “young artist.” By starting her own press, she does something important: she takes control of the means of production for an easily transportable object. Her press exists outside of the art world’s marketplace, which gives her the freedom to reject mainstream standards and present an alternative measure. Lots of poets start their own presses, but there is no market for their wares, unlike the art world, which supports and fetishizes works by Mark Grotjahn, Jeff Koons, and Richard Prince, bad boy darlings whose whiteness is essential to the product.

The challenge for younger artists — particularly ones of color — is this: do you want to accommodate yourself to this world on the off-chance that you will get anointed? Or do you find another way that is not dependent on the marketplace and gallery system, but does not cut you off from that system entirely? I think that these questions were what initially intrigued me about the fact that Nguyen started her own press. Of course, I did not know what I would be getting myself into by digging deeper, but I believe that the state of not knowing is important to writing about art. Otherwise, you too become too dependent on the marketplace and what the galleries are showing.

Nguyen grew up in San Francisco and went to Cooper Union. In 2007, after graduating from Cooper, she got a Fulbright to go to Vietnam to study lacquer painting. She ended up staying for four years, and worked as “Concepts Team Manager” for My Duc Ceramics. She was able to travel throughout Asia for her job. In 2011, he moved back to America and went to Yale, where she got her MFA in painting and printmaking, graduating in 2013.



Tammy Nguyen's studio

While she was a student at Yale, she took classes in biology and anthropology. One of her professors was Eric Harms, author of *Saigon's Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011). She worked as a volunteer at William Robertson Coe Ornithology Library, which is housed in the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History. This museum has one of the most comprehensive bird collections in North America. On Friday mornings Nguyen would help skin birds for the collection. This is how she learned taxidermy.

At some point, as she put it to me, she got interested in animals. This eventually led her to research the red-shanked douc langur, an endangered primate native to a small area of Vietnam near Danang City, and to learn more about the passenger pigeon, which went extinct when the last of its species, named Martha, died in the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914. Because she died before the age of Freon and refrigerated trucks, Martha was packed in a 300-pound block of ice and shipped by train to the Smithsonian, where she was photographed, skinned, and mounted. Just 36 years earlier, in 1878, seven million had been slaughtered in a hunt in Michigan. Focusing on an endangered species and an extinct one becomes, for Nguyen, a way of framing geopolitical issues.





A work in progress by Tammy Nguyen

The habitat of the few hundred remaining red-shanked douc langur primates is Son Tra Mountain (also known as Monkey Mountain). Used as an American observation base during the Vietnam War, it has since become a destination point for global travelers and, according to one online guide that I consulted, it is about a 35-minute drive from downtown Danang. Today, the building of hotels on Son Tra Mountain poses a serious threat to the red-shanked douc langur. If you can kill seven million birds in a single hunt, you can certainly knock off a few hundred moneys with red faces in the name of tourism and great lookout views. The other thing to know about Danang — which the guidebooks don’t tell you — is that it is located at 16 degrees latitude, directly in line with the disputed Paracel Islands, which sit in the middle of the South China Sea and are claimed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam.



Tammy Nguyen, image from “Primate City Narrative”

The issue Nguyen faces is how to pull all these different strands of knowledge together. Passenger Pigeon Press is one way. Making artist’s books was another. She has made two books in the shape of the red-shanked douc langur. One of the books contains a facsimile of a 1969 US military intelligence proposal to modernize Danang City, which she found in a bookshop when she first visited Vietnam. In that book she came across the term “Primate City,” which was used to designate Saigon. A “Primate City” is an urban conglomerate that people move to from more rural areas; it absorbs the resources of the countryside without

replenishing it. Nguyen is doing what many terrific artists before her have done: making connections where there were none before.

In addition to publishing under her imprint of Passenger Pigeon Press and making artist’s books, she has been writing fiction and painting on paper, mostly to construct visual narratives. One visual narrative, “The Red-Shanked Douc Langur,” was published in [Bomb](#) (February 28, 2017). This is an excerpt from that narrative:

The red-shanked douc langur is an endangered species of primate that lives on Son Tra Mountain in Danang City. There are only a few hundred of these primates left on Earth, but their ancestors have survived in Vietnam through a thousand years of Chinese domination, through colonization by the French and Dutch, and through all the battles between America and the Vietnamese Communists.

I don’t think it is far-fetched to suggest that Nguyen’s survival as an artist shares something with the red-shanked douc langur. What’s changed is the enemy.

---

© 2020 Hyperallergic.

**Proudly powered by Newspack by Automattic**