

ELEPHANT

LIFE THROUGH ART

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DREAM ON
*Art and Optimism in
Cataclysmic Times*

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Dream On

As 2020 comes to an end, feelings of optimism might, understandably, be far from many people's minds. Here, we explore the uses and pitfalls of a hopeful outlook: does it provide the fuel needed to create a brighter future, or is it yet another damaging social pressure that keeps people locked in a loop of inevitable disappointments?

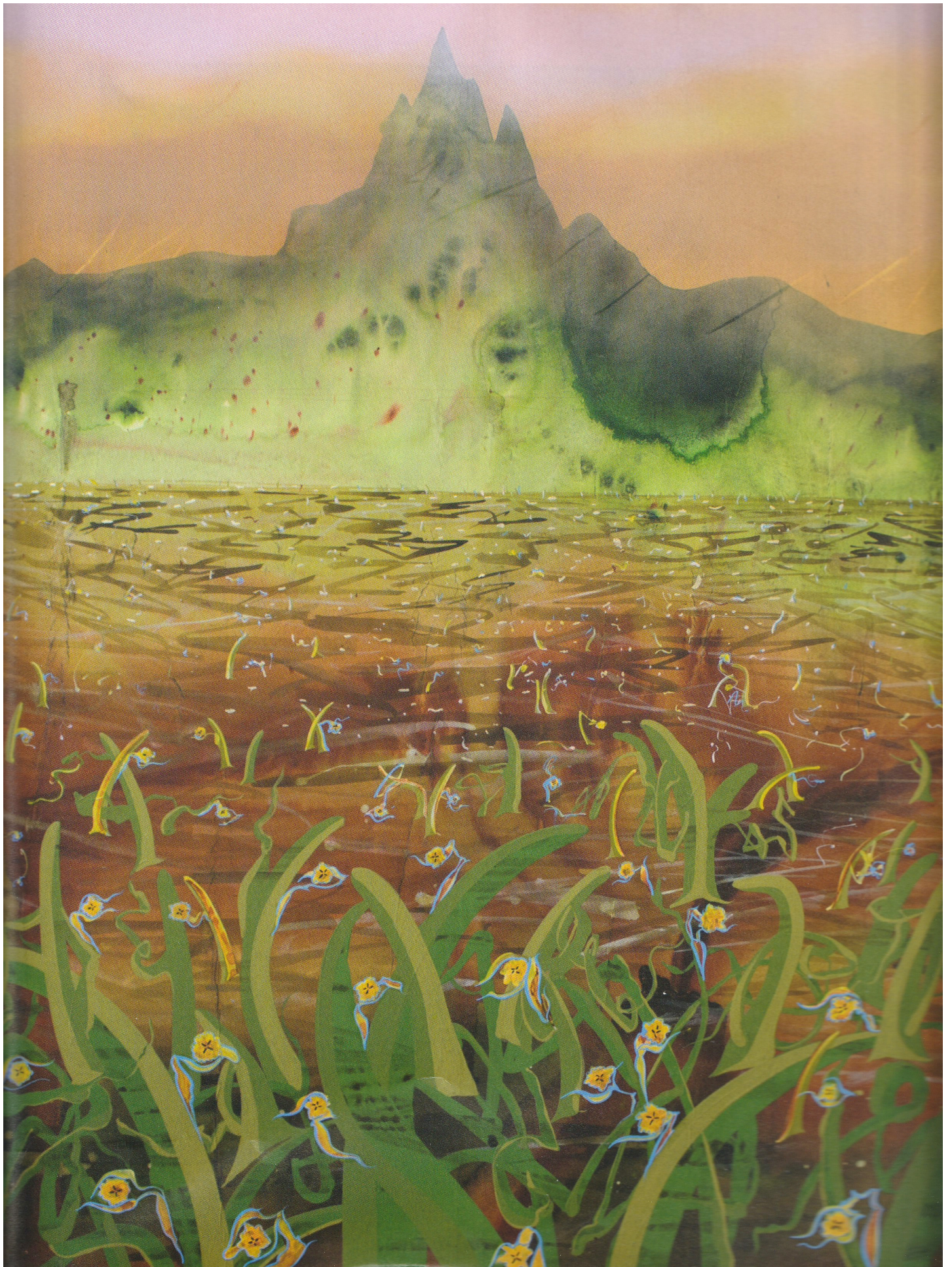
We meet five artists who address optimism in some way through their work, whether playing with the tools of language to convey and manipulate public mood, or creating visions of alternate, better worlds. Barbara Walker features those who are displaced and erased from the mainstream, taking a personal approach through pencil portraits and voice recordings. But she retains an optimistic attitude, something she says is key to making art. Conversely, Ad Minoliti creates

bright, sumptuous utopias but sees little hope for the future of humankind as it currently stands. Her post-human, geometric world is inspired by queer theory and the joyful aesthetics of childhood.

Mark Titchner speaks about his series of posters that appeared around London at the beginning of lockdown, bearing the phrase "Please Believe These Days Will Pass", and shares how he employs both the positive and negative language of politics, advertising and self-help to engage viewers. Tammy Nguyen talks about her quest for the "all-American smile" and her investigations into the symbology of Vietnamese immigrant resolve. Collaborative art group Keiken examines how technology shapes identity and consciousness, and considers how social-media tools can—contrary to popular belief—evoke empathy.

It could be argued that all creative acts require the belief that things can get better. If not, what's the point? As Walker says, "To be an artist, to create in times and moments of adversity, is, I believe, to be optimistic."

Words by Holly Black, Emily Gosling, Arwa Haider and Emily Steer



Tammy Nguyen *WHEN YOU'RE SMILING*

In the dream world, losing one's teeth can point to anxiety, fear and a loss of control. But for Tammy Nguyen, who was born without her permanent lateral incisors, the quest for an all-American smile has served as a powerful source of inspiration. Her latest body of work investigates the symbology of Vietnamese immigrant resolve, South East Asia's geopolitical landscape, and ancient mythology.





COURTESY THE ARTIST

Tammy Nguyen's practice is nothing if not expansive. The Vietnamese-American artist makes gloriously surreal paintings and prints that touch on ideas of identity, mythology and the spoken word, as well as stunning sculptural pieces that tread the line between artist book and objets d'art. She also runs a press dedicated to producing handmade publications that explore the intersection of art, science, geopolitics, ecology and more. I spoke to her about a new body of work informed by the personal experience of her missing teeth, the interconnected nature of her visual and literary output, and learning to break free from the constraints of expectation.

You have recently completed your first piece of long-form writing, "Phong Nha, the Making of an American Smile", in collaboration with Ugly Duckling Press. It is a surreal story that combines your life-long experience with radical dental work; the cave formations of Phong Nha, Vietnam; and a manmade island called Forest City located along the Strait of Malacca. Can you tell me more about writing this tale, and how it sits within your interdisciplinary practice? My major bodies of work usually involve travel and fieldwork; going to the sites that I'm interested in and developing work over several years, which plays out as writing, painting and other art objects. When I was visiting the caves it just so happened that I was getting my permanent implants, which was a momentous time in my life. I was thinking a lot about how unnecessary the whole process was and how it reflects a Vietnamese diasporic ambition: to assimilate, to obtain capital and to earn a certain kind of reputation and social status. It is all woven into this set of teeth. Then I found the connection with the cave site's name: "Phong" meaning wind and "Nha" meaning teeth. That's when everything started to congeal.

And the Forest City? I have been obsessed with that place for years. The idea of manmade islands fascinates me; they are places of leisure and luxury, but also geopolitical power-play. A lot of islands in South East Asia live on that boundary between military control and leisure. For me, Forest City is the implant and Phong Nha are the real teeth.

How has your painting developed in line with this body of writing? I have been making a lot of small works that really hone in on the terms of visual language. For example, what do I mean when I say "cave"? Likewise, I'm considering the recurring "O" sound in the text, and how that is represented visually, like an opening or a vessel. The shape has magical potential to it, in terms of what it could mean as a metaphor.

Mark-making is also a huge component in my painting practice, so I have spent a long time examining geological formations and the way that human skin relates to that. At the end of the story several prisoners leave the caves, and I have been focusing on depicting their skin oozing out of the rocks. It presents a lot of different painting problems.

You are certainly considering a lot of visual and literary outcomes. Do you always work on different strands of your practice concurrently? It is such a coming-of-age issue for me, concerning how I identify as an artist. When I was an undergrad I couldn't even mess with imagery, I was terrified. I wouldn't even paint a person because I was so scared of having to defend the image, so instead I became this muscular abstract painter. When I was in graduate school at Yale, I had a really difficult problem with trying to bring together all of the contradictions I was feeling about being Vietnamese American. I had just finished living in Vietnam for four years as a Fulbright scholar, and so there was a lot of contradiction there. Despite still working in abstraction, I made a painting of my grandmother turning into a bird, as a way of exploring ancestral worship. A professor told me to go to the ornithology library, and soon I became a volunteer, sketching the birds and doing taxidermy every Friday morning. It was a breakthrough moment, I could paint again, with the birds working as a political proxy for me to ask questions about identity.

All of this informed the book *Research for the Prevention of Primate Cities in Vietnam*, which was based on a military document I brought back from Vietnam. It proposed to modernise central Vietnam, assuming that the United States would win the war. I used it as a map to survey and observe, and the result was this fancy book with all the bells and whistles: a silk cover, letterpress, hot stamping. It was basically an illuminated manuscript. However, when I looked back, I was a little bit disappointed in how the political urgency and agency in the content couldn't reach a larger audience.

Was this the jumping-off point for founding your publishing imprint, Passenger Pigeon Press? Yes. I wanted to expand beyond the limits of a painting show and also be more democratic than most artist book publishers, with low price points. *Martha's Quarterly*, which is the main project, offers a yearly subscription for four handmade artist books, which deal with all kinds of political issues in nuanced, experimental and playful ways. There's no option to purchase single volumes, so people are buying into the idea of discovering new and disparate topics.

You also collaborate with an incredible array of experts, creating some amazing intersections between art, politics and science. It is very rewarding to hang out with so many different folks. I became an Asia Delegate for the Carnegie Council in New York, which has led to some of our collaborations. Passenger Pigeon Press just finished a book, *Atomic Sublime*, which explores nuclear activities in the American Southwest. I am certainly interested in storytelling, but beyond that I question how we actually read. What does it mean to encounter an artist book, or a body of paintings? I'm invested in taking the reader on a journey through disparate thought. (HB)

Previous pages
Tammy Nguyen, "...He Saw a Long Tube, Something That Reminded Him of His Own Throat..."; 2020
Watercolour, vinyl paint, and metal leaf on paper stretched over wood panels
51 x 41 cm

Opposite page
Tammy Nguyen, *The Good Light Study No. 3*, 2020
Watercolour, vinyl paint, pastel, and metal leaf on paper stretched over wood panels
15 x 10 cm