

[MUSIC PLAYING]

My name is Phung Huynh and I'm one of the 2021 COLA Fellows for Individual Artists. So I grew up in Chinatown with many Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants. And my childhood best friend, Nary La who is Cambodian-Chinese, raised in Paris, moved next door. And I was eight. She was nine.

I always liked to draw and paint. But she really encouraged me to do that. And we both would look at Anna Mae and draw and draw. But my parents did not want me to be an artist. They're refugees and they came to this country and fled war and genocide and violence. They were worried about me being able to survive and sustain myself.

And for them, an artist meant, you won't have a job. You need to be a doctor or a lawyer or a business person. So I had to do really well in school and high school. And I went to USC after high school and I told them I was a premed major. But I was taking all of these art classes. They had no idea.

And I decided, you know what? I want to be an artist. And I came out to my parents and said, this is something that I really, really want to do. And two very important people who advocated for me were my abuelita Nellie Parone, who is just second generation Mexican-American, grew up in East LA. And she met my mom because she was a production manager.

And my mom worked with her in garment factories. And she knew I loved to draw and paint. And I told her, Grandma, Mom and Dad don't want me to do this. She goes, you do it. And the second person is my mentor who I met when I was about 15, 16 years old. His name is Charles Daily. He's a Vietnam War vet. He grew up in Brooklyn. He's a Black artist and activist.

And he met me and said-- realized how much I love to draw and said, you need to do this. I'll talk to your parents. I'll encourage you. And what I love about having him as my mentor is he de-centered whiteness and taught me about decolonizing in art, and showed me-- taught me about Black History, and looking at artists of color.

And because he's a Vietnam War vet, we have a very close connection, in that he lovingly empowered me in my voice and referred me to as his daughter-- an experience where I feel, as refugees, we're conditioned in this country to be quiet and be grateful. But he didn't make me feel that way.

So for a long time I wanted to make my work-- thinking about making art about my family's journey, but hesitant to because I wanted to do it in a respectful, meaningful, and thoughtful way without feeling like I'm tokenizing my family's experience or capitalizing it and commercializing it. So I haven't made work about the Vietnam-- the American War in Vietnam, and what that meant, and how it was like for me to be raised here-- to listen to stories from my family about what we went through and how different they were from US history textbooks, and watching these Hollywood films about the Vietnam War that silenced us and silenced Asian bodies.

So I felt like this was time. This was time to make work about this. So the current work is confronting anti-Asian racism about GIs and the military in Vietnam, and also recognizing really important scholars, and artists, and cultural builders who are making this kind of work, like Thi Bui, who did the graphic novel *The Best We Could Do*. That's completely relatable and impactful.

Or the work of Viet Thanh Nguyen, who wrote *The Sympathizer*, and now *The Committed*. And lastly, an important person that influenced this new body of work is Long Bui, who teaches at UC-Irvine, and his seminal book on the *Returns of War*, and the memories of South Vietnam. So those are all things that really influenced this body of work-- but also to find joy.

I feel like in many minoritized groups, where we're oppressed, it can't always just be about the oppression but about how we transform that oppression. And that there is story-- there are stories about resilience. And my mom would tell me stories like that of-- stories about not only their survival but, gosh. I remember once she told me about when we were in the Thai refugee camp.

And I was running out of clothes, and she'll take her own clothes and cut it and tear it apart and re sew my clothes. Or how she thought about, OK, I need to make a living when we arrive in this new country. So in Thailand, my parents went to a store and bought these wooden molds to make moon cake. And so my mom was already planning. OK. I'm going to make moon cakes. I'm going to sew. I'm going to find ways to support my family.

That-- those two pieces that you're referencing-- with the dollhouse and the GI Joes-- are influenced by this what I experience as asymmetrical representation. That I had to learn about the war in Vietnam, not only through family narratives, but looking at these really demeaning Hollywood films that fetishize Asian women, Vietnamese female bodies. And not giving any Vietnamese people speaking roles in these films.

Culture displacement and assimilation was a very painful process. And it made me remember, I used to play with GI Joes. And how really violent, and ironic, and screwed up that is-- really-- that my family and I survived this and we come here and now I'm playing with GI Joes. And I'm a young girl-- or young woman-- playing with GIs, who in Vietnam were bombing the country, raping women.

And here I am playing with GI Joes. And how-- what kind of sick relationship that is for me. So in the dollhouse piece, I wanted to acknowledge all of those complicated issues and feelings of being a woman, having an Asian body, and in many ways not being able to be a child. When you're a refugee, a lot of your childhood and innocence is taken away. So I wanted to unpack that in the work.

I always feel like, of course, my work is very culturally specific. They're very unique and individual experiences. But at the same time, I feel like there are aspects for people to connect with, even though they're not refugees, immigrants, or Southeast Asians. So I hope that-- I always hope as an artist that I'm connecting with the viewer not just visually, but psychologically, emotionally.

And I hope that the viewer understands my story and how that story impacts them, because I don't believe that we are all these small isles. Everything we do-- every single person-- our actions and words and thoughts affect each other. So I hope that my work creates some sort of impact for the viewer, and that the viewer walks away inspired to create change.

I'm not only an artist, I'm an activist and educate-- and educator and mother. I care about my community. And so I hope that people, when they look at my work, are positively impacted by it and take away from it to rethink their relationship to their own communities and what kind of impact they can make.

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