

TRĂM NĂM SÔNG THỌ

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*Trăm Năm Sống Thọ*, is an exhibition that celebrates the flourishing Vietnamese-American community. *Trăm Năm Sống Thọ*, translates to “100 Hundred Years of Longevity.” In Vietnamese culture, this is a phrase that one says to their elders, wishing them long life, good health, and happiness. My desire is to give the deserved recognition to this community and to show that their struggles, perseverance, and success have not gone unnoticed. Aspects of this culture are slowly changing through the passing of time. Certain nuances that I may have witnessed may not be remembered by the next generation. When turning to the limited documentation of Vietnamese-American culture, you will find that most narratives center around the Vietnam War from an American perspective. Though the Vietnam War is a significant marker in history, the trajectory of the Vietnamese refugees and immigrants is not limited to this focus. Having had the privilege of being raised in Vietnamese-American culture, I find the importance of telling this narrative that is seldom told.

This body of work consists mainly of ceramic and textile materials. Ceramic and silk production are two highly specialized trades in Vietnam, and have gained global acknowledgment for the quality of their fabrication. These traditions are respected within Asian cultures as high craft / art. By using these mediums, I am exploring their historical values with Asian cultures and investigating how they reflect in current Vietnamese-American society and Asian-American society as a whole, to elevate the status of these minority communities. Within these artworks, I am using traditional ceramic production methods and decorative motifs, combined with the

Vietnamese-American aesthetic that has manifested, to work as an archive of Vietnamese-American culture.

The first part of this body of work, *Nail Salon*, is a series of ceramic sculptures focused on how the Vietnamese nail salon industry embodies the success of the community. In the mid 1970's, following the fall of Saigon, the Vietnamese people evacuated to refugee camps within the United States. Prior to their evacuation, professional nail care was not a known line of work in Vietnamese culture. "The initial Vietnamese involvement in manicuring is almost apocryphal...The actress Tippi Hedren, concerned with the plight of Vietnamese refugees housed in a tent city in California, sought to help the women "make it" in America. Allegedly impressed with the women's hand dexterity, in 1975 she brought her manicurist to teach them manicuring skills. She also persuaded a beauty school both to train the refugees, free of charge, and to help them find work."<sup>1</sup> The nail salon profession became highly desirable to Vietnamese refugee women because of the minimal English-speaking requirements. In just a few decades, the Vietnamese nail salon workers had transformed the industry by broadening the customer base and increasing the demand for professional manicurists.<sup>2</sup> The Vietnamese contribution to the profession has turned the nail salon industry into a multi-billion dollar business by the early 2000s.<sup>3</sup> However, I believe the Vietnamese nail salon represents more than lucrative monetary figures. The nail salon stands as a beacon for the Vietnamese-American people, a place where they can find

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Eckstein and Thanh-Nghi Nguyen, "The Making and Transnationalization of an Ethnic Niche: Vietnamese Manicurists," *International Migration Review* 45, no. 3 (2011): pp. 639-674, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2011.00861.x>, 651.

<sup>2</sup> Eckstein and Nguyen, "The Making and Transnationalization of an Ethnic Niche: Vietnamese Manicurists.", 653.

<sup>3</sup> Eckstein and Nguyen, "The Making and Transnationalization of an Ethnic Niche: Vietnamese Manicurists.", 645.

work and security here in their newly adopted home. In Vietnamese culture, people take pride in their similarities and accomplishments as an overall collective. I believe that the success of the Vietnamese nail salons reflect on all of Vietnamese-American society, and is shared and honored within this community.

The pieces in the *Nail Salon* series are porcelain casts of display hands typical to a nail salon. These mundane objects used to display available nail types or designs are passed by on a daily basis and easily disregarded. However, to the workers in the nail industry who struggle with language barriers, the hands become more than a mundane object. They are a tool for communication. Many immigrants rely on various means of visual representation to navigate the unfamiliar circumstances of anew. Objects such as the display hands take on crucial roles as translation devices, mediating conversation for someone who faces the difficulties of language barriers.

By taking these plastic display hands and casting them in porcelain, I am elevating the significance of these objects and the role they play in the lives of the nail salon workers. Porcelain is a white fine-grain clay, known for its translucent quality. Fine porcelain is typically associated with Asian cultures, specifically China, where there is widespread availability of mineral deposits of “China stone” and China clays, known as kaolins.<sup>4</sup> Historically, porcelain has been a highly sought after product in European countries, as collectible “exotica from the East.”<sup>5</sup> These “Fine China” collectibles are items that are put on display, in cabinets or shelving, to be presented as precious items. I believe that within this context of “preciousness,” the work acts as a reclamation of a

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<sup>4</sup> Vandiver, Pamela B./ Kingery, W. David., *Ceramic Masterpieces: Art, Structure and Technology* (John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2019), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Vandiver/ Kingery, *Ceramic Masterpieces: Art, Structure and Technology*, 165.

material that embodies Asian identity, directing the focus on what I believe should be recognized and seen as “precious items.”

Another part of the *Nail Salon* series are the blue and white porcelain vases. The blue and white tradition is respected as a high art in Asian cultures. By following this tradition, I am using its histories to reflect on Asian-American culture and reinforce that Asian-American culture is authentic in and of itself.

These vases are meant to represent cultural aspects of Vietnamese-American life presented in a form that historically is known as traditional or high art to elevate the Vietnamese-American minority group and honor the culture they have established. Stylistically, the work is a contemporary take on the traditional use of Chinese blue and white pottery. Less commonly known is the discovery of blue and white pottery in Vietnam that dates back as early as the 15th and 16th century.<sup>6</sup> Vietnam, sharing the border of southern China, has adapted many of China’s traditions, blue and white cobalt painting to be one of them. In my work, the way I have been connecting my imagery and concepts back to the traditions of Vietnamese and Chinese pottery, is by incorporating motifs found in these types of ware, into my own work. What I have noticed is that Vietnamese pottery shares many motifs and symbols as Chinese designs. This is more apparent in northern parts of Vietnam, particularly the Annam and Tonkin regions because of their proximity to southern China.<sup>7</sup> For example, the Annamese potters expressed in their own native way some of the styles and techniques of the potters of Kiangsi in China.<sup>8</sup> These symbols are used to convey narratives and meanings that

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Nelson Spinks, *A Reassessment of the Annamese Wares* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1976), 42-43.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Nelson Spinks, *A Reassessment of the Annamese Wares* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1976), 43.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Nelson Spinks, *A Reassessment of the Annamese Wares* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1976), 43.

have been passed down throughout history. However, with the diaspora of Asian-American culture, those traditions have been severed. With my blue and white vases, my intent is to reconnect the history of ceramics in Asian-American culture with the cultures of the origin countries.

The shape of the vases in my series replicate the iconic image of a nail polish bottle. Simultaneously, the form is a reference to the Annam Vase, a historic Vietnamese ceramic vessel. The Annam Vase is a porcelain vessel, decorated in cobalt blue. Also, the vase's shape is strikingly similar to that of a nail polish bottle. The vase has had a complicated history since its rediscovery in the early 1900s. The vase was publicly brought to the attention of the art world in 1933 by the scholar R.L. Hobson,<sup>9</sup> who saw the vase in the Topkapi Sarayi Museum in Istanbul, Turkey. In his publication, Hobson deciphered the thirteen characters that were written on the vessel and determined that the characters read "Painted for pleasure by Chuang, a workman of Nan Ts'e-chou in the 8th year of Ta Ho'." Without question, the entire world subsequently praised this vase as a great Chinese antiquity. From there the *Annam Vase* was showcased in a series of Chinese Art exhibitions. The vase had this status as a Chinese vessel until 1977, when the historian Roxanna M. Brown reexamined the vessel and realized that the order of the characters did not make sense in Chinese. In 1983, the discovery of the Chu Đậu ceramic kilns and the discovery of a shipwreck off the coast of Hội An in Vietnam, which contained ceramic vessels that were similar to the *Annam Vase*, provided the possible lead to solving the mystery of the vase. The vase was traced back to the region where Chu Đậu pottery was originally created and there a

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<sup>9</sup> Taimantis.com, accessed April 28, 2022, <http://www.taimantis.com/chinese/annamvase.html>.



family claimed that the inscription on the vase was the name of their ancestor, Bùi Thị Hỷ.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly to the history of the *Annam Vase*, Asian-American society still faces these occurrences of generalization. In my blue and white vases, I am using this vessel to reflect how its history speaks to the present day.

I was influenced by the artist, Stephanie Shih, a Tawianese–American ceramist. Shih’s work explores the diasporic nostalgia and material lineages of migration and colonization through the lens of the Asian-American kitchen. Her painted ceramic sculptures examine the relationship between consumerism, cultural interchange, and identity in immigrant communities. I believe Shih and I both work in a similar vein conceptually and we both work in a way that archives Asian-American culture.

Within the *Nail Salon* vases, I began depicting imagery of commercial items that have been specifically targeted to the Asian-American demographic. For example, *Tôm Vase* references the shrimp paste that has always been present in my household.

There are specific products, which have been around for many years, that one could only find in Asian-American grocery stores. I believe that many Asian-American citizens have a familiarity with these items because they have been the only products available that fit specific needs. Though these commercial items are products that are produced for generalized groups, the items have become in a way iconic to the Asian-American society. By painting them in the blue and white tradition, I wanted to memorialize them as a part of an Authentic Asian-American culture.

*Yellow* works to redirect the stigma and stereotypes of Asian-American society, specifically, the stereotype of “Asian people being yellow.” The piece consists of 108

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<sup>10</sup> Taimantis.com, accessed April 28, 2022, <http://www.taimantis.com/chinese/annamvase.html>.

ceramic yellow nail polish bottles, displayed as they would be in a salon or beauty supply store, suggesting what is in style or what is beautiful. Within this context, the multiplicity of the yellow nail polish bottles acts as a reclamation of identity, and represents diversity within the Asian community.

During my travels to Vietnam, I learned that the ant represents Vietnamese people because ants work together as one unit to create structure and stability. I find that apparent in Vietnamese-American culture and Asian-American culture as a whole. Of course we are all individuals, but in a place where we are the minority, we rely on the solidarity within the Asian-American community.

*Yellow* conveys the duality of multiplicity and singularity. From afar, the nail polish bottles are indistinguishable from each other. However, when taking a closer look, each nail polish bottle has its own unique shade of yellow to represent our individuality while also representing our power in numbers.

As I was beginning to expand the narrative beyond the *Nail Salon series*, I became interested in the philosophical underpinnings of the I Ching, or the Book of Changes, which is an ancient Chinese divination text. The I Ching is structured in complex arrangements that offer the idea of plurality.<sup>11</sup> This idea of multiple answers is rooted in many Asian religions and I believe this idea is fluid within the everyday livelihood of Vietnamese-American society. As a first-generation citizen, I believe that the concept of plurality has been imperative to my existence; being immersed in Vietnamese culture and American culture. I saw this as a way to be flexible within the approaches of how I executed the artwork within the same body of work. In the *Nail*

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<sup>11</sup> Rudolf Ritsema and Shantena Augusto Sabbadini, *The Original I Ching Oracle: The Pure and Complete Texts with Concordance* (London: Watkins, 2007), 15.

*Salon series*, the works were smaller, more intimate pieces, all dealing with the concept of multiples. With the concept of plurality in mind, I found that pivoting to focus on the singular, to be appropriate.

*Chén*, is a large-scale ceramic bowl. The piece is a replication of the small plastic “Longevity” bowls that were present at every meal in my household. The bowls themselves are commercial products based off of the traditional Wan Shou Wu Jiang porcelain-ware from China. The Wan Shou Wu Jiang (longevity) porcelain are typically seen as “Fine-China,” used for display and decorative purposes. For a period of time throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s, “...many of these porcelains were exported to the West, with comparatively few remaining in China.”<sup>12</sup> I was interested in the fact that at this point in time, collectors of these porcelain wares were more familiar with the “authentic items,” than perhaps the Asian-American diaspora who I believe would have been more familiar with the plastic reproductions. These plastic bowls have become a part of the ritual of having a meal in the Vietnamese-American home and I find them to be just as precious as “Fine-China.” In the piece, *Chén*, I am acknowledging the importance of this mundane object by emphasizing how this object has become a symbol of the Vietnamese-American household. In this work, I have transformed the plastic longevity bowl design (which differs from the traditional design), back into the material of ceramics and treated the surface decoration in the original tradition of Chinese overglaze enamels to memorialize this item that has become the Asian-American “Fine China.”

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<sup>12</sup> Watersilkdragon et al., “Some Notes on Wan Shou Wu Jiang (万寿无疆) Porcelains since the Late Qing Period,” watersilkdragon, September 25, 2021, <https://watersilkdragon.wordpress.com/2013/03/12/some-notes-on-wan-shou-wu-jiang-%E4%B8%87%E5%AF%BF%E6%97%A0%E7%96%86-porcelains-since-the-late-qing-period/>.

*Sky, Earth, Humanity* is a ceremonial altar devoted to my late father, Hoàng Việt Đình. My Father, like the rest of my family, was a refugee of the Vietnam War. His narrative, along with every other Vietnamese refugee and immigrant, are important stories to be told, remembered, and honored. The remembrance of my father pays tribute to his legacy and the many sacrifices that my ancestors made for the generations to follow.

*Sky, Earth, Humanity* incorporates the daily Vietnamese practice of praying for the deceased, as well as ritualistic offerings that occur during Tết (Vietnamese Lunar New Year) and on đám giỗ (death anniversary). The rice in the shape of a circle and a square represent offerings of respect to our ancestors, similar to the bánh giầy (round cakes) and bánh chưng (square cakes) enjoyed and placed as offerings for the deceased during Tết. In Vietnamese culture, the bánh giầy represent the sky and the bánh chưng represent the earth. Furthermore, burning incense traditionally functions as a way to pray for and remember ancestors. The smoke of the incense is seen as prayers from the human realm being sent to the heavens, bridging the two realms of humanity and sky.

Within the Vietnamese tradition of altar displays in the household to honor the deceased, an image of the person is typically hung above the altar. In the installation, hanging above the altar are four laser engraved reproductions of my father's tattoos: a panther, a rose, a grim reaper, and three Chinese characters (天地人). Below the wooden panels are the locations of the tattoos on my father's body written in the Chữ Nôm script, a writing system formerly used in Vietnam. The four hanging panels become a manifestation of my father, mapping out the body and creating an image of him. The

tattoo of 天地人(Tian Di Ren), located on my father's left forearm, translates to the realm of the heavens, the realm of the earth, and the realm of humanity.

The final piece created for the exhibition is a silk replication of the South Vietnamese flag, titled *Trăm Năm Sống Thọ*. After the Vietnam War, the South Vietnamese flag was banned throughout Vietnam. Now, the flag is only flown in regions of the world where the Vietnamese refugees had relocated, becoming a symbol of the Vietnamese diaspora. When creating this piece, I was considering how meanings change over time, generationally. To the Vietnamese refugees and immigrants of the Vietnam War, this flag represents their diaspora, the loss of their homeland, loss of their families, and their perseverance through the hardships. When thinking about what the South Vietnamese flag means to me, a first generation Vietnamese-American citizen, I view the flag with a different context. Though the South Vietnamese flag does represent what I have stated earlier, I believe that the flag represents that generation of Vietnam refugees and immigrants who have paved the foundation for my generation and it is a symbol of honor to commemorate them.

The overarching theme for this body of work is the act of remembrance. That being the remembrance of objects, places, practices, traditions, and people, that mark a point in time of Vietnamese-American culture. With this body of work, I aim to contribute to a working archive of what defines the Vietnamese-American aesthetic. By archiving the history of the Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in the visual form, this work complicates how the narrative of the Vietnamese refugees has been portrayed in American culture, such as in films, television, pop culture, and music. *Trăm Năm Sống Thọ* is an exhibition that focuses on the positive narrative of the Vietnamese-American

community and is meant to be a moment of celebration. This exhibition is in honor of the Vietnamese refugees and immigrants who have come before, and to them, Trăm Năm Sống Thọ.



Gallery View: *Trăm Năm Sống Thọ*

Carroll Gallery at Tulane University

April 28th - May 6th, 2022



Gallery View (2nd Angle): *Trăm Năm Sống Thọ*

Carroll Gallery at Tulane University

April 28th - May 6th, 2022





*Gallery View: Nail Salon Series, Installation*

Carroll Gallery at Tulane University

April 28th - May 6th, 2022



*MÔT HAI BA DZÔ!*

Porcelain, silk, & lacquered wood, 2021





*AROMA*

Porcelain, silk, & lacquered wood, 2020



*French Tip*

Porcelain, silk, & lacquered wood, 2020



*Tết*

Porcelain, silk, & lacquered wood, 2020





*Longevity*

Porcelain, silk, & lacquered wood, 2021



*Cá Hấp Vase*

Porcelain, 2021



Left: *Nước Mắm Vase*

Porcelain, 2021

Right: *Tôm Vase*

Porcelain, 2021





*Yellow* (Wall piece)

Porcelain & wood, 2021



*Sky, Earth, Humanity*

Ceramic, wood, paper, incense, fabric, & sand, 2022





*Sky, Earth, Humanity (Detail)*



*Sky, Earth, Humanity, (Detail 2)*





*Chén*

Ceramic & jasmine rice, 2022



*Trăm Năm Sống Thọ (Detail)*

Silk, 2022



*Trăm Năm Sống Thọ*

Silk, 2022

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## BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1992, Christian Dinh is a Vietnamese-American ceramic artist from Orlando, Florida. He received his B.A. in 2016 from the University of West Florida in Pensacola. While studying at UWF, Dinh was nominated for the International Sculpture Center's Outstanding Student Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award. Relocating to New Orleans in 2018, Dinh is currently attending the M.F.A. program at Tulane University. Dinh's ceramic and sculptural work has been in numerous exhibitions throughout the Gulf Coast, including *And Now For Something New Vol. 2* at LeMieux Gallery in New Orleans, *PHILIC / PHOBIC* at the Pensacola Museum of Art, *Focus Spotlight: Nail Salon* at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, Louisiana, and *Blue Norther* Exhibition at the Silos at Sawyer Yards in Houston, Texas.