

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## Family Portraits Left Incomplete

by Keith Plocek, March 25, 2015



*Trong Gia Nguyen, "Family, Enid, circa 1982" (2014)  
oil pastel on canvas, 145 x 208 cm*

HO CHI MINH CITY — Trong Gia Nguyen was only three years old when he was crammed into a Renault Dauphine with 13 other family members and driven to the Saigon docks on April 30, 1975. It was Reunification Day, or the Fall of Saigon, depending on your perspective. It was the day North Vietnamese forces finally expelled the foreign invaders, or the day the Americans callously abandoned their South Vietnamese allies. Amid all the confusion, with asylum-seekers trying to climb over gates to the U.S. Embassy and Americans pushing empty helicopters off aircraft carriers, the Nguyens managed to get on the last boat out of Saigon. They immigrated to the United States and never spoke of the day again.

Forty years later, artist Nguyen is revisiting his family's journey in *DONG*, a documentary film project in collaboration with collector-filmmaker David Raymond. In the [teaser posted online](#), you can see Nguyen playing with notions of memory, mixing clips from *Spaceballs* and *Sixteen Candles* with family interviews conducted by the artist's Brooklyn friends.

In addition to the film project, Nguyen is making works with similar themes for galleries, and one such show is up currently at [Galerie Quynh's](#) downtown space in Ho Chi Minh City. For *The Leavers*, Nguyen has taken old family photographs and created oil pastel paintings that look like completed pages of a coloring book, but with the original black lines erased.

The message behind the fuzzy paint and lack of outlines is clear: memories are imperfect, messy, constantly shifting and changing, like oil pastels that are never quite dry. You can never step twice into the same river, look at the same painting, or remember the same event, no matter how important it was for your family history.



Trong Gia Nguyen, "The Leavers" (2014), oil pastel on canvas, 14 works, overall: 1.90 x 4.50 m.

The highlight of the show is "The Leavers," a set of 14 individual portraits. These paintings are hung in the gallery with the patriarch and matriarch hung in the middle and the children fanning out, just as you'd see on the wall in a family home. A few of the men have decidedly 1970s looks about them, with smudges for nostrils that potentially double-up as mustaches.

Other paintings in the series are recreations of single snapshots of the artist's family members, with some of the photos dated before the artist was born. Taken as a whole, the paintings are radiant and messy. Nguyen takes us with him down hazy paths of childhood memory, and the works in *The Leavers* balance conceptual heft with playful technique.



Trong Gia Nguyen, "Family, Guam, 1975" (2014)  
oil pastel on canvas

We often reflect upon the imperfections of memory with sadness. We want some moments, such as victories and kisses, preserved in amber. But Nguyen's paintings also bring to mind ways in which forgetting is important for healing, especially for a country sundered by war. Though originally cast as traitors, those who fled Vietnam were eventually welcomed back by the government and encouraged to start up businesses. Nguyen had not returned to his homeland until a few years ago, when he went to install a show at Galerie Quynh, where he was invited back this February.

He tells me over email that he's quickly spotted by locals as someone who grew up elsewhere, especially because he's six feet tall. "But once that little bit is over with, I've found that as Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese), I'm treated the same as 'countrymen' and will always be regarded as such. It's quite touching actually."

You can never go home again, but *The Leavers* shows us that sometimes where you wind up isn't wholly divorced from your past, and that memories can grow at once fuzzier and brighter over time.