

STEPHANIE HUBER

Exhibition Review: *Tuan Andrew Nguyen: Unburied Sounds*

Tuan Andrew Nguyen: Unburied Sounds. James Cohan, New York, NY. April 12–May 7, 2022.

In the sun-drenched rooms at the James Cohan gallery on Walker Street in New York City, a gleaming sound sculpture made of reflective silver disks titled *A Rumble Across the Sky* (2022) took such prominence that for a moment it visually—and erroneously—claimed its place as the main event of Tuan Andrew Nguyen’s recent exhibition. A gallery employee performed a sound demonstration with a mallet, which made the Calderesque mobile bellow like a sonorous wind chime. Behind an adjacent wall sat four *Singing Bowls* (2022) made from evacuated artillery shells and mallets that reveal the percussive beauty of these objects. On the surrounding walls, two large mounted digital C-prints told the real-world origin story of these metal instruments and their excavation, both with the identical title: *Unexploded Ordnance, 16 in. 50 caliber, Sông Ngân hamlet, Linh Thượng Village, Gio Linh district, Quảng Trị, January 14, 2021, 2022*. Nguyen included the photographs as the before picture, suggesting that through great care and the manual pounding of brass, these missiles had been transformed into the beautiful, quasi-sanctified vessels on display.

In this opening salvo, Nguyen offered up what seemed a disparate few objects that shared no intuitive relationship with each other. He tied them together with the true lynchpin of this exhibition, a video installation found through an understated entryway near the gallery reception desk and titled *The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon* (2022). The fifty-eight-minute film (in Vietnamese with English captions) opens with an extended shot of a bomb casing that has been converted into a planter, with cows grazing in the background. A melancholic song repeating the lyrics “Day After Day” in Vietnamese establishes the mood of a place that is both unchanged and forgotten by time.

Nguyen was born in 1976 in Ho Chi Minh City, one year after the American War in Vietnam had officially come to an end. Although he and his family moved to the United States in 1978 as refugees, in this film Nguyen fabricated an alternate lifetime as experienced by a young woman named Nguyet who stayed in Vietnam and could easily stand in as a surrogate for the artist. Nguyet—also born in 1976—operates a junkyard in Quang Tri with her mother. Like Nguyen, Nguyet has no direct memory linked to the war, but unlike him, she has always lived in immediate proximity to its material reality.

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Installation view of *Unburied Sounds* (2022) by Tuan Andrew Nguyen.

Due to their line of work scavenging scrap metal, Nguyet and her mother rely financially on the bomb shells that surround them, a livelihood that forces them to live in a constant state of mortal fear. The film explores the reality of what it means to grow up in a place like Quang Tri, the most heavily bombarded territory in history. Its inhabitants are decades separated from the war, but as thousands of farmers in this region have died from undetonated land mines and bombs since 1975, they still fear death in an immediate way that makes it seem as if the conflict never really ended.

The film also lays bare the variety of ways that different generations process trauma, depending on their temporal proximity to the event. While her mother fears leaving the family home and avoids talking about the war, Nguyet leans into excavating its histories, making art out of its material artifacts in the form of a massive mobile sculpture made from hammered bomb shell casings. She has a cousin who works at a museum dedicated to teaching the history of the American war in Vietnam and its material aftereffects. He bears a more physical and permanent reminder of his curiosity about artillery: he is missing three limbs and one eye, the result of being a curious child who, nearly thirty years earlier, had playfully tapped on a live bomb, maiming himself and killing Nguyet's brother.

The film successively peels back layers that reveal varied interpretations of rebirth as an ever-expanding concept. While gathering paper for scrap, Nguyet comes across an article



Still from *The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon* (2022) by Tuan Andrew Nguyen.

about Alexander Calder’s mobiles and his political work in protest against the War in Vietnam. Despite her skeptical distance from such theological concepts, Nguyet comes to believe that she embodies the reincarnated spirit of Calder, who died exactly forty-nine days before she was born—the precise window of time specified by Buddhism to take a new body when passing from one life cycle to the next.

Nguyet’s visit to a Buddhist temple yields a deeper understanding of reincarnation and initiates her more sanguine view of the war’s detritus as a useful tool in the healing process. A monk explains to her that the temple had converted one of the artillery shells into a bell for use in service, which they also use in sound therapy for victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Perhaps intentionally on Nguyet’s part, the curved form of the warhead resembles the traditional convex-shaped bell often found in pagodas in Vietnam.¹ Likewise, the practice of ringing a bell has long been associated with awakening in more than one sense: both rising for the new day and the process of Enlightenment. Their use in the film call to mind the teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh, the Vietnamese monk and anti-war expatriate who founded the Plum Village Buddhist tradition. Also called the “father of mindfulness,” Hanh used bells as a way to invite practitioners to meditation, which in turn also trained them to view the otherwise interruptive sound of telephone rings, alarms, and car horns in this same way.² Much like Hanh, the monks in this film integrate aspects of the common, everyday lived experience into an opportunity for psychological and spiritual realignment.

The Buddhist monk at this temple provides the explanatory hinge between the material and the spiritual worlds. He reminds Nguyet as well as the viewing audience that everyone and everything is made up of metaphysical particles without a permanently defined shape or vessel. His speech exposes the impotence of the stone monuments that also appear intermittently in the background and in brief montages throughout the film. These large-scale sculptures intended to commemorate the war falsely place the totality of

1. Lewis Doney, “Bronze Temple Bells from the Tibetan Imperial Period: Buddhist Material Culture in Context,” in *Framing Intellectual and Lived Spaces in Early South Asia*, ed. Lucas den Boer and Elizabeth A. Cecil (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 110.

2. Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Bells of Mindfulness* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2013).

the conflict in the past, as an event to simply remember, rather than acknowledging it as something that continues to haunt its victims. One notable example is the memorial and bridge commemorating the demarcation line between North and South Vietnam along the Ben Hai River. In Nguyen's characterization of the Quang Tri province, everything becomes a sound sculpture—especially converted artillery shells, which also perform a kind of exposure therapy: an inadvertent confrontation of the very thing that caused the trauma in the first place.

In a way that the artist Nguyen never could, the character of Nguyet grapples with the lived experience of second-generation trauma: an indirect experience of the war that never really ends. The stakes, however, remain the same: the fear of landmines and live bombs are still quite real. The younger generation wants to exist in the same state of prewar innocence as their parents did—or they want to make art out of the only world they know. This emphasis on aftermath reveals the way that war can transform societies on a molecular level, as some epigenetic studies have recently revealed.³

By the time the video comes to an end, Nguyen has carefully perforated the threadbare distinction separating lived reality from fiction. His gallery display and inclusion of photographic, and thus concrete, objective, and even scientific evidence, also played a role in mythologizing the sound bowls and mobile on display. Nguyen demanded a generous time commitment—an hour explanation to justify the seeming paltry number of objects on exhibition. He rewarded the audience tenfold for their investment with a show that extended far beyond its immediate commercial objectives and allowed for an important spiritual recalibration. ■

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3. Carl Zimmer, "The Famine Ended 70 Years Ago, but Dutch Genes Still Bear Scars," *New York Times* (January 31, 2018), D5, www.nytimes.com/2018/01/31/science/dutch-famine-genes.html.