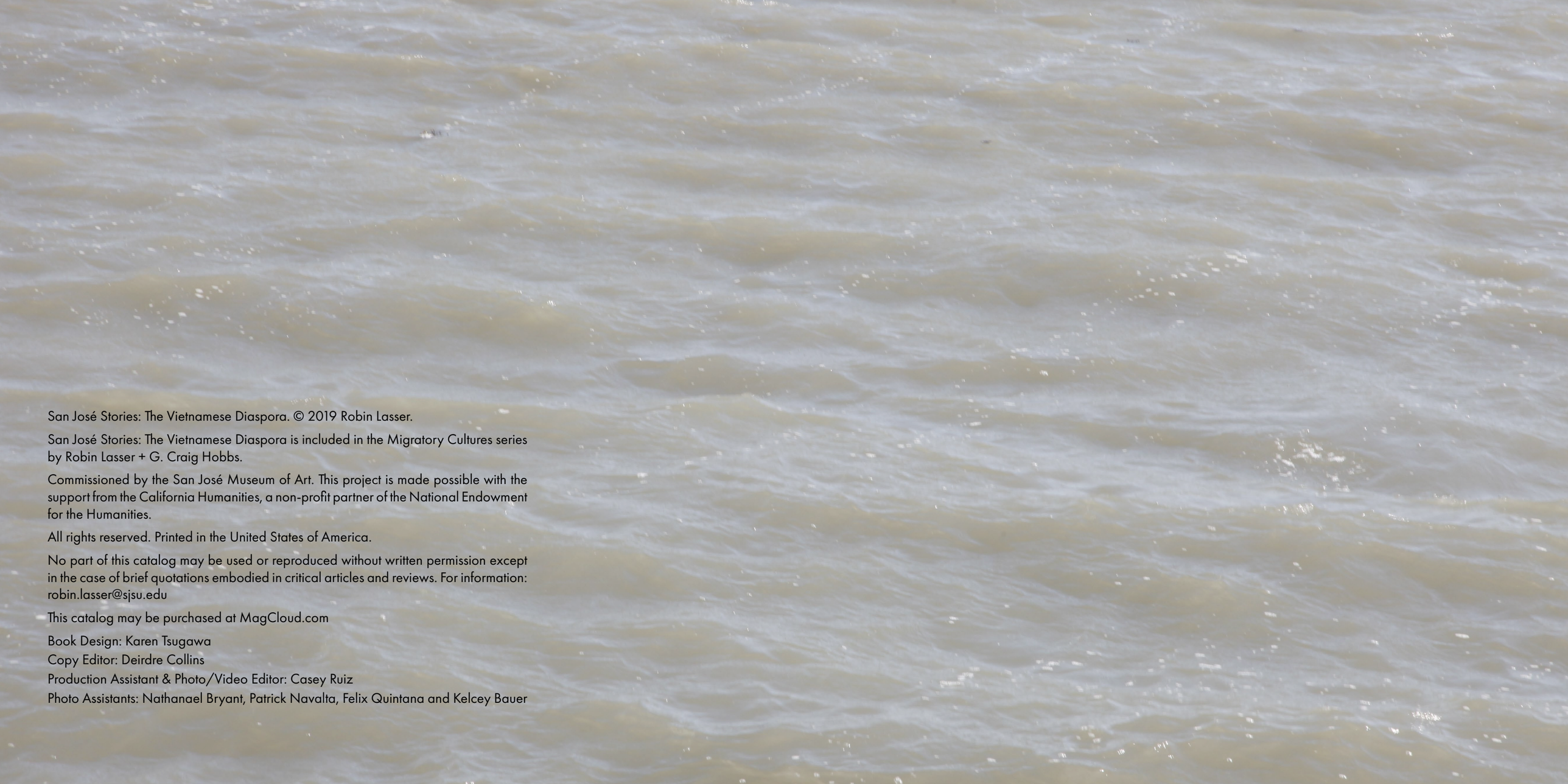
San José Stories:
THE VIETNAMESE DIASPORA

Robin Lasser



San José Stories: The Vietnamese Diaspora is included in the Migratory Cultures series by Robin Lasser + G. Craig Hobbs.

Commissioned by the San José Museum of Art. This project is made possible with the support from the California Humanities, a non-profit partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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San José Stories:

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Introduction

by Rory Padeken

Robin Lasser explores the geopolitics of people and place through photography, video, and site-specific installation. Born from intensive research and close engagement with various communities, her works chart the flow of human migration, unravel histories of colonialism, examine the social dimensions of eating disorders, and disclose humanity's impact on the natural world. Lasser often collaborates with other artists, cultural organizations, government agencies, and public entities to create her socially-relevant and participatory works.

Since 2015, she has worked with G. Craig Hobbs on an ongoing project called Migratory Cultures, which connects regional stories of migration from diaspora communities in the San Francisco Bay Area with those found internationally, most recently in Goa, India. They have gathered stories from individuals representing fourteen countries, including Bosnia, Ethiopia, France, Germany, India, Iran, Japan, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia, and Yemen. Video mapped onto the facades of museums and lighthouses, onto trees in gardens and along residential streets, and within public space, these honest and powerful stories are intertwined with both culturally-specific and universal imagery to reveal our shared humanity.

Commissioned by the San José Museum of Art for the film program "Stories from the Farther Shore: Southeast Asian Film" (March 20-24, 2019), Lasser's San José Stories: The Vietnamese Diaspora is an iteration of her Migratory Cultures project and features interviews with individuals from San José's multi-generational Vietnamese-American community. Guided by Lasser's openness and generosity, these individuals share deeply personal, introspective stories of migration to reveal a more complex narrative of the largest Vietnamese diaspora in the United States. Interspersing her video portraits with images she recorded that evoke migration–flying birds, the ocean, and hundreds of animated Vietnamese emigrants on their journey. Lasser honors the experiences of her subjects and offers a space for empathy, connection, and reflection.

Rory Padeken is associate curator at the San José Museum of Art. Recently organized exhibitions include Dinh Q. Lê: True Journey Is Return (2018), Won Ju Lim: California Dreamin' (2018), Border Cantos: Richard Misrach | Guillermo Galindo (2016), Tabaimo: Her Room (2016), Beta Space: Diana Thater (2015), and David Levinthal: Make Believe (2014).

Foreword

by Trami Cron, author of *VietnamEazy*

Artist Robin Lasser and I met over a plate of hot buffalo wings; they were neither hot nor buffalo, yet we all accept it as truth.

This is also true of the story you hear about the Vietnamese diaspora. There is a single narrative that is told and shown over and over. The naked girl screaming, running down the street; the old woman with black teeth, wearing a khăn rí, a small fabric wrapped on her head, carrying a screaming baby in her arms while a white American soldier helps her climb on an American battleship; distressed, thin young men dressed in bell bottoms clinging onto the gates of the American Embassy during the days leading up to the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

My story is different, yet seldom heard. I imagine this to be true for many Vietnamese immigrants.

On April 30, 1975, I was two and fatherless. There are many versions of how he left, why he left, and under what circumstances he left. But he left. He was on his way to America on a helicopter. I heard he ended up on an island somewhere and eventually was sponsored by the Mormon Church, made his way to Utah, and later moved to California.

My father is alive, and we have connected a few times throughout the years. I had many questions for him each time we saw each other, but I never asked. We don't ask about where our elders have been. That's the way we were raised. If he were to tell me his story, I imagine it would be a watered-down version of the truth so as not to hurt me, the family, my mother, or reveal the mysteries surrounding the shadowy six years of his life.

I suppose his story would fit with the commonly known American narrative. Between 1975-1979, more than 540,000 Vietnamese refugees left by boat and landed in neighboring countries in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. Most ended up in the US, but many went to Canada, Europe, and even Israel.

The second wave of immigration came after the creation of the Orderly Departure Program, commonly known in the Vietnamese community as the H-O program in 1979. The objective of the ODP was "family reunion and other humanitarian cases." This program continued from 1980 until 1997; 623,509 Vietnamese resettled abroad, of whom 458,367 settled in the United States. More than forty countries participated in the program.

My story still did not quite fit into these boxes either. It is something in-between.

Mine is the 2.5 version. My family was sponsored by my aunt who lived in Paris, France. In 1981, we left comfortably on an Air France flight to Charles de Gaulle, where I experienced the coldest winter of my life. It was all misery from untreated chapped lips, language barriers, and confusion as to why I was in this freezing hell. Adults did not explain anything to children. We just did as we were told and stayed out of their way. My childhood trauma was so deeply ingrained that to this day, when I am asked, "If you were on a deserted island and could only bring one thing, what would it be?" My reply is and will always be "Chapstick." As my body adjusted and somebody finally gave me a French version of this soothing balm, my swollen and cracked lips began to heal, but the fear of going without one remains to this day.

I began to appreciate my new life as a refugee living Troyes, France in a comfortable apartment complex with my extended family and hundreds of refugee families from various parts of the world. I remember the single-use jellies and butters, and fatty French foods that smelled like every cafeteria in Europe or America. This smell still churns my stomach today. I remember being in awe as I they took me to a huge room full of clothes donated by the French locals so I could pick out my new outfits, shoes, and coats to keep warm during the bitter winters in the suburb of France. There was no limit on how many I could take, but as a shy, reserved Vietnamese girl under her mother's watchful eyes, I knew not to take too many.

I will never forget the worried eyes my grandparents wore daily despite the smiles they reserved for us and our guests. We hosted and attended mini parties with our foreign neighbors in the complex who came from various Middle Eastern countries and backgrounds. We had a grand time despite the language barriers. We shared the language of food and music, looks of anguish, and fears of the unknown.

My elders lost more than their wealth, they also lost their voices and their standing in society forever. They went from being somebodies to nobodies and learned to lay down their pride to accept handouts from the French government and generous donations from the French people. Even now, I can only imagine a fraction of their sufferings from my life experience with discrimination in corporate America and from living in San José, California. Even so, I am often told how lucky we were to not have to flee Vietnam by boat, to not have the experience of floating on a small fishing boat packed with people, to not suffer hunger, sea sickness, and pirate attacks on our bodies and spirits. A million of us never made it on land and became butterflies on our families' window ledges. Many will never forget what they have seen or experienced. Yet we all live, within our sorrows, we all live so we can see the second Vietnamese-American generation thrive.

I finally met my father for the first time at the end of 1983 at Los Angeles airport, coming from Paris, France. He didn't look as handsome as the photos I've seen where he was a lean, clean-cut, hot young man, posing on the steps of a French colonial building in Đà Lạt, Vietnam. Instead he looked like a well-to-do, middle-aged man with a little gut, and wavy, salt-and-pepper hair. I wished our first meeting were something more unicorn magical, but it wasn't. It was more like, "This is your father, say hello." I politely said, "Thưa Ba, hello Dad," a word as foreign to me as the English language. Before that day, I have never used the word Ba to address anyone directly in my entire young life. He was as a stranger to me as this new strange land.

The Vietnamese artist community knows my father as artist Lâm Triết. Google says he was born in 1938, in Bồng Sơn, Vietnam. He now lives in our ancestral home with relatives. I visited him once. He has dementia and doesn't remember who I am anymore.

The third wave of Vietnamese came to the US after 1997, they came through family sponsorship programs, as opposed to the earlier history of Vietnamese migration as refugees. They are considered immigrants, not refugees. This distinction is seldom considered when Americans think of the Vietnamese diaspora, but it matters to us, to our economic situation.

Now over 110,000 Vietnamese live in San José, making it the largest Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam. As we slowly settle into our new land of the free, we are bombarded with constant reminders of the Communist regime, with the current and fourth phase of immigration coming to America. The new wave of Vietnamese wealth is encroaching on Little Saigon, a small community of Vietnamese businesses, strip malls, temples, churches, and community centers, located between Story and Tully roads off Highway 101.

They come in the form of exchange students, new businesses, cash-paid homeowners, business owners, haughty air mixed with fake politeness, K-Pop inspired clothing, delicate white skin, and voices thick with accents we instinctively know are from the Communist mecca of North Vietnam.

But are we too quick to judge? Are they also people who survived that regime because they had no choice? Don't they also have the right to pursue the American dream? Are they not our brothers and sisters, Anh Em, after all? One of the beautiful things I appreciate about the Vietnamese language is how we refer to each other as Uncle or Auntie, Niece or Nephew, not You and I. It is a gift our ancestors left to remind us we are a family despite our different last names.

In the end, I ask myself, why are we still enemies? If we are able to find enemies within our own community and continue inter-fighting, then we should not blame those who see us as as Other.

Artist Robin Lasser's Migratory Cultures project, *San José Stories: The Vietnamese Diaspora*, is an important work that explores these questions.

Another part of the larger Migratory Cultures project includes Dream Boats, a project created in partnership with Chopsticks Alley Art, where the community is asked to fold paper boats and write or draw their migration story on them. The boats are displayed at Chopsticks Alley's *Salt Stained* exhibit until they are launched in the evening of September 14, 2018, under a moonlit sky at the Japanese Friendship Garden Koi Ponds, in Historic Kelley Park. The process gives participants an opportunity to revisit and share their migration experience with others. The launching of the boats on water is a symbolic reflection of the past and letting go of the pain.

Robin's work inspires and reminds us of our shared human experience and discover commonalities instead of focusing on differences so we can begin to heal.

Since the writing of this foreword, Artist Lâm Triết passed away in Bong Son, Vietnam on December 8, 2018 at the age of eighty.

Trami Cron was born in Vietnam and is the author of VietnamEazy, *a novel about the Vietnamese culture. She is the founder of Chopsticks Alley Art, a non-profit organization serving Southeast Asian artists and communities;* Chopsticks Alley, *an online publication for young Vietnamese and Filipino-Americans, and Chopsticks Alley Eats, a food community with over 3,000 members.*

Ms. Cron has a BA in Business Marketing from the University of Utah and is serving as a San José Parks and Recreation Commissioner.

On September 14, 2018, we celebrated the moon and our migration stories. Visitors drew/wrote their migration stories onto paper boat lanterns and joined us for a sunset launch into the Koi Ponds at Friendship Garden, Kelley Historic Park in San José. The paper boats are designed to resemble the fishing boats utilized to escape Vietnam and represent the dreams and nightmares they still carry as symbols. The boats are decorated by SJSU Image and Idea students, by visitors who attended the exhibition *Salt Stained*, curated by Trami Cron, executive director of Chopsticks Alley Art, and by visitors attending the Kelly Historic Park Dream Boats event.

As dusk turned into night, the trees surrounding the Koi Pond came alive with projection mapped documentaries of migration stories. These projections occur as the dream boat lanterns float like lily pads in the Koi Pond. The Vietnamese zither is played by musician Ahn Tran. Members of the Áo Dài Festival, in traditional Vietnamese dress, lead the launching of the boats.

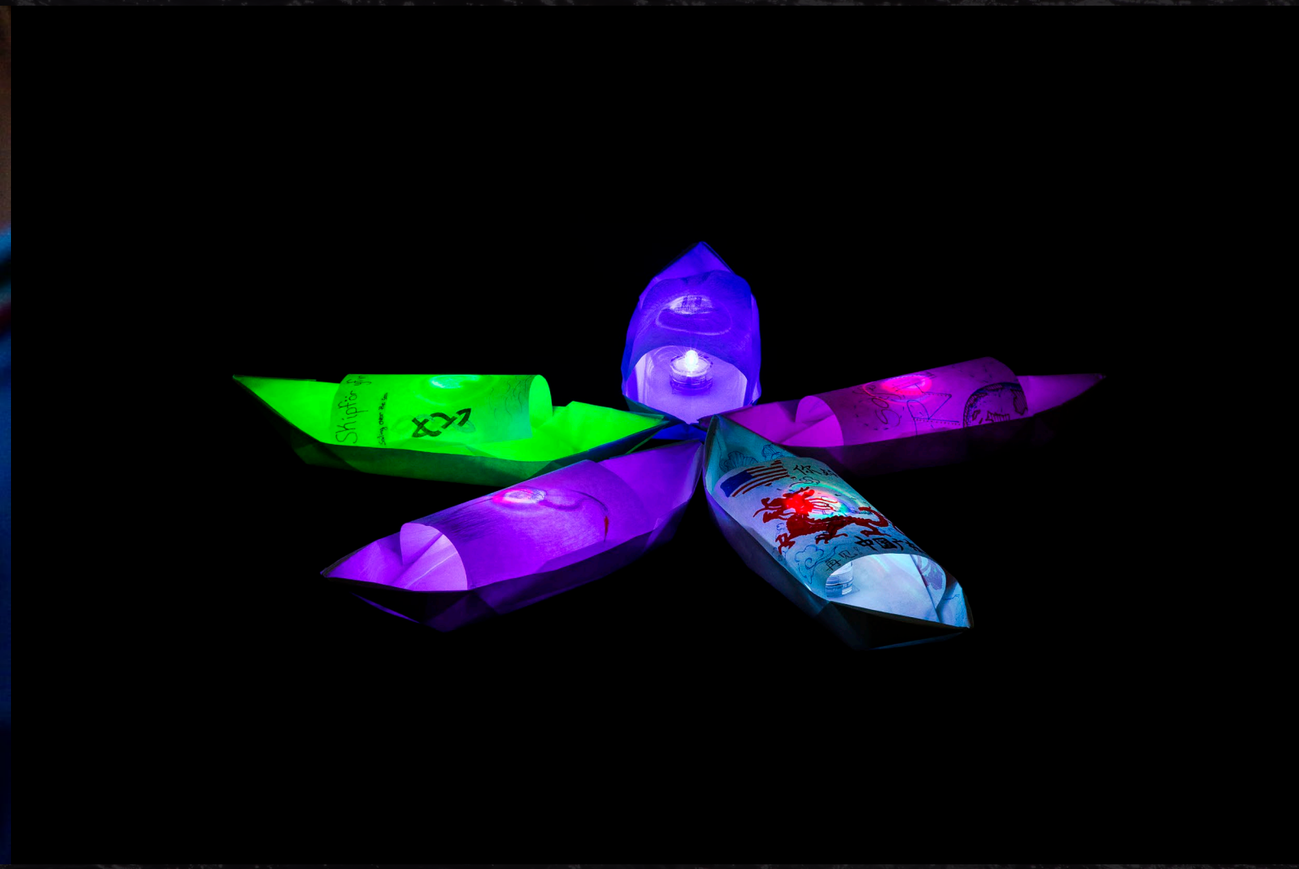
This project is part one of two events commissioned by the San José Museum of Art. The commissioned project title is *San José Stories: The Vietnamese Diaspora*. The project is made possible with the support from the California Humanities, a non-profit partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

In partnership with Chopstick Alley Arts and the Áo Dài Festival and hosted by San José Parks Recreation and Neighborhood Services, Keep Coyote Creek Beautiful, Happy Hollow Park and Zoo, and Open Space Authority of Santa Clara Valley.

Dream Boats

Kelley Park, Japanese Friendship Garden, San José, CA
September 14, 2018
Site Specific Project 1 of 2


I'M ON THE
POLISH FOOD
DIET PLAN
PIEROGI
KIELBASA
GOLABKI
KAPUSTA
PACZKI



Rooted Migration Stories

Video portraits projected onto a juniper tree in Oakland, CA

Text transcriptions from the film *San José Stories: The Vietnamese Diaspora*

Binh Danh

I came to this country in 1979 with my family. When we got to the fishing boat, there were about fifty-five people on the boat, four families, each with ten or eleven members. When we got onto the boat, we hid beneath the top deck. The crew on the boat disguised themselves as fishermen going out to fish for the day. We followed the fire off an oil rig off the coast of Malaysia.

We were taken to a refugee camp called Pulau Bidong. We lived there for a year before we received asylum to come to the United States. The refugee camp closed in 1993. It closed because that was when Vietnam normalized its relationship with the United States. All the refugee camps around Southeast Asia closed, and all the people still at the camp were taken back to Vietnam. They were going to process people still seeking asylum through an orderly departure program. Some of them committed suicide; people didn't want to go back to Vietnam.

The thought of that is pretty painful. You have to imagine the journey, the devastation, and the trauma that is passed down from a generation.

Le My Thai

I was born in Vietnam. In 1978, I escaped from Vietnam with my family. My husband worked for the freedom government and that is why we could not stay there. The communists would kill him. He had to escape, and we had to follow him. When we were on the boat there was a big storm. I was so scared; I thought my children would be safe on the boat but there were huge waves. I called every Buddha, whatever could help keep my family alive. I was worried that I may be the one who killed them. I felt very hurt about that. I was crying, and I was afraid.

At that time, I did not know if my family would survive in the boat. There can also be pirates, and they rape the women and kill the men. They know when people escape, they take their money with them. But we were lucky. We arrived safely to Pulau Bidong Island. We were one of the first groups of people to arrive so there was no rice, no water, no anything. When we got there, we had to sleep on the sand. No roof at night. I worried about my kids. When it rained they would get wet, and they looked like chickens who had fallen into the water! But at least we knew we were alive, more than I felt on the ocean!

Jaq Victor

My mother came with many other Vietnamese refugees during the largest wave in the seventies. Being a child of a refugee means that our parents have set the bar for atrocity so high that how dare I indulge in therapy. So, it is kind of weird to be a therapist. It has felt like a journey of being very selfish and on the other hand, I see how important it is to process trauma.

Had I not found the queer trans community in the Bay Area, I probably would have spent my life feeling embarrassed about my Vietnamese, angry that I don't know more Vietnamese, angry that I was forced to learn English for economic and cultural survival. But now I am on stage and get to be broken in the way that I am broken, and represent so many 1.5 and second-generation people who also are very broken. I never thought I would be the embodiment of a linguistic bridge. But that is what community does—it can celebrate you in ways you never thought you could heal yourself.

We had a dinner, and we were talking about our pronouns in English and Vietnamese, and it got to my turn, and I don't know how to say my pronouns in Vietnamese. I don't even know how to say pronouns in Vietnamese. The word *em gái* means sister, and that was not going to work for me, and the word *em trai* means brother, and that also wasn't going to work for me, so I said *chanh*, which sounds like both words put together, but also means lemon, and it was this amazing moment when all of us at the table were like yes, *chanh*!

We collectively came together around this new word, a way to talk about our gender in Vietnamese. We did it together as a community. This is probably one of my favorite moments of my entire life, because it was so sour and so real. So today in the Bay Area, we call each other *chanh*.

Timothy Duong

I am first-generation American Vietnamese. Growing up Viet but also in America is kind of a balance of Viet and American cultures. Mostly growing up we would be exposed to everything Vietnamese. I ended up learning English by watching TV. I started speaking English more and more. Now, when I try to speak Viet, it is not as fluent as it could be. I tried to speak with my aunt yesterday in Viet and right off the bat she said, "You have an American accent." I was born in America so that makes sense to me.

I remember in kindergarten I had a full-on Vietnamese meal. I was sitting next to my best friend at the time, and she was white. She looked over and said "What is that?" and I got really nervous to explain what it was because I did not know how to explain it in English. I got really upset and threw the little bun away. I still feel bad about that.

Christina Nguyen

Vietnam is a communist country, and you don't have the right to speak what you think. Now I know I was one of the people who were brainwashed. The kids, when they grow up, hear: "If you see your mom and dad trying to hide anything, you always have to tell the government, because it is a good thing to do." If the government finds out something, they are going to bury them under the ground with just the head above. Then they will use the tank to run them over.

Now I understand why people here are so angry still after thirty-plus years. The north, when they invaded the south, they just wanted to erase all the memories, to turn to a new page in a very bad way. They want to erase everything. We are human, and they want to mentally erase us, and we are still here.

Hung Le

When I was six or seven years old, my father was always telling me stories about his life, when he was living in the thirties. He talked about the communists, but they did not call them communists then. They were called Vietminh. Since I heard the story from him, I was against them since I was a toddler. When I was seven years old, I told my father some day when I grow up I would like to live in USA.

In late 1950, a small group of army men lived near my home. One of the army men became my best friend; after school he went fishing with me and played with me. Unfortunately, the first fight that broke out, they killed him. I was so sad. I went to the place he died, and I couldn't keep my tears. Almost half a century later, I still miss him. The second night after that fight, my parents said okay, we should go to bed early, and shut our door, and shut the light off. We couldn't go to sleep because the atmosphere was so tense. We were just waiting for something to happen; we couldn't even breathe.

So, it took me four times to escape by boat. The first two times, I escaped right inside Saigon and failed. When I was in prison, I thought, when I get out I am going back to Saigon to visit my mother before I try again. That unfulfilled wish has haunted me for the last forty years.

We escaped the fourth time. After two days on the water, we met the first pirate boat at eight o'clock in the morning. I was so scared. There were about fifteen or twenty young people on the pirate boat. The first thing they did, they beat the boat driver. After that they took everything we had, and then they took us to an abandoned island. No people lived there. We stayed there for ten days with no food. Some Malaysian army came and had a gun ready and starting shooting. "You leave the boat alone, if you take anything we will shoot you. You have to chop your boat." And we did.

When the boat sank water came up to my chin. I tried to hold my daughter; she was three years old. The Malaysian army and police surrounded us and took us. Then we saw the tents and clothes drying and we knew it was a refugee camp. I saw an American gentleman, and he spoke Vietnamese. He said welcome to the camp in Vietnamese. We were relieved.

Kristina Le

We emigrated from Vietnam, and we were sponsored by a lovely, warm, welcoming community in Canada. My parents were the first Vietnamese family ever in Canada. It was a really small fishermen's town. Not very ethnically diverse. It was a civilian sponsor group that got together—they said they had seen a bunch of the videos on TV and seen all the traumatic stories so they decided, independently of any organization, to sponsor a group. My parents, luckily, were the first people over there.

My parents were forced to assimilate and learn to speak English to get around. But here in San José, we had a lot of family that didn't speak English at all, because they didn't need to. Once we came here we engaged more in a lot of Vietnamese traditions, and we celebrated New Year with a big family. Whenever you meet your aunts and uncles, you bow. I did not learn this in Canada. Probably my aunt and uncles would say that I don't have the best Vietnamese etiquette, but that is okay.

Loi Duong

I grew up in the war zone. Grade two, my school was burned down. So, me and my brother and a neighbor, we were village-to-village for five or six years. Every day we hid under the bomb shelter. We were hungry; we were poor. All the other brothers and sisters had left home. Maybe one or two of them joined the communists. We had no choice.

When you are a teenager, you can go to the city and try to survive, or you join the communists and go to the mountain and go to north Vietnam. It was hard, when I remember now and see the war in Iraq, I don't like it because it is hard for me. It can be your brother or father on a different side. But you are on the same side, right?

Bao Ngan Tran

I grew up in a little small town in Vietnam. When I was growing up in Vietnam, I didn't know anything about the Vietnam War. It was not taught in our history books. I didn't know that our country was divided at one point. When I got to America, I learned for the first time that the south and the north were separated. It was shocking to know that my own people were fighting with each other. After we lost the war, the communists came in and took most of my family's money and land. My mom said they lived day-by-day in fear they would take something else away again.

I heard they call me FOB which is a short term for "fresh off the boat." The term is for boat people. I was very upset at that time because I didn't get here by boat. I got here by plane, so it should be FOP? I was really upset. For the first time I experienced stereotypes.

Treesy Ngo

I was born and raised in Saigon, Vietnam. My family was sponsored to come to America in 2013. It was my grandparents that sponsored us. My life in Vietnam was hard. It was actually not hard for me, but it was hard for my parents. I was under the protection of mom and dad.

I felt that living in Vietnam was very dangerous. I did not feel safe about many things—the food and the traffic. Walking outside I could be hit, I could get infected by HIV, I could be kidnapped suddenly.

Henry Duong

My parents moved to Vietnam because the communists took over China in 1949. Then in 1975 the communists took over the south. I had to go and join the army during the war in 1968. After the war, we became the enemy of the new government. Every officer, every soldier had to go to the re-education camp. That means the jail, not the education camp. Luckily, I stayed in the camp only three months.

But when I went home, I didn't have a job, they didn't let me work, they didn't let me have food, and we had to go and become farmers. They don't let us stay in the city. So, I went to the farm, I bought land, I planted vegetables, I did not make money but stayed away from the eye of the government. I was looking for a way to escape. In 1983, my brother-in-law made the document for DOP, departure for ordinary program, so my family moved to the United States. There I worked at everything, I worked at the newspaper, farming, I worked in the restaurant.

I am happy to live in this country because my kids have a high education. Right now, they have the good life and myself, I have the good life. I have Medicare, medical, and we don't have to worry about the lifestyle.

Paulina Phuong Le Huynh

I came to America in 1983. Up to now, it has been thirty-four years. When I came, I gave birth to my youngest son. He is now thirty-four years old. I did not go to school for long, so my English is not good.

About the life of a woman before 1975, the woman only has this, the husband is always out earning a living. I as a wife and mother have the obligation to take care of my children and guide them so that they grow up to be better. It was fortunate I was able to come to America. Now my children are grown up and have good careers. They all have houses and have good jobs. Personally, at this age, I am just staying at home. If necessary, I will take care of my grandchildren. Thanks to the American government, they helped us, so now we have better lives. I am very grateful to the American government who helped our Vietnamese people to come over here.

Cindy Duong

I was born and raised in San José. I am first-generation Chinese from a Vietnamese family. My parents and my older siblings emigrated here from Vietnam before I was born. It is interesting for me to describe myself, because my identity is more Chinese than it is Vietnamese. When I was raised, my parents didn't teach me Vietnamese, they choose to teach me Chinese specifically because they wanted to preserve the language. Because of that I identify more Chinese than I do Vietnamese. But growing up I thought I was Vietnamese, and my parents had to say no you are actually Chinese, and I thought that does not make any sense, why were we in Vietnam in the first place?

My dad was in the Vietnam War. For my mom she was handling four kids on her own and never knowing if my dad was going to come home. My dad has super awful stories of the war, like guerrilla warfare. He tells me this one that super freaks me out. There were landmines, and he was with his infantry, and they stepped on a bunch of landmines. Luckily my dad made it out because he was super speedy and he could run, but he had to take his helmet and pick up the scraps of his peers. The remainders that he could find barely fit into his helmet. I can't even imagine what that must have felt like for my dad. I know that even now he still has PTSD from it. Sometimes he will wake up in the middle of the night. My mom tells me now that thirty-four years after, he still wakes up in the middle of the night super traumatized yelling and upset. He has days where he is really out of it because of memories that haunt him. My dad had a really hot temper, aggressive and unforgiving when he first came here. That was a side effect of the war.

My parents still live very Vietnamese. They live in Little Saigon in San José. Everything we eat, everything we do outside the house and inside the house is all Vietnamese. But I still identify as Chinese. For me, I am an American. I was born here. All my lifestyle, the way I dress, the way I talk, my hair, it is all super American. I go home and feel Chinese, but mostly American.

Andy Nguyen

Now I live with my mother only, because my father was never able to escape Vietnam. The communists arrested him. He is still in Vietnam, and I never got to live with my father. This is very hard emotionally for me. When I see fathers and their sons and daughters, I feel so emotional–I feel they are luckier than me, because I never got to live with my father.

I don't mean to say that Vietnam is an evil country, but during the Vietnam War it was very evil. The bleeding is everywhere. The first time I got to San José, it was a culture shock for me. I have to try my best to keep going with what I can do for my family. I would like to go back and visit my relatives in Vietnam. I would like to make a book about Vietnam, but I cannot go anymore. I am one of the members in our Vietnamese community here. It is a fear that if I go back to Vietnam, the communists might arrest me. They might make up something so that they can kill you or put you in prison. And they can torture you. It is very hard to think about that. It has happened to many people already who have gone from America to Vietnam.

Linh Nguyen

I am from Saigon. My life there was really great, if not perfect. Of course, nothing is perfect, but I really loved my life in Vietnam. I lived on a small street, and I knew everyone on that street.

Here everyone is focused on their own lives. I really don't know anyone. I left behind a lot. We were really close, I knew my best friend almost fifteen years now. It is kind of hard for me when something happens. She was the one I would always go to and talk to, but she is so far. We can only do Facebook, and that really doesn't have the same effect, you know? I think everyone assumes you want to come here, and they put that stereotype on me too, when they don't know the real story.

Artist Statement for *San José Stories: The Vietnamese Diaspora*

Curated by Rory Padeken

On March 21, 2019, at sunset, fifteen migration stories are projected onto the front entrance architectural façade of the San José Museum of Art. The moving portraits are framed by hundreds of animated Vietnamese emigrants on their journey. These representations of Vietnamese walkers are projected onto the columns directly above the front entrance to the museum. The animated character is fashioned after a journalistic photograph taken during the war depicting a mother escaping Vietnam carrying her children and belongings balanced precariously from a bamboo stick flung over her shoulder. Migrating birds are projected onto the columns, posts, and portals. Projected water crashes down the museum steps as visitors walk into the scene, enter the museum, and become part of the real-life diorama of mass migrations that define the twenty-first century.

Many of the stories are gifted by SJSU students and alum. They are multi-generational, including elders who took part in the war as early as the 1950s. SJMA has commissioned Bay Area artist Robin Lasser to create two site-specific outdoor video projection mapping events as part of the ongoing project Migratory Cultures. Lasser's video installations feature interviews with individuals from San José's Vietnamese-American community who together reveal a more nuanced narrative of the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States.

The artist hopes that this exhibition can be a partnership of Migratory Cultures and the Vietnamese-American community in San José, inspired in part by SJSU students and their families. The world today is experiencing the largest waves of human migration since World War II, and with this country's continued, active shaping of world politics, and the refugee crisis on the southern border growing ever more complex, Lasser seeks out and engages with the narratives surrounding migration by highlighting the voices in our communities of those who have lived the experience.

The projection mapping of interviews with multiple generations of Vietnamese immigrants and the interactive Dream Boats event are designed to transform the Migratory Cultures project into a platform for the Vietnamese diaspora in San José to frame their own, individual migration tales. Each of us alone is limited to the details of our lived experience, but a project incorporating many voices can seek to do the work of narrating history, confronting trauma, and exploring memory. Ultimately, we hope that this project will serve our community and want to thank everyone that participated by gifting their story to this project.

San José Stories: The Vietnamese Diaspora

San José Museum of Art

Projection Mapping Exhibition

Premieres March 21, 2019

Site Specific Project 2 of 2

From left to right: Robin Lasser, Victoria Thuy Vi, Trami Cron, Cindy Duong, and Treesy Ngo

Victoria Thuy Vi, Miss Teen Vietnam USA, 2019

From left to right: Robin Lasser, Trina Ngo (Mrs Vietnam USA 2017), and Henry Duong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From left to right: Dinh Q. Lê, Robin Lasser, and Binh Danh

"Women in War" by Felix Quintana

In Memory of
Paulina Phuong Le Huynh

March 1, 1954 — March 25, 2018

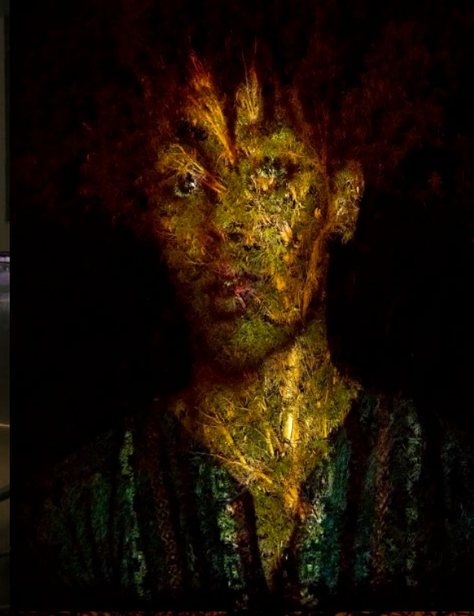
Paulina Phuong Le Huynh was born in Chợ Lớn, Ho Chi Minh City in March, 1954 and came to America in 1985. She decided to stay home to raise her children but, having previously attended beauty school, acted as a personal hairdresser for the entire family for nearly thirty years. Paulina was not only selfless and loving towards her family but also to her local community. Several organizations and movements she contributed to included: the memorial at the Vietnamese History Museum, the Former Viet Armed Force Alliances, the International Rescue Committee, and the Welcome of Vietnam's First Lady. Paulina was an incredible cook and will be remembered for the desserts she made for hundreds of people during community events. Paulina is survived by her brothers, husband, six children, and many grandchildren. She was incredibly loved and will be sorely missed.

Migratory Cultures

www.MigratoryCultures.com

Migratory Cultures is a site-specific video projection mapping and documentary video project. Artists Robin Lasser and G.Craig Hobbs team with Bay Area and Bangalore partners to connect regional experiences of immigration with stories from around the world. Imagery includes portraits of immigration stories as told by Bay Area, Bangalore, and Goa residents representing fifteen unique countries. Countries of origin: India, Mongolia, Russia, Mexico, Bosnia, Pakistan, Japan, Vietnam, Germany, Ethiopia, Mexico, Latin America, Yemen, Iran, and France.

Images:
Cubbon Park Metro Station in Bangalore, India (top left)
Eucalyptus forest surrounding Cubberley Arts Center in Palo Alto, California (top right)
Lighthouse at the edge of the Arabian Sea in Goa, India (bottom left)
Handball courts behind the Pajaro Valley Arts Gallery in Watsonville, California (bottom right)



Artist Biography

Robin Lasser is a Professor of Art at San José State University. She produces photographs, videos, site-specific installations, and public art dealing with environmental issues and social justice. Lasser often works in a collaborative mode with other artists, writers, students, public agencies, community organizations, and international coalitions to produce public art and promote public dialogue. Lasser is a 2019 Eureka Fellow, award by the Fleishhacker Foundation.

Lasser exhibits her work nationally and internationally. Recent exhibitions include installations at museums such as: Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, CA; San José Museum of Art, CA; National Gallery of Modern Art, Bangalore, India; the Museum of Goa, India; Exploratorium Observatory Gallery in San Francisco, CA; Kohler Museum of Art, Sheboygan, Wisconsin; Metenkov House—Museum of Photography in Yekaterinburg, Russia; Recoleta Cultural Center in Buenos Aires, Argentina; and The Caixa Cultural in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil.

Lasser also participates in international biennials such as ZERO1: Global Festival of Art on the Edge in San Jose, California; Nuit Blanche Toronto, Canada; and the Pingyao International Photography Festival, China.

Earlier national and international exhibitions include: Aronson Galleries–Parsons School of Design in New York City; Wave Hill Glyndor Gallery in the Bronx, New York City; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; De Young Museum in San Francisco, CA; Osaka World Trade Center Museum in Japan; and the Academy of Film in Prague, Czech Republic. Lasser is currently the US project lead and participating artist in a cross-cultural art exchanges between Russia, Iran, India and the U.S.

www.DressTents.com | www.RobinLasser.com | www.MigratoryCultures.com

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