



Mai Nguyễn-Long

Kôgábinô

Curated by Adam Porter

21 October 2023 - 7 April 2024

Director's Foreword

Diaspora by its nature involves issues of displacement, voicelessness, disempowerment, and resistance.

Mai Nguyễn-Long's exhibition 'Kôgábinô' is the current evolution and permutation of her continued explorations into the manifestations of diaspora and the complexities of personal and cultural identity which ensue.

As described in curator Adam Porter's insightful catalogue essay, Kôgábinô is a mistranslation of Vietnamese English for 'vomit girl.' This invented character functions as both incantation and avatar, embodying Mai's continuing exploration of sometimes ambiguous, complex, and contested issues surrounding the diaspora experience.

Featuring a series of new work comprising sculptures and familial objects, Mai creates nuanced and layered landscapes drawn from her academic investigations, personal experiences, and memories. By unpacking the essence of the creative impetus for mythmaking, Mai's recent sculptural figures and work explore often elusive notions of home, family, and community. The fragility of these constructs shares an essential link with identity and belonging, impacting experiences of cycles of cultural oppression – including language and historical perceptions of artefacts.

We would like to thank Mai for sharing her work and story with us. 'Kôgábinô' provides us a visceral experience and speaks to Mai's thoughtful inner dialogue and struggle and the exhibition exposes the complex set of intellectual and cultural adjustments required to frame a sense of identity and belonging. We hope you will accept our invitation to join Mai on this personal and fascinating journey.

John Monteleone
Program Director
Wollongong Art Gallery



Top left image: Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Vomit Girl: Vigil (Scar Jar)*, 2017-2022 Large particle creamy white clay fired to 1100, 48 x 23 x 23cm, photographed by Bernie Fischer.

Top right image: Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Dobakapi 3*, 2023, glazed large particle earthenware fired to 1100, 49 x 27 x 27cm, private collection, photo credit Michael Reid Sydney + Berlin.

Bottom left image: Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Dobakapi 1*, 2023 Course textured clay fired to 1220, with brushwork 56 x 31 x 28cm, photo credit Michael Reid Sydney + Berlin.

Bottom right image: Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Dobakapi 2*, 2023, Coarse textured ginger clay fired to 1220, 46 x 22 x 22cm, photo credit Michael Reid Sydney + Berlin.

Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Vomit Girl: Vigil (Toad Fairy)*, detail, 2017-2022, medium textured white raku clay fired to 1220, 82 x 37 x 37cm, photographed by Bernie Fischer.

Mai Nguyễn-Long: **Kôgábjô**

Adam Porter - Curator

Kôgábjô is a double mistranslation of Vietnamese English for ‘vomit girl’. A recurring motif and adopted character in Nguyễn-Long’s practice, this somewhat grotesque but uncontrollable bodily reflex becomes a visceral metaphor for diasporic stories and nuances and the artist’s inquisitive and ongoing negotiation with the messy edges of histories, cultural identity and family values.

Through PhD practice-based research, Nguyễn-Long has expanded upon the idea of vomit girl with the alter moniker, ‘Vigit: Goddess of Infected Tongues for all those who have lost their mother tongue’. Rendered into clay sculptures, the works featured in this exhibition draw upon Vietnam’s art histories and family objects. Presented together, they playfully invoke the power for the artist to transcend restrictive paradigms. The intentional bastardisation of languages in the term Kôgábjô, suggests that these corporeal expulsions derive from desperation about what voice to speak from as an Asian-Australian living in times of great social and political upheaval, whilst aspiring to non-didactic forms of resistance.

Conceived as ‘deities’, Nguyễn-Long’s clay sculptures absorb each other’s forms, continuously evolving to evade domination, they dance between the iconic and aniconic. Referencing stylistic impressions of the artist’s prolific drawing practice, the deities are interconnected in a complex web that stretches across personal and cultural histories. The potential of unglazed clay unveils stories behind cultural artefacts and folkloric references specifically the wooden carvings found in 16th-18th century *đình* (spiritual/administrative communal house/hall) of northern Vietnam.

Kôgábjô flirts with a perpetually present complexity associated with the narrative of 1,000 years of Chinese domination of Vietnam by looking toward spirit worlds informed by a historical tension between patriarchal rule and matriarchal practices. Clay assists Nguyễn-Long in connecting with mythological origins. The various forms supplicate a contemporary self, syncretised through expanding realms of sentient beings with code names like ‘Foyot’, ‘Hefeco’, and ‘Dobakapi’. An ongoing search for Kôgábjô’s form through clay-building and these numerous iterations highlights the fluidity of belonging, a longing for autonomy, defying annihilation, and grounding with mother earth.

2023 coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between Australia and Vietnam. Australia joined the Vietnam conflict in 1962 as an ally of the United States’ geopolitical Cold War campaign. Nguyễn-Long was born in Hobart when the White Australia policy was being dismantled. Like so many others, her family continues to be dogged by the long shadow cast by these conflicts’ divisive effects.

Presented within the Mann-Tatlow Gallery, Kôgábjô acknowledges Wollongong Art Gallery’s Mann-Tatlow Collection of Asian Art. Responding to perspectives clouding Vietnam’s art histories the exhibition asserts a renewed embrace of the artist’s personal connection with Vietnam, punctuated by her mother, Kerry Nguyễn-Long’s publication *Vietnam Visual Arts in History Religion & Culture* (2023).ⁱ



Kôgábjô is dedicated to the late Đỗ Mỹ Thiện (Thien Do; 1944-2019), author of *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: views from the southern region* (2003).ⁱⁱ Thiện is a respected authority on Vietnamese popular religion, spiritual culture, and folk history of southern Vietnam and was an informal advisor for the artist’s doctoral research.

ⁱ Nguyễn-Long, Kerry. *Vietnam Visual Arts in History Religion & Culture*. Hà Nội: Thế Giới Publishers, 2023.

ⁱⁱ Do, Thien [Đỗ Mỹ Thiện/Đỗ Thiện]. *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: Views from the Southern Region*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Vigit Ward (stitched)*, 2022, glazed earthenware fired to 1100, 47 x 22 x 16cm, photographed by Bernie Fischer.



Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Vigil Hefeco 3 (with grenade hat)*, 2023, heavily grogged large particle clay fired to 1220, 90 x 23 x 22cm, photographed by Bernie Fischer.



Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Vigil Hefeco 4 (with worm hat and pocket mini)*, 2023, heavily grogged large particle clay fired to 1220, 75 x 32 x 22cm, photographed by Bernie Fischer.

Decoding **Kôgábjnô**

Mai Nguyễn-Long - Artist

At the 'Berlin Biennale' (2022), Vomit Girl was *Kotzmädchen* or 'puke girl'; In Hanoi, she has been described as *cô gái buồn nôn* or 'nauseous girl'. To me, she is *cô gái bị nôn* or 'girl vomiting'. Drawing from these variations of mistranslation and wordplay, common to contemporary global exchanges, Vomit Girl's new alter-moniker is **Kôgábjnô**. Hidden and multiple identities, mistranslations and reinterpretations are concepts woven throughout my practice, alongside ideas of colonisation, decolonisation and recolonisation. Vomit Girl compelled me to reconnect with Vietnam and announce an affection for đình woodcarvings, a connection I had previously thought too dangerous in Australia.ⁱ

I was drawn to the museum-style cabinets of the Mann-Tatlow Gallery (MTG) in Wollongong Art Gallery (WAG) for its shrine-like/pagoda-vitrine references. Working with objects behind glass relates to my ongoing *Specimen jar series*ⁱⁱ; and a recurring sensation of being trapped behind glass, perpetually screaming but unheard. The MTG was specifically designed to house the WAG Mann-Tatlow Collection of Asian Art. However, the collection's apparent absence of artefacts from Vietnamⁱⁱⁱ echoes my life experience. My sense of invisibility and irrelevance had been exacerbated when, as a tertiary student in 1990s Australia I found it impossible to source any information about art from Vietnam.

The 'Kôgábjnô' exhibition disrupts this sense of erasure. It also serves to footnote pre-Vietnam War social exchange between Vietnam and Australia

ⁱ Nguyễn-Long, Mai. "Vomit Girl Beyond Diasporic Trauma: Interconnecting Contemporary Art and Folkloric Practices in Vietnam." Doctor of Creative Arts thesis, School of the Arts, English and Media, University of Wollongong, 2022. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses1/1510>.

ⁱⁱ *Specimen* (2014) in "Beyogmos." Solo exhibition curated by Gina Fairley, Wollongong Art Gallery, Wollongong, 28 February-25 May 2014; *Specimen (Permeate)* 2022 in "The 12th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art." Group exhibition curated by Kader Attia, Akademie Der Künste, Hanseatenweg, Berlin, 11 June-18 September 2022; *Skippy Subcluster* (2023) in "What's that Skip?" Group exhibition curated by Miriam Williamson and Leah Haynes, Wayout Artspace, Kandos, 19 August-1st October 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ On 30 August 2023, the Mann-Tatlow inventory of 226 entries indicates object accession numbers 2003.035 and 2003.239 are attributed to China. However, citing Kerry Nguyễn-Long, Louise Brand explains new expertise suggests that both these ceramic artefacts are in fact Vietnamese. At the time of writing this essay, Brand confirmed WAG is working towards formally acknowledging this reclassification.

through my parents' cross-cultural marriage. Kerry Nguyễn-Long^{iv} and Đỗ Mỹ Thiện's research, alongside Nguyễn Kim Long's photo archive, have provided me with a counterbalance to devastation by opening a portal for a different kind of knowing. However, my commitment to engagement with Vietnam has at times faced vicious opposition. Uncannily reflecting my Vomit Girl, such trauma-informed vitriol is alluded to in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article quoting a protestor's impulse to "vomit"^v – but with oppositional triggers to my own.

There are a host of rational and imagined reasons for my sense that Vietnam's art history has been neglected from multiple contexts, both in and outside of Vietnam. Amongst these are French colonisation, the Vietnam/American/Cold War, Australia's Asia literacy deficit, anticommunism inextricably bound with trauma and prejudice, Sinocentric narratives, and loss of language or 'mother tongue'. All these have informed my sense of shame. To counter the colonising power of this shame and its associated traumas, my clay works declare the embrace of shame and a celebration of marginality.

Historical and family artefacts provide hints for decoding a reading of my clay 'deities'. Juxtaposing Tasmanian/Vietnamese, old/new, public/personal, communist/anticommunist, Chinese/Vietnamese artefacts opens messy and uncomfortable spaces.

My clay sculptures are mediums for deliberating the Vietnamese aesthetic of "*mộc mạc*". The book that first introduced me to the term *mộc mạc*^{vi} is but one sampling of cultural resources that suggest further depth and richness lies untapped. *Mộc mạc* is literally 'earthy.' However, I've formulated it through my creative practice as an aesthetic of resistance, a practical primordial essence incorporating elements of play and a fluid resistance to shifting forms of domination.^{vii} This guides my building with clay, processing village *đình* sensations through my Worana (worm-dragon-snake) coil-building method

^{iv} Kerry Nguyễn-Long and Nguyễn Kim Long are my parents.

^v Gibbs, Stephen. "Thousands protest as SBS considers bulletin's fate." *The Sydney Morning Herald, News*, Wednesday, 3 December 2003: 2.

^{vi} Nguyễn, Đỗ Cung. *Việt Nam: Điều khắc dân gian thế kỷ XVI – XVII – XVIII* [Vietnam: Popular Sculpture 16th – 17th – 18th Centuries]. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Ngoại Văn [Foreign Languages Publishing House], 1975.

^{vii} Nguyễn-Long, Mai. "Vomit Girl Beyond Diasporic Trauma."



Mai Nguyễn-Long, 'Kôgâbîñô,' detail, Mann-Tatlow exhibition space, Wollongong Art Gallery, 21 October 2023 – 7 April 2024, photo credit Michael Reid Sydney + Berlin.

and conceptual Doba. Doba is the cylindrical form of a disused bombshell repurposed as a village bell.

Dobakapi is my big belly clay jar form deriving from the “1450 Topkapi Jar,”^{viii} an artefact that was misidentified as Chinese for 500 years. Reclassification as a Vietnamese artefact opened appreciation of new histories of trade and understanding of Vietnamese wares. The punctuation of hot orange amongst unglazed forms breaks up the hegemony of an earthy aesthetic, acknowledging that every notion of decolonisation risks recolonisation—a condition of perpetual doubt. Orange signifies the destructive chemical Agent Orange, and simultaneously serves as an incantation for collapsed binaries.

Some resonances playfully vibrating across the objects for me includes empty bullet shells I collected from a refugee camp on Vietnam’s border with Cambodia; my self-harm kit; a warplane metal ruler made by my uncle in a re-education camp. The three stripes of the ‘Freedom Flag’ in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article is mirrored in multi-stripes on the now extinct Tasmanian tiger—a huon pine carving gifted to me by my late Tasmanian grandmother. My late Vietnamese grandmother is remembered through a Khmer Krom^{ix} ritual earthenware, the likeness of which was smashed to protect her soul from evil spirits. Cultural practices of flag-waving are echoed in *đình* festival flags, ripped and faded by the harsh Aussie sun. Statues^x are secreted in hessian to acknowledge stories forever untold. The narratives in my drawings abstrusely contend with the fallout from these colliding histories.

Other artefacts include Dakao high-heeled shoes worn by a 1960s Vietnamese Colombo Plan student to Tasmania, and limepots particular to rites of passage—early objects from Mum’s research archive^{xi}. Toads in a Đông Hồ print, metaphorically critiquing hollow authority within the education system are echoed in a toad-shaped ceramic artefact from my

parent’s collection. Toads are potent symbols in Vietnamese folklore. On Đông Sơn drums they call for rain. These agrarian roots inform iterations of Vomit Girl as *Vigit Hefeco*, with what I affectionately refer to as “poo balls” in his/her hands, honouring the collection of manure as fertiliser. At the same time, 1,000 of these balls reference 1,000 years of Chinese domination. Here, poo balls might be ammunition. Water and fluidity define my relationship with clay, and a water puppet likewise speaks to the prevalence of watery folkloric practices; dimpled reflective surfaces suggest mirror devices for mediumship transformation^{xii}, and are a homage to my 1996 artwork *Child Bride Rising*—an imagined ascendancy of domination. The empty cabinet invites attribution to one’s personal deities perhaps remotely located.

‘Kôgábịnô’ does not offer resolutions to conflict and contradiction but is part of a larger process of agitation and repair. Vomit Girl’s yearning for connectivity is coupled with a mistrust of belonging. Cultural specificity is tempered through the materiality of clay, my sculptural forms ever-evolving through an ongoing conversation with artefacts. Kôgábịnô aka Vomit Girl hosts my imaginary army of spirits, my weapons of spiritual resilience, detoxing and fending off imminent annihilation.

^{viii} Nguyễn-Long, Kerry. *Vietnam Visual Arts in History Religion & Culture*. Hà Nội: Thế Giới Publishers, 2023. Page 26 explains how in 1977 this ceramic vessel in the Topkapi Sarai Museum, Istanbul, was established to have been made in Vietnam.

^{ix} The Khmer Krom are indigenous peoples of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. Source: Walker, Julie. “Khmer Krom strive to preserve their cultural heritage in Viet Nam.” *United Nations News: Global Perspectives in Human Stories* (17 May 2012). Accessed 26 August 2023. <https://news.un.org/en/audio/2012/05/573442>.

^x (1) Bust of Hồ Chí Minh (2) Virgin Mary standing on a snake (3) Dancing water puppet fairy.

^{xi} Nguyễn-Long, Kerry. “Vietnamese Limepots.” *Arts of Asia* 27, no. 5 (1997): 66-77.

^{xii} Hoskins, Jane. “The Spirits You See in the Mirror: Spirit Possession in the Vietnamese American Diaspora.” In *The Southeast Asian Diaspora in the United States*, edited by Jonathan H.X. Lee, Chapter 4, 73-100. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014.



Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Vigil Hefeco 6 (one arm)*, 2023, smooth grog clay with manganese and iron fired to 1190, 56 x 29 x 23cm, photographed by Bernie Fischer.



Left: Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Doba* (black brushwork), 2023, smooth terracotta fired to 1120, 37 x 13 x 13cm, photographed by Bernie Fischer.

Right: Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Doba* (black and white brushwork), 2023, smooth terracotta fired to 1120, 35 x 12 x 12cm, photographed by Bernie Fischer.



Left: Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Foyot Cat (in 3 parts)*, 2023, smooth terracotta pigment fired to 1120, 19 x 8.5 x 9.5cm;

Centre: Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Foyot Cat 3 (with baby)*, 2023, coarse clay fired to 1100, 28.5 x 13 x 12.5cm;

Right: Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Foyot Cat (in 2 parts)*, 2023, smooth terracotta pigment fired to 1120, 23 x 23 x 11.5cm.

Photographed by Bernie Fischer.



Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Vigit Hefeco 5 (balls in hand)*, 2023, smooth terracotta fired to 1120, 58 x 32 x 22cm, photographed by Bernie Fischer.



Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Abstruse Narrative 2*, detail, 2017, drawing on concertina sketchbook, 21 x 113cm, photographed by Bernie Fischer.



Left: Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Vigít (Gloss Ward 2)*, 2023, glazed earthenware fired to 1100, 53.5 x 20 x 18cm, photo credit Michael Reid Sydney + Berlin.

Right: Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Vigít Hefeco 2 (orange)*, 2023, large particle earthenware clay fired to 1100, 47 x 17 x 14cm, photo credit Michael Reid Sydney + Berlin.

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We pay our respects to the Dharawal people who are the traditional custodians of the land, whose deepening connection to culture and customs have cared for this country for over 60,000 years. We acknowledge Elders past, present and emerging for their immense spiritual connection to place which was never ceded.

Always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Back cover image: Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Vigít Hefeco 6 (no balls in hands)* – back view, 2023, smooth terracotta fired to 1120, 46 x 26 x 19cm, photographed by Bernie Fischer.



Dulux in partnership with the Wollongong Art Gallery is proud to support the *Mai Nguyễn-Long's Kōgābinō* Exhibition. Dulux welcomes the creativity and inspiration that this event inspires in our community.



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