

trầnsfiguration

Nhung Đinh / Latipa / Jamie Maxtone-Graham / Corey Pickett /
Đinh Thị Thắm Poong / Faith Wilding

Curated by Việt Lê

September 16 - December 16, 2023

Opening Reception: September 16, 5 - 7pm

/ (Slash) 1150 25th St, Building B, San Francisco
Open Thursday - Saturday, 11am - 6pm



Nhung Đinh, *Cậu Bin hầu bóng*, 2023, site-specific video installation and digital C-print mural, dimensions variable

Queer(y)ing spiritualities and sexualities, **trầnsfiguration** is a shifting hologram that centers transnational artists who challenge the limits of the body—and the body politic—to embody the divine. Divine, divas, Śiva, shiva, the mundane. Shapeshifters, masters of drag and the spirit—*I believe in miracles, you sexy thang*.¹

Let's explode dom/sub subcategories: dominant art histories of figuration, beyond subjugated subjects and ground, foreclosures, and fissures—go figure. Formalism><conceptualism><figuration><abstraction?

¹ Much love to the Slash team (in alphabetical order): Ana, Efe, Maxine, Tuğçe. This curatorial statement/ poem/ channeling challenges normative academic citational practices and in its stead remixes experimental citations, links, embedded playlist, and references inspired by Trịnh T. Minh-hà, Joan Didion, as well as Maggie Nelson's practice of autoethnography.

Let's recon (reconcile, reconnoiter), reconfigure our telescoping, teleological timelines: progress is not progressive. No big bang theories; no get rich, bang for your buck schemes: something from nothing—formless void.

Emptiness: void and form, void as form. Expanding definitions of "trans," "trance" and "medium," (both artistic tool and spirit intermediary), we engender visionaries: visionary quests and questions. This marks an epistemic and paradigm shift oriented by the global south, guidance and sustenance ranging from Southeast Asian Indigenous shamanism to Black Atlantic religions. What are the bounds, the bonds, of our physical, emotional, and metaphysical worlds?

- I. **A prose** (by any other name) **poem:** (Call me by your name) "I am imagining, I am imagining," child Faith whirls, "playing with this idea of making a world..." "Who runs the world?" Queen Bey sings rhetorically, (lip)liner notes. Limned, lined, liminal. Moisturized n unbothered. What does it mean to make a world, to reworld, when we feel unheimlich as Freud wrote, "unhomely," not from the home, unfamiliar, uncanny?² At once at home and not at home in the world? Reworld, rewind, unwind. It's wine o'clock.

Let us move in delight, enlightened to our shadows: past grief, towards small joys transcendent—past present future tense. Terse/meta-multi-verse/perverse/traverse the intensity, queen bee Saint Teresa of Ávila³—religious and/or sexual ecstasy? Illness or opening, affliction or

²Freud states that "the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something that is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimisch*], which has undergone repression and returned from it" (230). Italics mine. In Freud's essay entitled "The Uncanny" (1919), he attempts to delineate the evasive boundaries and qualities of uncanniness. As sociologist Avery Gordon suggests, "uncanny experiences are haunting experiences." Uncanniness can be said to be related to fear, as well as the familiar and the unfamiliar. Freud states, "It may be true that the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something that is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimisch*], which has undergone repression and returned from it, and that everything uncanny fulfills this function."

Tracing its genealogy, Freud notes that "the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted—a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The 'double' has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons." See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1955, pp. 230-233. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

³"Canonized (made a saint by the Church) largely for the spiritual visions she experienced, Teresa of Ávila was a nun who lived in 16th century Spain, at the height off the Reformation. She wrote about her visions in several books, including this description of the scene Bernini depicted:

Beside me, on the left, appeared an angel in bodily form... He was not tall but short, and very beautiful; and his face was so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest rank of angels, who seem to be all on fire.... In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul content with anything but God. This is not a physical but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it—even a considerable share.

ascendance? Is pathology a power? "Let's get (meta)physical, physical, let's get animal, animal; lemme hear your body talk.." ⁴ Becoming animal, body without organs.

Done with the dyads: East/West; flourishing/floundering; ill/thrill; Netflix & chill/TMZ DMZs/DMing doms/subs, subtitles, titular spectacular spectacular ⁵ oil spill/jism/cataclysm/catechism—beyond schisms.

**Bundt cake
or bukkake?**

II. Let 'em eat cake and have it, two (halve it, too). If it's either uncanny double trouble, or double happiness, maybe it's three's a crowd, three's company (misery/miserly loves company?), ménage à trois <> throuple, quadruple quarantine Valentines—exponential potential. "Friendship as a way of life" à la Foucault, apple (of my eye) pie à la mode. Main dish or side piece, side eye, side to side, side by side.

III. I'm done with selfies, shelf life, half-lives, ⁶ lifetimes, and *Lifetime* tm t.v. *TMZ* tm suffering spectacles—eyes on the prize. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật. Baby Phat tm "Where are you/in the cities in which I love you,/ the cities daily risen to work and to money,/ to the magnificent miles and the gold coasts?" ⁷ Polly Pocket tm lined with gold, limned and liminal. Where are you in the cities in which I love you? Let the gold coasts drown in its sunsets, Selling Sunset Boulevard tm, doom&gloomaggedon, Dietrich and DiMaggio, whirl, and whorl. Who runs the world? Gurls.

Our sunrise, libidinous—our joys and faith.

Turn the lights on. ⁸

IV. **A channeling/poem/recitation/citations/performance text; a karma chameleon:**

Saint Teresa describes an intensely spiritual encounter in physical, even sexual terms. Why? We know that an important goal of Baroque art is to involve the viewer. Teresa explained her vision in this way to help us understand her extraordinary experience. After all, being visited by an angel and filled with the love of God is no common event. How can we, caught up in the realities of life, hope to understand the intensity and passion of her vision if not put in terms of our own human experiences?" Khan Academy

⁴ Olivia Newton-John, "Let's Get Physical" (1981).

⁵ "The Pitch/ Spectacular Spectacular" song from *Moulin Rouge* (2001), dir. Baz Luhrman.

⁶ For more on the half-life and half-lies on dioxin, Monsanto, and Agent Orange in the American War, see chapter 4 in my academic book Return Engagements (Duke University Press 2019).

⁷ For more on Li-Young Lee's book and poem of the same title, *The City in Which I Love You*, see Hesford, Walter A. "'The City in Which I Love You': Li-Young Lee's Excellent Song." *Christianity and Literature*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1996, pp. 37-60. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44312502>. Accessed 29 June 2023.

⁸ Beyoncé, "Sweet Dream," from *I Am... Sasha Fierce* album, Columbia and World Music Entertainment, 2008.

"Trần meant 'ancient' in old Vietnamese, while in modern Vietnamese it has multiple meanings: Trần means 'roof-top', Ở trần means 'naked', and trần tục means 'dusty'."

Get nekkid n raise the roof, dusty spring, field of dreams:

"The formula that came to me is a hologram. The elements cannot be taken separately but combined with each other create transmutation. The definition of transmutation I am using is the ability to change the nature of a substance. The work of effecting environmental change is how to change toxic substances into neutral substances.

The formula I arrived at is intention + union + love + focus + concentration + harmony + imagination = transmutation."⁹

I am letting this room
and everything in it
stand for my ideas about love
and its difficulties . . .

Your scent,
that scent
of spice and a wound,
I'll let stand for mystery.¹⁰

The wound is where the light enters you.¹¹

.....

And I never believed that the multitude
of dreams and many words were vain.¹²

Lined, limned, liminal.

Turn the light on.

- Việt Lê

⁹ Sandra Ingerman, "Medicine for the Earth," 2012.

¹⁰ Li-Young Lee, "This Room and Everything in It" from *The City in Which I Love You*, 1990, BOA Editions Ltd. (NY).

¹¹ Rumi; full poem and reflection here by Prof. Omid Safi, Islamic Studies, Duke University.

¹² Li-Young Lee, "The City in Which I Love You," full poem here.

trànfiguration, curated by Việt Lê, is the tenth in a series of exhibitions in the main gallery at / (Slash), each organized by an independent Bay Area-based curator. The exhibition will be accompanied by a series of public programs taking place throughout the Bay Area under 500 Capp Street's *Shifting Possessions* salon series, co-presented with Headlands Center for the Arts, California College of the Arts, and Slash. 500 Capp Street's *Shifting Possessions* salon series is made possible with support from California Humanities, a non-profit partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, with additional support from Teiger Foundation.

Nhung Đinh is an independent artist, curator, and filmmaker working with queer communities in several countries. Most of her projects are collective works that are rooted in her approach to participatory and relational aesthetics in which her roles as facilitator, artist, curator, and organizer are overlapping. She is the founder of *Bàn Lộn-Vagina Talks*- a public art and education project in Hà Nội, Việt Nam, that consists of performances, workshops, and exhibitions.

Latipa is a Pilipinx (Maguindanao/Pangasinan) artist, filmmaker, writer, and Associate Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of California, Riverside. Her interdisciplinary praxis works toward community healing and empowerment through radical media forms and memory work. She is the Founder and Director of the Memory and Resistance Laboratory.

Jamie Maxtone-Graham spent over 20 years as a cinematographer in NY and LA, working on both independent and mainstream feature films before moving to Vietnam on a Fulbright research grant in 2007. Since then, his diverse photography portfolios and moving image works have been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Europe and Asia, including at Noorderlicht, Netherlands; Le Magasin de Jouets, Arles, France; Galeri Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta; and Galerie Quynh, HCMC. His photography has also been published in *Burn Magazine*, *Trans Asia Photography*, *Culturehall*, *Invisible Photographer Asia*, and *Photography & Culture*, among others. Jamie Maxtone-Graham lives and works in Hà Nội.

Corey Pickett is an interdisciplinary artist living in New Mexico. His practice examines the relationships of fear, race, and social systems, which are informed by his upbringing in the Golden Isles of Georgia. In addition to being a working artist, Pickett is the founder and Director of The Jaye Rock Cultural Center in Clovis, NM. He received his Master of Education in 2008 and his MFA in 2017 from Vermont College of Fine Arts. He has exhibited his work in cities throughout the US and is a recipient of the International Sculpture Center's 2017 Outstanding Student Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award.

Đinh Thị Thắm Poong is a contemporary Vietnamese artist whose paintings are influenced by her Mường and Thai heritage. Her detailed watercolors incorporate surrealistic elements into portrayals of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Born in 1970 in Lai Chau, Vietnam, she studied at the Hanoi Fine Arts College. Thắm Poong was awarded first prize for the Minority Artists Exhibition in 1993. The artist currently lives and works in Hà Nội, Việt Nam. Her works are in the collections of the Singapore Art Museum, the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Faith Wilding is a multi-disciplinary artist, activist, and Professor Emerita of performance art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Wilding emigrated to the United States in 1961 from Paraguay and her practice emerged at the forefront of Feminist Art in Los Angeles during the late 1960s and 1970s. As an avowed eco-feminist, Faith Wilding's work addresses the deterioration of the natural world in her lifetime. She has exhibited at museums including The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Documenta X, Kassel, Germany. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2009 and the prestigious Women's Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014. Wilding lives and works in Rhode Island.

Việt Lê is a queer, disabled artist, writer, and curator whose work centers global south sexualities and spiritualities. Lê is the author of *Return Engagements* (Duke University Press, 2021). The art book *White Gaze* is a collaboration with Latipa (Sming Sming Books, Candor Arts 2019). Lê has presented their work at *Civitella Ranieri*, the Shanghai Biennale, among other venues. They co-curated *transPOP: Korea Việt Nam Remix* (with Yong Soon Min: ARKO, Galerie Quynh, UC Irvine Gallery; YBCA, 2008-09) and the 2012 *Kuandu Biennale* (Taipei). A 2022-24 Headlands Bay *Area Arts Fellow*, Lê is an Associate Professor and Chair of Visual & Critical Studies (VCS) at California College of the Arts. vietle.net vietle

/ (Slash) is a nonprofit visual art space founded in 2018 to advance and promote the expanding field of contemporary art in San Francisco through exhibitions, publications, and public programming.