

Video Walkthrough | Alvin Luong: *DEPHINITELY PARADISE*

Alvin Luong provides a virtual tour of his ongoing solo exhibition, *DEPHINITELY PARADISE*. The artist discusses staging his first meeting with Lan Thiệu Nguyen, a former refugee from Vietnam who resettled to the United States by way of Pulau Bidong, an island off the coast of Malaysia.

Watch the walkthrough on Mercer Union's website:

<https://www.mercerunion.org/exhibitions/luong-dephinitely-paradise>

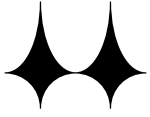
Alvin Luong: Lan is this person who embodies all of the histories of the island. As someone who lived there, as a refugee, and as someone who now takes care of corals in his house. So suddenly you have this person who could possibly be a keeper of corals that came from Bidong. That kind of coincidence is something you can't really make up. It's just an amazing moment of serendipity.

This is the exhibition, *DEPHINITELY PARADISE*. It's a newly commissioned moving image work that's accompanied by a suite of frottage drawings on sheer fabric and three metal sculptures that recreate infrastructure that coral are grown on in the bottom of the ocean.

So, Pulau Bidong is an island on the east coast of Malaysia. It's an important site because it was the epicenter of the refugee crisis following the end of the Vietnam War. And what's significant is many of those people became Canadians. Many became Americans. I was drawn to the island because it was a place where my father had also lived. I only knew the history of the island, and I knew it to be quite bleak, but I was surprised when I was there. It was actually a moment of joy to be there. One, it was so beautiful, and two, I could see the camp had moved on, or the island had also moved on. And that's where I came up with the discovery that the island is now a coral farm, and it exports corals to Canada.

The film is principally shot in a small town in Connecticut, called Milford. It's the home of a man named Lan Thiệu Nguyen. Principally, the film is a conversation between Lan and I, where we go over the contemporary history of a refugee camp where he used to live. And through the conversation, he learns about how the island is now a research center for corals and also a place to farm corals commercially. And through this conversation and throughout the film, we emerge at finding out that Lan himself is a passionate keeper of corals.

Coral farming is an extractive industry. You're taking corals out of the sea and shipping it to places where corals can't really live in the wild. But in this kind of strange irony, the corals can't live on their own anymore in the sea. So you have this instance in the film where essentially a former refugee is recreating the conditions of the ocean and the bottom of the sea for creatures that can't live in the sea anymore. So there's a sort of poetic link between the two.



Lan spends a lot of energy and time purifying tap water from Connecticut and then remaking the perfect ocean water. This person is really passionate about the ocean and has a very specific relationship to things that are crossing the sea and things at the bottom of the sea.

When we encounter the sculpture works, probably the most striking component are these steel scaffold structures that exist on the seabed that look like beds. It's a place where corals are grown, but it's also a place where refugees had drowned. So it's a structure that tethers itself to making life, but also signaling a rest, if you will. And of course, the ability for the audience to sit on these structures to watch the film was kind of a dream of mine. I think the structures here are completed when people sit on them. They kind of reactivate this thing that's supposed to be in the bottom of the ocean, and that brings us to this idea of maybe we are underwater right now when we're viewing the exhibition.

When we were designing the show together, we decided to begin the show with this experience of refusal, so you don't necessarily see everything at the same time. Instead, you see the back of several drawings, and you're funneled through a corridor where the first legible piece of work you see is a photograph that's framed in black granite. And this acts almost like a key to unlocking the first part of the show. It rewards people to look closely at its small text. That's where you find out it is a tombstone marking a mass grave, and it marks several hundred deceased boat people who were refugees from Vietnam following the end of the war.

And then right beside the photograph is the first legible panel that you see, the first drawing. The drawings themselves are actually made through the process of frottage, which is imprinting the surface by rubbing the fabric with a drawing instrument. So it introduces the panels as a transcript for eventually the film that you'll encounter.

The frottage pieces themselves are wrinkled, they're folded, and this is how they fit in my backpack as I was making them. So one, it's a way of bringing a very distant site to Toronto for this exhibition, but it's also a way to allow the work itself to have gone through a process of migration. So these works have physically touched the mass grave and the tombstone, and they've been transported here.

So the score is made with a band based in Ho Chi Minh City. Their name is Rắn Cạp Đuôi. I approached the band with this idea of wanting to make the sounds of Lan's aquariums into music.

In the final scene of the film, we encounter a score where samples of Lan's various equipment, pieces of equipment from the aquarium, like these kind of gurgling machines, become manipulated to play a genre of Vietnamese music called Vong Co. And it's an important genre because during the American occupation of Vietnam, this genre took on its own life through guitar. And so it has a very kind of diasporic lineage now.