

DEPHINELY PARADISE is the first institutional solo exhibition by Alvin Luong.

DEPHINELY PARADISE is made possible with Leading Support from The RBC Foundation.



The exhibition is presented in partnership with CONTACT Photography Festival.

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SPACE: Alize Zorlutuna | *Surface Tension: Reckoning [Git gel with cedar]*
12 February–22 May 2026

Mercer Union invites artist Alize Zorlutuna to develop a yearlong series of works titled *Surface Tension* for the SPACE Billboard Commission in 2025–26. Building on a practice in the traditional hydrographic printing technique of Ebru, *Surface Tension* explores distinct marbled patterns in a sculptural study of their intricacies. Over the course of the year, the artist presents three banner works, using cuts and folds to trace and transform the image as method of releasing the movements already humming within. Read more about the second edition, *Reckoning [Git gel with cedar]* (2026), along with an accompanying text at mercerunion.org

Alize Zorlutuna is an interdisciplinary queer artist whose work explores relationships to land, culture and the more-than-human, while thinking through history, ancestral wisdom and healing. Moving between Tkarón:to and Anatolia (present-day Turkey) throughout their life has informed Alize's practice—making them attentive to spaces of encounter. Bringing together material practices rooted in Anatolian textiles, ceramics, and marbling, with contemporary mediums, they forge new directions for considering diasporic relationships to place and belonging. Alize enlists poetics and a sensitivity to materials in works that span video, installation, printed matter, performance and sculpture. Conjuring earth, air, water, and spirit, Alize collages mediums, methods, and geographies. The body and its sensorial capacities are central to their work.

SPACE invites one artist to produce a yearlong series of images for a public-facing work on the east façade of Mercer Union.

Image: Alize Zorlutuna, production still from *Surface Tension: Reckoning [Git gel with cedar]*, 2026. Courtesy the artist.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Throughout his multidisciplinary practice, **Alvin Luong** uses strategies such as reenactment and reconstruction to recoup moments from the past and to cast them anew against the conditions of contemporary life.

In 2025, Mercer Union invited Alvin Luong to develop a new moving image installation for his first institutional solo exhibition. Since 2023, the artist has conducted research into Pulau Bidong, an island off the coast of Malaysia that was once the epicentre of the refugee crisis following the end of the American-Vietnam War. Commissioned by Mercer Union, *DEPHINELY PARADISE* (2026) is the final work in a trilogy of films where Luong pursues the analogical connections between Bidong's refugee histories and the rehabilitated corals cultivated there today for export, often to many of the same countries where the refugees resettled. The film brings together documentary and experimental filmmaking styles, and stages the first meeting between Luong and Lan Thiệu Nguyen, a former refugee from Vietnam who resettled to the United States by way of Bidong.

At Mercer Union, Luong's film is presented within an installation that collapses spaces of life and death, and folds multiple geographies into intimate encounter. His exhibition offers a space that is neither origin nor destination, where the complexity of displacement and the fullness of human experience can be held without resolution.

Mercer Union's collaboration with Alvin Luong emerges from our long-held commitment to commissioning new work, and creating milestone opportunities for artists to bring their visions to fruition in Toronto. Through our commissioning platform *Artist First*, we invest in the lifecycle of a project from conception to realization, cultivating discovery, risk-taking, and artistic development through long-term support and dialogue. To learn more, visit mercerunion.org/support



In his multidisciplinary practice, **Alvin Luong** (b. Toronto) reflects on histories of migration and trade, considering how they both mirror and impact the conditions of contemporary life. Luong has exhibited at institutions including the Art Museum at the University of Toronto (2025); Times Art Museum, Guangzhou (2024); The Polygon Gallery, Vancouver (2021); and Gudskul, Jakarta (2019). He has held research and resident artist appointments at the Inside-Out Art Museum, Beijing; HB Station Contemporary Art Research Center, Guangzhou; and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. He was longlisted for the Sobey Art Award (2023), and his works are held in the TD Bank Art Collection, Toronto; and the Permanent Collection of The Rockefeller Foundation, New York City.

Image: Alvin Luong, production still from *DEPHINELY PARADISE*, 2026. Courtesy the artist.



Alvin Luong:
DEPHINELY PARADISE

13 February–9 May 2026

After Work, a Blue Sun Rises Over Saigon

by Sofia Thiệu D'Amico

The words PULAU BIDONG appeared throughout my childhood, most memorably as my uncle Lan's Wi-Fi password. It hadn't registered as a real location until I spoke with Alvin Luong. Perched across from one another in a clamorous Manhattan cafe, Alvin explained to me his work in Malaysia researching and filming a former Vietnamese refugee camp on an island where there is now a coral research facility. I'd heard of a Malaysian camp in my family's immigration story: "I think my uncle was held at a refugee camp in Malaysia with my grandfather after they left Vietnam," I told Alvin. "He also raises fish and coral at home in Connecticut." Waves of synchronicity washed over us.

Lan Thiệu Nguyen was born in the coastal city of Nha Trang, Vietnam on 18 April 1972, and later moved with his family to Saigon. Growing up, he spent much of his time at the edge of the Saigon River where he developed a lifelong fascination with marine life. Wild stories emerge this time, moments of youthful humour and play amidst war and poverty—struggle mitigated through mischief.

In July 1987, at the age of fifteen, Lan escaped Saigon with his father, Hung, leaving behind my grandmother Ngoc Lien, my mother Bao Chau, and her two sisters, Bao Tran and Bao Tram. For years, they would have no contact, the journey by boat being especially unsafe for women. Lan and Hung were transferred to the Pulau Bidong refugee camp, where they remained for twelve months. Channeling an insurgent humor, Lan describes this period as one of great freedom. "I didn't have to go to school anymore," he jokes. We might glean from his stories that there are infinite ambiguities to the refugee experience: hardship and joy are often held within the same hand, or rather, on the same island. Lan focused on the crystal clear waters and white sands of his time on Bidong. His reframing of the camp as a tropical paradise becomes a means of survival that stands as a contemporary counterpoint to narratives of Vietnamese victimhood found saturating Western media.

In 1988, Lan and Hung were sent to a camp in the Philippines. They arrived at JFK Airport in 1989, continuing on to Hartford, Connecticut, where they settled through church sponsorship. Lan attended Foran High School in Milford, where he was inducted into the National

Honor Society despite knowing little English. In 1992, the rest of the family received sponsorship from Hung, reuniting in Bridgeport. At Connecticut College, on full academic scholarship, Lan majored in Economics with a minor in Marine Biology, completing two internships at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

His fascination with saltwater coral began in 2007, when he drove past a storefront glowing with a striking blue light. Through research, conversations with shopkeepers, and years of trial and error, he learned how to sustain even the most delicate corals. Their care requires daily labour, extreme sensitivity, and constant vigilance—monitoring chemical balances, changing water weekly, or intervening when species compete or cause harm. I believe it is precisely his attentive, nurturing spirit that keeps them alive—a collapsing of reef and skin in reciprocity. I sense that coral can feel this too.

In Sinocultures, "Lân" refers to a mythological half-dragon, half-lion guardian. Similarly, Lan himself watches patiently and cares deeply for those around him, human and non-human alike. He is the primary caretaker for his mother, who has Alzheimer's, and his father, who suffered a heart attack several years ago. While caring for Hung in hospital, Lan's coral fell into neglect, and many died. He didn't outwardly grieve. Instead, he kept their white, calcified skeletons as memorials to that time. Enamored with the turquoise waters surrounding Bidong, Lan now creates the purest possible water for his coral—his "little piece of the ocean," he says.



For a weekend, Alvin integrated seamlessly into my family's Connecticut ecosystem. Arriving in Milford with detailed storyboards and a profound attentiveness to others, he mapped remarkable connections between personal memories and global phenomena, weaving my family's story into a larger allegorical and historical tapestry. Attuned to material poetics, Alvin understood Lan's collection of objects as an externalization of personhood and positionality in the act of visual storytelling. Lan's model ships, in proximity to his coral aquariums, reference the journey across water, and the sea as both a site of sublime biodiversity and a perilous escape from a fallen capital. After the Vietnam War in 1975, when the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was established, an inconceivable number of Vietnamese boarded ships only to never touch land again. Alvin's family and mine may have made it, but many others sank to the seabed. In many ways, a quiet beachfront life in Milford was the kind of future hoped for but never anticipated.

In Alvin's film, *DEPHINITELY PARADISE* (2026), Lan's political paraphernalia—Ho Chi Minh fliers, a Vietnamese flag hat, and a "Welcome to the Party" poster—are at once satirical and sincere, signalling Lan's nuanced relationship with the country he left behind. Within our communities, Vietnam is often remembered as a site of loss. Much of the diaspora who fled the post-war establishment of the Socialist Republic now tend to swing politically right with an assimilationist patriotism for the West in veneration of the formally Western-backed and now defunct Republic of Vietnam. Lan holds the Socialist Republic with a discerning criticality toward the machinations of its national history and resultant post-war reality, as if to say: *My country sought its own basic independence through communist means, and if I love my country—even as I leave it—I love it for what it is.* Within Lan's idiosyncratic collection lies a radical undoing of contemporary political flattening, and a rare, rather valiant, clarity. The framed portrait of Ho Chi Minh, hung high with reverence in the filtration room that Lan uses to create saltwater, stands as a commitment to historical truth: that the Vietnamese refugee crisis emerged from layered histories and internal conflicts, intensified by colonial interventions, interests, and actors over time.

When we first arrived in Lan's room, Alvin noted with surprise that he owned the same coral lamp. Lan explained that his lamps are calibrated to turn on each day at 5:00 pm, so that when he comes home, he

can enjoy the coral in their fullest atmosphere. They simulate sunlight filtering through the ocean's surface, when reefs extend their tendrils into bloom and fish become active around them. When the reef's day begins, Lan's workday ends; and on the other side of the deep and dignified ocean, the sun begins to rise in Vietnam, its blue light washing over Saigon.



Sofia Thiệu D'Amico is an independent curator and researcher based in New York. Her work is invested in social practice and poetics, with recent research focused on intercolonial solidarities and abolitionist imaginings. She previously worked as assistant curator of Canal Projects, New York and has held arts administrative roles at organizations such as the Vera List Center for Arts and Politics, New York; the Isamu Noguchi Museum, Takamatsu; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among others. Sofia holds an MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and her thesis research will be featured in the upcoming volume *Borders of Art: Migration, Mobility and Artistic Practice* (American University of Cairo Press, 2026).

Cover and interior images: Alvin Luong, production still from *DEPHINITELY PARADISE*, 2026. Courtesy the artist.