

For Immediate Release

Mercer Union presents Alvin Luong's first institutional solo exhibition, *DEPHINITELY PARADISE*

26 January 2026 (TORONTO, O.N.) — Mercer Union presents *DEPHINITELY PARADISE*, the first institutional solo exhibition by **Alvin Luong**, on view from **13 February–9 May 2026**. The exhibition features a new film commission situated in an installation of sculptures and frottage works. This is the twelfth project developed through Mercer Union's trailblazing *Artist First* commissioning platform, following HaeAhn Paul Kwon Kajander's exhibition *How Is Where You Are* in Fall 2025.

"*DEPHINITELY PARADISE* is a meditative exhibition by Toronto-based artist Alvin Luong, comprised of a new body of work," says Theresa Wang, Director & Curator of Mercer Union. "The central film, of the same name, tells a deeply personal story about migration and becomes an invitation for us to reflect on our relationships with place and land."

DEPHINITELY PARADISE (2026) stages the first meeting between Toronto-based artist Alvin Luong and 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. In the film, Luong is an interventionist documentarian, his hand coaxing a conversation out of the reserved Nguyen as they flip through photographs taken by the artist during his recent research trip to Bidong. They comment on the contemporary status of the island as a hub for marine conservation and coral farming, subjects that captivate Nguyen who is himself a passionate hobby keeper of corals. Their respective family histories intersect in Bidong, once the epicentre of the refugee crisis that followed the end of the American-Vietnam War. This implicit background surfaces quietly through glimpses of political paraphernalia and model ships in Nguyen's collection, and most resoundingly through what remains unsaid in Luong and Nguyen's conversation.

Throughout his multidisciplinary practice, 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. *DEPHINITELY PARADISE* is the final work in a trilogy of films where Luong pursues the analogies between Bidong's refugees and the rehabilitated corals cultivated there today for export, often to many of the same countries where the refugees resettled. In Nguyen, Luong finds a subject who encapsulates the complexity of Bidong's history of migration and trade. As the film pans across the aquariums meticulously built and maintained by Nguyen in his Connecticut home, a melancholy *vọng cổ* ballad—scored by Rắn Cạp Đuôi Collective and made from audio samples of Nguyen's aquarium equipment—offers a poetic imagining of reincarnated undersea lives finding refuge in Nguyen's care.

At Mercer Union, Luong's film is situated within an installation of sculptures and frottage works. Eight fabric banners bear the film's transcript of the understated exchange between Luong and Nguyen. Created by making rubbings of a mass grave tombstone in Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia, the suspended frottage works spell out the film's dialogue while imbuing it with the presence of the refugees who drowned at sea enroute to Bidong. Formed letter by letter with the names of the deceased, these layered documents contend with the insufficiency of both mortality and memorialization. Anchoring the film are a series of steel rebar sculptures: one presented as an autonomous assemblage and two others that act as seating for the film. Luong borrows the form of structures used to farm corals on the Bidong seafloor, which bear an eerie resemblance to bed frames and evoke refuge. By collapsing spaces of life and death, and folding multiple geographies into intimate encounter, Luong's 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 the need for resolution.

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.

Alvin Luong: *DEPHINITELY PARADISE* is made possible with Leading Support from the RBC Foundation.



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This exhibition is presented in partnership with CONTACT Photography Festival.

CONTACT PHOTOGRAPHY FESTIVAL

DEPHINITELY PARADISE is presented as part of *Artist First*, a Mercer Union commissioning platform. Artist First commissions are made possible with the generous support of Paul & Kaye Beeston, Rebecca Carbin, Sarah Heim, Vida Juozaitis in memory of Ric Evans, Christie Kirchner, Liza Mauer & Andrew Sheiner, Margaret McNee, Matt Meagher, David & Erica Neligan, Marina Shepaksov, Jad & Roula Shimaly, Lauren Charyk Silverberg, Carlos Yep, and Yue Yin. Learn more at mercerunion.org/support

artistfirst

About Mercer Union

Mercer Union is a non-profit, artist-run centre dedicated to commissioning and producing new works of contemporary art and providing an engaging program that encourages critical inquiry and conversation. We champion ambitious exhibitions that empower diverse Canadian and international artists in formative and established stages of their practice.

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