

Art

Reviews

Weekend

The Trouble with Capitalist Utopias

Maybe a sense of belonging is a thing of the past, a sign of privilege.



by John Yau
July 24, 2021

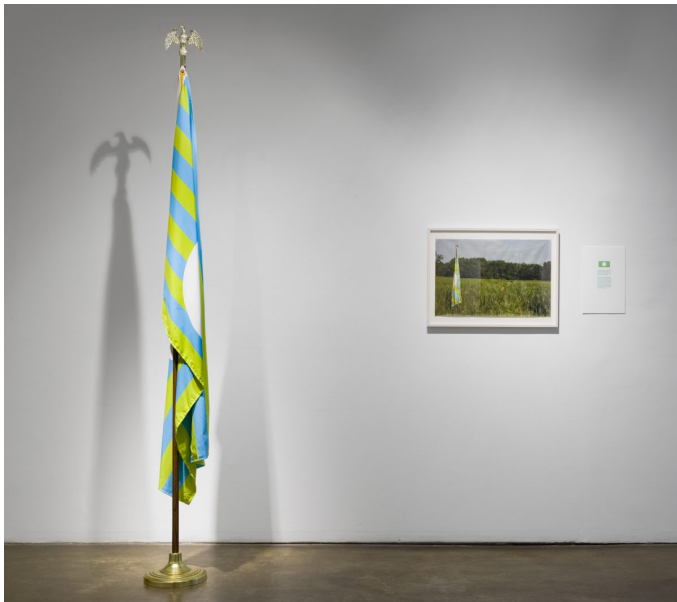


Installation view of *Tammy Nguyen, Freehold* at Smack Mellon, Brooklyn. Left to right: “Man,” (2021), watercolor, vinyl paint, pastel, and metal leaf on paper stretched over wood panel, 60 x 36 inches; “Woman” (2021), watercolor, vinyl paint, pastel, and metal leaf on paper stretched over wood panel, 60 x 36 inches; “Ape” (2021), watercolor, vinyl paint, pastel, and metal leaf on paper stretched over wood panel, 60 x 36 inches (image courtesy Smack Mellon. Photo: Etienne Frossard)

I have never asked Tammy Nguyen if she knows of this statement by Stéphane Mallarmé: “Everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book,” although it makes sense that she would. In 2017, after meeting her at an Asian American Literature Festival hosted by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center in Washington D.C., I thought of her as a book artist and subscribed to Passenger Pigeon Press, which she started in 2016. What I have since learned is that she has a very elastic vision of what constitutes a book.

Nguyen has designed and printed offset editions, made letterpress books that include laser-cut technology, dense collages, prints, and large paintings on paper that has been stretched around a wood panel and displayed on the wall. Marbling, chine collé, gold and silver leafing, and calligraphic brushwork are some of the processes that she utilizes in her work. She has studied different disciplines, including the taxidermy of birds, when she worked at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History while earning her MFA, and lacquer painting when she was in Vietnam on a Fulbright (2007–8).

In her paintings, which arise out of firsthand experience, buttressed by historical and scientific research, she combines aspects of illuminated manuscripts, manga, watercolor, and gestural painting to address specific geographic situations in Southeast Asia in a time of global expansion, as well as territorial disputes over shipping lanes, capitalist investment, utopian fantasies about gated communities, climate change, and her own family history.



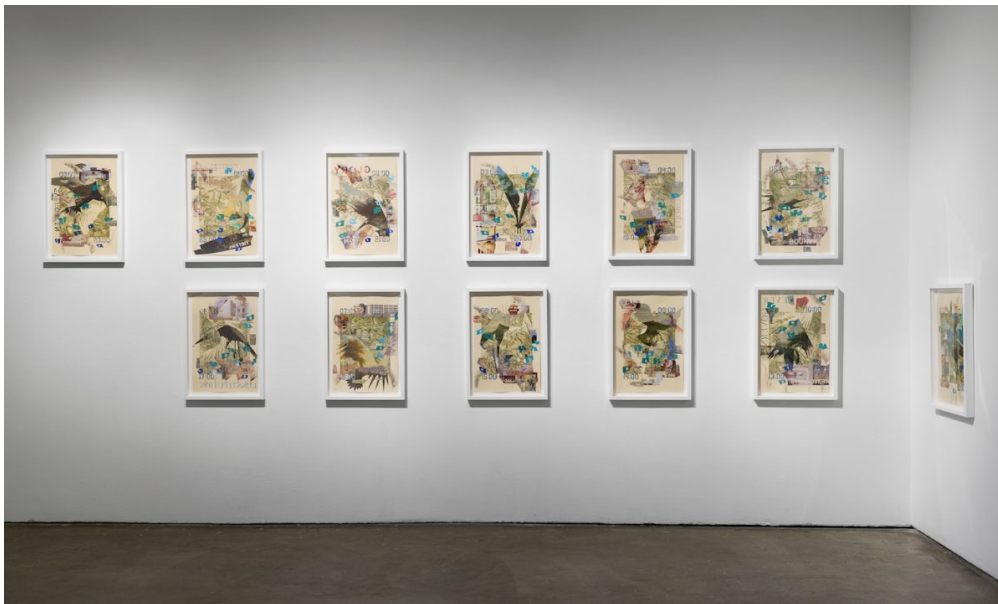
Installation view of *Tammy Nguyen, Freehold* at Smack Mellon, Brooklyn. Left to right: “The Flag” (2021), digitally printed cotton, flag pole, dimensions variable; “The Flag and its Meanings” (2021), digital print and letterpress on paper, dimensions variable (image courtesy Smack Mellon. Photo: Etienne Frossard)

One of three exhibitions on the theme of water curated by Rachel Vera Steinberg, *Tammy Nguyen, Freehold* at Smack Mellon (June 26–August 8, 2021) brings together the work stemming from her latest investigation into Southeast Asia,

specifically — as the press release states — “Forest City, a tax free, man-made island in Johor, Malaysia, located along the Singapore Strait and adjacent to the Strait of Malacca —one of the busiest trade conduits in the world.”

Advertising itself as “a smart and green futuristic city,” Forest City will “create an ideal, idyllic and technology-driven living and working space ecosystem.” It sounds perfect, doesn’t it? Who wouldn’t want to live there, at least part of the year? Posing as a potential investor, Nguyen went to the island to look at the real estate and amenities, which included a gym, a spa, fine dining, and a golf course, as you might expect.

There has always been something methodical and thorough about the way Nguyen approaches a subject. For this exhibition, she designed and made a flag and flagpole, which is in the exhibition, along with a photograph of it in a field in Connecticut. What’s a man-made utopian island without a flag? Nguyen’s flag is composed of a white circle (a sacred sun) in the center of a field of 12 alternating green and blue stripes, signifying land and water, all existing in perfect harmony.



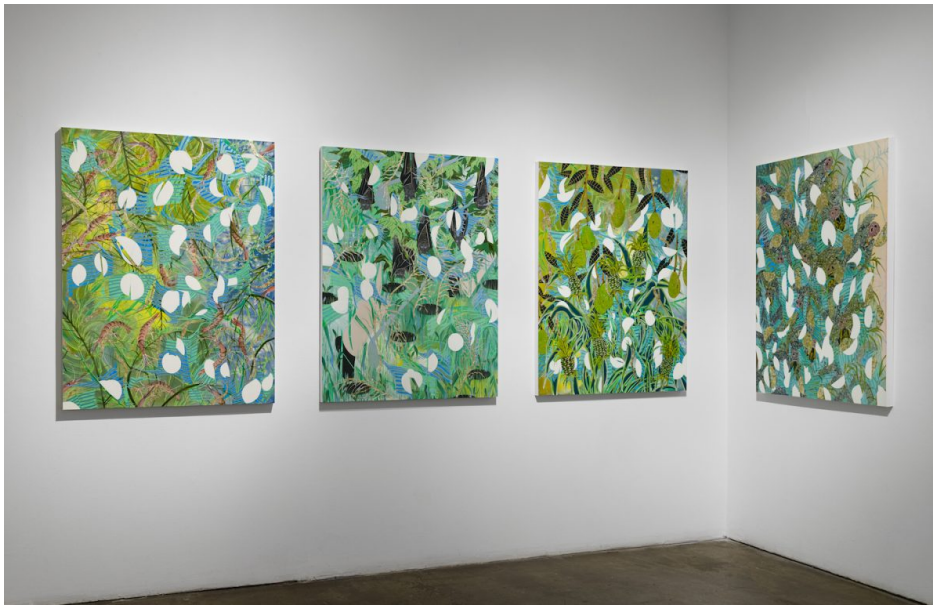
Installation view of *Tammy Nguyen, Freehold* at Smack Mellon, Brooklyn. Prints: *Deep Time*, *The Hours*, and *Trajectories* (in order, left to right: “Evergreen”; “Destiny”; “Constitution”; “Glory”; “Hope”; “Triumph”; “Galaxy”; “Liberty”; “Everglobe”; “Bounty”; “Evergovern”; “Treasure”), all 2021, series of 12 unique intaglio prints with chine collé and collage on paper, 22 x 15 inches each (image courtesy Smack Mellon. Photo: Etienne Frossard)

There is something wry and even melancholy about planting the flag of a real estate fantasy in the Singapore Strait in a nondescript field in Connecticut. It is the humor of feeling displaced, and wondering if there is any place that you belong. Maybe a sense of belonging is a thing of the past, a sign of privilege. This sense of displacement is emphasized by the inclusion of the photograph in the exhibition, and the actual flag, with a metal bird of prey topping the flagpole, just in front of it.

Three other bodies of work are in the exhibition: two groups of either three or four thematically related paintings and a group of 12 intaglio prints with chine collé and collage, whose titles are taken from the names of container ships — *Treasure*, *Evergovern*, *Everglobe*, and *Destiny* are among the names.

In each collage, Nguyen includes the name of the ship, a number referring to the time of day (which doubles as a reminder of the constant role shipping plays in the world's economy), a negative space shaped like a bird of prey, in which another space is glimpsed, images taken from *The 'Nam*, a Marvel comic book series about the Vietnam War that was published from 1986 until '93, and ran for 84 issues, and Forest City's striped flag, with the sun literally cut out.

By crisscrossing the figure-ground relationship, Nguyen subverts any sense of stability and the comfort that comes with knowing where everything should go. In "Treasure," we see an aerial view of a landscape within the bird's contours. A bomber is flying in the blue sky framed by one of the bird's wings. Elsewhere, faces are contorted in pain and eyes peer through abstract foliage and holes in the flag. While everything is in a state of disturbance and dislocation, the presentation of the images is cool, the edges carefully delineated. The resulting tension is one of the subjects of the work.



Installation view of *Tammy Nguyen, Freehold* at Smack Mellon, Brooklyn. Left to right: “Seasons of Revolution” 1–4 (in order) (2021), watercolor, vinyl paint, pastel, and metal leaf on paper stretched over wood panel, 48 x 36 inches each (image courtesy Smack Mellon. Photo: Etienne Frossard)

The series *Seasons of Revolution* (all dated 2021 and measuring 48 by 36 inches) consists of four paintings on paper stretched over panel. Each depicts different types of tropical foliage, an animal, and a white abstract shape, which evokes Nguyen’s symbol of the sacred sun, all of which appear more than once. In these pieces, Nguyen lays down an abstract ground by staining the paper with different hues, whose shapes and tones are used as initial guides. As in much of her work, she complicates the figure-ground relationship.

In their layered, all-over compositions, the *Seasons* paintings approach abstraction, but Nguyen deliberately does not cross over. The juxtapositions are not arbitrary. The glimpses of golf clubs and black bats hanging upside down in “Seasons of Revolution 2” evoke the meeting of manicured landscape and dense foliage at the golf course in Forest City. In addition to their roles in vampire tales, bats have assumed other sinister implications since the World Health Organization connected them with the spread of COVID-19.

In “Seasons of Revolution 1,” crustaceans underscore the rising seas and suggest the folly of building a manmade island. Climate change is everywhere, even if, as the press release tells us, Nguyen’s

[...] guide informed her that there was “no climate change here.” Malaysia, he explained, does not suffer from natural disasters like its neighboring countries.

The exhibition’s three largest works focus on an archetype inspired by Nguyen’s experience in Forest City and all the different associations and memories her visit stirred up. In “Ape,” she depicts the animal looking back at the viewer, at once bewildered and perplexed; a bird is behind the ape and snakes rise up from below. The work references King Kong (there are movie studios in Forest City). For trivia experts who see a reflection of culture in little remembered facts, it is worth recalling that in *Kong: Skull Island* (2017), the 11th King Kong film since the first premiered in 1933, the character of San Lin, the Asian woman biologist, was continually rewritten and reduced until Alison de Souza, in her review in the Singapore newspaper, *Straits Times*, described the role as a “hua ping,” meaning a vase, something insignificant in the background, and the actress “hardly does or says a thing.”

Tammy Nguyen, “Woman” (2021), watercolor, vinyl paint, pastel, and metal leaf on paper stretched over wood panel, 60 x 36 inches (image courtesy the artist)

In the painting “Woman,” it becomes more evident that, as with the ape’s fur, only someone who knows calligraphy, the repetition of a set of abstract marks, could have done the different kinds of mark making visible in a terrycloth towel. This is something that viewers ought to recognize — this and other paintings in the exhibition have their roots in the history of Asian art, from Nguyen’s use of paper to

her mark making. In the towel a set of delicate abstract marks are repeated without becoming rote or predictable.

The woman in the painting comes across as absurd and hilarious. She has cucumber slices covering her eyes (a common beauty treatment) and stands in dense growth. Snakes are entwined in her hair (recalling Medusa), and a speckled, metal-leaf bird partially covers her face (is it also a mud pack?) and peeks out from behind it. If she is getting a beauty treatment, why is she standing in a tropical landscape, with snakes on both sides of her? The fact that Nguyen's figure seamlessly compresses different narratives and archetypes, from Medusa to a smooth-skinned woman undergoing a spa treatment, is one of the strengths of her artwork. Her paintings and collages are immediate and visually compelling, but still require unpacking. It is with prolonged looking that Nguyen's intentions begin to reveal themselves.

Tammy Nguyen, "Glory" (2021), intaglio print with chine collé and collage on paper, 22 x 15 inches (image courtesy the artist)

Tammy Nguyen, Freehold *continues at Smack Mellon (92 Plymouth Street, Brooklyn) through August 8.*