

Minh Ngọc Nguyễn
Sweet, Sweet Nectar
Apr 25 — Jun 16, 2024

The highest art is no art. The highest form is no form.
Bruce Lee(1)

A stack of colourful tiny stools, pearly wet as if covered in sweat are surrounded by an array of half drunk glasses of beer. This luscious still life is presented in front of a semi-invisible dark backdrop of plants, that enhances the bright colours of the objects in front, but still adds a layered depth in which green foliage appears here and there. The image is shiny and glossy, looking like it could have been on a poster or the page of a magazine, with just next to it a logo, or maybe a slogan. Commercial photography, with its tropes and tricks, its apparent neutrality, but even just by generally being ahead in technological progress, has always been bringing small and larger revolutions into fine art photography. These revolutions became first a trademark for some, but each time, while practices defined as a revolutionary turned into established and filled museums, new generations of photographers have always started using these advances as a language, just one of the possible languages to be bent into their own narratives, taking the shape of new ideas and experiences. So it has been for colour photography, as it has been with the glossy and composition-perfect style of the still lifes and studio pictures which Minh Ngọc Nguyễn masters in technique. I do not know if after seeing the fruit covered in acupuncture needles and locusts, appearing on another of his pictures, I would be supposed to buy pears, an acupuncture session or some locusts (as snacks maybe?), but I would definitely be interested in any of

these items after seeing the image. But Ngọc Nguyễn is not shooting ads, he is accurately using the knowledge achieved from studying commercial photography to build a narration based on his own experience as a first-generation Danish grown as part of the Vietnamese diaspora. Using and co-opting stereotypes, images and the whole vernacular of South-East Asia, bending this imagery in a way in which only a young European would do, the photographer has created a unique language. These incredibly attractive pictures mirror at once our glossy experience of reality (through social media, magazines and billboards) and the experience of a young Nordic person born from Vietnamese parents. It is a language that merges together the same stereotypes a Westerner would clumsily use, together with the insider jokes and references only a Vietnamese would grasp, the discriminator and discriminated joined together. It is then that the small stools in the picture with the beers become the classic seating one would easily recognise, as they are found all over in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City or anywhere else in Vietnam, crossing social statuses and venues, and linked to a particular concept defined as *nhau* which one would translate with “drinking and eating with no particular purpose.” Hence we understand why the beers are there, as we can understand with no need of help why a portrait of such a stereotypical figure as Bruce Lee is standing as a sculpture next to an electric toothbrush on another picture. It is a particular and catchy world the one we find in Minh Ngọc Nguyễn’s pictures. Chameleonic and accurate, as the photographic style they are inspired of, these images go great lengths to make us laugh, fascinate but eventually reflect on the nowadays unfortunately complex ideas of integration and identity. In another famous quote Bruce Lee said “Water can flow, or it can crash. Be water, my friend.”(3)

- (1) Bruce Lee, *Jeet Kune Do: Bruce Lee's Commentaries on the Martial Way* (1997).
- (2) Such a complex idea in nowadays culture and interconnected world that it would be worth another text by itself, but surely the synaesthetic way in which the show is entitled connects to this too.
- (3) *Bruce Lee: A Warrior's Journey* (2000).

Minh Ngọc Nguyễn (b.1992, Copenhagen) is one of the most interesting new voices in Scandinavian contemporary photography. Merging and remixing stereotypes and pop imaginary from Asia in a visual language which is savvy and witty, personal and universal at once, he produces striking images, as simple as they are powerful, as hilarious as they are relevant. Ngọc Nguyễn holds an MFA in Photography from HDK-Valand Academy of Art and Design in Gothenburg (2018) and a BA in Visual Communication from Danish School of Media and Journalism in Copenhagen (2016). He was exhibited at NEVVEN (Bologna, 2024), Oblong (Copenhagen, 2023), Fotografisk Center (Copenhagen, 2023), 3:e Våningen (Gothenburg, 2023), Galleri Format (Malmö, 2022), Galleri Golsa (Oslo, 2021), and Röda Sten Konsthall (Gothenburg, 2018) among others. Ngọc Nguyễn lives and works in Copenhagen, Denmark.

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