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New York: Truong Cong Tung: Trail Dust

By Qingyuan Deng



Installation view of "Trail Dust" by TRUONG CONG TUNG at Canal Projects, New York, 2024. Photo by Izzy Leung. Courtesy the artist and Canal Projects.

Trương Công Tùng
Trail Dust
Canal Projects, New York

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For his recent solo exhibition at Canal Projects, Vietnamese artist Trương Công Tùng created a semi-immersive environment that experimented with alternative forms of land sovereignty and stewardship in all their mysterious material effects. Part of the mystique of “Trail Dust” came from the site-responsive and iterative nature of Tùng’s methodology, responding as he did to the basement of the New York contemporary art center with its humidity and lack of natural light. The environment Tùng built evoked the premodern forests in Vietnam’s Central Highlands through a profusion of spatial arrangements that subjugated perception to a mist of pure affect and atmosphere. The result was an ever-evolving irrigational apparatus *The state of absence – voices from outside* (2020–) that never quite settled into its full potentiality until the very last moment.

Untraceable yet persistent hums permeated the environment, demanding close aural attention. The sounds emanated from invisible streams of water channeled through a network of clear plastic tubes. These tubes then connected low platforms that resembled gardens filled with dirt and seeds, stand-ins for the soil of Gia Lai and Đắk Lắk provinces. Lacquered gourds of varying sizes and colors were installed on or nearby the platforms, also connected by tubes. At several junctures bubbling water served as reminders of the abundance of movement within larger systems, in spite of being hidden. On one of the platforms, a black pond from which bubbles emerged further obscured the system’s activity. *Long Long Legacies* (2021–), a heavy drape of beaded curtain made from seeds of nonindigenous vegetation introduced to Vietnam to serve the French colonial plantation economy (and later integrated into the agricultural modernization plans of the Communist regime) flanked the right side of the room. Burdened by its own troublesome materiality, the drapes do not conceal. Rather, they are caught between states of collapse and expansion, evoking the history of southern Vietnam’s ecosystem.

While untamed growth of mushrooms and wild grass were visible on a number of the platforms, “Trail Dust” (the name of which derives from the eponymous herbicidal warfare program conducted by the US military during the American War in Vietnam that weaponized hunger against the Viet Cong and resulted in mass death) was not an exhibition that uncritically celebrated an imagined nature uncontaminated by industrial activity. Instead, it showcased the way in which flows of elemental life, bound up with the porous confines of modern technology, continue to be autonomously established without much human engagement or understanding. It was, in essence, a heterotopia that mined fixated events of haunted histories for uncertain ends.

Here, vitality became secondary to forms of speculative representation that generated cryptic images. A video, *The Lost Landscape #1* (2021), looping in the back of the basement, is a montage consisting of close-ups of glass eyeballs of taxidermized animals exhibited at the Natural History Museum in Paris. The unmoving gaze has a clinical, documentary nature, dealing with the affective intensity of Vietnamese folklore (allegedly, the last image animals see before they die is forever reflected in their eyes). Different animals appear in the video, but their cold, empty stares reject viewers’ curiosity (or interpretation), resulting in an interrogation of our perverse need, as humans, to subjugate tradition for the sake of technology. A few lacquer paintings depicting unknown, ghostly organic forms were also included. The laborious process of layering and sanding these paintings is perhaps a fitting metaphor for how specters conjured from Vietnam’s modern history generate cartographies of dark ecologies in today’s changing landscape.

“Trail Dust” was an exercise in opacity, with Tùng investigating the impenetrable distance between human and nonhuman others. Knowing our susceptibility to historical thinking and narrativizing, he created an environment teeming with ungovernable overgrowth in a state of confusing temporality, slipping between past and future.