

Phung-Tien Phan Unfolds the Many Roles We Play in Life

The artist's first exhibition at DREI, Cologne, reflects on the social implications of everyday objects and the permanent switching between self and role

BY [MORITZ SCHEPER](#) IN [EU REVIEWS](#), [REVIEWS](#) | 13 JAN 20



Phung-Tien-Phan, *Lil Emo*, 2019, toy trucks and photographs in presspan collecting vitrines with sliding glass panes, 6 parts, each: 60 × 80 × 9 cm. Courtesy: the artist and DREI, Cologne

Phung-Tien Phan's name has been circulating in the Rhineland art scene for some time now. Born in Essen, she studied at the city's Folkwang University of the Arts and then at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Some were struck by her tombstone sculptures at Bonner Kunstverein in 2016; others know her as the co-founder of the project space Belle Air (2014–17) in Essen. Nevertheless, her exhibition 'biste links oder frustriert' (Are You Left Wing or Frustrated) at DREI in Cologne marks the artist's first solo show in a commercial gallery.



Phung-Tien Phan, 'biste links oder frustriert', 2019, exhibition view, DREI, Cologne. Courtesy: the artist and DREI, Cologne

As in many of her previous works, the sculptures *Volkswagen (Longevity)* and *Volkswagen (Saigon)* (all works 2019) explore the social implications of everyday objects. Both take the form of wheeled wooden cabinets that follow the same set-up: the bottom compartments are painted in monochrome – one in cream, the other dark violet – and

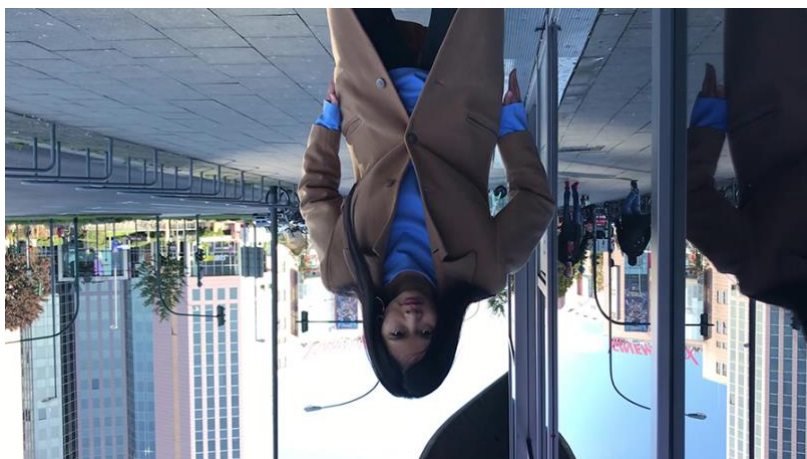
equipped with doll's house furniture, resembling sparse studio apartments. Beds, computers, hot plates and record players re-create a miniature interior that recalls urban dwellings. The shelves above are dedicated to shrines resembling those found in Vietnamese Buddhist households, which are central to ancestor worship. Here, plastic rice, tea, a bottle of beer and a can of condensed milk are placed as offerings for the dead. Instead of the traditional candles, yellow and red lightbulbs illuminate the altars. Atop each cabinet, espresso machines serve as vases for bouquets of bamboo twigs and flowers. With their cheerful compositions, Phan's sculptures seem to explore the elements of singledom and family life, basic comforts and material aspiration.



Phung-Tien Phan, *Volkswagen (Saigon)* [detail], 2019, pressspan, wood veneer, Multiplex plate, wheels, dollhouse furniture, acrylic paint, lamp, devotional picture, teapot, pot with chopsticks and coaster, bowl of rice, spoon, beer, toothpicks, incense, sieve carrier, espresso machine, plant, 141 × 50 × 50 cm. Courtesy: the artist and DREI, Cologne

That the transition from childhood to adulthood (and, eventually, parenthood) isn't always smooth is reinforced by a scene from the video *Actress & Actors*, which focuses on a man's marriage proposal. In the presence of his wife, the husband tells us that his plan was set up perfectly during a family vacation in Hong Kong but, right after he popped the question, one of their children wet themselves. Just as life can't be scripted, so Phan's video has no overarching plot; rather, individual shots and sequences stand out in their own right.

Actress & Actors has a wonderful medley-like quality, tacking together disparate elements through highly stylized edits and unusual shots, blending them with pop songs and dubbed dialogue from Hollywood films. The video's opening scene shows the artist shifting from her role as an actress to that of a director, emphasizing the many parts that we have to play in life. Elsewhere, two young men who are sometimes filmed in private and sometimes perform stilted dialogues in scripted situations highlight how people play up for the cameras. The line between filming oneself and being filmed, between being oneself and playing a role, becomes increasingly blurred.



Phung-Tien Phan, *Actress & Actors*, 2019, video still. Courtesy: the artist and DREI, Cologne

The great thing about this exhibition is its accessibility. We can all relate to playing roles in public or private, to growing pains and a version of adulthood that isn't what we had envisioned for ourselves. In spite of this, Phan manages to wrest so much beauty from the everyday, reminding us why we go on nonetheless.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell