

**Tammy Nguyen**  
*A Comedy for Mortals: Purgatorio*  
March 13 – April 20, 2024  
London



Tammy Nguyen, *Angels Carrying Crosses on Mount Purgatory*, 2023 (detail)

“This mountain is so formed that it is always wearisome when one begins the ascent, but becomes easier the higher one climbs.”

— Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*

Lehmann Maupin presents *A Comedy for Mortals: Purgatorio*, Tammy Nguyen’s first solo exhibition in the United Kingdom, which spans two floors of the gallery’s location in Cromwell Place. Featuring new paintings, works on paper, and a sculptural artist book, *Purgatorio* is the second exhibition in a three-part series based on the *Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri’s canonical masterpiece of Christian literature. *A Comedy for Mortals: Inferno* opened in Seoul in March 2023, and the series will culminate in 2025 with *A Comedy for Mortals: Paradisio*, Nguyen’s first exhibition in New York. Additionally, *Purgatorio* follows Nguyen’s recent debut solo museum exhibition at the ICA/Boston.

Nguyen’s multidisciplinary practice explores the intersections between geopolitics, ecology, and history, using narrative to intertwine disparate subjects through artmaking. Across her mediums, Nguyen’s work aims to unsettle, and the tension between her elegant forms and harmonious aesthetics often belies the nature of her storytelling. She probes this contrast between form and content by confusing the visual plane, which she achieves by creating intricate visual metaphors nestled within many layers of diverse material. Nguyen works with watercolor and vinyl paint, repeatedly obscuring and revealing her subjects to build friction.

In Nguyen’s version of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante’s three epics act as a metaphor for the geopolitics of Southeast Asia during the Cold War. Nguyen constructs narratives that explore the moral gray areas that permeate global history, probing the power language has to shape these ambiguities. Her world building is often ripe with inversion—in *Inferno*, Nguyen tracked Dante and Virgil’s descent into hell against the Space Race—up is down, day is night, and large is small. In *Purgatorio*, as Dante seeks to purify his soul by ascending Mount Purgatory with Virgil as his guide, Nguyen plots a simultaneous descent into her version of the Grasberg Mine (a project conducted in West Irian, Indonesia from the 1930s–80s).

The paintings in *Purgatorio* are united in formal qualities but marked by distinct characters—from statuesque angels appropriated from Gianlorenzo Bernini sculptures, to prehistoric dinosaurs, to a host of international leaders from the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia. Nguyen immerses these characters in a lexicon of imagery that sets the scene for her version of purgatory, which takes the form of an island that exists in liminal time and space, each occupant a kind of refugee in an eternal state of waiting. In *Angels Carrying Crosses on*

*Mount Purgatory* (2023), angels ascend the canvas, nocturnal luna moths trace the path of the moon, seashells dot the sky like stars, and ancient fern fronds rhythmically punctuate the picture plane. In *Natural Love is Always Inerrant* (2024), Jesus Christ himself arrives by boat to the shores of purgatory, bearing a crucifix; the composition is divided in two, the figure at center framed by sunset on the left and sunrise on the right.

During the Cold War, Southeast Asian countries were contending with the anxiety of both looming conflict (augmented by the destruction wreaked by the atomic bomb in Japan) and their new sovereignty. Here, ancient monsters reference this kind of existential and ever-present menace. In several paintings, including *Love Can Never Turn its Sight* (2024) and *What Sin is Purged Here in the Circle Where We are Standing?* (2024), prehistoric dinosaurs emerge from and retreat into the surrounding fauna. Nguyen’s dinosaurs allude to one monster in particular—Godzilla, whose depiction first developed in 1950s Japan. In this way, the dinosaurs in *Purgatorio* reference the continued threat of atomic warfare and serve as a vehicle for the address of traumas past. Other works, such as *I Pray to God That This Asian-African Conference Succeeds* (2024) and *World Peace is Not Merely the Absence of War* (2024), depict individuals who were present at the Bandung Conference, where African and Asian leaders gathered to imagine a future independent from Western influence and control. These figures permeate the environment of purgatory, gesturing towards the endurance of ideas and resistance.

*A Comedy for Mortals: Purgatorio* culminates in a large-scale artist book entitled *Mine, Purgatory* (2024), which itself takes the form of a mountain and opens inwards like a mine. With each turn of the page, the reader descends into the mountain, growing closer to the center. The pages themselves contain excerpts from both the Bandung Conference and Dante’s cantos in *Purgatorio*; Nguyen manipulates the stanzas to create her own idiosyncratic translation, which becomes increasingly complete as one reaches the end of the book. As the cantos conclude with Dante’s discovery of his true love, Nguyen’s reader approaches the center of the mine, and treasure is unveiled: at the base of the book is the golden imprint of a dinosaur foot. Through an investigation of the materiality of language, Nguyen’s artist book in *A Comedy for Mortals: Purgatorio* offers a paradigm for the formation of both identity and history, and in their intersection, probes the good, the bad, and the morally ambiguous.



Tammy Nguyen (b. 1984, San Francisco, CA, lives and works in Easton, CT) creates paintings, drawings, artist books, prints, and zines that explore the intersections between geopolitics, ecology, and lesser-known histories. A story teller, Nguyen's multidisciplinary practice takes two forms—her more traditional fine arts practice, which encompasses her lush, dense paintings, as well as her prints, drawings, and unique artist books, and her publishing practice, embodied through her imprint, Passenger Pigeon Press, which creates and distributes *Martha's Quarterly*, a subscription of artist books and interdisciplinary collaborations. Across both domains Nguyen's work aims to unsettle, and the tension between the artist's elegant forms and harmonious aesthetics often belies the nature of her content. The confusion this dissonance creates becomes generative, opening space for reevaluation, radical thinking, and the dislodging of complacency.

Many of Nguyen's paintings expand from her unique artist books, often through engagement with similar themes, questions, or investigations. Throughout her work she has explored a range of topics and ideas, including the Bandung conference, the first large-scale Afro-Asian conference which was attended by world leaders from 29 non-aligned countries during the Cold War, Forest City, a sprawling off-shore development project in Malaysia, and the red-shanked douc langur, an endangered species of monkey native to Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. A recent artist book series, *Four Ways Through a Cave* (2021), relates Nguyen's travels through the Phong Nha-Ke Bang karst in Vietnam, significant for its numerous underground caverns and passageways and its history in the Vietnam War as a crucial area of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The book simultaneously invokes Plato's allegory of the cave—the recognition of truth through the loss of

illusion—and conveys the sense of physically moving through a cave, with circular-shaped cutouts that shift from page to page, tunneling through the book and transforming the reader into a momentary spelunker.

In 2008, Nguyen received a Fulbright fellowship to study lacquer painting in Vietnam. Her recent paintings reflect influences of this traditional technique in their remarkable flatness, colored grounds, use of gold and silver leaf, and her rich, intricately layered compositions. In Nguyen's newest paintings she re-envision the Stations of the Cross, filling the picture plane with references ranging from the biblical, to the historical, to the contemporary. Fighter jets fill the sky of one station, in which Jesus' face has been transformed into a commedia mask, while in another the outline of a Pan American airliner can be identified. Commercial ships emblazoned with names like Enterprise, Constitution, and Truth sail across the 14 panels, implying the deep interconnection between commerce, colonialism, religion, and global politics.

At its core, Nguyen's, collaborative, research-based practice is propositional, exploring ideas and conjectures for ways of looking at the past, examining the present, and imagining possible futures. Across her work, Nguyen addresses the question of how one reads, both visually and linguistically, and she considers the idea of multiple narratives being told simultaneously, held together by the edges of her compositions or spines of her books.

Nguyen was born and raised in San Francisco, and received a B.F.A. from Cooper Union in 2007, and an M.F.A. from Yale in 2013. Select recent solo exhibitions of Nguyen's work have been organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (2023); Lehmann Maupin, Seoul, South Korea (2023); Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn, NY (2022); Nichido Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan (2022); François Ghebaly, Los Angeles, CA (2022); Tropical Futures Institute, SEA Focus, Singapore (2022); Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY (2021); Lightwell Gallery, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK (2019); Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA (2019); Mariboe Gallery, Peddie School, Hightstown, NJ (2018); The Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL (2017); and Ground Floor Gallery, Brooklyn, NY (2017), among others.

Nguyen has been included in numerous group exhibitions, including *Still Present!*, 12th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany (2022); *Past/Present/Future: Expanding Indigenous American, Latinx, Hispanic American, Asian American, and Pacific Islander Perspectives in Thomas J. Watson Library*, Thomas J. Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY (2022); *Greater New York 2021*, MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY (2021); *Nha*, The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (2021); *Face of the Future*, The Rubin

Museum, New York, NY (2018); *Bronx Calling: The Third AIM Biennial*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, NY (2015); and *DRAW: Mapping Madness*, Inside-Out Museum, Beijing, China (2014).

Nguyen's artist books are in many notable public collections, including Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT; The Center for Book Arts, New York, NY; Clark Art Institute Library, Williamstown, MA; Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Mayer Library, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York, NY; New York Public Library, New York, NY; Philadelphia Museum of Art Library, Philadelphia, PA; Thomas J. Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Wesleyan University Library, Middletown, CT; and the Whitney Museum of American Art Library, New York, NY.

In 2023, Nguyen was named as a Guggenheim Fellow; she has received numerous other honors and distinctions including NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship in Painting, New York, NY (2021); N-Square Network Fellowship (2018); Scholarship for Advanced Studies in Book Arts, The Center for Book Arts, New York, NY (2014).

**LEHMANN MAUPIN**

Rachel Lehmann and David Maupin co-founded Lehmann Maupin in 1996 in New York. Since inception, Lehmann Maupin has served as a leading contemporary art gallery with locations in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. For over 25 years, Lehmann Maupin has been instrumental in introducing international artists in new geographies and building long-lasting curatorial relationships. Known for championing diverse voices, the gallery's program proudly features artists whose work challenges notions of identity and shapes international culture. Today, the gallery has permanent locations in New York, Seoul, and London, as well as team members based in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, and Palm Beach. In recent years, with growing opportunities in new markets, the gallery has opened seasonal spaces in Aspen, Palm Beach, Taipei, and Beijing.

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