

Tammy Nguyen

A Comedy for Mortals: Paradiso

June 5 – August 15, 2025

New York

“Open your mind to what I shall disclose, and hold it fast within you; he who hears, but does not hold what he has heard, learns nothing.”

—Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*



Tammy Nguyen, *O Good Apollo*, 2025

Lehmann Maupin presents *A Comedy for Mortals: Paradiso*, Tammy Nguyen's first solo exhibition with the gallery in New York, on view from June 5–August 15, 2025. Across a series of new paintings and works on parchment, *Paradiso* marks the culmination of a three-part exhibition series based on the *Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri's canonical masterpiece of Western Literature. Previously, *A Comedy for Mortals: Inferno* opened in Seoul in March 2023, and *A Comedy for Mortals: Purgatorio* opened in London in 2024. *Paradiso* comes on the heels of solo exhibitions at the ICA Boston, Massachusetts, in 2023, and the Sarasota Art Museum in Florida in 2024.

Nguyen's multidisciplinary practice explores the intersections between geopolitics, ecology, and history, using her unique visual language to intertwine disparate subjects and explore the moral gray areas that permeate global history. Across Nguyen's work, the tension between her elegant forms and harmonious aesthetics often belies the nature of her non-linear storytelling. Nguyen's research-based process involves a close reading of foundational texts across the Western canon. Formally, she works across mediums including printmaking, ink drawing, and painting to examine the contrast between text and image, creating rich visual metaphors within layers of material. By generating compositional push and pull between the visible and invisible, she invites the viewer to question preconceived notions of history. Often ripe with inversion, Nguyen's work presents fluid, spiritual worlds. In her version of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante's three epics act as a metaphor for geopolitics during the Cold War. In *Inferno*, Nguyen tracked Dante and Virgil's descent into hell against the Space Race, and in *Purgatorio*, she compares Dante's ascent of Mount Purgatory to the 1955 Bandung Conference and the Grasberg Mining project.

In *Paradiso*, Nguyen ascends into the celestial heavens through a body of new paintings and prints on parchment. Her work chronicles Dante's journey into the afterlife, where she explores the good and evil territories of beauty, love, and knowledge. Nguyen sets the scene for Dante's journey against the Cold War-era Space and Arms Race, which, on one hand, accelerated advancements in scientific knowledge and space exploration, and on the other, accentuated the looming threat of natural disaster, war, and the "military-industrial complex." Always in a state of flux, Nguyen's new work presents historical and divine subjects in sublime, floating environments, often seen suspended against an ornate backdrop of lush vegetation, abstract forms, and subversive symbols and motifs.

The paintings in *Paradiso* are marked by distinct characters and events—from eagles, Frankenstein, Dante, and Eisenhower, to the moon landing, Kennedy's notes from the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Eisenhower's 1961 farewell address. Using images and texts sourced from public archives, Nguyen's characters in *Paradiso* represent either divine insight or cautious warning. The latter is especially apparent in Nguyen's paintings that feature Frankenstein, who appears in scenes of natural disaster, punctuated by rhythmic stamps of Eisenhower's portrait. Standing on Mount Tambora—the volcano whose 1815 eruption sparked the global climate crisis that inspired Mary Shelley's novel—Frankenstein alludes to atomic technology and the ongoing threat of destruction. In several works on view, an eagle motif represents justice; these birds are seen soaring diagonally across lavish, sunset-toned atmospheres. Furthermore, the exploration of imperial structure is foundational to the exhibition, using Dante's *Paradiso* as a key text to unpack symbols and themes central to its ideologies. This is especially apparent in the exhibition's central work, *Love Justice, You Rulers of the Earth* (2025), where this titular phrase is spelled out by a giant eagle emerging from the center of the multi-paneled, cathedral-like composition.

A Comedy For Mortals: Paradiso also includes new prints on parchment, depicting characters encountered on Dante's spiritual journey. Here, he meets Beatrice, the love of his life, who replaces Virgil as his guide. In Nguyen's new etchings, she uses compounding printmaking techniques, including intaglio and screen printing, layering upon copper plates previously used in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. These prints reference Dante's beatific ascent, marking a return to the body as the ultimate vessel of wisdom and knowledge and to nature as the ultimate source of beauty and structure in the celestial realm.

Concurrent to the exhibition, *A Comedy for Mortals: Artists' Books of Tammy Nguyen* will be on view June 27–September 26 at The Cooper Union Library in New York. This presentation will showcase a selection of artist books from Nguyen's *Divine Comedy* series, including *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Presented together for the first time, these books bring the body of work in this series full circle, offering an exploration of the malleability of language and its power to construct and dissolve worlds.

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 The Herb Alpert Award in the Arts, California, LA (2024); NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship in Painting, New York, NY (2021); Scholarship for Advanced Studies in Book Arts, The Center for Book Arts, New York, NY (2014).

Artist portrait by Axel Dupeux.

**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 throughout Asia and Europe.

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