

Tran Luong

*When sky merges with Earth*

10 June – 07 Aug 2026

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Bortolami is pleased to announce *When sky merges with Earth*, the first U.S. solo exhibition of Tran Luong since 1999. Tran (b. 1960, Hanoi, Vietnam; based in Hanoi) has been recognized as one of the most influential figures in contemporary Vietnamese art, an iconoclastic and interdisciplinary artist known for both his dreamlike, atmospheric painting and pioneering work in performance and video art. As a curator, activist and founder of multiple nonprofit art spaces in Hanoi, Tran has also supported generations of artists within Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora.

Tran's work, regardless of medium, is deeply rooted in drawing as well as his formative experiences in extraordinary circumstances. When the U.S. first began to bomb Hanoi in 1965, he was 5 years old. His family took him out of the city and into the countryside, far from any schools. Tran's parents gave him some rudimentary art supplies, encouraging him to draw his surroundings to pass the time. As his temporary evacuation became seven-plus years away from school, Luong began an obsession with aquatic life.

*"I became fascinated with observing underwater life. I spent hours watching the creatures in small ponds or small canals. That underwater life is a whole different world to me. It's both magical and bizarre, yet also incredibly peaceful and endearing. This also connected to my mental state; when up on the land, life was tough. I was hungry, fleeing from place to place during the evacuation. Many times, bombs and bullets fell above my head. Death was close. That's why the underwater world resembles an image of peace, and imaginary world where I could escape and find salvation."* [1]

In his *Flowing* (1996-99) and *Under the Flowing* (2023-current) paintings on paper, a reflection on changes in the natural world persists in the form of stylized, two-dimensional depictions of animals and insects. Most commonly, Tran renders dozens of "amoebas" in his compositions – white, talismanic ovals with two black pupils which acknowledge the existence of life in all things and at microscopic scales. The paintings are rendered with gouache, ink and natural pigments on handmade Dó paper, a material produced in North Vietnam for centuries which is known for its porous, fibrous surface and archival permanence. The Dó paper is then mounted to a larger sheet of paper and stretched, like a work on canvas; its golden-brown color serving as an earthy ground for Tran's semiopaque paint applications. The titles acknowledge a Buddhist sensibility, to let things "flow" rather than to perceive challenges as hardships.

Tran's series of five *Tâm Tả* paintings, executed with oil and acrylic on stretched canvas in 2017, examines the history of Vietnam in five chapters. The paintings

begin with the country's mythological origins and progress to the dynastic era, foreign influences, civil war, international conflict and the painful aftermath of Vietnam's post-war recovery. Symbolic figures and objects bob within a metaphysical ether of rolling clouds; guns, sickles, hammers and Tran's unmistakable "amoebas" are rendered in flat cut-out shapes in bronze, copper or aluminum. The various shapes are collaged onto the paintings' surfaces, suggesting an animated movement as they glimmer in light.

The *Tâm Tã* canvases marked a return to painting after Tran "quit" the medium for over a decade. By the late 1990s, he began to feel disillusioned with the commodification of painting in Vietnam's budding commercial art market. After all, at the onset of his career, there was no art market to speak of, no venues which would willingly exhibit the work of Tran or his peers, such as the so-called "Gang of Five" group to which he belonged. Tran turned to increasingly conceptual work centered on video, installation and performance. And to some controversy within the Vietnamese state, his work became more critical of politics, government corruption and social issues.

*An Up-to-Date Dragon*, a 1998 installation, was first shown at Nha San Studio, a space Tran co-founded in Hanoi. Within the work, a small red plastic dragon is suspended in a transparent box. It is tethered to the floor and ceiling with eight lengths of chain to symbolize each cardinal and ordinal direction. Tran plays with the multi-layered symbologies of dragons in Vietnamese culture; from the mythological figure of Lac Long Quan, a water dragon known as the ancestral father of the Viet people, to the proclamations of 1990s communist leaders that Vietnam would become a "Dragon of Asia" as it industrialized. It is no coincidence that the "up to date" dragon used here is a cheap plastic, mass-produced toy, colored in the red hue typically associated with communist propaganda.

[1] Excerpted from a video interview with Tran Luong for Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai, UAE, 2024.