

Elise Nguyen Quoc

sous ultra-vide

24 September – 7 November 2026

Herald St is delighted to present Elise Nguyen Quoc: *sous ultra-vide*, the Paris-based, French artist's first solo exhibition in the United Kingdom. The exhibition brings together new works incorporating acrylic, paper, pigment, ballpen, graphite, dry pigment and resin on wood and wood panel. Blurring the boundaries between painting and drawing, these works depict what Nguyen Quoc describes as "remnants": traces of visual and physical encounters that she experiences, notices and photographs, before reproducing them through different techniques.

In her practice, Nguyen Quoc seeks to restore materiality to overlooked and elusive traces observed in daily life, which she describes as "remnants" or "leftovers". She carefully photographs these encounters before reproducing them with different techniques. "I take photos of fragments which dwell at the periphery of a big subject, caught within the flow of time: human or non-human marks that I think have the potential to become an inscription," Nguyen Quoc explains, describing her interest in drawing attention to otherwise overlooked encounters connected to both her life and artistic practice – be it the residue left in an empty paint tray or friction marks at the entrance to her apartment. "My practice is grounded in chance and the everyday: not in ideas; doing, wandering, cooking, cleaning, discarding... It is from these ordinary acts of life that my work emerges. No exalted genius here – I invent nothing," she continues.

The French title *sous ultra-vide* refers to a state of ultra-high vacuum: a condition of exceptionally low pressure in which so few particles remain that they can travel vast distances without encountering one another. Such conditions can be artificially reproduced using machines that remove almost all particles from a space, creating environments sufficiently empty for highly precise scientific observation and experimentation. Nguyen Quoc is interested in why we seek to create such emptiness: in the possibility that absence might allow us to better understand reality, while also providing the conditions through which new realities can be forged. Her interest also lies in the instability of emptiness itself – how what appears empty to one person may not be empty to another, and how spaces seemingly devoid of matter might nevertheless remain charged with traces, encounters and possibility.

Lining the entire length of the main gallery and raised just above the polished concrete floor, *Ralentissement du chant des oiseaux [Slowing down of birdsong]* (2026), is among Nguyen Quoc's largest works to date. The work continues a series in which ballpoint pens are directly applied to wood panels – here blue, red, and black. On close inspection, the densely accumulated gestures of biro become visible, built up through repeated hand movements from left to right working with the panels horizontal, parallel to the ground. Each work is scaled to the span of the artist's outstretched arms, with elements subsequently removed by hand-sanding. The resulting compositions appear to reference post-war abstraction and Colour Field painting; however, they are in fact representational. This work, for instance, continues from the making of an earlier large-scale ballpoint pen work, during which the artist's arms left friction-induced traces on the underside of its stretcher as she worked. It is an example of the way Nguyen Quoc's works evolve in succession, with residues from earlier works informing encounters that, in turn, spark new moments of significance and new images. Through the hand-driven process of repetition involved in producing this large-scale work, Nguyen Quoc's body moves almost automatically and unconsciously, arriving at an extremely dense and multifaceted composition: at once resembling rays of light, muddled tracks, signals and impulses, and both micro- and macro-elements of the cosmos.

Also on view are examples of Nguyen Quoc's works in dry pigment and graphite powder, such as *Pas le mot juste [Not the right word]* and *Sous ultra-vide* (both 2026). With these materials, she can pay much closer attention to colour than in her biro works, which are limited to fixed, standardised tones. Her Drawings series records the process of finding the precise pigments used in her dry pigment works: swatch-like mixtures of blues, greys and blacks, framed in Plexibox. This search for colour is among the lengthiest processes in her practice and is important to Nguyen Quoc as a way of revealing to viewers

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how she actually works. “The way I work is part of the work,” she reiterates. More than simply offering a behind-the-scenes glimpse, these works make visible an almost ethical commitment to process – akin to opening the door of her studio to the viewer. For Nguyen Quoc, every stage involved in making a work is as significant as its final form. Reflecting on her own interest in the work of other artists, Elise recalls that it was equally important for her to learn about their habits and studio processes: whether they worked alone or with assistants, and the particular conditions through which their work came into being.

“My works testify to the gap between living reality and its frozen image, where I surrender myself to my perceptual tools, to that sensitive and archaic instrument that is the body,” says Nguyen Quoc, continuing, “To transcribe an image is to change its mode of existence. It is to render perceptible the experience of making, where time is no longer capital but becomes the sign of a lived duration... To track, to scent, to follow a footprint or flattened grass, belongs to a fundamental mode of attention in the formation of human gestures. The body anticipates, translates and adapts; these operational chains, born from the demands of survival, persist in the way we enter into relation with the world. To reproduce a trace is to prolong this gesture, not by interpreting a sign but by taking up a trajectory again, by inscribing one’s own body into the continuity of a previous movement, of what remains of it.”

Elise Nguyen Quoc (b. Trappes, FR) lives and works in Paris, FR. In 2023, Nguyen Quoc received her MFA with honors from Beaux-Arts de Paris. Prior to that, she graduated with honors from Villa Arson and completed an exchange program at Kyoto City University of Arts in 2022. In 2024, a book on her practice, titled *Offering body and soul to a radical alterity*, was published by Gratin and included essays by Katia Leonelli and Elise Nguyen Quoc. Recent exhibitions include *Despite the teacher’s threats and the jeers of child prodigies*, Gratin, New York, US (solo, 2026); Elise Nguyen Quoc, Keijiban, Kanazawa, Japan (solo, 2025–26; and Brink, Herald St, London, UK (group, 2025–26).

– Text by Laurie Barron