

ROOM FOR WITHDRAWAL

Material Vitality and the Production of Meaning, *a conversation with Minh Lan Tran and Meryl Yanna*

Hosted by Francesca Hussey

Francesca Hussey (FH) :

Hello and welcome to what I hope will be the first of many talks with the artist, here at the ZÉRUÏ. My name is Francesca Hussey and this morning we will be discussing the powerful works of two artists in the collection we see around us, Minh Lan Tran and Meryl Yana.

Something we might want to bear in mind, as I introduce these artists to you today, is that I know very little about their lives or the things they use to drive their work. It's definitely been a pleasure, but we've had very little time to get to know each other. On the other hand, I've spent a considerable amount of time sitting with their artworks in this space. I work at the University of Arts London, just over the road and in Jerry's good graces I've hidden away in here trying to design workshops that though working with, and studying materials could explain concepts that I thought were exciting or important to share, particularly in the moment in history we're currently living. It didn't really take me long to realise that many of these ideas were right here, beautifully played out in the work around me. Each day that I sat here was a day they distracted, helped me teach, and gradually built a more complete and sensorial understanding of ideas I thought I already knew. I definitely have their blessings on this, but in the spirit of fallibility, I'll introduce these artist's work to you today as I've come to know them.

Minh Lan's work displays a deep acknowledgement of the life of the materials she works with, not by leaving them 'raw', pure and untouched, only to then overlay their communicative ability with human centered contexts or history. Milan seems to get up close, and has a sensorial engagement with them. She takes materials not only as they appear in our small blip of time, inert, impassive, or in need of us to complete them. She sees materials on their own terms, on larger time frames, and in vast systems of movement, to recognise the fundamental capacity for all stuff to transform. Our culture trains us to understand our world by cutting it into manageable pieces, and defining them through difference, but in Minh Lan's work we are given an opportunity to practice an alternative approach. She shows these substances to us by what they do, how they move, mix, and perform with her. Their behavior isn't controlled or stifled; we are presented with a site of mutual exploration – the outcome of congealing agency between her body and the substances in her work.

And with Meryl's work as well, we see a lot of dedication to the essence of things and an intimacy with materials. With her older works – which primarily take the form of the textural surfaces, we can see here // gestures to 'Wasted acts, Destroy soul' // – there is an implied labor with and responsivity to her processes. Which when taken into her newer works, in the more identifiable objects around us, appears to have given her the stability to cultivate an acute sense of balance. Multiple, conflicting aspects of the work are expertly held together. It swings from humor, sexuality, sincerity, and disgust - never settling in one place. Concepts that might float in the head as words are dissipated, given weight, and tethered to the real world – Legible in the objects she presents. In some cases, oppositional imagery competes for the same space, not as two separate objects placed in juxtaposition; contradiction sits simultaneously within one form. It flickers between, until you find a way to hold them both at once and offers bite to pluralistic theory

FH:

I'll start with Minh Lan.

The presence of the artist's body, and your movement, is very visual in your work. Despite this, you seem to, in no way, speak over the materials you work with. I'm not drawn to overlook their agency and read some gestural message you've left for me in the piece – where the physical matter of the work serves only as a mediating function between us. Instead, we're presented with the sight of an almost violent intimacy and sensorial exchange between yourself and the substances at work here.

How do you achieve such a delicate balance between what you impart, and the release of control over the material?

Minh Lan Tran (MLT):

I think the relationship with my paintings, when I paint, is like a dance. It's both a dance and a fight. So there's like movements of, as you were saying, intimacy, and sometimes it's violence. Sometimes it's very tender. It's a relationship with a being. I don't want to humanize it either. I truly believe that it's coming to life. At least, I think to paint you have to believe in the miracle that it is going to come to life. You have to believe in magic in a way. I think I truly have faith in the work coming to life. And then, on the other side of it, it's being honest with what's in front of you in your work. Especially in the gestural aspect that you were talking about, because I think each gesture has to be truly honest. Otherwise, if you look at yourself making, then the work dies. And so, I think faith and honesty are the two things to balance, so the work can have its own autonomy and can come to life slowly. But it's not easy. It's a fight. There are a lot of doubts, and layers that are erased. That's visible in the process – a lot of scratching, dissolving, adding. And so, yes, it's a conversation. It's a dance, a fight, all that.

FH:

Do you feel like you get a lot of support from the materials you work with to have that belief, that it's coming to something?

MLT:

Yes, I work with materials I love and that I truly desire. And so, I trust them. I trust them when sometimes they don't listen to what I want to make them say.

FH:

You seemed to have a very genuine interaction with your work, but are there any points where you feel like there is something that you don't want there anymore?

How do you deal with that?

MLT:

Materially, I cover, I erase, dissolve, as I was saying. But, I'm not scared of the work being bad, or looking bad, because I really believe in a constant transformation that's possible. So if I don't like it, if I'm almost disgusted by it, I like it because it's very challenging. It can become something else, and then it has another life. There's loads of cycles in the life of one painting. I find it exciting when it's chaotic and I hate it and it returns. Sometimes that's going to end, but sometimes it's just me. It's very exciting to work on. This is why I called it 'Space of Resistance'. It talks a little bit about that, about the work as a field of tension. It's all about the tension happening and then at some point, maybe, it will be made. And, sometimes not. You have to believe in the event happening at some point.

FH:

So you feel like you'd rather keep all the tension of that within the painting?

MLT:

I transform and I transform what's there. I try to do that instead of throwing it away. Sometimes that works, and sometimes it's just not possible.

FH:

So it's clear you really give a lot of consideration to the materials activity, when you're working. But, I think it's also interesting what's been noticed, especially by people who have been in the galleries most, looking after the work. They've seen with 'Move Through Me' subtle, slow, little changes happen throughout the day.

How do you achieve this?

MLT:

This one is made with salt and it's not sealed. That's why it's very sensitive to the environment. That's something I think I have in all of my works, where it reacts to light or to the environment, because the materials I use are quite organic. So, pigments, eggs sometimes, chalk. It all evolves with the temperature, the light, and so on. I want the work to have its own agency and that's something I'm trying to reach. I want it to have its own agency once it's out of me – once it's there.

FH:

Were you aware of what would happen to this work before it was placed in the gallery? Or, did you intend for it to be responsive to these particular environmental conditions, which you can't really predict ahead of time?

MLT:

I think it's a balance between giving the materials their own autonomy and still knowing what you're doing. You know, mastering your own work. It's something I'm still working on. I think of how religious images, or icons, were perceived as changing. They were changing with light, for example, and people have interpreted that as answers to their prayers. I'm not saying that for my work, but it's that agency that I find moving. It's a way to keep the work open for the viewer as well.

FH:

I think it's a lot easier for us to engage with, or derive meaning from, things that we can kind of see as living alongside us, and your work does this quite beautifully. It is such a quiet, almost secretive aspect to your work. Unlike my experience, where I have sat here for ages in the space with these pieces – with a more traditional gallery visit it's a quality that could go completely unnoticed.

What role does this withdrawal from accessibility play in your practice?

MLT:

Can you repeat the question?

FH:

Sorry, not to put you on the spot. I think it's something that's really very beautiful in your work. Almost like you are rewarding curiosity, or making room for a different experience, or more, a different way to experience artwork. You've left it its own life, to do as it will. And so, it's just as exciting if this slow, discrete quality wasn't something you necessarily intended to be there. The fact that it is, speaks of how much you give over to the artwork and let it decide. But, it seems like there are a lot of hidden, secret little aspects to many of your pieces.

Is this something that you yourself see as having a big role in your work?

MLT:

Yeah, I think there's a lot of little secrets I'm trying to put into my works. I mean, there are a lot of layers, and with each layer there is a lot of concealing as well. Through the process things come through, and I really believe in that. Believe that what comes through is what should be seen, and the rest is concealed for a reason. That belongs to the process. There's a lot of things you can't see in my work and what comes through is the secrets it can have.

FH:

Almost like they are not just your secrets? Secrets that you have, or are going to have, with the materials?

MLT:

Yeah, things are happening while you are painting. It's a very strange space, the space of the making. And, as I was saying, you need to be very honest with yourself and with the work. It's very dedicated in that sense. Everything you do has to be true.

I guess the truest things are what comes out, what connects it.

FH:

Material and color seem to be one and the same in your work.

So, I guess based on this true feeling that you have, is there any specific way that you select or deal with pigments and stains, that encourage this relationship you have with them?

MLT:

Yeah, I don't think I use colour as colour. Every material I use is taken as matter, or light. Matter, light, energy being balanced, and composing the work – creating an event. I don't think in terms of colour, or even materials. Really, it's as a whole.

FH:

You mentioned to me before, about a time where you were layering up a particular colour so much that it became monochromatic.

Where did you find a stopping point there?

MLT:

No, my work was in a good place at that point.

FH:

Were you in a good place at that point?

MLT:

No, that's right. So it was during lockdown. I was spending a lot of time in my studio and I was doing these huge paintings. They all ended up with loads of salt and loads of matter, and they ended up in almost black monochromes. So, very heavy. I was really missing the transparency and the lightness that I was actually looking for. It was stronger than me, and I was just colouring and colouring, concealing everything.

What was the question, sorry?

FH:

No, I was just sort of checking with you, really. Something I saw in your work was that it seemed to be not about the selection of colour; instead it was all about materials. But still, there was this huge sense of colour in your work, in terms of depth, and so on.

I was wondering where you found your stopping point. Were you saying that it's dependent on your feelings at the time?

MLT:

Yes, and also it's a question of weight and lightness with colour – and, transparency, opacity. Because, it's very easy to make use of transparency, but it's actually the transparency that lets things through. That can say something. It's through transparency. Just clarity in general. It's a balance again. But then, the way I use colors is really by desiring them. Sometimes I'm really craving a color, and then a few months later it appears in my work. But then, I still have my obsessive colours. Still, I don't really see it as colour, but then there are these dark purples, reds, or this ochre that I see as like golden lights.

FH:

I expect this works quite well. This transparency, with those kinds of colors that have a huge amount of depth to them anyway. So even with lighter tones, they still have that pungent quality to them. You have a very unique relationship, I would say, with these substances. It looks like you consider them in time, and give them a lot of room to behave outside of yourself, as we've discussed.

Is there a specific way in which these paintings // Gestures to 'Space of Resistance' // have informed that relationship.

MLT:

I actually started them as one piece. They were all attached to each other. And so, it was much more of a gestural thing. There was a lot of movement. Then I turned them around – changed them. And, it all became something else. I was thinking a lot about rhythm. How to have different layers of rhythm in one work. Just like in music, you don't often have just a single rhythm in a song. So, you have to compose a painting, almost like sound, in terms of rhythm. I think that's the only way you can make space and time meet, and make an event happen somehow. That's how I was dealing with matter and meaning.

FH:

Yes, I've seen that in your previous work. If we look at 'Untitled (incarnation)', you have these three paintings connected, with dripping pushed across, treating it as one surface. In this one they are split, and with the name 'Space of Resistance' I guess it gives it room for this rhythm?

MLT:

Yes, but this resistance I'm talking about, is also the resistance between all of this. It's almost like a poetic resistance. It's a meeting, but not really. There is a vibrational space that separates them.

FH:

Are there multiple parts of yourself, or identifiable differing modes of behavior, you bring to the materials you're engaging with. In each iteration maybe // Refers to 'Space of Resistance' // or at different points in a painting?

MLT:

These days I always start them by writing. So there is smaller writing and then bigger writings that are more adapted to the scale, to the space of the work. Writing then becomes movement somehow. It's a way of creating heat, creating energy in the work; in the structure. It's a way to encounter work also. // Quickly, rubs hand over palm, as if to create a spark // We are creating heat so something can happen. It's really a way of preparing the surface. That's how I prime my work. So, we have writing, then covering, rewriting, and then building layers. Building meaning from something and concealing again. And then, movement becomes matter. Light becomes matter. Light becomes movement. And, all of this becomes a whole. Sometimes it becomes very chaotic. Gray matter, like something that doesn't have meaning. Sometimes it comes to something. But, with the way I work, I give a lot of time to the work. I work on loads of different pieces at the same time. I leave and let them rest for a while, and then at the end I work very fast. I work maybe 6 or 8 hours, and I finish it, and then it's done. I create this late intensity, where I take over the work. I always leave agency to the materials at the beginning, and at the end I take control. Then it happens.

FH:

It sounds like you're connecting the agency of materials here, with your other works as well then. Like avenues? Because if you have a lot of them – beginning them all at one point and going between them – It's like prospecting. Not relying on everything inside you to already be there. It seems like you acknowledge that the experiences you have in your life are going into the work.

MLT:

Going into this is actually, I was talking about this with a friend of mine the other day. To accept each work is what it is, and not everything at the same time. Because, in a way, they're all part of one work. But, I have to accept that each work is one

thing, and the other is going to be something else. Everything doesn't have to be one way. It doesn't have to be a whole universe in one work, you know? It's fine if it's just one thing. It's something I'm working on.

FH:

I kind of like that you can have both though. That you can take a work as one work but also have this connection with the others.

MLT:

Yes, they are all parts of me. There is this poem by Miguel Hernandez – he's a Spanish writer, a poet – and he says "everything is full of you, and I am full of everything". If you interpret it in a mystical way, you think he's talking about God or whatever. But, I take it as being similar to the relationship I have with my work.

So it's like being full of each other; like when you are in love.

FH:

I think this is interesting. With these words, you take them as free to have multiple interpretations, whether God or things that you find in it. So, I think it's interesting that you use words to begin your practice. Taking some sort of direct and specific meaning, then breaking it down; turning it into something physical.

Do you feel like there's something more communicative added there, that that mitigates what's lost.

MLT:

There's a weird moment where language becomes something else, and I see the limits of written language – in grammar and linear structure. And, then at this point, they become something else. There's a weird transformation in meaning. Still, I always like to bring words back, so I don't want to get rid of them either. It's just a different kind of language that takes words as form, as gesture, as matter, as feelings. Actually, everything definitely starts from words. My work here // Gestures // is called 'The Last Word'. So, it was a way to talk about this, these words that just transform and don't stop being words.

FH:

I think this is something I admire in you a lot. You don't take an approach like 'I don't want it to be words any more, I want to turn it into something else'. You don't react, or more you don't make a reactionary response – where your trajectory bounces off or is oppositional informed by the thing you are responding to. You seem to relax. You still interact with it. You don't seem to push it away; 'Ohh I don't want to do this'. In this case, it seems you've gone into words to make something without them.

MLT:

I used to think I had an idea of what my work should be. Last year actually, I worked on trying to get rid of this. To stop thinking about what my work should be and to just be making. This goes along with the honesty that I was talking about. It's just being true to what you are. It is the only way work can be okay. Or, be something.

FH:

I don't have this written down or anything, this is more like a personal question. How do you get to that point? I don't know about anyone else but It's something I struggle with a lot.

// Laughter //

MLT:

I think being well surrounded. And then, meditation?

FH:

I think that may be one of those things where we are told and it's like 'yes! I should do that' and then I'm still here asking that question.

MLT:

But, I'm not there yet.

FH:

Oh yeah, it's a road, but you are on it most definitely. I'm still on the side, with my thumb out.

FH:

So.

Just as with Minh Lan's, your work Meryl, displays an intimate knowledge of and sensitivity to the materials you work with. There was this strange moment where you picked up part of your work. // Refers to 'Chthonic Hiss' //

Meryl Yanna (MY):

Ah, yes the penis stuff.

FH:

Actually, it was this kind of vessel underneath. It was just a strange moment in my brain, because – the way you were moving with it – it was clearly much lighter than I expected it to be. Correct me if I'm wrong, but to get to this kind of unplaceable material quality, and the quite unique textures that much of your work has, there must be hours of refinement and testing.

How does this interaction with the substances you engage with Affect the arrangement or the outcome? Now, obviously they are here, present in the work. But, how else does this relationship inform you?

MY:

I think it's an obsessive character trait of mine to be completely consumed by what I'm making. The process of making it is not set. I don't know where I'm going with it. I'm just making, and making it. I don't necessarily have a thing that I'm going towards as well. It's kind of like being in the dark, and finding your way through. That path is dictated by an interest in matter.

But yes, I guess they all look a bit like Stone. Rocky, earthy things. Because, I'm naturally attracted to these surfaces, and using these materials. It has my work looking like this, // Gestures to 'Secretion Pit' // and also, this // Refers to 'Cathonic

Hiss' // super shiny and reflective way. I was influenced by a kind of fetishism and BDSM parties. All that kind of subculture that's very present in London or Berlin, and so on. And yes, things got through I suppose.

FH:

You mentioned stone in your work. Stone can be thought of as quite impassive, or inanimate and still. But, I think in your work you see so much labor. Even with the ones that look really heavy, I didn't think 'oh that's just stone' – this must be so many different materials, all in one.

How do you know when you've found what you're looking for? As in, When do I stop putting this in? And, ahh maybe next time I should take that out.

MY:

I genuinely don't think about my work in this sense. I know what I've felt. I know what I've found when I'm looking for it... I'm not looking for it. As I say, it's in the dark. I know that something is working for me when I have no idea what's about to happen. It's like being in constant unpredictable situations. I come into my studio the next morning after just having done something, and it looks so different from the day before. It's in constant change and transformation. So, I guess that I'm happy with work when I'm detached from it. It's like there is a third party, and I'm arranging, putting things together, and letting them do their own thing, you know? But I'm not that involved, in a sense.

FH:

Does this sort of detachment allow you to go away, have a sleep on it, come back to something else? As in, what is this change within you that allows you to see your work differently?

MY:

I guess it's because I don't see art making as a finished product. I never think 'oh, I'm making a painting', 'I'm making sculpture'. It's like I'm making a body of work and I'm testing stuff out; like witchcraft, you know. It's like I'm mixing, making a body of work, testing things out. Witchcraft. All this different stuff in a potion. I'm mixing them and I'm trying shit. I'm putting them in the sun, and putting them under the rain. I put them in or under plastic. I let the humidity affect it.

MLT:

Nice.

MY:

//Laughter//

And yeah, I don't know, just constantly being surprised by what I'm doing; what the work is doing.

FH:

Yes, you seem to...it's not that you seem to take materials like 'oh this is paper over here. What is paper?' It's like you take this specific piece of paper over here, and have a particular relationship with that specific piece of paper. Even if it might be completely indistinguishable from another in the pile. It seems like such an intimate relationship.

How did you cultivate that? Or, perhaps this is just you?

MY:

No, so I mean, for this body of work, it was mostly made from paper. Prior to that I used to work a lot with sand. And then, covid. There was a lot of sand in my room, in my bed and AH! It suffocates me.

// Laughter //

MY:

...So I really needed to find another version of making. And, then there was just piles of tax papers and all the papers that were getting thrown around – thrown away. I was grinding it up, mixing it – my dad was redoing his bathroom – mixing it with cement, there was flour and tile glue, some paprika. Whatever I could find. Basically, whenever I'm in a space, that space feeds me. It dictates how the work is going to come out, rather than me looking for specific things. And then, new techniques are being developed for a constant *obsessive* making, and making and making and making. So not refining, because I don't know what I'm trying to achieve. I'm just making.

FH:

That's really quite an important distinction actually.

MY:

Yeah.

FH:

It seems like you let life happen to you when it comes to making.

Is this approach that you take because it's in the rest of your life? Or, is this something that's identifiable, when you notice or think 'this is me making now'?

MY:

Do you mean that I live my life in the same way that I make?

FH:

Yes, but more as in you don't seem to go out and look for particular materials. It's more like you notice them, meet them in the space around you. Maybe, let them call out to you.

Is this like a mode? 'Oh, I'm making now so I'm going to let all this happen to me' Or, is this like an approach that you can sustain all the time?

MY:

It's for my whole life. I don't know where it comes from, but it's like having a kind of trust or faith that it's going to be what it is. So, I'm not trying to have too much control over that and just be impulsive. But, not clichéd impulsive – you know. Just genuinely being in tune with the world that's happening around me, and letting things just happen the way that they're supposed to happen.

FH:

I guess what I'm trying to ask here is, is this like a chicken or the egg situation? Is it because you are like this with your materials it allows you to be this way in your life, or is it the other direction?

MY:

It's both. And, I don't think I could answer that. It's like when I was on my residency in India and I stepped on a fruit. I don't think – well it depends on who you are – but because I stepped on that fruit, it made a huge red stain. At the time I was reading a poem by Jorge Luis Borges, and he was writing something about sticky scarlet rivers. At the same time, I hear this story of a girl that was found in a river after having been raped. I was thinking of a sticky scarlet river and the fluid that this fruit had, the fluids that we have, and all the associations that were made in my head. I took all these fruits, I was looking through the trees and I brought all of this fruit back into the studio. I was painting with the fruit and having this really automatic mark making. It came from so many directions but, for some reason, my brain associated all of this to that. If I hadn't stepped on that fruit, if I was another person, or I wasn't making the works that I make, I would have just stepped on the fruit and just walked. But, I didn't.

FH:

There is quite an interlaced arrangement of your work around the work room, but it's still very easy to tell which ones are yours.

MLT:

Is it?

FH:

Do you not think?

MTL:

I think sometimes it's quite difficult to distinguish our works.

FH:

I think with Meryl's, I'm just seeing a lot of labor to produce the materials that you are using.

Possibly I'm wrong, but what would you attribute this particular character to?

For instance you have here quite shiny works // Refers to 'Cathonic Hiss' // and others they're matt but in my head they all still look like you, or a character that you have brought to it.

MY:

I think it depends on what other works are around mine. And, I would not agree, I think it's difficult to pinpoint whose work is by who in this case. I mean, they were curated by Jerry for a specific reason. So they all kind of interlaced with each other. Maybe, with my work, there is this similar color palette. They are brighter in the space than the other ones, I suppose, even though I only use natural pigments. And then, yeah, there is a very specific research on materials that kind of binds them together.

FH:

Yeah, no. Sorry for my shitty question

MY:

Sorry for my shitting answer

FH:

No, not at all.

FH:

So, the sculptures that you presented today are quite different from your previous work. I was just wondering, what inspired this quite dramatic change in direction.

MY:

The paintings came before the sculptures, and I was supposed to have a solo show, taking place in a synagogue. So, because of my Jewish background, I immediately started to question the stories from where I come from; what's allowed in a religious space, and what's not allowed. Especially in Judaism, because you have this whole thing about not having any images, or visuals, that are representative. Judaism is dictated by text and words only. So as an artist – and a visual artist – it was interesting to have visuals, of this kind, in a space where it's not really allowed. I was taking stories from the Torah that are kind of taboo, and aren't really spoken about. Like the story of Onan, for example. Like with this painting. The title is 'Wasted Act, Destroy Souls', which is taken straight from the Torah. Basically, Onan has a brother called Er, and Er has a wife. This guy Er dies, and then the only way his wife can remarry is to his brother. So Onan and his late brother's wife end up together, and during sexual intercourse he refuses to impregnate her. He ejaculates on the floor – all of this is described in really strong words, you know – So by doing this, he defies the word of God. He wastes his seed and wastes his potential for life. From this story, there's this concept called Onanism. This is where men who practice Judaism are not allowed to masturbate basically, and waste their seed. I was looking at these kinds of stories, and it freaked them out.

// Laughter //

MY:

....Even though it's there; it's in the Torah, you know. I'm not inventing anything. So underneath all these paintings there are these, crazy sexual, drawings of taboo stuff that are not really looked at. And, then covered up with opaque layers of whatever the fuck I put in there.

Then it was censored. A week before the show, they canceled it. And, I don't know, it gave me a sort of ... It's like when someone tells you 'don't do this'. You do it. So it, not inspired me, but made me do more. Do things that would be less visually ambiguous than I would normally do.

FH:

Because, as you were saying, you covered up these things that they might not want to be seen, and as it is, directly from the Torah, and I'm sure you were talking about your work with them.

Do you have any idea what it was they found so worrying about your work? Because, they stopped it just before you were due to exhibit right?

MY:

It's interesting because I'm not that close to the religion, but I was having almost a weekly coffee with the rabbi. It was a really interesting situation. We were discussing all these crazy subjects and I was speaking of masturbation with a rabbi which was strange. He was okay with all of it, you know?

But, there's the political side of the synagogue, the chairman or whoever works there. They were scared of the press, I suppose. I feel like if you're from any kind of background, anything that you say can have a really negative impact. So they

were probably scared of the works being read the wrong way, and having an article that says Judaism does this or Judaism says that. So supposedly it was this that stopped them from going forward with the show. But, the censorship was super interesting. Because, it's like you're censoring your work and your own word, or the book that you live by.

FH:

Yeah, it doesn't seem like you're having a reactionary... or negative reaction to that, in any way. But, it does seem as though – after this moment of disappointment – you got quite brave, and explicit with your work. Not just with its sexual nature, but also with its references. There are quite a few identifiable features in there.

Is this something you plan to continue with in the future, or was it more about responding to specific events, or things, that happened?

MY:

I think that...I don't know, let's see what I make. I am interested by what I'm making now. It feels more, as you say, like brave, adventurous. There's also my family background and this whole tension with what I make, and what I can show to my parents or my family; what they can be aware of. If my parents had come here, as I told you to, I'd have told you 'hide this!' // Refers to 'Cathonic Hiss' and 'Insatiable'

MY:

...It's like this constant tension, between what it feels like I can do, or cannot do. This goes within the work, and I don't think it's any decision that I make. It's almost a subconscious need for expressing what I can express or I can't express. And, this is where the work is.

FH:

Yeah, so I'm a complete heathen. No one is going to be associated with, or upset by what I do. So, it's nice to hear how this part of you affects your work. I suppose in a way you've already answered this, but in what way does this aspect go into it. The fact that you're having to keep some of it secret. As in, if your parents had come the other day and we had to remove parts, what would the work *be* then?

MY:

I think that the work I make — not all of it — is linked to the fact that I can't I can't do everything that I want to do. And, having limitations imposed on you is not necessarily a bad thing. If you were free to do whatever you wanted — whatever you wanted to do — then you wouldn't. I don't know what I would make, because I think that my work derives from some sort of conflict; always being stuck in the liminal space. An inbetween. That is not knowing. You know, like *Le cul entre deux chaises* [an ass between two chairs]. So it has this conflict, and this constant tension, where the work is also created. As you say with yours // Refers to *Minh Lan* // it's a chaos. It's a fight and a dance. And, it's adding stuff, It's going back into it, and scratching, and removing, and adding. Which is really similar to the way I make paintings. It works in a physical sense, and in a metaphorical sense — a psychological sense, and a philosophical sense. It has various layers.

FH:

I think part of the reason that your work is so captivating is how you've dealt with these identifiable references. In previous works they are textural, quite ambiguous, but even here // Refers to 'Cathonic Hiss' // there is still a lot of room for interpretation, in these more figurative objects. As I was saying, when introducing your work, there is this almost flickering

of contradictory imagery set simultaneously within one form. There is enough room for a multiplicity of meaning or varied approaches to your work, despite the fact you have more set identifiable things to bounce off.

How do you see this interplay between access and ambiguity in your work?

MY:

I think ambiguity is super important. I'm much more touched and attracted to things that are suggested, or implied, rather than having something that tells me what I should be looking at. But also with my work, I make things in almost a selfish way. In the sense that I don't necessarily think of how the viewer is going to be affected or interpret it in any sort of way. I'm not trying to impose any message, but rather, a meditative or contemplative feeling I suppose.

Yeah interplay, having things that are not juxtaposed, but as in having a penis and a nipple within the same form. They're both milking devices in a way.

MY:

You have this thing that squirts out some ... well they both have a white liquid coming out. It's the same with the udders back there // Refers to 'Insatiable' //. They are like udders, but also they look super phallic. It's this female organ that nourishes you and this udder provides you with all the myths around that. The cow as a mother. A cosmic cow. There is the myth of the cow, the Scandinavian one, where she licks a block of ice, and molds the world as we know it today.

But at the same time, it's super phallic. You have this gestural thing that comes into it, white stuff that comes out. But, this white stuff is also like a source of life, in a way. And then, it's not allowed in Judaism. There's this whole thing. I suppose that my own brain makes these really weird associations.

Not weird, but distinctive. As for the viewer, I don't know how they will take it. As in, I'm not expecting the viewer to think of all of this.

FH:

I think the fact that you're not trying to communicate something that's... you know, this is not word stuff. This is like some strange bridge between this and this. I think you do a really beautiful job of that. Is this something that you're going on to test? Like a sliding scale of identifiability. Being even more overt, and coming back a bit, or are you intending for this to just naturally come out of you.

MY:

I expect it to naturally happen, as it happens. Because as I said, in the process of making, I'm not necessarily thinking about any of this stuff. It's like I'm not even thinking at all. It's like I'm there but I'm not there. It's like I'm a puppet and someone, some other force, is coming through me, tells me what to do, without me necessarily thinking about anything specific. Even though I have all of this research, things I look at, and things that I read, at the back of my brain — also other things that are deep within — it just comes out the way it does.

FH:

Another point of envy then here. How have you got to a point where you can just relax and...

MY:

Am I relaxed?

FH:

You're intensely into it, but there is a certain sense where you relax into not watching yourself watching yourself think. You're just there and you're doing. You know, I want to know how you got there, because I want to do that.

MY:

Do you do stuff?

FH:

Yeah. But, I would constantly just be in my head. If it's something that I thought, 'Oh, this is important. This could be something'. I'll end up watching myself thinking about it.

MY:

I think that because I'm prone to naturally think this way, I have this one moment, and this one space, that allows me to not think that way. And, it's like you can not think. I don't know how to explain it.

FH:

It's again a question I'm asking that's really hard.

MY:

No, but because you're constantly thinking all the time with life, and then you have these spaces that are dedicated to... It's almost like a meditative reaction to all of this stuff that goes on outside of this space where you can just make.

FH:

Yeah I suppose if you could answer that you've be very famous

MY:

If I could answer that, I wouldn't be making art. It's because I can't answer that. It's because you don't have all these answers. You're looking for these answers, or even looking for these questions, through the process of making.

FH:

So, now I'd like to direct these questions to both of you.

I think you both mentioned this idea of concealment in your work. Layering over, and not throwing away. Especially considering that is something you both do, what would you say was behind your decision to work this way?

MY:

I dont think it's a decision. I think it's more of an instinctual way of making. I don't know what it is for you. // Directed to Minh Lan //

MLT:

I think I'm layering because I'm looking for a presence. I'm trying to provoke something. But also, with any good paintings there are already so many layers. But, yeah, it's a search. If it was ready at the first layer then, it's not fun.

FH:

Is it something you respond to, each layer?

MLT:

Yes.

FH:

How has exhibiting along side each other affected the interpretation or meaning your own work has for you. Or, does it? I should probably ask first.

MLT:

I think our works were not close, in the space, but I was shown quite close in relation to Alex's work. These sculptures were called voices, and I really like that relationship with my work. That it referred to voices, and sounds, and things that are semi errey — silent voices, and yeah resonance.

As I was saying earlier, showing together can make you feel quite safe.

ML:

You just understood. There was a commonality.

MLT:

There is a vulnerability that our works share. Strength and vulnerability that play in our works. And so, I think that's what felt safe.

FH:

Is this feeling something that will change your work as you go forward?

MLT:

We both have exciting projects with Jerry. So, I guess, it's already affecting something in the future. Other things will happen later for me.

FH:

And, what was your answer to the original question? // Directed to Meryl //

ML:

Same. Everything you've just said, I agree. Even though we had never spoken of it, there was a common underlay of understanding.

MLT:

We have never really spoken of our works.

MY:

Yeah, but it's like, I get you. Also I just like being together, doing this show and speaking about everyone's work. It all just happened in a very organic, natural way.

FH:

When I was sitting here trying to do a specific type of research, between the two of your works, they seemed to cover a lot of the things I was trying to communicate to students. Things I thought were important.

MY:

Like what?

FH:

Well, with yours you could talk about a pluralist notion of truth. It's important that we are able to hold contradictory ideas in our brains at the same time, or different opinions. We need to be able to communicate properly with each other and discuss; find truth that way. Rather than, relying on data collection, seemingly unbiased stuff like that, and presuming objective truth to reside there. It's part of it but there also needs to be a whole conversation between various perspectives. I think this is important particularly for students to take with them to their work.

And, with yours // Refers to Minh Lan // there's no hierarchy between yourself, the materials, and anything else really. The way you do this, you don't split anything off from everything else. It stops us from having humans up here, then animals here, nature // hand gestures from a higher to a lower position, and lower again //, and so on. Not only do you remove that hierarchy, it seems, but it's also like you're doing this by seeing them as things that interplay and 'intra-act' with each other. It's really nice to play with all those aspects together.

With that in mind, there's quite a few features of your work that might be associated with various 'New Materialist' areas of study.

Is that something that you would identify with your practice, or want it to be associated with?

MLT:

I mean, I've been very interested in New Materialism, but then I think I'm more interested in it as a theory, and in relation to other people's work. Because, for example, I love David Hammons' works and I think he's very relatable to New materialism. The way he uses materials is not with a symbolic meaning, but it is associated with a meaning. Whereas, I don't really think with that linear kind of signification. I don't really think of materials in terms of what they signify. For me, they're like intermingled. Matter is substance and significance at the same time. I think more in terms of substance *than* significance. But, I think New materialism is a theory that is still about something that signifies, about discourse. I believe more in embodiment.

FH:

And, I think this goes to show the difference between the various areas within New Materialism. That sort of embodiment you're speaking of would go along with — well we've spoken of, and I know you're quite into — Karen Barad and her 'Agential Realism' and then with others this signification is, as you were saying, a more direct, causal, chain of events. With hers there's no specific direction, it's a mutually transformative thing. And, your work really gives that to me.

FH:

Again the same question for you. // Refers to Meryl //

MY:

I would answer in a similar way. I think New Materialism has space, its place, and it's a movement that I love. However, I don't think it applies to the way that I work. Even though people in the past — especially tutors and people who I have had conversations with — try to impose a New Materialist theory onto my work. Even though it has nothing to do with it. Even though I do get why it would. People ask me, 'so do you use turmeric because you're from Morocco', and I would say, no, I use it because it's there. It was in the kitchen and then it started reacting with cement, and then it became red because cement heats, and when you heat turmeric, it becomes red. All these reactions are between the materials themselves. I'm not necessarily trying to dictate the meaning of where the material comes from, and why am I using test papers in my work, or my sister's GCSE papers. All of this has no place in the way that I make it. It's more about letting the materials have their own voice; do their own thing.

FH:

I mean, I know I'm bringing these things up to be quite antagonistic. I think you're quite right. I think theories and things like that shouldn't be attributed to work unnecessarily. Because that can sort of talk over your work really. But, I thought it might be quite interesting to discuss the different areas of it just because — you know how your tutors are telling you you are using turmeric because of this — which is a really shallow view on your work. Whereas, in other areas of New Materialism, they would really appreciate that you are about the essence of things.

From what you've said, you're looking at the material as it is; as it presents itself to you.

Do you think, possibly, the *difference* between those two aspects are valuable to your practice?

MLT:

Which aspects, sorry?

FH:

Between this kind of shallow view. Which is like 'you use turmeric because you are from Morocco'. And, then one which acknowledges that you're really listening to materials. Something which is quite explicit in 'Vital Materialism'.

MY:

I mean, I think that they're both important and they both have interplay with each other. There's like a dialog between these two views, but I would lean towards one more than the other. But actually, if I wasn't from these kinds of countries, if we go to Morocco and there's literally kilos of spices in the kitchen, maybe it starts from there. Just because it's there. As I said, the space that I'm in feeds me. But, then it stops being about where the material comes from, and I'm having a genuine interest in the aura of the material. It's properties, agencies and everything else in between. .
