

The grafting process involves cutting into the branch of a trunk (called the rootstock) with a sterilized pruning knife and attaching with twine a branch from a different plant (the scion), then waiting patiently for the tissue of the two plants to grow together. Grafting is one of many ways a gardener may exercise control over nature.

Huong Ngô's first solo exhibition in Colorado features photography, prints, sculpture, fabric, plants, and sound. The newly commissioned works include a series of blind-embossed prints that reproduce some of the earliest illustrations of grafting; a sculpture of branches held together by metal clamps that emits the sound of its own making; plants from the artist's collection hanging in front of wallpaper picturing herbarium samples collected by French scientists in Indochina; and stitched-together handmade dó paper, which is made from the bark of a tree grown in northern Vietnam. Complementing and contextualizing these are earlier works that the artist made in response to her research on Vietnamese resistance to French colonialism.

Whereas grafting involves cutting, joining, or fixing, Ngô's newly coined word "ungrafting"—also the title of the show—suggests a healing of the historical record via imagery, language, and material matter. But this healing is not a simple smoothing-over, not an elision of past harms. Rather, it operates via unsettling and troubling, and the scars remain visible. Specifically, rather than seeking to undo histories of violence and colonization, "ungrafting" is Ngô's suggestion for attending to them instead, and celebrating resistance and care along the way.

Ngô began her research for the new works with a visit to the French national archives in Aix-en-Provence, where she discovered photographs documenting trees and tree grafts imported by French colonists to Indochina in the early twentieth century. She was intrigued to notice that most of them feature an Indigenous person from the region, but likely just for scale; the purpose of the photographs was to document and catalog the European trees in their new environment, not the lives of the local people. In one picture, a young man stands behind an elm tree, his face taut and his gaze looking both at and beyond the camera, seemingly oscillating between piercing defiance and resignation. Each photograph in the archive bore an inscription, and this one read: "native elm tree bent under the load of fruits." This caption, attached as it is to one of the few photographs picturing a native plant (as opposed to an imported one), has a patronizing, even

violent tone, suggesting that both the plant and the unmentioned person will not be properly maintained without foreign intervention and control.

Using the Van Dyke printing process—a type of contact print common at the time the original pictures were made—Ngô reproduced the photographs but skipped the usual fixing chemicals at the end. This omission opens the resultant prints, titled *Latent Images (Grafts)* (2024), to a gradual degradation, and repeat visitors will notice a visible darkening of their rich sepia tones over the course of their display in the galleries. Inviting deterioration into a work of art may come as a surprise, since it seems so antithetical to the remit of museums and archives to conserve materials for as long as possible, preferably forever, by controlling climate and access. But Ngô’s modification of the printing process via a gradual fade intentionally injects instability into the archival record. In this way, the artist asks us to acknowledge how the images’ making is bound up in the graft that was the French colonial project—to tend to the damage and pain it inflicted and is inflicting still. Although the images fade, they will never entirely disappear; a ghostly index will always remain.

In addition to attending to painful histories, ungrafting is also a recognition of the resistance and solidarity that emerges therefrom. Collectively titled *To cut, to bleed, a rust-colored river* (2024), three cut and sewn-back-together pieces of fabric hang from mahogany and white oak armatures. The artist applied copper, iron, and Colorado soil across the sutures of the fabric in one work, while in another she used the same materials to print a stanza from a poem that recounts the history of the French minting coins in Vietnam with iron, which rusted and became unusable. The last work in this series reproduces the phrase “Land to the tillers, freedom for the workers.” This slogan was a popular refrain in the 1940s tenant-farmer uprising in Vietnam that eventually resulted in major land reforms in the 1970s. The words in these works were printed using a condensed typeface with a bold outline, but given the nature of the copper, iron, and soil, they inevitably bled and spilled across the surface of the fabric, defying the control of language. Iron is the metal that makes Colorado soil vibrantly red, and the Spanish word for “red colored” was the name given to the territory in 1861, and to the state in 1876. In the present, corporations mine copper in the US state of Arizona, a practice in direct conflict with the land sovereignty of tribal nations. “Land to the tillers” thus aligns with present-day movements such as Land Back

that are calling for Indigenous land sovereignty across the globe, demanding care and respect for nature over and above individual or corporate ownership.

*Graphs* and *Skin/Giấy Tờ Giấy (I, II)* (both 2024) offer a form of care that emerges out of the graft. The former is a work that Ngô made with branches collected by her young son, and the latter documents a centuries-old Vietnamese form of papermaking. Ngô experimented with making her own version of the paper, carrying on this tradition. Carefully stitched together along their horizontal bands, the sections are layered to create volume and movement. They offer us another version of the historical record, one that again ungrafts.

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