

AWDB Spotlight: Interview with artist Tuan Vu

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AWDB speaks to Vietnamese artist Tuan Vu in his studio in Montreal, Canada. His practice follows in the style of the Parisian artist group Les Nabis*, combined with influences of Japanese prints. Vu's artworks portray the beauty of unpredictable mistakes, creating abstract forms and unique imagery in sync with his state of mind. Through the chaos and doom of life, he aims to create a dreamy landscape in his works that bring hope and appreciation to our surroundings. His current solo exhibition, 'Elysium', at Kristin Hjellegjerde in London, presents Vu's visions of paradise through paintings inspired by landscapes from his home country of Vietnam, to the South of France, to Japan.



Tuan Vu, 'Les Arômes d'un Après-Midi', 2023, Oil and oil sticks on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist

What artworks are you presenting for 'Elysium', and what message do you hope to communicate to the viewers?

In these bodies of work, I aim to transmit a message of hope to viewers amidst the turmoil of our post-pandemic world, caught between the shadows of conflict and economic instability. Through these pieces, I seek to illuminate the resilience of the human spirit, reminding us all that even in the darkest of times, there exists a glimmer of hope. My hope is that each viewer will find solace and joy within these creations, carrying with them a piece of happiness as they navigate the uncertain landscape of our era.

How has your upbringing informed your artistic practice, especially since living and practicing in the diaspora?

I wasn't born in Montreal, Canada, but my family were boat people. I came here when I was 8 or 10 years old, and vaguely remembered being on a boat and standing on adults' shoulders to survive, then being imprisoned because we tried to escape the country [amid the Vietnam war]. To me that isn't a trauma, but a journey of losing everything and starting again. My experience as a member of the Vietnamese diaspora in Canada has allowed me to explore themes of identity, belonging, and cultural hybridity. Living between two worlds, I navigate the complexities of cultural assimilation while seeking to celebrate the diversity of my background.

In my artistic practice, I strive to bridge the gap between cultures, offering a space for dialogue and reflection on the nuances of diasporic experience. Through my work, I hope to challenge stereotypes, amplify marginalised voices, and foster a greater understanding of the complexities of cultural identity. Ultimately, my upbringing as a Vietnamese Canadian artist has imbued my practice with a sense of purpose and meaning, driving me to explore the intersections of culture, identity, and belonging in a rapidly changing world.



Tuan Vu, 'Stardust', 2023, Oil on canvas, 90 x 90cm. Image courtesy of the artist

As art often reflects the times or certain situations in life, do your works, often mystical and full of natural imagery, represent moments in your personal life or, on the other hand, serve as an escape from our reality?

I begin my artistic process by curating source imagery that resonates with the atmosphere or narrative I aim to evoke. I start a process of taking images for inspiration everywhere; from the internet, to imagery in public spaces like the subway. Rather than immediately reproducing these images, I opt to immerse myself in contemplation, allowing the essence to permeate my thoughts. This contemplative phase often leads me to sketch directly onto the canvas with paint, embracing the spontaneous emergence of form and narrative as I layer colours gradually.

In this intuitive process, I liberate my subconscious mind to guide the creation, resulting in compositions that flow harmoniously. Central to my paintings are the interplay of a harmonious palette and carefully considered compositions, each stroke contributing to the

narrative unfolding on the canvas. Through my art, I endeavour to encapsulate sentiments of joy and hope, believing fervently that our contemporary world yearns for such nourishment.

The environments in your paintings are inspired by various locations around the world known for their distinct landscapes. How do you feel about the loss of biodiversity in many of these places due to climate change? How do you think it will cause your art to evolve?

Witnessing the degradation of ecosystems and the disappearance of species is not only a loss for the environment but also for humanity's cultural and spiritual connection to the natural world. The earth is very dear to me, but the planet is suffering because we are exploiting its resources excessively. The impacts of climate change on these landscapes serve as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for action to mitigate its effects. As an artist, I feel a responsibility to raise awareness about these pressing environmental issues through my art. While it is heartbreaking to witness the destruction of these natural wonders, I believe that art has the power to inspire change and ignite conversations about the importance of conservation and sustainability.

In terms of how climate change will influence the evolution of my art, I see myself delving deeper into the beauty of impermanence and the need to appreciate and protect the natural world while we still have the chance. I hope that my art can serve as a catalyst for dialogue, empathy, and action, fostering a deeper understanding of the profound impacts of climate change on our planet and inspiring positive change for future generations.



Tuan Vu, 'Exaltation de la Nuit', 2023, Oil and oil sticks on canvas, 55 x 60cm. Image courtesy of the artist

As a successful self-taught artist, how do you think not having a formal art education has shaped your practice, if at all? Do you think it has limited conformity in your work, or propelled you to drive yourself more intensely?

Not having a formal art education has undoubtedly shaped my artistic practice in profound ways. While some may perceive it as a limitation, I see it as an opportunity for uninhibited exploration and authentic self-expression. Without the constraints of traditional academic norms, I have been free to experiment, take risks, and develop my own artistic voice.

One of the most significant ways of being a self-taught artist is how my practice fosters more creative freedom. I have not been bound by preconceived notions of what art 'should' be, allowing me to explore unconventional techniques and unconventional subjects with abandon. At the same time, being self-taught has required a high level of self-discipline and motivation. Without the structure of a formal curriculum or the guidance of instructors, I have had to drive myself to constantly seek out new sources of inspiration, refine my skills, and push the boundaries of my creativity.

While it's true that not having a formal art education may have limited my exposure to certain artistic techniques or theoretical frameworks, I believe it has taught me to embrace my unique perspective, trust my instincts, and never stop learning and growing as an artist.

**Les Nabis were a group of post-impressionist French painters active from 1888–1900 whose work is characterised by flat patches of colour, bold contours and simplified drawing.*
Source: [tate.org.uk](https://www.tate.org.uk)

Tuan Vu's solo exhibition 'Elysium' is taking place from 14 March – 13 April 2024 at Kristin Hjellegjerde in London (Wandsworth). For more information, please click [here](#).

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