

Finding

Artist **Hong Dam** talks to

Artist Hong Dam produces shimmering, dream-like images where Asian wetlands collide with industrial cityscapes and doors open in darkness to reveal glittering, golden vistas. Many of them feature the figure of a small girl, floating in a bubble or looking on from the sidelines. She represents Dam as a child, caught between worlds and unsure of where she belonged – always on the outside looking in. The work is Dam's attempt to communicate a childhood she struggles to recall clearly.

At the age of eight, the 44-year-old – who now lives in Hove and is exhibiting her work as part of this year's Artists Open Houses festival – was among the millions of Vietnamese people who fled the country by boat in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

Although born in Vietnam, Dam's father was of Chinese origin and lived within a large Chinese Cantonese-speaking community. When, in 1979, Chinese troops crossed Vietnam's northern border and clashed with Vietnamese troops, life became very difficult for the local Chinese population, she explains. As employment was withdrawn they were left with no choice but to flee or starve.

While her parents scraped together the money for their own exit, Dam was packed off on a boat with her uncle and grandmother, taking the place of her cousin whose mother would not allow her to leave. She was to take care of her grandmother when her uncle found work. But before they reached the UK the three spent more than a year in a refugee camp in Hong Kong, at that time a British territory.

"We assumed we'd find the promised land in Hong Kong," says Dam over tea in Brighton's Marwood Cafe. "It was the city of gold. But of course things are very different when you're a refugee."

Instead the family found themselves crowded in with other refugees sharing one small room in the camp. Bunkbeds lined the walls and people took turns to sleep in them, she says. There was no privacy and frequent bouts of violence among the traumatised refugees who had found themselves far from their homes and families in an unfamiliar country. To this day, baked beans – given to the refugees every day as a source of protein – make Dam shudder.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, her memories of this period are patchy. "I know they must be in my head somewhere but I don't seem able to access them."

When the family finally arrived in London in November 1980, the effort involved in adapting to their new life left her with little

forgotten memories

Nione Meakin about how life as a refugee has influenced her work

time for reflection. She went on to study fine art at university, but for a long time resisted calling herself an artist.

“As a refugee you need money and art doesn’t earn money unless you’re very successful.” She took an MA in computer animation and visualisation as a way of channelling her creativity into a practical skill and for 15 years worked as a digital artist on major Hollywood films including Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* and *Babe*; *Pig In The City*.

It was having her two children that finally prompted her to reexamine her past. How, she wondered, could she explain what her childhood was like to kids who had only known a safe, loving home in a stable Western country? How could she help them understand why she couldn’t bear to see them leave rice on their plates and why she became so impatient at their demands for new toys and gadgets?

She began making her dreamlike digital images as “a visual diary” of her memories. Her art is a means of trying to reclaim a past where dreams and reality are blurred. It is also an illustration of the traitorous quality of memory – sometimes rewarding, sometimes painful.

“I didn’t want to focus on the grimness of what happened to me so much as what that world felt like

to a child; that sense of never quite belonging anywhere that’s so common to immigrants; why you’re never really afraid of anything when you are left with nothing to lose.”

Dam has never stopped wondering about the life and people she left behind in Vietnam and later in Hong Kong. There was no time for best friends, she says: “I would make them easily but would then have to leave them. I remember their faces but I don’t know their names.

I sometimes wonder what they are doing now, if they’re still alive.”

The cousin whose place and name Dam took (originally she was known as Huu Hop Dam) came to Britain in her teens to find her father (Dam’s uncle) but died suddenly of cervical cancer aged 21, leaving Dam with a lasting sense of guilt.

“I felt that our fates had been swapped when I took her place on the boat and that it should have been me who died.”

Water features heavily in Dam’s images – a hinterland between old lives and new ones, fear and hope. “To me, water means duality,” she explains. “Something that could save me or kill me. It means fate.”

She has recently begun an extensive project tracking down and interviewing other Vietnamese boat refugees, using their memories to piece together

context for her own. It has brought her into contact with an array of people, from a demolition diver who saved a boat of sinking Vietnamese refugees, to a musician who taught music to Vietnamese orphans in 1978 at a school in London.

“I want to use these interviews to create further artwork that expresses our collective experiences of displacement, upheaval and starting a new life in a new land.”

When Dam’s father died a few months ago, she realised it had been left up to her to record and continue the family’s story in the best way she knows how. For years she didn’t read accounts of the millions who fled Vietnam and avoided looking at photographs of events or reading reports.

“It’s only now I’ve started to come to terms with what happened. It was horrific and I can’t believe I was there sometimes. But as a refugee you don’t tend to spend much time looking inwards. Your focus is always on the outside and on the future. You don’t look at the past so much as the hopes and dreams and opportunities you have had. I will never stop feeling that I am the lucky one.”

● *Childhood Memories, an exhibition of Hong Dam’s work, takes place at 110 Westbourne Street, Hove as part of this year’s Artists Open Houses festival. Visit www.aoh.org.uk for full details.*

Hong Dam’s traumatic past obviously influences her work (pictured below). Inset: A photo of Hong Dam as a baby

