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# Hong Dam and the Butterfly's Dream

A story of a refugee

In a world shaped by conflict and culture divide, a young girl is being caught up in the middle of all this mayhem, observing the changing world around her.



*Image: The Butterfly's Dream*

Against this backdrop, digital artist and sculptor Hong Dam's work is a timely reminder of the emotional reality of living in exile.

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Dam was born during the Vietnam War in the 70s. She left Vietnam for Hong Kong on a rickety old junk in 1978, and did not return until 2012, 34 years later. See how life as a refugee has influence and impact Dam's art work?

### **How would you describe your work?**

“I want to find out what makes me who I am?” And Where do I come from?”

The result of Dam's work is a journey of self discovery; exploring the universal themes of love, loss, separation and hope. She uses images, words and materials that remind her of the past to bring together the different facets of her childhood memories – the feelings of hopes and dreams of a child who had to flee her homeland as a refugee. Her artistic use of colour, shape and form enhances the great tradition of story telling of two cultures – a fusion of East and West.

*“My work is about my life as one of the ‘Vietnamese Boat People’: my refugee’s story. Surprisingly my memory of this period is very patchy, where dreams and reality collide.”* In recent years, she has start tracking down and interview her refugee peers to create a collective memory; a social snap shot of their lives – some of whom attended secondary school with her, using their memories to piece together her past. And to understand what has become of them? What are their social values?

After obtaining a BA Fine Art Sculpture, even though considered by many as being very talented, Dam is reluctant to become an artist. Primarily because she was a refugee, the feeling that she need to do something practical to earn a wage. Dam's took an MA in Computer Animation and Visualisation at Bournemouth, before going on to work in special effects in the film industry. Her credits include block buster movies such as: Babe:Pig in the City, 10,000 BC and Ridley Scott's epic film, Gladiator. Her personal work has been exhibited in various prestigious galleries such as: Maidstone Museum and Art Gallery, The British Museum and The Turner Contemporary.

However, her father's passing and the birth of her two daughters made her reconsider her decision to tell her story. Dam has start to document visually her own childhood in Vietnam, contrasting it with western industrialisation. Each piece of Dam's work show a different facet of a story that shows how ‘Triumph from Tragedy’ *“I don't want to concentrate just on the grimness of that particular journey, on the contrary, I want to focus on how hopes and dreams have kept me alive and help me to become a stronger person. And that I am really proud to be me. I hope that my art will inspire and enrich my children and their generation to conquer fear of the unknown.”*

Hong explains, *“In recent years I could not deny my urge to tell my story through art, using the skills I have obtained in the film industry. I feel this is my destiny especially after the passing of my father. The many stories of unsung heroes left untold. I feel that my artwork benefits others and they enjoy it. I have mastered the skills that I need to create and communicate my visions. I am beginning to realised that Art could transcend language barriers, gender, sex, race, colour and religion. I started my childhood memories project in 2010 when my daughters Jessica and Amelia was 10 and 6. My daughter brought brought me back to my own childhood. Seeing my two daughter at a similar age to myself when I first left Vietnam as a Boat Refugee made me felt that as if we were living on two parallel worlds, East and West, rich and poor.”*

### **How has your work been impacted by your experience of displacement?**

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Hong's artistic expression is rooted in her experience as an eight year old girl as one of the 'Vietnamese Boat People' fleeing Vietnam for Hong Kong before arriving in the UK in 1980. *"I realised that my memories about my journey as boat refugee was very patchy. I think as children we block out bad experiences in order for us to continue and adapt. I was born in Vietnam in the 1970s. I flee Vietnam when I was 8 years old on a rickety old boat to Hong Kong and stayed in refugee camp for a year, before flying to England – to my adopted mother land in 1980. Jumping forward several decades, I am fortunate enough to live to tell the tale. My art work is based on the themes of displacement, sense of not belonging, separation, loss, hope – promise of a better life, and childhood memories of a distant time and place."*



*Image: Promised Land*

The "Promised Land", images of the Great Wall of China are layered and combined with Hadrian's Wall and the rushes of Vietnam, then superimposed against a foreground including London's Gherkin. Hong said: *"As a refugee, I am always searching for the promised land."* She adds, *"I didn't leave Vietnam with my brothers, sister or parents, like you'd imagined. I flee the North Vietnam with my grandma and uncle. I took the place of my cousin – my uncle's daughter. I took her identity in search of promised land."*

### **What does it feel like returning to Vietnam after 34 years?**

*"I was full of anticipation, unlike my Husband John and daughters, Jessica and Amelia (age 12 and 6 at the time), they were so excited about this big family trip, seeing their mother land for the first time. It is kind of funny, I was still afraid to return even though I held a British passport and after 34 years!"*

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*'I recognise it,' she says of the iconic image of the girl running naked along the road during the Vietnam War. 'And it made me shiver. "Some of Hong's art contains explosions and bombs. "But, where there is destruction, there is new life," she explains. "People had to start again. There is always a positive among even negative events."*

*"Only after returning to Vietnam as an adult made me realised and appreciated the impact Agent Orange has on the people of the land even to this day. The subtle and dreamy colours which was found in my work before I went back to Vietnam is now echoes and influence by the strong red and orange of powerful Agent Orange's explosion that forces the migration of thousands butterflies."*

*"The Butterfly's Dream is about a little girl living in a fragile world, that is, the glass bottle, the changes and adaptations she has to make after migrating. The fragile beauty of the perfume bottle versus the ordinary lives of another world: two parallel worlds of East and West."*

In Hong's own words: *"I feel trapped between the invisible glass of a fragile, expensive bottle; wanting to break free. The sea, the sky merged into one; a big crash of explosion forces the migration of 1000s of butterflies. A message in a bottle drifting across derelict lands in search of a new life. Change, adapt I will – in order to survive. Says Hong, "I always see the sky as the limit," "It is how determined you are that matters, even if you don't get there, you get further than you would if you didn't have that dream."*

Hong uses the fragility of the perfume bottle to represent how western women seem to be valued for being less capable, a luxury women in poorer countries can't afford. She recalls her mother blowing up rocks and shovelling them onto trucks in Vietnam, ready to make into tarmac - a stark contrast to the perceived vanity and elegance of women in western cultures, conditioned to limit themselves in the name of elegance.



*Image: Dreaming of Home*

*"Dreaming of Home" scenes of the west are often dark and polluted, contrasting with the lush purity of nature in Vietnam. "I don't feel that I belong anywhere, I am constantly searching, but I do truly believe that home is where my family is."*

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*We should continue to dream, while understanding our present, be content and value our love ones.”*

