

VISUAL ESSAY BY
PHUNG-TIEN PHAN

THE FAMILIAR
STRANGE

WORDS BY
ELA BITTENCOURT

I first came across the work of German-Vietnamese artist Phung-Tien Phan during a visit to Project Native Informant during the 2025 edition of CONDO London. Located in a more rugged part of town peppered with warehouses and repair shops, Phan's solo show, "doesn't work," felt refreshingly down-to-earth, despite its surreal touch. One of her sculptural pieces, *Volkswagen (Romeo and Juliet)* (2025), is an unassuming cabinet featuring miniature furniture reminiscent of dollhouses along with domestic-shrine items, such as incense sticks. An old coffeemaker, perched atop, whimsically sprung a bouquet of flowers. The scenario wasn't entirely oneiric. Unlike the Surrealists, who evoked the uncanny through dreams and dark desires, Phan's work carried a pointedly undramatic, even homey, yet playful air.

I was especially drawn to Phan's short video, *dog* (2025), in which a plush toy serves as her alter ego. Through it, she detaches herself from a screen that is anxiously flashing global statistics (on coffee beans, arms sales, etc.) and ventures around her house, from browsing books and art supplies to briefly glimpsing a baby stroller outside. The video's lo-fi aesthetics, marked by handheld camera work and jerky movements, stressed spontaneity and chance. At the same time, Phan's attention to the domestic sphere — historically considered women's domain — reclaims its routines and family duties as valid grounds for art-making. While not overtly political, her work positions art as labor, especially domestic labor, intimately tied to childcare.

After seeing her new solo show, "kein Charakter," at Schiefe Zähne during Berlin's Gallery Weekend, I spoke with Phan about her ability to make the familiar seem strange from a distinctly domestic, feminist perspective. I mentioned how much I loved the plush dinosaurs in her installation. In the context of the weekend, they felt like a gentle reminder to the often-jaded gallery crowd to stay open to possibility and exploration, which at times go missing in high-brow art. Phan, however, saw the dinosaurs as symbols of societal pressure. "They're fun and approachable, but also extinct and [a toy with] a forced smile," she said.

This striking reimagining of everyday objects and settings also informs Phan's photographic spread for *Flash Art*, which features a small child in a modest, low-key environment. On the phone, Phan mentioned that she saw the series as a "slowdown moment," a way to insert a spontaneous, seemingly ordinary scenario into the glossy context of an art magazine. Indeed, her images are devoid of what one associates with high-production value. Staged in her garden in her hometown, Essen, Germany, they remain true to her habit of enlisting her immediate surroundings (in this case, also featuring her own son as a protagonist).

In Phan's video work, the documentary impulse only goes so far. She isn't so much interested in conveying an identity or a truthful portrait, but rather in challenging the very notion of identity and its assumed stability. Her photographs also explore how images can construct — or reconstruct — reality. Her approach zeroes in on a mental trompe l'oeil and its open-ended narrative possibilities. By giving the images mostly women's names, Phan asks us to transcend gender: on one hand creating ontological confusion, on the other stressing the essential inviolability of her subject. Meanwhile, the name of Hind Rajab, the Palestinian girl killed with her family by the Israeli Army in January 2024, evokes the similar anxious sense of the domestic realm permeated by echoes of conflicts and crises conveyed in *dog*.

In the end, "feminizing the spread," as Phan puts it, becomes a way to reflect on the experience of working as a woman artist in a world where major exhibitions have historically been reserved for men. In this sense, she questions the very concept of a magazine spread as a central feature or a spotlight by turning to an understated subject matter. Yet, in its own quiet way, this gesture — marked by seriality, delicacy, tenderness, and a tongue-in-cheek sensibility — also winks at the reader. It reveals Phan's desire to expand not only where and how art is made, but also the significance we assign to social constructs — home among them.

Phung-Tien Phan (1983, Essen) lives and works in Essen. Phan explores the constructed nature of identity and the societal roles we inhabit. In both her sculptural practice and her videos, she reflects on the production of the Self under the influence of consumer culture and the tension between aspiration and reality it feeds on. Recent solo exhibitions include Project Native Informant, London; Kunsthalle Basel; Édouard Montassut, Paris; CAPC – Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; DREI, Cologne; and Bonner Kunstverein. Her work was included in group shows at Schiefe Zähne, Berlin; Francis Irv, New York; Times Museum, Guangzhou; Sentiment, Zurich; TONUS, Paris, Arcadia Missa, London; and Ludwig Forum, Aachen. Phan's solo exhibition "kein Charakter" is on view at Schiefe Zähne, Berlin through June 14, 2025.

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Huong

Toni



Mary Ka-Ying



Linda



Robin



Nghi



Susanne



Derya

Hind

Rajab



Luna



Judith



Nora



Neda