

HO CHI MINH CITY

Galerie Quynh

TRONG GIA NGUYEN

THE LEAVERS

At age four, artist Trong Gia Nguyen left his uncle's house in Vietnam in a Renault Dauphine and headed toward the city port. From there, on April 30, 1975, his immediate family of eleven and three other relatives fled to the United States on the last boat to leave Saigon before the reunification of Vietnam. This past March, Nguyen, now based in Brooklyn, returned to Ho Chi Minh City for "The Leavers," an exhibition of works that chronicle the events before and after his family's harrowing displacement 40 years earlier. Nguyen's second solo show at Galerie Quynh was derived from *DONG* (2014–), his ongoing art documentary featuring interviews with his family. While the film conveys the vicissitudes of memory, the exhibition was an insightful visual commentary on its ambiguity and transience. On view were seven oil-pastel works, based on old family photographs, which portray how people's perceptions skew the ways in which they shape, colorize and remember the past.

The exhibited works' titles were not provided at the gallery, which deprived viewers of context, but also referenced the uncertain nature of memory. Visitors first encountered a large-scale portrait, *Family, circa 1962* (2014), near the gallery's entrance. Painted in muted colors, and with a crayon-like aesthetic, the canvas is covered in wide, haphazard strokes that depict undefined contours and shapes, which reiterate the notion of remembrance being organic and fluid. Gathered together in the foreground are six figures: a woman in beige holding an infant stands next to a man dressed in gray and black, while three children wearing white and beige clothing are lined before them. Each lacks eyes and a nose, but has black hair and, except for the baby, round red lips. The figures' simplified shapes and colors fit awkwardly with a choppy background portrayed in a similar color scheme. A chalky blue sky seen at the top of the canvas highlights a white, tower-like structure in the background. Viewers must mentally redraw and define the painting's missing lines and spaces—an act that stirs curiosity and anxiety, and resembles the act of recalling and working through one's memories.

The processing of memories was further explored in five large-scale landscape paintings, which feature not only Nguyen's unembellished crayon-like aesthetic, but also a vibrantly polychromatic palette. In *Family, Beach, circa 1960* (2014), a father and his three children, highlighted against a goldenrod beach, azure sea and cerulean sky, pose in front of a retro-lime sedan parked adjacent to an electric-orange pier. They are all colorfully outfitted: the father sports violet pants; the oldest child dons a canary-yellow blouse; the younger has marigold pants; and an infant cradled



T-shirt. Nguyen's hyper-bright palette projects a childlike rendering of past events, suggesting a sense of naïveté, but also an acknowledgment of his own limits in translating the disposition of his family from different eras in their history. By choosing not to present the paintings in the chronological order of their reference photographs, Nguyen hints at the instability of memory. Without an accompanying display of titles or indication of time frames, viewers saw *Family, Enid, circa 1982* (2014)—in which ten relatives in formal clothing pose within a warm-toned room—alongside *Grandmother's Funeral, 1974* (2014), where a rainbow-colored group of villagers congregate around a violet burial ground. Though one was inclined to understand how these scenes aligned within the Nguyen's family narrative, deciphering their full context posed a certain challenge.

Offering closure at the back of the gallery was *The Leavers* (2014), an endearing, shrine-like assortment of variously sized portraits illustrated in Nguyen's signature style, depicting his immediate family members and relatives. In using vivid oil pastels, a medium that never completely dries, he restores and keeps memories alive. Certainly, Nguyen seeks reconciliation with his heritage, like many other artists of the Vietnamese diaspora. As parents and their children grow older, there is an impetus to validate and illuminate all that has been dimmed or forgotten from the family's history, and Nguyen's works—introspective and deferential—show that old photographs can be a puzzling, but ultimately worthwhile, starting point.

RUBEN LUONG