

Cholon, Not Forgotten

An exhibition by artist

Rosalie Lam

Curated by Erin Storus



Acknowledgments

I've drawn and painted since I was a child, but only recently decided to work with my childhood memories of Vietnam in my art. My children, Vincent and Elsa, encouraged me to put these memories into visual form, and my husband Andrew has always supported my passion for painting.

Independent curator Erin Storus led the selection of paintings, drawings, and family photos for the solo exhibition *Cholon, Not Forgotten*. It was a pleasure to work with Erin, who visualised an evocative setting for my works and curated a show that was complete in every way.

Thank you as well to Jennifer Vong, who has generously contributed her graphic skills to producing promotional material and this catalogue.

Some of the pieces in this exhibition were originally shown at the Red Head Gallery and in the John B. Aird Gallery's *Painting 2020* juried exhibition. I am grateful to the staff at both galleries for the opportunity to present my work in public, and especially to John B. Aird Gallery director Carla Garnet for presenting the *Cholon, Not Forgotten* exhibition.

My sincere thanks to everyone who made this possible.

Rosalie Lam, B.Arch, OSA

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Introduction

CARLA GARNET, DIRECTOR

The John B. Aird Gallery is pleased to present this catalog documenting Rosalie Lam's *Cholon, Not Forgotten*, a solo exhibition prepared for the Gallery by independent curator Erin Storus.

This art publication is offered with the objective of affording a lasting document of the exhibition. It includes short response texts by the exhibition curator, as well as by the artist's son, Canadian writer and medical doctor Vincent Lam. It is designed by Jennifer Vong.

Cholon, Not Forgotten centres on a recent series by Vietnam-born Chinese-Canadian painter Rosalie Lam. The works, created over the past decade, draw from the artist's childhood memories. Lam's sensitive and poetic oil paintings and coloured pencil sketches depict a pre-war Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), intricately weaving together image fragments of family, food, city life, spirituality, and war.

Curator Erin Storus writes that "Rosalie Lam's work has not (to date) been significantly recognized within Canada. Presenting her work at a public art gallery gives a larger art audience the chance to engage with an artist whose work explores memories of a way of life that has ceased to exist, but that continues to significantly inform contemporary Chinese-Vietnamese culture, both within Vietnam and the Chinese-Vietnamese diaspora in Canada."

The exhibition *Cholon, Not Forgotten* deftly combines the curator's and artist's visions to create an immersive art installation. The presentation of the works was enriched by framed archival family photographs, arranged on heirloom teak wood furniture. A hauntingly romantic soundtrack comprised Vietnamese folk songs selected by the artist. Storus's curation of a beautiful, evocative exhibition succeeded in being both reflective and impactful.

We are hopeful that this online and print art booklet provides new insight into the works and curation of *Cholon, Not Forgotten*.



Rosalie Lam: Cholon, Not Forgotten

ERIN STORUS, CURATOR

Carla first asked me to curate a show for artist Rosalie Lam in the spring of 2021. At that point, I'd been working with Carla as her assistant at the Aird Gallery for just over a year, designing exhibition pamphlets and helping to write grant proposals, and I knew I wanted to be a contemporary arts curator—but of course, wanting something and having experience doing that thing are very different. Carla, however, had confidence in me and felt I'd be a good fit for Rosalie, as I had traveled Vietnam and studied modern Vietnamese history in my undergrad. She also felt it was important to extend a dialogue within a cross-cultural and cross-generational context—an integral component of this project.

I was 26 years old, roughly 45 years younger than Rosalie, and unlike Rosalie, who is Chinese-Vietnamese, I hail from a European background. Keenly aware of these differences in our life experiences, I wasn't sure I'd be able to give Rosalie the show she needed. I knew her work to be a deeply personal expression of her memories growing up in Saigon between the 1940s to 1960s. I was concerned I wouldn't be able to accurately convey the sensitive emotional content of her work to a Toronto audience.

I remember the day Rosalie and I met quite well. It was warm and sunny, and I had significantly overdressed, with wool leggings under my pants, and a wool sweater and jacket. I decided to walk the six kilometers from my apartment at Bloor and Bathurst to Withrow Park in the city's east end. When I arrived at our agreed meeting location, a sweet little café just south of the park, I was ten minutes late and covered in sweat. "How is Rosalie supposed to take me seriously?" I remember thinking to myself. But Rosalie, ever gracious, greeted me warmly, and we made our way to a picnic table in the shade where we began to discuss our upcoming project.

Over the following months, Rosalie and I continued to connect through studio visits, phone calls, and a cozy lunch one afternoon that fall. I listened to Rosalie describe her childhood

memories in Saigon—the elephants carrying carts, the monks preparing alms, her parent’s fear and anger when she was late in returning home from school one day—and in return, I began to articulate my visions for the exhibition.

By the fall, I had gained some experience curating, having organized a series of day-long group exhibitions in my backyard that summer. I was feeling much more confident in my abilities. I told Rosalie that I wanted—to the best of my ability—to recreate the environment she grew up in. To me, her paintings could never exist in the sterility of the white cube. They were too alive and abundant with colour and movement, almost akin to a performance rather than a two-dimensional canvas work. I felt the environment these works were displayed in needed to respond in kind to the vibrant cityscapes of Rosalie’s Saigon.

The Saigon I had a small taste of in my travels was vastly different from the Saigon of Rosalie’s childhood, but similarities remained. I remembered the taxi ride from the airport to my hostel in the heart of the city, a small blue abode tucked behind some shops in an alleyway adorned with friendly stray cats and laundry drying in the humid evening air. I spent a week traversing the city streets, visiting museums, restaurants, shops, and seeing a performance at Saigon’s opera house. More than images, I remember what it felt like to be in Saigon. The city was hot, humid and busy. People on motorbikes zoomed in and out of standstill traffic while street vendors sold phở, bún chả, cà phê sữa đá, and dozens of other delectable specialities. I remember the sounds of the city, the traffic, the music drifting out of cafés, teenagers practicing dance routines in the city’s parks, birdsong, people chatting, oil sputtering on hot pans. I remember the heat, the ever-present moisture in the air. I remember the streets adorned with small shops where locals sat on small plastic stools and ate soup and conversed and laughed with one another. All of this I wanted to bring into the gallery.

Over the following months, I began to gather what I would need to make this exhibition a reality. I worked with a friend to compile a soundtrack of Rosalie’s favourite songs, interspersed with field recordings from in and around Saigon. I asked Rosalie to compile old family photos. She also provided me with a beautiful rosewood sideboard, matching intricately carved wooden armchairs, and two paper floor lamps. I carefully selected the paintings and sketches for the show. The final piece I felt was necessary to bring this show to life was plant matter. Saigon is alive with flora and fauna at all times of the year, while Toronto in March is a dead, grey thing. One cold day at the end of February I ventured out and found a bamboo plant, which was, coincidentally enough, being sold in a small shop on Dundas West run by an older Vietnamese woman.

With my bamboo safely wrapped in plastic bags, I made my way to the gallery where Carla’s partner, John, and her son, Jackson, were sanding and painting the walls for the show. I had requested an accent wall of light pastel green. Once the gallery was prepped to receive the art and furniture, my dad and I climbed into his Jeep Grand Cherokee and drove over to Rosalie’s studio, where we picked up the desired materials from Rosalie and her equally lovely husband, Andrew. The entire exhibition process had become quite the family affair.

What we ended up with is the show you will see in this book. I wish the soundtrack that adorned the exhibition could flow from the pages, but sadly, paper can only do so much. Nevertheless, I think you’ll get a good sense of what the exhibition was like from photographs alone. It was truly beautiful—a small oasis of vibrancy and warmth amidst the never-ending cold of winter. I’m grateful to Carla and Rosalie for trusting in me and allowing me to work with them in mutual honesty and kindness to create the exhibition *Rosalie Lam: Cholon, Not Forgotten*. I also wish to extend my sincerest thanks to John and Jackson Abrams, Jennifer Vong, my father Paul Storus, Andrew Lam, Elsa Lam, and Vincent Lam, my friends Denholm Whale and Greg Tascona, and to all those that came to see the exhibition while it was up. The memories of creating this exhibition will long stay with me.

Cholon, Not Forgotten

ROSALIE LAM

Before the Vietnam War, Cholon was a predominantly Chinese-speaking city bordering Saigon. I was born there, and remember the community with its schools, markets, temples and rituals of life. I remember our house along the canal, elephants walking on the street. I also remember the sounds of battles, fought just over the bridge from where we lived.

The war in Vietnam is long over, and many economic and political changes have taken place. Urban growth has merged Cholon with Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh City. I paint to recapture the setting of my childhood and to share with you the Cholon that no longer exists.

I remember living in a community where flame trees burst into full bloom after monsoon rains. There were my caring parents, my grandmother, siblings and cousins, neighbours and friends, a busy kitchen with lots of food, and long evening dinners.

The evenings were cool and relaxing, but also dark and mysterious. I recall sitting quietly on our balcony watching flare lights illuminate the sky, casting a glow on helicopters zigzagging over fields. Imagine fireworks that stay in the sky: it was strangely beautiful.

Spirituality played a major role in life. We believed in a superior power and prayed for peace, seeking blessings. There was the ritual of preparing food for offering to the dead, morning and evening prayers.

I remember that Cholon was full of birds: swallows swooping over the arroyo canal, black starlings covering tree tops, crows, pigeons and wagtails on the streets. Helicopters joined them in flying through the air, like the uncontrollable birds in Alfred Hitchcock's movie. People of different political interests also flitted bird-like around Cholon, watching over everything in a long and confusing war.

All these memories weave through this series of paintings. I hope my Cholon will not be forgotten.





Reflections

VINCENT LAM

A memory from my childhood of my mother painting: the dining table pushed to a corner of the room, the floor draped with old paint-stained bedsheets, an easel bearing a canvas. Sometimes she painted late at night, and in the morning I would see that the canvas had progressed—sketched suggestions had become defined, colours had found shapes. The dining room was pungent with oil paint and turpentine. When I looked from the canvas out to the yard, I squinted into the brightness of reflected sun on snow and ice. Stepping outside, it was a crisp winter day, with snowbanks mounded higher than a car. The cold stung within my nostrils.

I grew up in Ottawa, a city of temperate disposition, whose defining season—and my favourite—was winter. For the simple prerogative of survival despite implacable elements, for the thick silence of snowfall, for the crisp sterility of ice and cold, for a beauty painted in tones of white and lines of drift. In contrast, the family origin stories which were also part of my childhood were set amidst a tropical heat that required daytime siestas, that burst open into monsoon rains, that suffused a place full of passionate argument and liaisons. My family's stories were often driven by—or unfolded despite—the complexities of upheaval and war, the resentments and ambitions created by colonialism, the longing for places through which one has journeyed, and to which one cannot return.

My parents were both born within the Chinese community of Vietnam. They grew up in Cholon, a Chinese merchant enclave of Saigon that flourished during the 19th century French colonization of Indochina. In the middle of the 20th century, the French withdrawal from a divided Vietnam dovetailed into American involvement in the country, and a war that was painful for the American psyche, and even more painful—in real terms—for the Vietnamese people. Once the American War in Vietnam was nominally concluded in 1972, a period of division between North and South was followed by the outright victory of the North Vietnamese Communists over the South Vietnamese in 1975, a hasty abandonment of Vietnam by the remaining American military and diplomatic contingents, and a purging of enemies by the victors. The Chinese in Vietnam—both a minority within that country, and emblematic of capitalism—found themselves cast as enemies within the narratives of a new Vietnam, and were harshly persecuted.

By the time I was growing up in suburban Ottawa—riding my bicycle alongside the Rideau Canal, skiing at Camp Fortune, taking violin lessons from a French violin teacher at the conservatoire in Hull—Chinese in Vietnam were having their property seized and being sent to concentration camps or killed. Thousands eventually risked their lives in precarious journeys to escape Vietnam in ill-suited boats, along with ethnic Vietnamese who found themselves enemies of the new regime by virtue of association with the defeated South Vietnamese government or army, or who simply wanted to leave.

In my mother's painting *With my Sister*, everything is moving: the buildings jostle one another, the fronds of trees gyrate in the wind, a cyclo driver pushes his pink ao-dai-clad passenger ahead of himself into a crowded intersection. Serene amidst the tumult, my aunt is perched in her rolling chair which hurtles past the commotion of Cholon: a fabric-draped elephant, fruit piled high by vendors, children looking on. This canvas, like several within the Vietnam series *Cholon, Not Forgotten* seems to be composed within a child's gaze: one that perceives the moment of an elegant woman traveling amidst chaos with an arresting immediacy.

It is the child's eye within their home that gives us the painting *Abundance*. This canvas captures a kitchen overflowing with greens and fish that have seemingly sprung from the soil and the water to nourish a family. The Chinese called Vietnam a 'land of fish and rice' for its abundance of life, tropical heat, and food. In telling me of her childhood home, my mother recalled a villa filled with children, servants, and chickens, all living closely amongst the pleasures of life, love, and food. To purchase evening snacks, my mother and her siblings had only to lower money in a basket from their windows to the street vendors, who would place the desired treats in the baskets for them to retrieve.

Flare Light records a scene of beauty and fear that my mother witnessed when she was a teenager: that of seeing nighttime military flares blazing above Saigon's bridges during the Tet Offensive of 1968. For several days, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launched a bold and sweeping incursion that penetrated major South Vietnamese cities, although they were soon repelled. The burning lights in the sky were intended by the South Vietnamese and Americans to illuminate the Viet Cong's nighttime movements, to neutralize their strengths of concealment and stealth by turning darkness into day. My mother might not have known at the time that both sides regarded the Tet Offensive as a failure: the Northerners considered it a military defeat, and the Southerners felt that a psychological blow had been struck, exposing the precariousness of their position. Soon after, my mother was sent to Canada to study.

The stories I heard as a child were rooted in escape and salvation, migration and the search for a new home. The Chinese in my family left China for Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Indochina. Some of my ancestors were in Indochina generations before it became Vietnam, and others arrived not long before it was engulfed by war. In their varied moments of migration, they sought to escape poverty, the Japanese occupation, personal vendettas, the Chinese communists, perhaps the constraints of tradition. They went to build their lives and their futures. For a time, they found peace and prosperity—likely not imagining how fragile it would prove to be.

In Vietnam, they found a place to both live as Chinese and to settle in a new land. Through business connections, friendships, and sometimes marriages with Vietnamese, the Chinese in Vietnam became, like many immigrant communities, a people with one foot in the past of the 'motherland' and one in their 'new home'. Lao Go, a Vietnamese woman depicted in one of my mother's paintings, was our family's most powerful matriarch. Beyond the midpoint of the 20th century, the Chinese found that the customs of their country of origin could be preserved in Vietnam, even while these traditions were being cast aside in China. With the upheavals of society in newly communist China, cultural objects were destroyed, traditional relationships between generations were abandoned, and the economy was thrown into disarray. Cholon became a cultural island where the traditions of Chinese households were maintained even as they were being repressed in China itself, such as that of ancestor worship depicted in the painting *Feeding Memory*, a tableau of the elaborate meals that were offered twice a month to the shrine of my grandfather's deceased first wife.

As the Americans became enmeshed in the country, a new world of technology—helicopters, transistor radios, western cosmetics—arrived in a place where elephants were still a common sight (whether decorated for processions or employed for heavy lifting and moving), where Buddhist monks such as those depicted in *Alms for Blessings* would go from house to house asking for donations of food and money. My parents picnicked in the rubber plantations depicted in *Terre Rouge over Cu Chi Tunnels*, a canvas of innocent children dancing in a shadowy forest. In the outskirts of Cholon, Cu Chi was in fact an underground stronghold of the Viet Cong, tunnels and warrens dug beneath the red soil of the rubber forest. Modern Cu Chi is a tourist attraction where, for a fee, visitors can squeeze themselves into Viet Cong tunnels and fire AK-47 assault rifles.

The work in *Cholon, Not Forgotten* embraces both the vision of the child and the insight that becomes possible when considering a time and place in retrospect. Often, wry ironies are expressed through juxtaposed references. The *Kodak Moment* in the botanical garden is, at first glance, a simple painting of a child amidst the lush foliage of the tropics. But the

越華報

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鴻龐及阮多街尾段橫街 今日凌晨曾有零星槍戰

軍警嚴守要道監視越共活動 別動軍已推佔各重要點

(本報綜合消息)越共部隊在阮多街及同慶大道尾段與政府軍激戰三日後，今(四)日凌晨起，被政府軍包圍之越共殘軍，竟趁晚上電流中斷時，湧往同慶大道附近橫街小巷，並與政府軍作零星槍戰。據聞上述發生巷戰區域，大部份房屋被越共焚燬，甚至挖地道，預備國家軍進攻時，四處流竄。

鴻龐大道及孔子大道、陳清芹街、總督府街、學樂街，依然由增強之別動軍第一大隊卅小隊，及野戰警察嚴守各要道，準備隨時向越共殘軍迎頭痛擊。

昨晚六時許，M一壹三裝甲車兩輛，曾開入陳榮發路所側之橫街，用砲及重機槍向巷內轟擊，聞該處一度為越共指揮部，且就有醫護人員。政府軍經三日夜苦戰，及用迫擊砲彈攻擊該處林四層大屋內之共軍，迫其撤退。昨晚由M一壹三裝甲車掩護下，別動軍先鋒部隊分批開入各重要據點。

(倫敦電台四日廣播)在堤岸，美軍直昇機向越共據守的陣地，投擲燃燒彈。在該處仍有小股共黨滲透份子。

(越文前線報載堤岸三日訊)據前線記者三日下午四時的最後消息：在直昇機和砲兵掩護下，別動軍向在孔子大道與陳清芹街交界處的共軍各據點，展開進攻，戰情十分激烈。

在這裏的共軍，用AK和B四十式武器猛烈還擊。

據前線記者消息：三日堤岸戰情之概況如下：

自凌晨時分，共軍仍然在賽增林酒店區域。

中午時分，飛機向賽增林區域投擲燃燒彈，共軍被迫至孔子大道與陳清芹街交界處。

據共軍方消息，雙方在該處，即轉到這裏。

至前線戰情暫時停止，有防務面其配備的別動軍，正與敵軍展開猛烈的肉搏戰。

(本報訊)今(四)日上午八時許，一枚砲彈不知自何方飛來，落在堤岸三叉橋脚。一家在橋脚

河畔定居的小茅寮，被砲彈擊中，使二名小孩當場受傷。

(又訊)昨(三)日下午二時左右，一枚砲彈落在平西范文志街一九一號新民國學校對面，一家住宅的天井，砲彈落下，擊中一小童的頭顱，該小孩頭顱破裂當場死亡，但該砲彈反而未曾爆炸。

(越文前線報)越共西貢三日訊，據從一越共俘虜的供詞得知：自新春至今，參加都城戰事的敵軍有三師團，在第一次攻勢中，參戰的為第九師轄下的二七一、二七二、二七三團。這三團曾參加同榮及嶺寧等戰役。

在第二次攻勢中，共軍則派第七師入侵都城，其屬下有一四一、一〇一及一六五團，一六五團另有B11一〇〇團或首都團。

在目前的第三次攻勢中，多戰的共軍團仍是第七師。但軍方在最近兩日中，發現到參戰的還有第五師的二七五及八八團。

總括來說：在首都作戰的共軍，計有第九、七、五、三師及一團換作六九獨立炮兵團。

共軍第五師除二七五及八八團已出現外，另一團的踪跡未明，可能敵方要使用這團作為援力軍。

在共軍這三師中，第九師的傷亡最嚴重，約三分二敵軍遭殲滅。

又訊：昨(三)日中午十二時廿分，越南別動軍，在堤岸與五七風白擊砲猛烈掩護下，已控制了匿藏有零星越共的堤岸陳清芹街與李成源街交界處之高樓住宅。同時，另批越南別動軍亦節節從堤岸向同慶大道尾段之李成源街一帶推進，以肅清各殘餘的越共份子。

因此，於昨(三)日上午十時半起，堤岸第五師各主要街道的平民重新聽到隆隆巨響的砲聲。

昨(三)日十時起，別動軍分由多條主要的街道，頻頻向匿藏零星越共的堤岸陳清芹街與李成源街，同慶大道與李成源街交界一帶區域進攻。

此外，美國直昇機亦出動在堤岸總督府街、馮興街、陳清芹街及李成源街等區域低空巡邏觀察。

未久，美國直昇機即俯衝向匿藏越共的李成源街高樓區，猛烈大批拋灑燃燒彈。一時，黃色的煙霧，濃厚密佈，致使在場的越共記者全部向後退避至總督府街。

在上述時間，兩中隊的別動軍迅速地向匿藏越共的同慶大道與李成源街交界處推進後，他們曾奮勇挨門挨戶地搜索。零星

的越共與頭圍還擊及投擲榴彈。

越南別動軍曾佔據堤岸陳清芹街與李成源街交界高樓，同慶大道與李成源街等住宅後，即從這些開闢搜索敵人殘餘的隊。兩架戰車不斷從總督府街向同慶大道與李成源街交界處，以集中猛烈火力掩護別動軍節節推進行軍。

較早時候，越南政治心戰局軍車，曾呼聲響星區越共出來投誠未果。迫於昨(三)日十一時起，採取全面猛烈火力，向敵人匿藏據地進攻。

據軍方發言人說：敵人難以迎戰。因為他們已沒有B四十四火箭彈的補給。我們堅決一定要全部肅清敵人。

(本報訊)別動軍司令陳文二上校，昨(三)日親自負責指揮馮興街與同慶大道尾段戰事，政府軍除用M一三三坦克車向孔子大道與同慶大道交界處兩列共軍佔據樓舖猛烈射擊外，復於十一時許，以繼續彈向該區投擲，政府軍曾發射防禦面罩，用射擊攻勢由二府廟旁之馮興街，及陳清芹街(近越南棋廠)與共軍對峙，火力異常猛烈，致該區充滿煙霧及密集榴彈聲，火頭亦跟隨燃燒。

第五師孔子大道、李成源、容家街等地區政府軍昨日繼續圍攻在該地區越共殘餘開闢激烈戰，兩團軍型坦克車於上午十時率命馳往孔子大道與馮興街交界處(即電油站前)，向越共在孔子大道與李成源街交界之殘餘越共猛烈射擊，並以五七巨砲砲擊不停向對方轟擊。越共亦以將榴彈還擊，雙方激烈戰鬥至十時卅分，李成源街附近房屋遂遭大火焚燒，政府軍不停在四週以擴音器呼越共投降，因政府軍已重圍該地區，十一時四十分，政府軍遂以榴彈投入越共據地，以迫使越共出來投降。

(越南通訊社西貢三日訊)第卅別動軍，於今日上午十時四十五分，在李成源街與馮興街交界處四起越共。至十一時，別動軍用榴彈以肅清該區之越共。

另一方面，海軍陸戰隊第五營在距平五及三三三公尺之地方，與一營共軍發生激烈之戰鬥。海軍陸戰隊有五

戰事影响輸運受阻 豬隻食物車輛 多暫停滯富林

前日部份開入勿慮缺乏

(越文決進報)西貢訊：由於堤岸及富林區戰事連綿，所以西貢及西區的交通被斷絕。數百輛運載豬隻食物車輛，只好停滯在富林區。

直到六月二日，堤岸區的戰事稍為靜寂時，一部份運輸車，即在警察的指導下駛入都城。

所以，都城的居民不需顧慮到食物缺乏。

胡大使昨午蒞堤 視察馮興街戰況

(本報訊)中華民國駐越南大使胡禮上將，昨日下午五時，在堤岸如祺官邸陪同下，前往堤岸戰區視察。當胡大使抵達馮興街與阮多街交界處時，曾下車向馮興街及李成源街正在交戰一方觀察。胡大使於離去時，頻頻揮手向阮多街華僑居民致意。



萬象街四叉路口中彈焚燒鏡頭

左起一：昨(三)日上午由別動軍司令陳文二上校指揮軍隊在萬象街四叉路口向匿藏同慶大道尾段之越共殘軍情形；二：政府軍嚴防毒面罩作戰；三：火頭起處乃為通及廣祥益兩處，數十間樓房被摧毀。

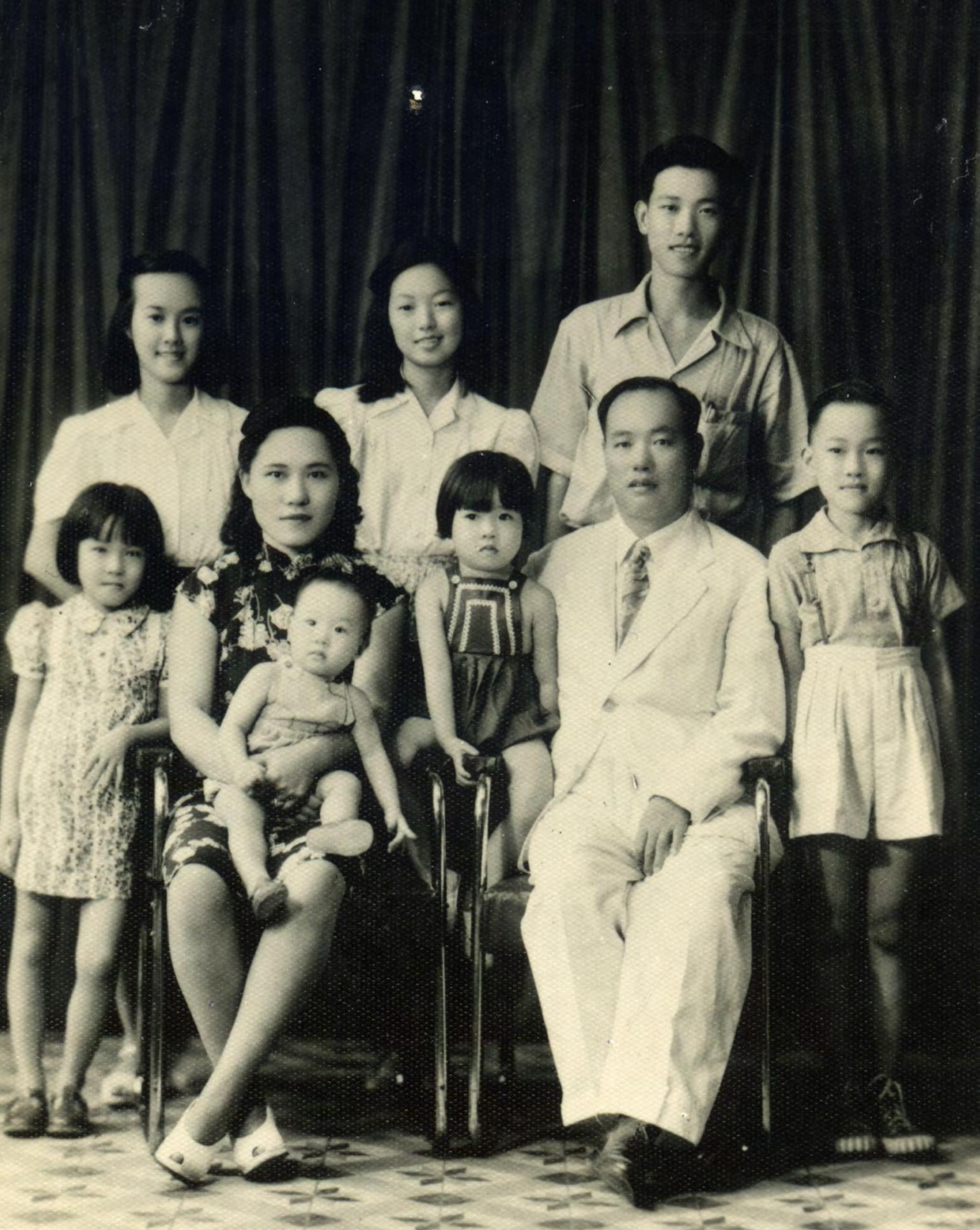


child stands within the colonial architecture of the French, and the title situates the image as an homage to a then-new phenomenon—the snapshot, created using an emblematic piece of American technology: the 35 mm camera. Since that day in the botanical garden, the location itself has been renamed by history, after the patriarch of the new regime, to become the Ho Chi Minh Botanical Garden.

Art also gives us the possibility of inhabiting a space and time of imagination, projection, and longing. One painting, *My Father's Altar*, is a depiction of a scene that my mother was not able to witness in person. She knew it from photos that were sent to her. By 1973, at the time of my grandfather's death from medical causes, my mother was studying architecture at McGill University. At that time, the conflict in Vietnam made it impossible for her to return for his funeral. Instead, she could only linger over photos of his funeral, an image of a table brimming with fruit, flowers, next to which my grandmother stood mourning. In the Taoist tradition, the soul of the deceased should be accompanied from the living world to that of the spirit. In the painting, two ceramic figurines can be seen on the altar: one to send off the soul of the dead, and the other to receive the soul in the spirit world.

As a child, I knew that the particulars of my parents' childhoods had been very different from my own. They knew monsoon rains, and I was acquainted with ice storms. They ate fresh produce from wet markets and street vendors, and I knew grocery stores and fast-food chains. Armed conflict intruded directly upon my parents' childhoods; they recalled mattresses being hastily propped against the windows during episodes of fighting in Cholon. I knew the rhythms of quiet suburban Ottawa, where rather than gunfire, the noises from outside were lawnmowers in the summer and snowblowers in the winter.

But like the generation that preceded mine, I had been dislocated by history. As with my parents, my sense of cultural identity was both rooted in my land of birth, and informed by a place I had never seen. Therein, sometimes a sense of uneasiness, sometimes freedom. My parents lived in China for the first time in their 50s, when my father was posted to Beijing as a Canadian diplomat. I did not visit Vietnam until I was an adult, and was deeply engaged in my own artistic journey—writing a novel set in that country, *The Headmaster's Wager*. Successive generations of my family have been faced with reconciling multiple identities—that which came from the echo of ancestors, and that of our countries of birth. One important difference between my parents' generation and mine, is that like many in their community, my parents grew up living as Chinese apart from the Vietnamese. I grew up encouraged to be a full citizen of Canada, my birthplace, to having a land of familial origin that was far away, and with the reassurance that there was no contradiction therein.



The threads once held by previous generations run through the fabric of our lives. My mother's art is an expression of how these threads are woven together in her own life. It binds together the past with the present, the fresh vision of the child with the meaning that arises by placing one image next to another. Tropical canvases emerge in a Canadian winter. There is wisdom in embracing tension and multiplicity on that canvas. The paintings in *Cholon, Not Forgotten* honour our passage through time, through space, even as the layers that are left behind continue to shape our lives.

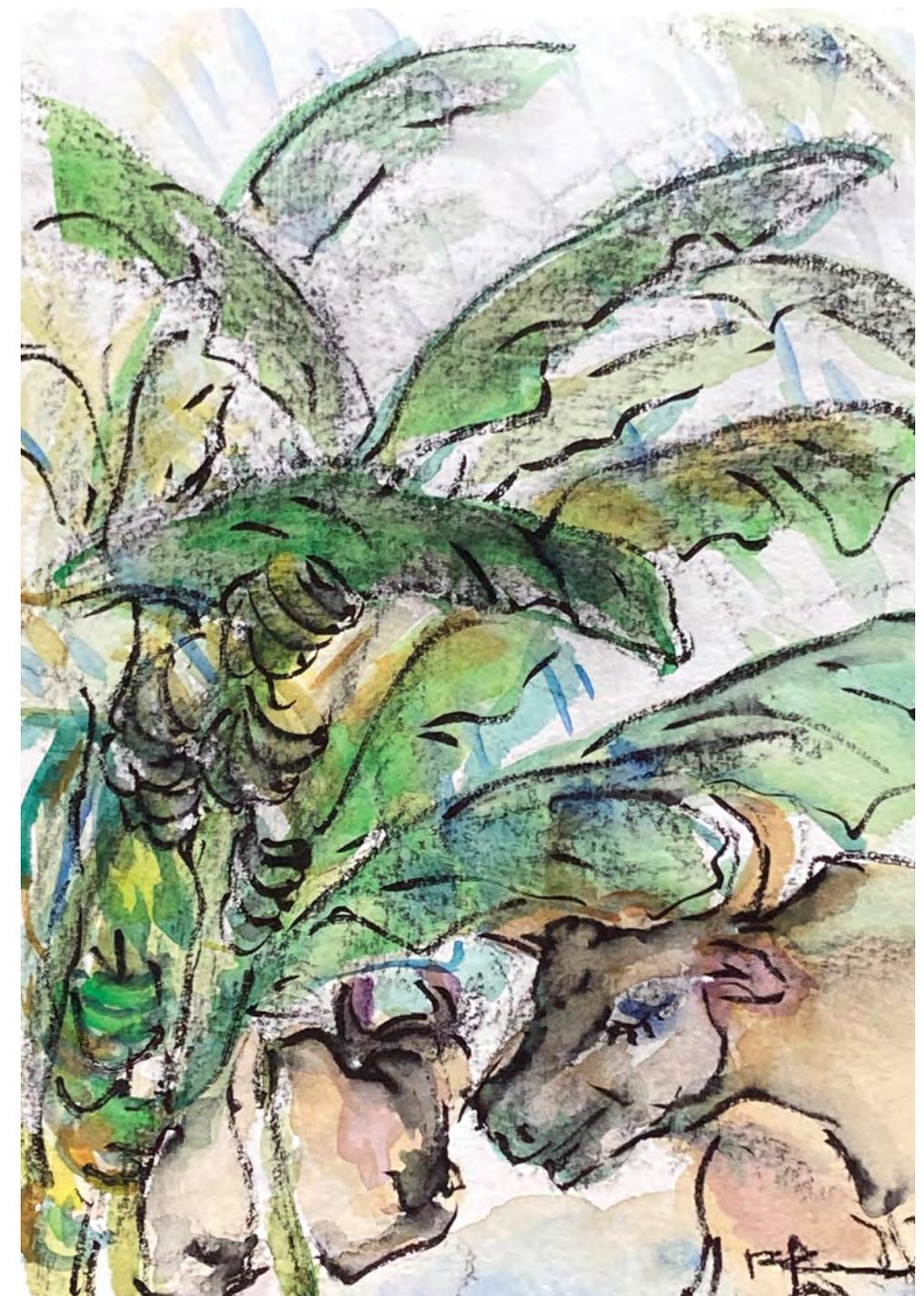
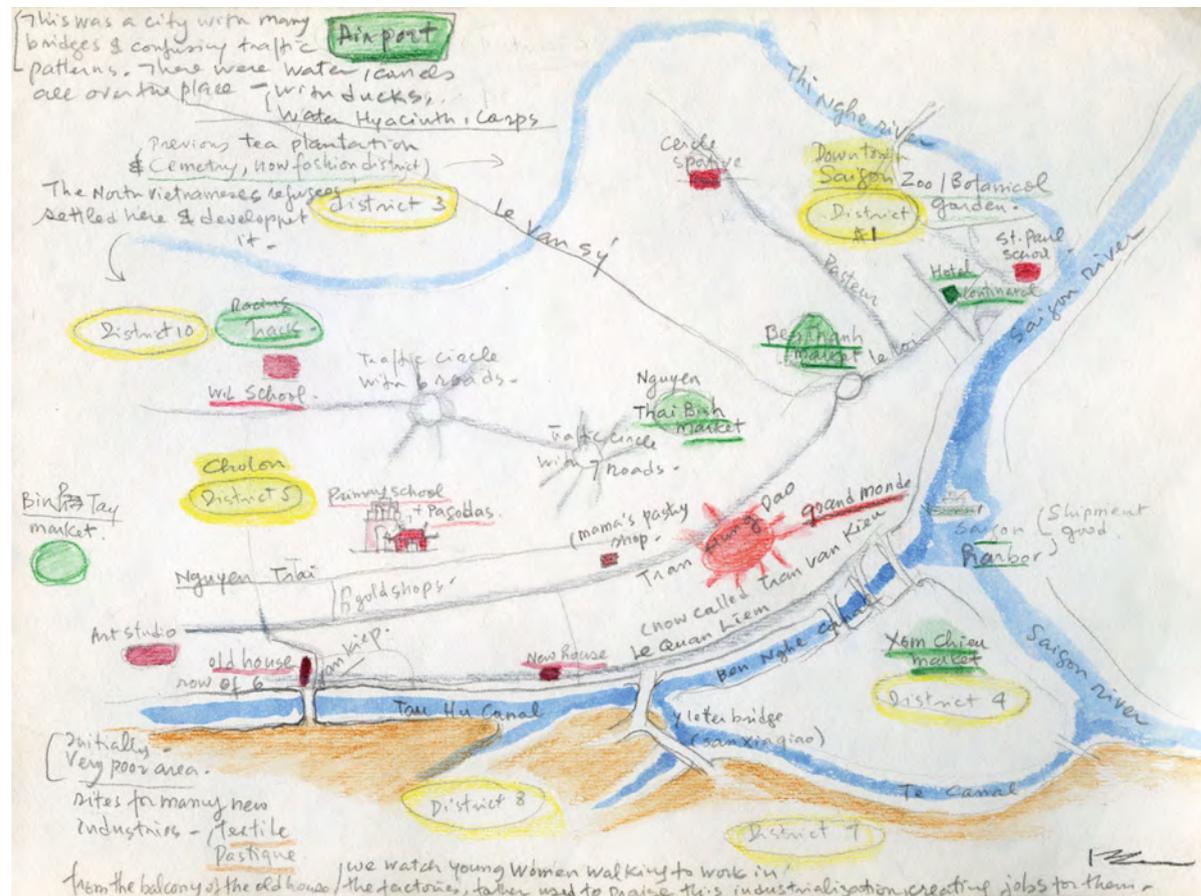
Cholon, Not Forgotten

Exhibition by Rosalie Lam
Curated by Erin Storus





Installation view of *Cholon, Not Forgotten*, John B. Aird Gallery, 2022



Artist's Map of Saigon-Cholon
Watercolour and ink on paper
22 cm x 28 cm

Shelter from Monsoon
Watercolour and pastel on paper
25 cm x 18 cm



Study of Altar—Ba Thien Hua Pagoda
Pastel crayon on paper
22 cm x 28 cm



Study—Spirit of Cholon
Watercolour and ink on paper
22 cm x 28 cm



Study of Incense Coils
Pastel crayon on paper
22 cm x 28 cm

Left: Photographs of Lam family gathering for prayer, 1973



Installation view of *Cholon, Not Forgotten*, John B. Aird Gallery, 2022



Flare Light – Night becomes Day

In 1968, during the last year that I was living in Cholon, the communist army invaded during the Tet festivities and briefly took over the city. In the ensuing weeks, Vietnamese soldiers, aided by American marines, forcefully reclaimed the town. In the 50 years since, I have occasionally revisited moments of the Tet Offensive in my memory.

With the passing of time, some images have faded, but certain elements are etched in my mind. The rotor-thud of helicopters, a sound that is both sharp and dull, interrupting the silence of night. The brilliant flashes of flares, blanketing fields with ghostly orange illumination, transforming night into day.

In *Flare Light*, I convey my visual memories of the brilliant flares illuminating the whole sky, while choppers circle overhead. Below, under observation, anxious residents of the besieged city are dormant and insignificant inside their houses, awaiting the unpredictable outcome of the struggle.

Flare Light—Night becomes Day, 2017
Oil on canvas
76 cm x 60 cm

Feeding Memory



Photograph of 林宝卿 shrine, 1930s

On the 1st and 15th day of the lunar month, elaborate meals were offered to pay respect to my father's deceased first wife. As a child, I remember these days well, because after the ceremony was over, we got to eat the prepared food. The format of the offering was that either three or five living creatures—chicken, crab and fish in the painting—were on the menu, in addition to fruits and rice. Preparing a good meal for the offering, and then for the family to enjoy, was a normal practice to demonstrate that the deceased were not forgotten.



Feeding Memory, 2016
Oil on canvas
76 cm x 60 cm



Installation view of *Cholon, Not Forgotten*, John B. Aird Gallery, 2022



Air Viet Nam
Pencil crayon on paper
48 cm x 66 cm

Air Viet Nam



Photograph of Air Vietnam, 1950s

This drawing is based on a photo taken from our balcony in the 1950s. On the center right is the Da Tong Hang (大通行) building with an Air Vietnam sign on a lower balcony. Da Tong Hang was the major travel agency in Cholon, providing travel-related services such as applying for visas, booking reservations, and buying tickets of all kinds. Air Vietnam's office was on the second floor of the building.

We used to have urns for pet fish on the balcony, and spent hot afternoons playing with the fish while watching activities in the neighborhood. The proximity to travel institutions and the sight of uniformed pilots and air stewardesses inspired my desire to travel, to take an airplane ride and go somewhere one day.



Installation view of *Cholon, Not Forgotten*, John B. Aird Gallery, 2022

My Father's Altar

The war was raging on in Vietnam in 1973, when my father passed away. I had emigrated to Montreal, where I received news of his passing. I could not return, and recall endlessly studying the photos of his funeral.

There were tables loaded with offerings: fruits, tall gladiolas, Vietnam roses, candles, incense sticks. Beside the altar table was my dear mother in mourning.

According to Taoist belief, to travel from our living world to the spiritual world, the departing soul has to be accompanied. Thus, the food was presented along with a pair of ceramic figurines. One figure was to send off the dead (金童接引西方去) and the other to receive the soul (玉女迎歸極樂園).

Thousands of miles away and decades later, the thought of my father and his passing remain vivid in my mind.

My Father's Altar, 2017
Oil on canvas
76 cm x 60 cm





Installation view of *Cholon, Not Forgotten*, John B. Aird Gallery, 2022

Sisters

My mother and her sister left Japanese-occupied Quang Dong Province to get married in Indochina. The two sisters finished middle school in Shantao, then, bearing a classical Chinese education and culture, they ventured to Indochina seeking a better life.

My mother stayed very close to her Chinese roots in the Cholon community, living through the war. She later immigrated to Canada, where she learned English and spent her old age with me and my own sister. My auntie married an overseas Chinese from Taiwan, and they settled down there.



Sisters, 2021
Oil on canvas
50 cm x 50 cm



Photograph of Rosalie Lam's mother (陳碧蓮) with her sister (陳碧良), 1940

Parade of Warriors

In popular folklore, warrior sisters Hai Ba Trung were heroines who led a rebellion against the Qing dynasty, when Vietnam was considered part of China. This folklore is frequently re-enacted during parades, with two beautiful ladies riding decorated elephants.

The infamous Catinat Post building, located at the top of Dong Khai Street, is painted as the background. During the war, French police—and later, the South Vietnam Secret Police—occupied the building. Many patriots were imprisoned and tortured there in the 1950s, and for many passersby, it still holds an aura of menace or fear.

To mark the period, I painted the parade marching over a yellow ground with three red stripes, similar to the South Vietnam flag before the reunification of the country.



Parade of Warriors, 2017
Oil on canvas
50 cm x 50 cm

Lao Go

1888-1967



Photograph of Lao Go - Nguyen Thi Hua (阮氏祐), 1888-967

Our ancestral home was a row of six stores next to a canal, which was later filled in to become Van Kiep Road. My grandfather left his first wife in Quang Dong Province to seek his fortune in Indochina. He did well in business and took a Vietnamese second wife, who we called Lao Go, meaning Grand Auntie.

Lao Go was a Vietnamese girl from Long Thang, who delivered produce to my grandfather's shop by boat. To anchor the boat, she held the rope in her teeth, jumped into the water, and swam to shore.

By the time I was a child, my grandfather had passed away, and Lao Go was running the business as well as the household.

Lao Go, 2020
Oil on canvas
50 cm x 50 cm





Installation view of *Cholon, Not Forgotten*, John B. Aird Gallery, 2022

Abundance

Early Chinese called Vietnam 'The Land of Fish and Rice.' Food was abundant: I recall busy kitchens with chickens running around, buckets of seafood, and bushels of produce. From killing the chickens, to gutting fish, to cleaning up muddy vegetables, preparing meal for our family of a dozen people was a full-time job. The kitchen was always full of activity.

Most kitchens were open-air, located either in an atrium or a courtyard. There were hooks to suspend food, including fruits and baskets full of eggs, protecting them from ground insects. We had big urns holding water, since the municipal supply was only available at certain times of the day. This rudimentary setup yielded culinary delights: I still recall the aromas of grilled fish and squid ready to be shared at the dining table.



Abundance, 2017
Oil on canvas
60 cm x 76 cm



With my Sister

Here, I painted my sister and myself in traditional Chinese costumes, standing in front of our ancestral home at the corner. We were part of a multicultural and inclusive society of Vietnamese, Chinese, French and Indians. The French established a dependable postal system for Vietnam, where postmen were respected as fonctionnaires or public servants, and the post office was the central landmark in many communities. A Chinese merchant built the Binh Tay market, populated by Vietnamese vendors. Nearby at Da Guang Ming Alley, Indian merchants operated rows of textiles shops.

My ancestral home (林合成) was on Rue Van Kiep, one block away from the local Bun Dien or Bureau de Poste et Telegram. This painting depicts the nonchalant mood and memorable buildings in my neighborhood: the Ba Thien Hau Temple (now a UNESCO site), the Ton Qing Restaurant (同庆酒店) with the first elevator in town, the Da Guang Ming Alley (大光明巷) with a popular cinema, and the Binh Tay Market at the back. There were all kinds of homes, stores, and business, including the Globe Newspaper (世界日报) office, street vendors, and rickshaws.

Elephants were part of Cholon's work force. Their owners fed them and loaned them out to do work that involved large loads, at a time when heavy mechanical equipment was not available in Cholon. As symbols of longevity and good luck, elephants were also part of many weddings and parades, suitably decorated for such occasions.

With my Sister, 2017
Oil on canvas
76 cm x 60 cm

Kodak Moment

Revisiting the Ho Chi Minh Botanical Garden during a trip to Vietnam in the late 2004, I saw a bronze elephant statue and recalled having my photo taken there when I was about five or six years old.

Walking through the garden's Rococo cast iron gates is like entering a French colonial era stage set. There are parterres of flowers, grouped and arranged to form patterns, manicured lawns, and trimmed and sculpted shrubs, all organized to offer long vistas. And there were those magnificent orange blooms on the huge flame trees. The colonial era left marks that become part and parcel of the Vietnamese culture—like the gardens, and the availability of a good coffee and croissant at any corner restaurant.



Kodak Moment, 2017
Oil on canvas
76 cm x 60 cm



Alms for Blessings

Early in the mornings, Buddhist monks traveled from house-to-house in Cholon, asking for alms. In exchange for food, the monks would say a prayer and give blessings. This Buddhist ritual gave everyone in the community the chance to be charitable.

An altar is depicted at the base of a banyan tree, where spirits were believed to dwell. A Vietnamese proverb says, "the banyan tree trusts Gods, the Gods trust the banyan tree," suggesting a connection, via the banyan, between Earth and Heaven.

In this scene of monks seeking alms, children run around innocently, and street vendors gather in the shade of the banyan. Meanwhile, high above, there are birds watching and spying on everyone.

Alms for Blessings, 2017
Oil on canvas
60 cm x 76 cm

Terre Rouge over Cu Chi Tunnels

In the outskirts of Cholon were many rubber plantations, most belonging to the French company Terre Rouge. In these vast, red soil forests, the sap was collected from rubber trees for export. Nearby, Cholon residents enjoyed excursions to open spaces that served as recreational grounds.

Most plantation managers patrolled their grounds by jeep, armed with pistols, in case they met with a tiger. It is possible that there were tigers in the woods, but the plantation managers were likely armed against ambush by their own laborers. After the war, it was revealed that there were many tunnels dug under plantations as hideouts for the Vietcong, including the Chu Chi tunnel system.

This painting juxtaposes the carefree days of childhood with the complicated realities of the colonial exploitation of Indochina, the political struggles underlying the war, and the unpredictable dangers that surrounded our living circumstances.



Terre Rouge over Cu Chi Tunnels, 2017
Oil on canvas
76 cm x 60 cm



Installation view of *Cholon, Not Forgotten*, John B. Aird Gallery, 2022



Biographies

ROSALIE LAM was born in Vietnam where she took classical drawing and painting lessons. In 1968, Lam immigrated to Canada to study, and graduated with her degree in architecture from McGill University. In 2005 to 2007, Lam studied Chinese painting at the Central Academic of Fine Arts in Beijing, China. In 2007 to 2009, Lam studied and exhibited at Sangeet Shyamala Centre, New Delhi, India. She has also taken courses at the Ottawa School of Arts, Haliburton School of Arts, Toronto School of Arts and George Brown Collage. Lam is a founding member of Markmakers Six, an art instructor, and an elected member of the Ontario Society of Artists. She has completed commissioned works for the City of Toronto Street Art program, and her sketches are included in the Myseum of Toronto's Quarantine Qapsule. Her work is included in the Ontario Archives collection.

Rosalie Lam has exhibited extensively, and her paintings are collected internationally.

ERIN STORUS is an independent curator and artist based in Toronto/Tkaronto, the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Currently completing a Master of Visual Studies in Curatorial Studies at the University of Toronto, Erin's curatorial practice is variously informed by investigations into ephemerality, decay, world-building, and spectacle. She curated a series of outdoor group art exhibitions entitled *Garden Variety* in her backyard in Summer 2021 and creates diaristic comics in her free time.

VINCENT LAM's first book, *Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures*, won the 2006 Scotiabank Giller Prize, and was adapted for television and broadcast on HBO Canada. *The Headmaster's Wager*, Dr. Lam's first novel, was shortlisted for the 2012 Governor General's Literary Award and the 2013 Commonwealth Book Prize. His second novel, *On the Ravine*, will be published in 2023. Dr. Lam is also the co-author of *The Flu Pandemic and You*, a non-fiction guide to influenza pandemics, which received a Special Recognition Award by the American Medical Writers' Association in 2007. He served as executive editor and co-author of the textbook *Opioid Agonist Therapy: A Prescriber's Guide to Treatment*, published in 2022. In 2011, he published a biography of Tommy Douglas, "father of medicare," for Penguin Canada's Extraordinary Canadians Series. Dr. Lam lives in Toronto, where he is an emergency physician, an addictions physician, and a frequent contributor to *The Globe and Mail*. He is the medical director of the Coderix Medical Clinic.

Erin Storus and Rosalie Lam at the reception for *Cholon, Not Forgotten*, John B. Aird Gallery, 2022



CARLA GARNET is the Director and Curator of the John B. Aird Gallery since 2014. She has worked as the curator at the Art Gallery of Peterborough (2010-2013), as a guest curator at Gallery Stratford (2009-2010), as an independent curator (1997-2010), and was the founder and director of Garnet Press Gallery (1984-1997). Garnet holds an Associate Diploma from the Ontario College of Art and Design, and a Masters Degree in Art History from York University. Garnet is interested in the politics of the art exhibition and its potential to function as a common—a public space for dialogue. Her curatorial area of interest engages with an exploration of work that presents the possibility of existing simultaneously in many tenses or occupying more than one subject position at once, or both, as a way to open up space for greater empathy. For Garnet, an artwork's significance is tied up with an ability to say what otherwise might be unsayable.

Guests at the reception for *Cholon, Not Forgotten*, John B. Aird Gallery, 2022



John B. Aird Gallery

The John B. Aird Gallery (1985-present) is a self-funded non-profit public art gallery with a director/curator, a managing board, and charitable tax status. The Gallery hosts up to nine exhibits per year, plus an annual fundraiser. These exhibits provide participation opportunities for up to four hundred artists per year. The Aird prides itself on being inclusive, and hosts several large group shows yearly, as well as two or three annual Arts Council and/ or Scotiabank CONTACT Festival of Photography-funded exhibits that pay CARFAC fees.

The Gallery's mission is to provide a generous, safe contemporary art exhibition space where visual culture can be shared and explored by an audience as diverse as its makers. We believe visual culture inspires, engages, and amplifies Toronto's communities.

In September 2019, the Aird Gallery moved from the provincial government buildings at Bay and Wellesley to a temporary location on Queen West. We foresee returning to our 3,500-square-foot space on the second floor of the Macdonald Block by mid-decade.



Guests at the reception for *Cholon, Not Forgotten*, John B. Aird Gallery, 2022

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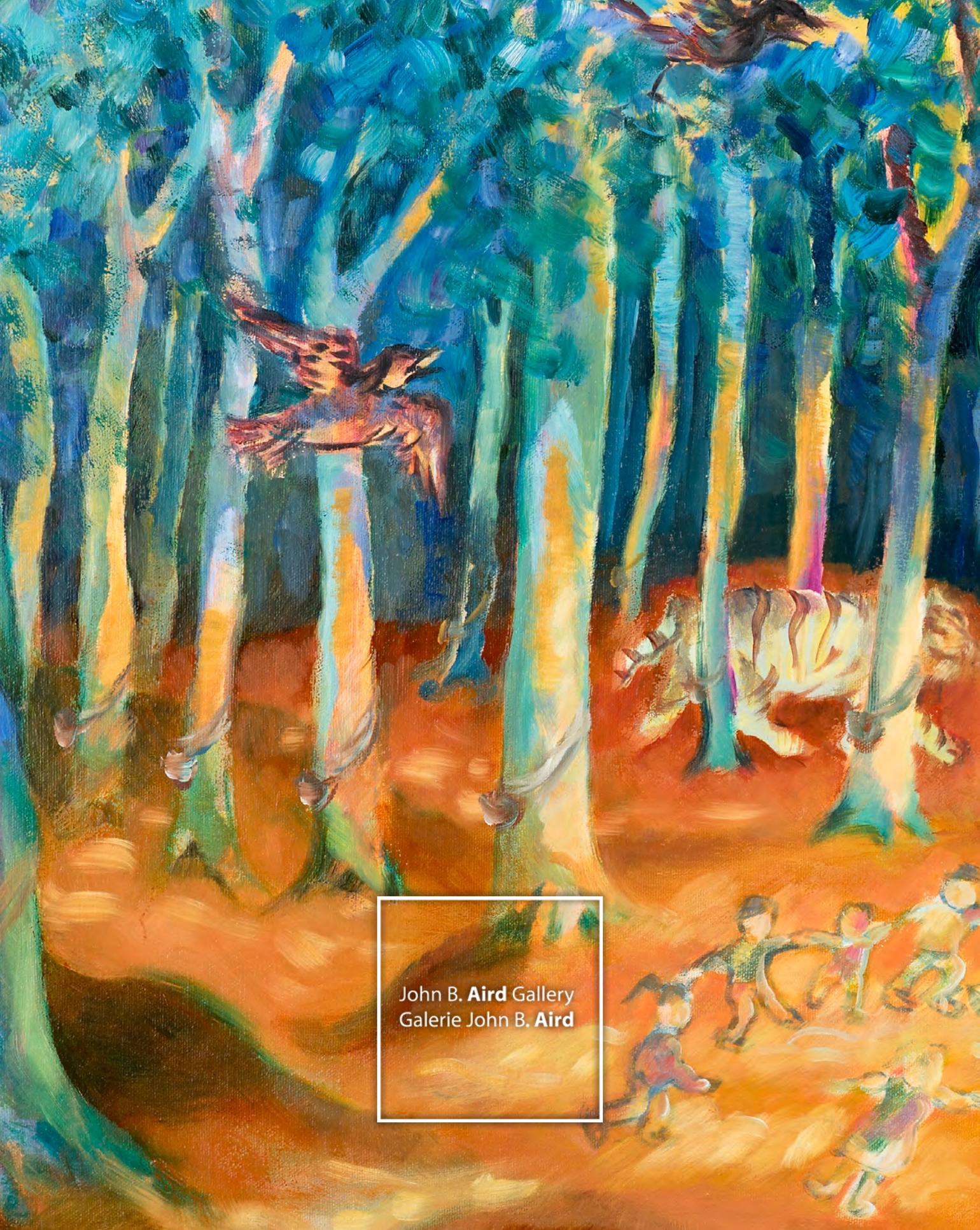
AIRVIETNAM

MAN-KIEN

HOA TUONG LANG

HOA TUONG

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John B. **Aird** Gallery
Galerie John B. **Aird**