

# JAMES NGUYEN

## EXIT STRATEGIES

4 SEPTEMBER - 10 OCTOBER 2015

***Exit Strategies***, a new exhibition by Vietnamese-Australian artist James Nguyen, reflects upon the artist's experience of living in a factory in south-west Sydney with his family during the 1990s. Living at their place of business was an expedient decision by the artist's parents that required the family to establish a double life—based on a sense of self-reliance, secrecy and concealment—in an effort to save their failing textile business during a period of sweeping reforms made to the textile, clothing and footwear sector in Australia. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Nguyen's new body of work explores the repercussions of the sweeping economic changes happening to the manufacturing sector in Australia at the time upon familial relationships between himself, his brother and his parents as migrants in an adopted country.

*Exit Strategies* sees Nguyen collaborate with his family as key characters in a fragmented narrative. Working in a semi-documentary mode of construction, whereby the artist presents a fictional story from multiple perspectives, Nguyen incorporates personal memories, factual details and actual events in his narratives. The exhibition includes a newly-commissioned four-channel video work, *Gimbal* (2015), that focuses on the artist's parents. Dressed in matching white t-shirts and shorts, the couple re-enact and narrate the experiences of their children through split scene sequences. Across four screens the sequences play out with the camera constantly in motion, creating a sense of vertiginous disorientation. With little direction from the artist, Nguyen's parents revisit various sites—the playground, factory, local shopping centre, and the route home from school—as a means to access the memories of their children. By reversing the roles of the parent, Nguyen re-imagines his childhood as a psychological reference for the responsibility that children of refugee or migrants often assume. Nguyen allows his parents to contribute, through collaboration in the project, to the artist's understanding of the parenting decisions from an adult perspective. The soundtrack for *Gimbal* is dominated by diegetic sound—passing traffic, the whine of a rusty swing set, the rattle of a trolley—but punctuated by the narration of the artist's parents as they reflect on their own reenactment of their children's daily walk to school. This further fragments the accuracy of the artwork as a document of truth, instead inflecting the work with the realities of raising a family.

Located in the storage spaces of 4A, usually hidden to viewers behind gallery walls, Nguyen has installed *Tripod* (2015), a series of short video vignettes amongst a room lined in blue tarpaulin—the same colour as the holding screen on many television screens. Periodically the televisions come to life, playing short re-enactments, this time by the artist and his brother of intimate actions and moments from their childhood. Through these glances of play the artist reminds us of the function of performance in the everyday to act as a testing ground for behaviour and the diversional craftiness of childhood.

Described by the artist as 'visual recollection', *Tripod* allows Nguyen and his brother to revisit their memories as a site for recollection and psychological reconstruction. At the same time, like Gimbal this work continues Nguyen's interest in how the camera as recording device can be incorporated into the performance. By internalising the observational processes of the camera and its apparatus (tripod and Steadicam rig) to disrupt the logic of the cinematic image.

Together with the assistance of his mother, Nguyen has also created *Flatbed Knit Polo Collars* (2015), a large-scale sculptural screen made by sewing together hundreds of surplus polo shirt collars saved from the factory. As a tribute to his mother's efforts to support the family through manual labour as the factory began to fail, the screen acts as a type of flag to represent a generation of women for whom the act of working became a strategy for survival and prosperity. With its stark blocks of contrasting colours, *Flatbed Knit Polo Collars* also echoes the formalist grid—and perhaps the regulative and repetition practices of the Textile industry—but dispels the Modernist utopianism of industrial technology and travel, instead highlighting the inequities of global economies and forced migration. Accompanying the sculpture is a two-channel video work that incorporates footage from the documentary *Fearless - Stories From Asian Women: Heart on The Sleeve* (2002) directed by Mathew Kelley that addressed the personal and socio-economic implications of government reforms that transformed the Australian economy, and in turn, Australian's migrant communities since the 1980s. Accompanying the documentary, Nguyen has interviewed family friend and fellow seamstress Hien Tran, asking her to re-watch the documentary that she starred in and consider how these massive changes to labour relations have affected her livelihood and family.

As the artist's first significant solo exhibition, *Exit Strategies* marks an important contribution by a member of a younger generation of Vietnamese-Australian artist, of which a critical mass share an upbringing in Western Sydney, and are likewise exploring concerns relating to the Vietnamese diaspora in Australia. Through restaging and framing intimate familial gestures in the face of financial ruin, *Exit Strategies* draws human and personal connections alongside broader geopolitics of war, economic reform and nationhood.

Toby Chapman, Project Curator

Produced & Presented by



## LIST OF WORKS

### GROUND FLOOR

James Nguyen, *Flatbed Knit Polo Collars* (2015)  
cotton  
3 x 6 m  
Courtesy the artist.

Mathew & Samantha Kelley, *Fearless - Stories of Asian Women: Heart on The Sleeve* (excerpts), 2015  
single-channel video, sound, 24:53 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist and MASK Productions.

James Nguyen, *Hein Tran Commentary* (2015)  
single-channel video, sound, 12:26 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist.

### FIRST FLOOR

James Nguyen, *Gimbal (bike)*, 2015  
4-channel video, sound, 8:03 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist.

James Nguyen, *Gimbal (playground)*, 2015  
4-channel video, sound, 7:25 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist.

James Nguyen, *Gimbal (trolley)*, 2015  
4-channel video, sound, 4:49 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist.

James Nguyen, *Gimbal (walk from school)*, 2015  
4-channel video, sound, 17:04 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist.

### STOREROOM

James Nguyen, *Tripod (bag)*, 2015  
8-channel video, sound, 3:40 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist.

James Nguyen, *Tripod (binroll)*, 2015  
8-channel video, sound, 2:42 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist.

James Nguyen, *Tripod (haircut)*, 2015,  
8-channel video, sound, 1:42 mins, looped.  
Courtesy the artist.

James Nguyen, *Tripod (iron)*, 2015  
8-channel video, sound, 1:27 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist.

James Nguyen, *Tripod (knife)*, 2015  
8-channel video, sound, 0:55 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist.

James Nguyen, *Tripod (river crossing)*, 2015  
8-channel video, sound, 4:12 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist.

James Nguyen, *Tripod (scissors)*, 2015  
8-channel video, sound, 2:01 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist.

James Nguyen, *Tripod (Texta)*, 2015  
8-channel video, sound, 2:00 mins, looped  
Courtesy the artist.

**James Nguyen** (b.1982, Vietnam) is a Sydney-based artist whose output ranges from drawing, installation, video and performance. He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) from the National Art School, Sydney, in 2012 and is currently undertaking a Masters of Fine Arts at Sydney College of Arts (SCA), University of Sydney. He has been the recipient of the Clitheroe Foundation Scholarship and the Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship. Since 2012 Nguyen has participated in several group exhibitions including at Articulate Project Space, Sydney; YOLK Collective, Sydney; William Wright's Artists Projects, Sydney; and Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts. His first solo exhibition was at Bradfield College, North Sydney, in 2013 titled EXIT Strategy, and his recent solo exhibition, The Man With the Movie Camera, was presented at both SCA Gallery and FELTspace, Adelaide in 2014.

Nguyen's video and performance practice looks at the process of making and observing art through the 'performative potential of the camera.' By documenting the actual recording of footage, the camera and the act of film-making becomes part of the work rather than just the filmic apparatus. Beyond the principles of cinematography, Nguyen is also working with BAD MUDDA (in collaboration with Salote Tawale) and Astute Art Investments International to find versatile collaborative interventions to engage with artists and communities from Australia and the greater Asia-Pacific Region.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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