



**DACCHI DANG
THE BOAT**

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Introduction

The end of the Vietnam War was officially marked by the fall of Saigon in 1975. For many Vietnamese, this event symbolised such a radical change of life that they would risk everything, including their own lives, to escape it. Spurred by a strong sense of hope and courage, many Vietnamese left their homeland by boat. This mode of migration would occur in countless individual incidences over the next twenty-five years. *The Boat* is an exhibition created by Dacchi Dang in collaboration with the Vietnamese community. It examines the experience of Vietnamese boat refugees and their journey to Australia. Dacchi Dang left Saigon in April 1982, travelling with his two sisters, younger brother and 135 other people on a boat 11 metres long. Drifting at sea for 4 days, without proper navigation equipment, food or water, they were on several occasions pursued by Vietnamese and Russian navy ships. They were assisted with food and water along the way by workers on an oil rig from where they were directed to a refugee camp in Pulau Bidong, Malaysia. Finally in November 1982, Dang and his family arrived in Australia.

Interview

Gia Nghi Phung: *The Boat* is an ambitious project, involving the Vietnamese community in retelling their experiences as refugees through the visual arts. Can you explain how the idea for *The Boat* was developed?

Dacchi Dang: The key message I want to convey through this project is to tell the story of the journey of Vietnamese boat refugees. For many Vietnamese people, the journey from Vietnam to Australia is a painful period in their lives, a time best not dwelled upon. I wanted to respond to this, I wanted to record some of the different stories specific to the Vietnamese community in Australia. Although these may not often be spoken about, they nevertheless affect the way that many Vietnamese relate to the present. Since graduating from artschool I have been interested in exploring this idea through my work, and *The Boat* has been developed from a series of artworks using this concept. The earliest work was a triptych of photo images on wax, which was slowly allowed to melt over the exhibition period. This process of change symbolises the gradual transformation of one's memories while revealing how our sense of identity is altered by the effects of migration and the influences of a new culture.

This work prompted me to return to Vietnam in 1994 to re-establish my connection with the country, people and culture. It was an attempt to reconstruct my memory and sense of identity after having lived in Australia. What I discovered altered my perception of my own identity. The Vietnam I had known and the Vietnam I experienced merged with the impact of living in Australia for 12 years. Dealing with the locals, who had mixed feelings towards returned 'Viet Kieu', was a further challenge. I took 150 rolls of film and created a series of photomontages to produce the exhibition *Spectacle II*. These montages show my impressions from this trip. At times, they invite the viewer to travel back to Vietnam, but mostly the montages evoke a personal journey, revealing the multiple layers of influence from my past, from Australia and Vietnam.

Ultimately, this journey led me to reconcile my experience as a boat refugee with my Vietnamese-Australian identity. I needed to come to terms with the pain and suffering of that experience. It occurred to me that many refugees feel this way, and this project was developed out of a need to retell this journey, which is one of danger as much as it is of hope. It is a way for new generations of Vietnamese-Australians to understand their heritage and for the broader Australian public to understand the conditions suffered by boat refugees.

GNP: How did the Vietnamese community help to develop *The Boat*?

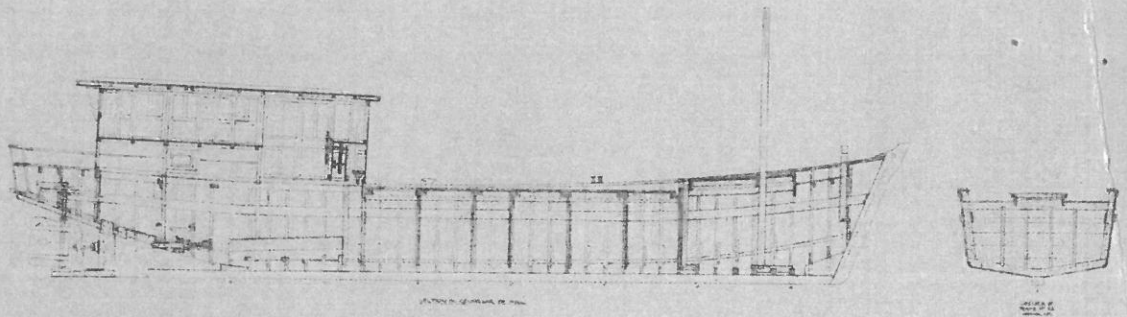
DD: I interviewed 15 people from the Vietnamese community from different age groups and backgrounds, selecting those who left Vietnam at different stages. I deliberately included these variations because they provide deeper insights into why each person chose to leave the country and the kind of obstacles or advantages they had in making a successful escape. It was important to work with members of the Vietnamese community because the story of boat refugees is a composite of many different kinds of journeys. There is the physical journey, but also emotional and psychological ones. It is not a literal translation. It is an interpretation. I realised through my interviews with each person that words are often insufficient to describe the experience. I have chosen to represent their stories through images. The montages build on my previous works in that they utilise layers to create different levels of understanding. In this way, I was able to provide a broad overview of these stories and, at the same time, present a more intimate and personal view from each individual.

Viewed from inside the boat, the experience of viewing the photomontages is further heightened by the physical confinement of the space. I want viewers to appreciate for themselves what it might have been like in the boat. It is not about revisiting the suffering, but to make people more aware that survival is also a story of hope, courage and betterment. This, I hope, will enable future generations to appreciate the contributions Vietnamese refugees have made to Australian identity and culture.

GNP: *The Boat* explores aspects of the Vietnamese-Australian experience. How does the exhibition draw from events of the past and relate to issues of migration today?

DD: There are 25 years of migration history in Australia relating to Vietnamese boat refugees. Yet these stories remain untold. Vietnamese people have also been unable to retell their experiences because the memories are painful and sad. They live in hope of the future in the sense that they want their stories to be told, but articulated in such a way that the outcome is positive.

I have been working on the idea of migration for nearly 10 years. The fact that it is still a contentious topic means that there remains issues that we need to address. *The Boat* is intended to create an opportunity for dialogue, not just amongst the Vietnamese community but also with the broader Australian public. I think the visual arts can open up new channels of communication, which in turn can develop a new language for the future. What is important is that we recognise that Australian culture is not only diverse but also dynamic. Perhaps this exhibition is one way for people to look back in order to appreciate what is happening today.



Dacchi Dang

b. 1966 Saigon

Lives and works Sydney

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2001 *Phantasmagorie*, Phyllis Palmer Gallery, Melbourne.
Phantasmagorie, Horsham Regional Art Gallery, Melbourne.
- 1997 *4 x 4*, Gallery 4A, Sydney.
- 1996 *Spectacle II*, Stills Gallery, Sydney.
Spectacle I, First Draft, Sydney.
- 1994 *Dacchi Dang Works*, Suncow Gallery, Sydney.
- 1993 *Predicament*, Stills Gallery, Sydney.
- 1992 *Dacchi Dang Works*, Asia Australia Institute, The University of New South Wales, Sydney.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1999 *We are Australian*, touring exhibition, George Adams Gallery, Melbourne.
Sense Place Personal Space, Kudos Gallery, Sydney.
- 1992 *Accusations of Unclear Thinking*, Arthaus Gallery, Sydney.
1992 Telecom Fine Art Scholarship Exhibition, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney.
- 1991 *This side up/Deze kant boven*, Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
Essence & Resistance, The Works Gallery, Sydney.



above: *Drawing of the Hong Hai* (detail)
Reproduced courtesy of the Australian National Maritime Museum.
With thanks to Wendy Payne of Alan Payne and Partners Pty Ltd.

below: Dacchi Dang
Untitled 2001
Photo montage. Silver Gelatin Print

The Boat
Dacchi Dang
Curator: Gia Nghi Phung

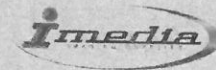
Exhibition dates: 26 October-17 November 2001

Asian-Australian Voices Seminar:
Onward Journeys: Charting the Vietnamese-Australian Identity
Panel: Thang Ngo (Chair), Dacchi Dang, Dai Le, Khao Do, Cuong Phu Le, Hanh Ngo
Thursday 1 November 2001, 6-8 pm

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asia-australia arts centre
gallery4a

181-187 Hay Street
Sydney NSW 2000
(between Pitt & George Streets)
tel: 9212 0380 fax: 9281 0873
asauac@ihug.com.au

Director: Melissa Chiu
Gallery Manager: Gia Nghi Phung
Marketing and Public Relations: Jennifer Kwok
Gallery Assistant: Aaron Seeto
Interns and Volunteers: Jessie Brett, Glen Clark, Katherine Olston, Natalie Seiz, Jane Somerville, Adrienne Tasker, Jacqui Thomas, Hwi Wan Yang



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