

Independent

The Personal Is Political: A Conversation with Antonius-Tín Bui

by Francesca Gavin, April 2023



"My work is as non-binary as myself," says artist Antonius-Tín Bui. They describe their practice as "poly-disciplinary," riffing on the refusal to be pigeonholed. Bui's works range from performance to intricate portraits made from cut paper, from textiles to ceramics, printmaking to installation. Across it all, there is an energetic lightness and freedom in their approach. This is an artist who blends the politics of queerness, the Vietnamese diasporic experience, and gender fluidity with an intuitive sense of beauty and a highly developed craft.

Bui was brought up in the Bronx, studied at Maryland Institute College of Art, and is currently based in New Haven, Connecticut. They have exhibited extensively across the United States. This May, however, will mark their first solo show in an art-fair context. Bui will present a spectrum of cut-paper pieces at Independent with Monique Meloche, ahead of their second exhibition at the gallery in Chicago

this summer. The works at Independent include representations of shattered ceramic vessels as well as the larger-than-life portraits of queer and trans Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) for which Bui is best known.

Antonius-Tín Bui, that a moment can be a monument, that the monumental can be this momentary, 2023, hand cut paper, ink, and paint, 76 x 42 inches (193 x 106.7 cm), courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, photo: Mikhail Mishin



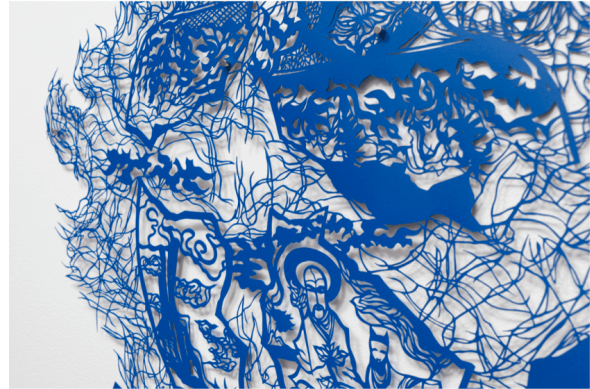
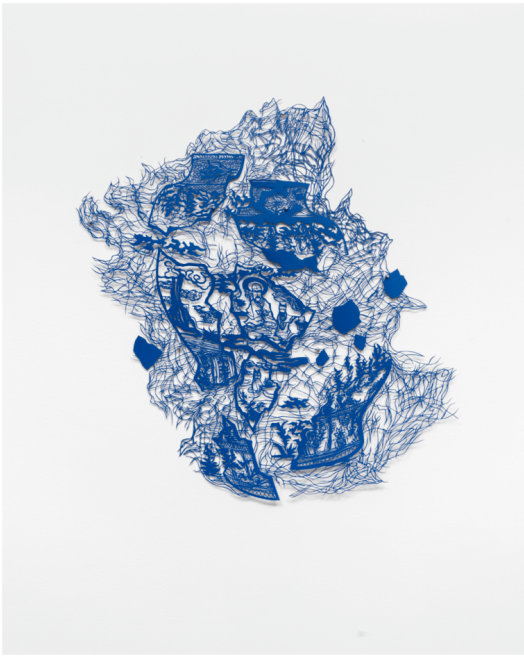
“[Lately] I’ve been more invested in exploding the figures, reassembling them, tapping into the messiness, the tensions, and the trappings of visibility,” the artist explained. “Especially as portraiture by queer and trans artists of color is just more and more consumable these days.” To counteract this kind of easy consumption, Bui enmeshes the portraits with intricate lacy patterns, creating complex nets that alternately trap or release the depicted figures.

Most of Bui’s subjects are intimate to the artist, though they sometimes portray historic characters and porn stars. In the works coming to Independent, for example, Bui depicts friends, relatives, fellow artists, organizers, and creatives. “Regardless of my relationship to them, I think they provide me a possibility,” the artist said. “They remind me of my identities, fluidity, expanding the contours of who I can be. Many of them have aided me in my own transition, have helped me realize how I wish to continue to evolve and express

myself. They all teach me to dream bigger than I’m ever able to do individually.”

There is a surprising level of experimentation and chance in Bui’s process, considering how meticulous the results are. “I call it a nonlinear dance between drawing, improv, and mistakes, because my hand slips quite a bit. I’ve learned just to go with the flow,” they enthused. “I really am enjoying the labor of it all.”

Antonius-Tin Bui, *only the parts of you unseen have memory of its creation*, 2023, hand cut paper, ink, and paint, 98 1/2 x 60 inches (250.2 x 152.4 cm), courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, photo: Mikhail Mishin



Antonius-Tin Bui, *Living for the Knife*, 2022, hand-cut paper, ink, pencil, paint, 37 x 38 inches (94 x 96.5 cm), courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, photo: Mikhail Mishin

The works begin with the whiteness of paper and sometimes stay white, playing with shadow, silhouette, and shape. Others are painted blue or red, alluding to blue-glazed porcelain, to the American flag, or to the traditional association in Asian culture between the color red and good fortune. "I'm going through my eternal blue era right now," Bui joked, explaining how their blue vessel pieces draw on extensive research on Asian objects in museum collections as well as the symbolism of certain emotions.

The series is a form of resistance to the pervasive objectification of Asian bodies and Asian culture. "Oftentimes, we're denied an interiority and valued more for the objects, the historical artifacts that we've left behind," Bui observed. "The blue is a reclamation of that aspect."

Bui views both the decorative aesthetic and performative aspects of their work as a reflection of their Vietnamese heritage. "I'm not a trained dancer whatsoever. But I did grow up in a very performative household," they recalled. "My parents would have these large gatherings. And every time my uncle got really drunk, he asked all the kids to put on fashion shows. We would all put on these talent portions, creating personas. We were also obsessed with wrestling as a family."

Antonius-Tin Bui, courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery



There is both a sense of intimate personal politics and wider socio-political statement in Bui's art. Yet there is nothing didactic about it. A feeling of nuance extends to their performances. Past pieces have included collective interventions, such as an annual dedication of objects at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall in Washington, DC, as part of the Missing Piece Project.

"Since the monument's erection [in 1982], every single non-living object that is left at the base has been collected and archived by the government. People leave these objects behind as a way to remember their loved ones who were lost in the war," Bui said. The offerings include everything from family photo albums to a motorcycle. But the Missing Piece Project was born out of the realization that only a handful of tributes were left by Vietnamese communities.

Every April 30, the anniversary of the official end of the Vietnam War, the group stages its own act of memorialization at the wall, dedicating objects that have been collected through their community networks. "There's no monument that really recognizes and tries to reconcile with the Southeast Asian perspective of the war," Bui pointed out. "It's been really exciting to dream of a monument collectively."

It is a testament to Bui's ability to reposition the clichés and stereotypes of Vietnam in the American and global imagination that their career has gained serious momentum in the past few years. Alongside their inclusion in group exhibitions at institutions as varied as the National Portrait Gallery in Washington (across the Mall from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial) and the USC Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, Bui's pieces have been acquired for collections from Arkansas to Pennsylvania. Imbued with the artist's characteristic sensitivity and skill, the works represent an unclassifiable fusion of beauty and aesthetics with big ideas of politics, gender, and identity.

Francesca Gavin is a writer, editor, and curator based in London and Vienna. She is the editor-in-chief of EPOCH, the author of ten books on art and visual culture, and a contributing editor at Financial Times HTSI, Twin, and Beauty Papers. She has curated exhibitions at galleries and museums internationally, including The Historical Exhibition at Manifesta 11 in Zurich and The Art of Mushrooms at the Serralves Foundation, Porto.