

Social Reflection in Contemporary Vietnamese Art: a Study of Representative Artists

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving relationship between Vietnamese society and artistic expression amid the transformative *Đổi Mới* era. It explores how artists have responded to rapid socio-economic and environmental changes, reflecting on issues such as industrial pollution, urbanization, corruption, and social inequality. Through literature review, aesthetic analysis, and interviews, the study investigates why environmental and urban concerns have become central to certain artistic practices and interrogates why many young artists steer clear of socio-political themes. The findings show a divide: while mainstream artists prioritize aesthetic exploration, a socially engaged minority harnesses art to critique and educate, offering moral and communal commentary. These works employ diverse forms—installation, painting, sculpture, mixed media—to render visible hidden crises. This research underscores the dual function of contemporary Vietnamese art as both aesthetic creation and civic instrument, calling for a more socially responsible and engaged artistic generation.

Keywords: Vietnamese contemporary art; social responsibility; environmental art; *Đổi Mới*; urbanization; political critique.

Introduction

Vietnamese society has transitioned from a closed, centrally planned economy to one marked by rapid urbanization and a global cultural orientation. In 1986, the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam introduced an open-door policy and promoted international trade to reverse the country's decades-long economic stagnation (Nguyen, 2005). This marked the beginning of the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) period, which helped rescue Vietnam from crisis and bankruptcy, alleviated hunger, and stimulated socio-economic development.

As foreign investment and capital flowed into Vietnam, numerous large companies and corporations initiated operations, contributing to the emergence of a state-oriented market economy. Simultaneously, the cultural and artistic spheres gradually shifted away from the exclusive view that "Art is only truly art if it becomes propaganda" (Drummond & Thomas, 2003, p. 37). Artists, musicians, writers, television producers, film directors, and others began to benefit from the new policies and economic growth (Drummond & Thomas, 2005).

On this foundation, Vietnam embraced and developed modern and postmodern art movements, including Surrealism, Cubism, Abstract Art, Expressionism, and Symbolism. Postmodern trends saw the emergence of Installation, Performance Art, and Video Art. During this time, foreign cultural and art institutions such as the British Council, Institut Français, and Goethe-Institut were established in Vietnam, serving as sponsors and patrons of contemporary art and supporting young Vietnamese artists.

A private art market also began to flourish, enabling artists to sustain themselves through their creative output rather than relying solely on state subsidies. Galleries opened, and foreign collectors became increasingly interested in Vietnamese art (Taylor, 2011).

However, the rapid and profound economic and social changes led to the formation of major economic hubs such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. This urbanization created sharp disparities between rich and poor and gave rise to numerous social issues: overcrowded urban areas, inadequate housing for workers, traffic congestion, frequent urban flooding, environmental pollution, concerns about food safety, and systemic corruption and bureaucracy. These issues have provoked growing resistance to government policies (Nguyen, 2005). As a result, they have become pressing concerns for Vietnamese citizens, with artists often acting as the vanguard of an emergent social movement. For

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many artists, politics has become a source of inspiration and a tool to innovate and promote political culture (Teune, 2005).

Vietnamese artists have matured across two distinct generations. The first generation was trained at the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine (Indochina Fine Arts College), founded by the French in Hanoi in 1925 and closed in 1946. These artists typically followed aesthetic traditions, producing portraits, landscapes, and scenes of everyday urban life. The second generation came of age during the resistance wars against French colonialism and American intervention (1946–1975). These artists largely adhered to socialist realism, depicting reality through the lens of struggle and labor, with minimal engagement with social critique or political commentary. For the most part, they did not view art as a vehicle for social reflection but rather as a form of aesthetic enrichment. Accordingly, still life, portraiture, and landscape genres dominated their output.

In contrast, the generation of artists engaged in art as a form of social resistance is closely tied to Vietnam's participation in global artistic exchange. Their creative practices are informed by lived experience, expressing more than rational commentary.

These artists expose and critique aspects of social life that many recognize but do not articulate—concerns met with silent resignation. As Simon Teune argues, “the artistic worldview can contribute to changing models of human interaction” (Teune, 2005, p. 12). These artists transform their understanding of society into visual critiques, conveyed through their use of materials and structural choices.

Prominent figures in this movement include Lê Quảng Hà, Phạm Huy Thông, Limkhim Katy, and Lý Trần Quynh Giang, among others. The most frequently used forms in their practice include modern and postmodern art.

Given these developments, the present article poses the following research questions:

- Why are environmental and urban issues central to the creative practices of many contemporary Vietnamese artists?
- What is the relationship between social relevance and aesthetics in contemporary Vietnamese art that addresses social issues?
- Why do artists who matured after the *Đổi Mới* period often show less interest in social critique through art?

Literature Review

The influence of global contemporary art on Vietnamese art during the *Đổi Mới* period—when the country opened to the world after a long phase of isolation and economic embargo—is undeniable. This renovation enabled young Vietnamese artists to access international modern and postmodern art movements, which began to appear in their creative practices. Artistic reflection on social issues became a defining feature of Vietnam's cultural landscape during this transformative period. Central to this phenomenon is the relationship between artists and society, particularly the evolving sense of the artist's responsibility within varying political and social contexts. Traditional conceptions of the artist as isolated from society have become obstacles to fostering creative engagement with real-life themes (Becker, 1994).

To identify gaps in current research, the author has reviewed a range of domestic and international sources related to these concerns. The aim of this literature review is to illuminate deficiencies and underexplored areas, especially those related to Vietnam's practical social and political realities.

In the edited volume *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*, Lisa B.W. Drummond and Mandy Thomas analyze the cultural and social changes in Vietnam (Drummond & Thomas, 2005). Their work focuses on popular culture and urban life, exploring the interconnections between economics, politics, street life, music, and entertainment media. The book provides a comprehensive overview of a culture undergoing deep transformation (Drummond & Thomas, 2003, p. 88).

Continuing this line of inquiry, Phuong An Nguyen (2006) examines the dynamic and often tense relationship between Vietnamese youth and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Nguyen emphasizes the complexity of this relationship, noting the State's efforts to maintain control while simultaneously addressing youth aspirations and the pressures of global integration (Nguyen, 2005, p. 25).

Ho Manh Tung (2020) investigates political critique in the Vietnamese context, focusing on how corruption during the *Đổi Mới* period has been represented through caricature. He argues that the rise of the market economy, social media, and widespread social issues have made caricature a rich medium for reflecting contemporary concerns. Caricatures, especially those tackling corruption, serve as a visually intuitive form of public commentary and a space for political reflection and social cohesion (Ho, 2020).

Rhiannon Corby's 2011 dissertation explores the role of dissenting art during Vietnam's anti-war movement. Corby contends that visual media such as posters and graphic art played a significant role in shaping political discourse (Corby, 2011).

Similarly, Beth Ann Handler's *Art of Protest* (2001) investigates anti-Vietnam War activism by New York artists between 1965 and 1971, highlighting the tension between artistic practice and political engagement (Handler, 2001).

Karen I.M. Huang (2016) examines how contemporary American artists engaged in political dialogue and protest during the Vietnam War, focusing on how collective memory of the war has been preserved and interpreted through visual culture (Huang, 2016).

Iola Lenzi (2022a) analyzes the emergence of contemporary art in Hanoi during the 1990s. She identifies pioneering Vietnamese artists who incorporated traditional materials to engage with contemporary political and social issues (Lenzi, 2022a).

Nora A. Taylor (2019) also investigates the impact of globalization on Vietnamese art, noting distinct transformations among artists in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and arguing that *Đổi Mới* facilitated artists' exposure to international trends and experiments (Taylor & Corey, 2019, p. 77).

Philippa Lovatt (2020) focuses on Vietnamese cinematic artists whose works reflect the environmental destruction, lingering consequences of war, and resource depletion in the country. Through her analysis of films addressing rubber plantations and wildlife exploitation, Lovatt reveals the devastating ecological impact of historical and contemporary policies (Lovatt, 2020, pp. 221-236).

In the same vein, Lê Nghia (2025) discusses the potential of contemporary art to reflect social reality and generate empathy. Nghia asserts that art transcends mere beautification and serves to illuminate injustice and environmental degradation. He views art as a unique bridge between intuition and a deep understanding of lived experience (Le, 2025).

Nguyễn Hữu Đức (2022) highlights the significant development of genres such as Installation, Performance, and Video Art in the 1990s. However, he also notes that financial constraints and insufficient policy support continue to hinder their growth. Đức advocates for greater socialization, state support, and innovation in art education to sustain the vitality of these forms (Nguyen, 2022).

Phạm Công Tuân Minh (2025) explores the limitations of contemporary art in Vietnam, describing it as a faint but persistent voice for social critique. Minh argues that contemporary art faces multiple obstacles, including limited public engagement and institutional support (Pham, 2025).

In Iola Lenzi's research, contemporary Vietnamese art is seen as a reflection of artists' engagement with social reality. Lenzi asserts that by drawing on tradition and social context, contemporary Vietnamese art holds its ground in the region (Lenzi, 2022b).

In contrast to more optimistic perspectives, Laurent Colin (2012) contends that Vietnamese contemporary art has stagnated over the past two decades. He attributes this to repetitive forms, mimicry of foreign trends—particularly Chinese—and the failure to cultivate a distinct artistic voice. According to Colin, the apathy of the domestic audience has further weakened artists' creative momentum (Colin, 2012).

Drawing from these diverse scholarly contributions, it becomes evident that the topic of social resistance in contemporary Vietnamese art remains underexplored. This article seeks to address this gap by offering a systematic analysis of how Vietnamese artists engage with and reflect social issues in their creative practices, responding to the research questions posed above.

Purpose and Methodology

This article aims to examine the relationship between society and artistic expression in contemporary Vietnam, emphasizing that—regardless of political context—Vietnamese artists

consistently engage with social realities and uphold a sense of civic responsibility through their creative work.

To achieve this, the research adopts a multidisciplinary methodology. It includes:

- Analysis of relevant literature to establish a conceptual and historical foundation.
- Direct observation of contemporary Vietnamese society.
- Aesthetic analysis of selected artworks.
- In-depth interviews with practicing artists.

These methods together provide a comprehensive basis for identifying patterns, interpreting artistic intentions, and engaging in critical discussion of the role of art in social reflection.

Results and Discussion

Environmental Issues in Creative Practice

This is a profoundly complex issue in contemporary Vietnamese society. The rapid construction of industrial factories across the country has had serious consequences for everyday life—particularly through the degradation of wastewater systems, the accumulation of solid waste, air pollution, foul odors, and excessive noise. These environmental stressors have deeply affected communities living in and around industrial zones.

Economic development in Vietnam has been marked by a striking duality: “economic growth positively promotes consumption of natural resources and environmental pollution, while human development helps limit environmental degradation” (Bui, 2023, pp. 20-29). Yet the negative impacts of industrialization have not been adequately addressed.

In this context, the creative responses of Vietnamese artists—particularly since the *Đổi Mới* renovation period—draw urgent attention to environmental deterioration. Their works highlight how natural ecosystems and human livelihoods in certain areas have reached a critical state. One of the most alarming examples is the Formosa Plastics Group chemical spill (2016), in which industrial waste discharged by the Taiwanese company caused catastrophic environmental damage across four central provinces. According to the Vietnamese government, the spill led to the death of over 100 tons of marine life, devastated the marine ecosystem, and affected an estimated 17,600 fishing boats, 41,000 people directly, and 176,000 people indirectly. Tourism and other economic sectors also suffered severe losses (Kinh, 2016).

This incident is just one among many. Across the country’s urban zones and traditional craft villages, environmental crises persist—driven by inadequate waste treatment, ineffective odor control, and unsustainable industrial practices. These threats not only disrupt daily life but also weigh heavily on the collective psyche. Artists are often among the first to articulate and process these concerns.

One such artist is Kù Kao Khải (b. 1978), whose work is deeply rooted in his emotional connection to his homeland and the sea. The destruction of local ecosystems has awakened in him a sense of artistic responsibility. His installations and sculptures often depict environmental ruin, combining visual and symbolic language to convey the scale of loss and urgency. In *Bell* [Fig. 1], Khải constructs a symmetrical composition around a central fish skeleton, which doubles as a bell—a stark symbol of ecological warning. On one side, distorted human figures emerge from the industrial landscape; on the other, affected individuals stand beneath smokestacks, witnessing the erosion of their environment. As the artist has stated, his work reflects “a peaceful homeland, a space that brings happiness to people’s lives,” now threatened by pollution that “destroys the happiness of each family and beloved village” (Colin, 2012).

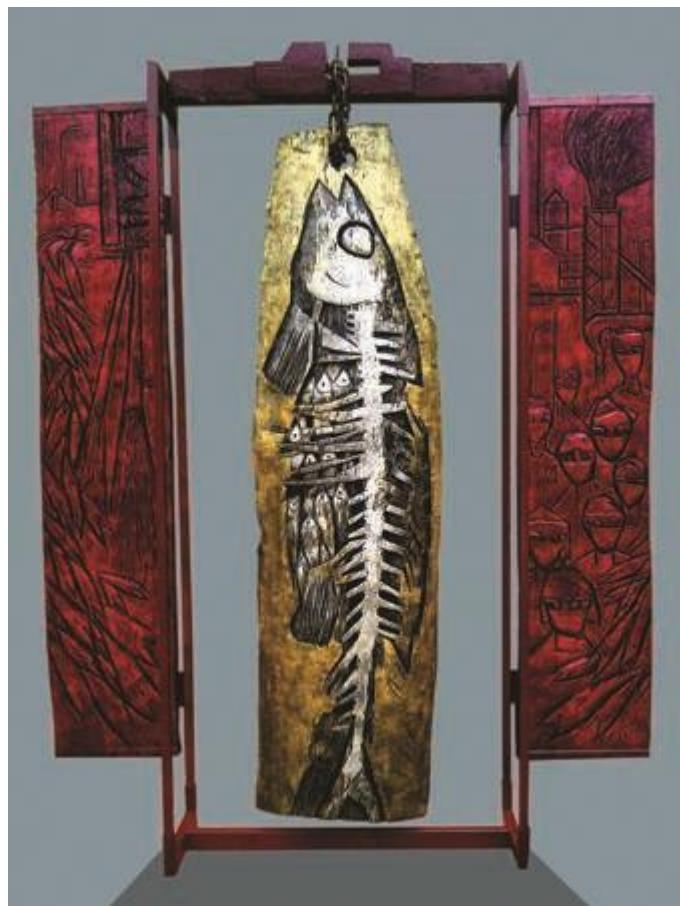


Figure 1: Kù Kao Khải, Bell, 2021, installation.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.

Artists such as Phạm Đinh Phúc have also addressed environmental concerns in their creative practice. In *Indigestion* [Fig. 2] and *Floating Slabs, Sinking Slabs* (2020), Phúc confronts the issue of industrial waste contaminating rivers and oceans, where it becomes fatal sustenance for marine life. His paintings depict skeletal fish remains—a common sight on Vietnamese beaches—as a haunting indictment of unconscious human behavior and environmental neglect. These works serve as visual condemnations of society's passive complicity in environmental degradation.



Figure 2: Phạm Đinh Phúc, Indigestion, 2019.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.

Similarly, Nguyễn Thành Sơn's *Disintegration* [Fig. 3] portrays the gradual decay of marine life along the coast, where death overtakes vitality. The painting offers a stark warning about the ecological destruction unfolding in real time.



Figure 3: Nguyễn Thành Sơn, *Disintegration*, 2020.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.

The extreme psychological and material toll of environmental pollution, particularly that caused by wastewater turning urban rivers into “dead rivers,” is powerfully expressed in Hồ Minh Quân’s *No Choice* [Fig. 4]. The painting presents a multigenerational family, their faces marked by stress and despair as they confront an environment no longer able to sustain them.



Figure 4: Hồ Minh Quân, No Choice, 2018, oil on canvas.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.

The work includes symbolic imagery of wastewater pipes, blackened rivers, lifeless bodies, and marine creatures floating in putrid water. Quân's commentary underscores the intensity of the urban crisis: "The stench rising from dead rivers haunts urban dwellers. There are rivers where no living creatures can survive, with foul water affecting tens of thousands of people every day" (Colin, 2012). Through simultaneous and layered imagery, Quân creates a desperate visual plea, collapsing the boundaries between life and death.

In *Poisoned Ocean* (2020) [Fig. 5], Đỗ Duy Tuân overlays images of marine corpses, their empty eyes and skeletal remains laid bare across a vast expanse. The work evokes the numbing spectacle of ecological annihilation. A similar symbolic tone is found in Đinh Văn Nói's *Human* (2019), in which a monumental human figure, fractured into three faces, is filled with embedded animal skeletons. The work condemns the scale of human-driven extinction and raises questions about moral responsibility and ecological consciousness.



Figure 5

Đỗ Duy Tuấn, *Poisoned Ocean*, 2020, oil on canvas.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.

Environmental degradation is also central to the works of Lim Khim Katy (b. 1979), who frequently portrays desolate fishermen adrift in lifeless waters. These solitary figures, displaced and abandoned in “dead seas,” convey the quiet despair of communities whose livelihoods have been erased.

With nature’s destruction, Vietnam faces the increasing threat of annual floods, which regularly devastate rural villages and infrastructure. The state of deforestation—one of the key contributing factors—is poignantly expressed in *The Call of the Forest* (2012) [Fig. 6]. The artist portrays anthropomorphic tree-figures, their bodies scarred with saw marks, symbolizing the violence inflicted upon forests. The work stands as both a lament and a warning: uncontrolled deforestation leads to flooding, droughts, and long-term ecological imbalance.



Figure 6: Lim Khim Katy, *The Call of the Forest*, 2012, installation.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.

Sculptor Huỳnh Đặng Viên captures this tragedy in *Running from the Flood* (2013), a moving depiction of farmers during harvest, who lose everything to sudden floods. One especially evocative

figure shoulders a heavy sack of rice, wading through rising water—a potent metaphor for the fragility of rural life under climate pressure.

In response to marine pollution, some artists have turned to using discarded materials as both medium and message. In *Gasping for Air*, Lê Văn Lợi repurposes scrap metal and found objects to produce a sculptural indictment of environmental destruction. Similarly, works such as *OPB Fish* by Phan Minh Tiên, *Stranded* by Hà Tiên, and *Plastic Jellyfish* by Hồ Đăng Chính were created as part of a collaborative environmental art project in Tân Thành fishing village, Hội An, Quảng Nam. Collectively, these works amplify a shared call for the protection of marine life and sustainable ecological practices.

The brutal effects of drought, exacerbated by climate change, are also a recurring subject in Vietnamese visual art. Parched mangrove fields and farmlands, left cracked and barren, threaten agriculture and rural survival. These desolate landscapes are vividly rendered in the paintings of Hà Phước Duy, who chronicles the cyclical trauma of water scarcity. In works such as *Seasonal Transition* (2019), *Peaceful Day* (2020), *Noon Field* (2019), *Earth Shifting* (2023), and *Earth Changing Seasons* (2023) [Fig. 7], Hà captures the lifeless earth scorched under a merciless sun. As the artist notes:

The barren images of dead fields during the drought season haunt my mind. These images repeat every summer, compelling my consciousness to create something that transforms these inanimate objects into speaking voices for the public, so we can become aware of life and collectively protect it in the face of climate change.



Figure 7: Hà Phước Duy, *Earth Changing Seasons*, 2023, oil on canvas.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.

Reflecting Urban Life in Creative Practice

Vietnamese cities during the *Đổi Mới* period have faced significant challenges alongside rapid economic development. These include widening wealth disparities, intensified rural-to-urban migration, employment precarity, and mounting pressures on civil society mechanisms. As Doan Kim Thang (2015) notes, such issues have become urgent national concerns within Vietnam's trajectory of modernization and global integration (Doan, 2015). Contemporary Vietnamese artists, with sharp observational acuity, have responded to these transformations, offering poignant visual documentation of the evolving urban condition. Central to many of these reflections are the poor and migrant populations—those most vulnerable to the shifting demands of 21st-century urban life. Collectively, these artworks offer viewers a profound understanding of the dual nature of urban progress: aspiration and struggle, growth and inequality.

Artist Nguyễn Công Trí explores the lives of construction laborers with quiet empathy. His painting *Midday Nap* (2013) [Fig. 8] captures impoverished workers in repose, their gaunt bodies collapsed into sleep during hurried midday breaks after hours of intense labor. This intimate glimpse into their vulnerability underscores both physical exhaustion and existential burden. Similarly, Đỗ Thê Thịnh's

Street Corner 2 (2012) [Fig. 9] and Đức Hò's *Life Goes On* portray the everyday struggles of Vietnam's urban working class. These artworks, centered on individuals toiling in cities such as Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, are subtle yet powerful commentaries on socioeconomic displacement. With earnings scarcely sufficient to support their families, these laborers leave their rural homes for uncertain urban futures. Their portrayals of sleep—etched with weariness, framed in silence—reveal deeper emotional truths beneath the visible surface of city life.

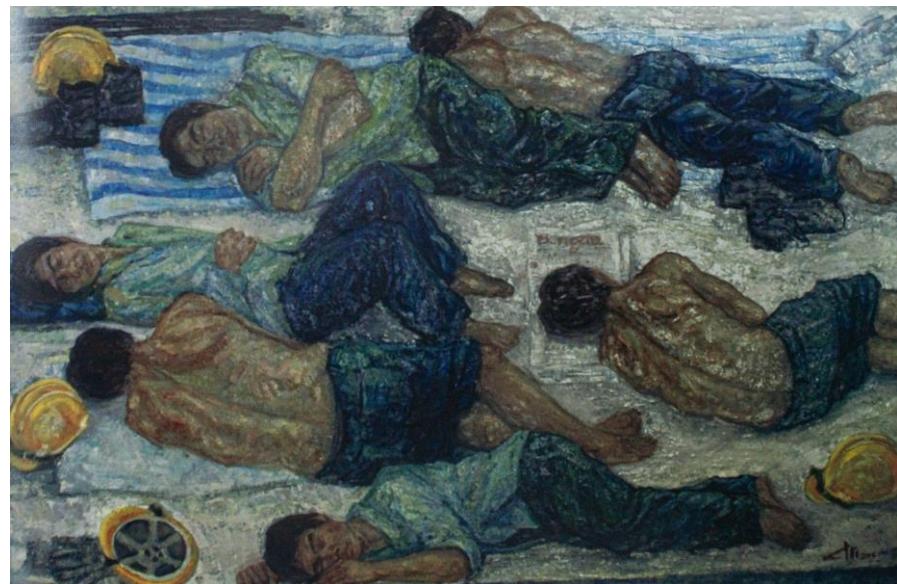


Figure 8: Nguyễn Công Trí, *Midday Nap*, 2013, oil on canvas.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.



Figure 9: Đỗ Thé Thịnh, *Street Corner 2*, 2012, bronze.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.

Painter Nguyễn Hoài Huyền Vũ also engages with urban themes in works such as *Urban Life 5* (2013), *New Urban Area* (2021), and *Urban Whirlwind* (2021). These pieces symbolically interpret the mounting pressures facing Vietnamese youth in rapidly expanding metropolises. The race to secure stable housing, cover rising living expenses, and establish a livelihood weighs heavily on a generation

navigating economic transition. Through sculptural and graphic abstraction, Vũ captures the psychological effects of urban acceleration and alienation.

The city's youngest laborers also occupy a place in this artistic discourse. In *Rhythm of Life* (2019) [Fig. 10], Huỳnh Công Nam depicts children roaming city streets, shining shoes and taking on odd jobs to survive. These lost, bewildered figures reflect a tragic facet of urban neglect, where childhood is prematurely consumed by necessity. Likewise, works such as Trần Quốc Tuấn's *Motel 2* (2009) [Fig. 11] and Nguyễn Ngọc Mai's *Clinic* (2009) portray cramped living quarters and anxious patients waiting in under-resourced urban clinics. These scenes bring into focus the lives of those left behind in Vietnam's narrative of urban development.

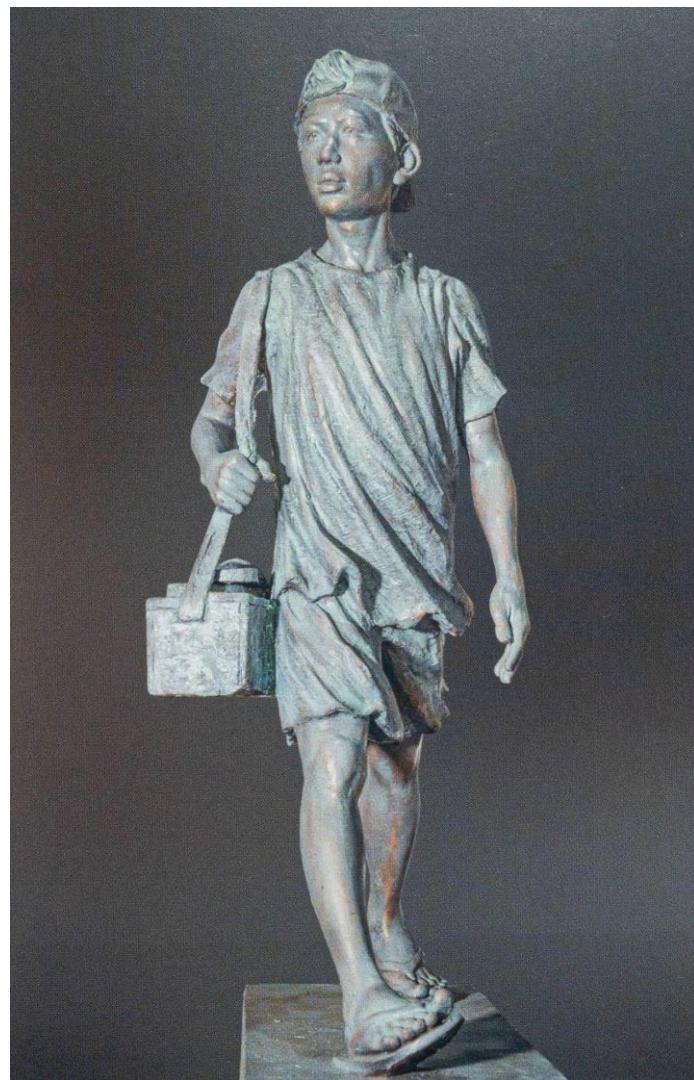


Figure 10: Huỳnh Công Nam, *Rhythm of Life*, 2019, bronze.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.



Figure 11: Trần Quốc Tuấn, *Motel 2*, 2009, oil on canvas.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.

Lim Khim Katy continues to document the overlooked lives of laborers through her distinctive high-contrast style. Her paintings strip away sentimentality to reveal the raw physicality and silent resilience of the working class—depicting workers sleeping in bare rooms, hastily eating bowls of rice, or laboring in solitude. These works carry deep emotional resonance, shaped by her immersive artistic process. As Katy explains: “Entering the daily lives of poor laborers. Meeting, listening to their stories, their confidences, their difficulties... – and then transferring those things onto canvas, with my own soul and inner strength.” (Lenzi, 2025a, para.). Through her depictions of sun-darkened skin and weary eyes, Katy renders visible the invisible: the quiet dignity and hardship of urban existence.

A further challenge to Vietnam’s urban life is the recurrent flooding during the rainy season. Annual high tides, combined with underdeveloped drainage infrastructure, frequently submerge city streets, turning everyday commutes into arduous trials.

These floods create chaos and frustration, damage vehicles and infrastructure, and elevate public health risks. Nguyễn Vinh’s *Under the Street* (2012) [Fig. 12] and Trần Ngọc Đức’s *Big Dream* (2009) confront this environmental reality head-on. Their depictions of workers and commuters wading through floodwaters capture both the literal and symbolic challenges of urban survival in an increasingly unstable climate.



Figure 12: Nguyễn Vinh, *Under the Street*, 2012, bronze.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.

Meanwhile, artist Nguyễn Văn Quý (b. 1971) addresses a less visible but equally pressing issue: water scarcity. His artworks highlight the daily routines of urban residents navigating life with intermittent

water supplies. In these scenes, individuals gather at public pumps or collect water in buckets—rituals that underscore systemic infrastructural shortfalls and deepening urban vulnerability.

Social and Aesthetic Considerations in Art Reflecting Social Issues

Many contemporary Vietnamese artists express limited interest in engaging with social commentary through their creative practice. A prevailing perception is that addressing such themes might compromise the aesthetic value of their work. Indeed, current observations suggest that over 90% of young Vietnamese artists demonstrate little interest in tackling social or political issues. Surveys of exhibitions in major cities such as Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi reveal a predominant focus on personal, introspective themes, often expressed through abstract, Cubist, symbolic, or installation art forms.

This trend raises important questions about the attitudes of young Vietnamese artists toward the role of art in society. Artist Nguyễn Văn Quý offers insight into this mindset:

I believe that artists turning away from social commentary in their creations is partly because such topics don't attract them to explore, discover, and express their inner selves. They seek philosophical content to create their works. Current artists are less concerned with social responsibility through creative activities. The prevailing view among young artists is that artistic creation is tied to beauty, and whether it reflects society or not is irrelevant.

Artists who came of age after the *Đổi Mới* (renovation) reforms tend to embrace depictions of life that celebrate beauty, rather than confront its difficulties. This orientation has become a general trend in the creative direction of many young Vietnamese artists today. However, this also presents a challenge for educators and cultural institutions striving to cultivate a more socially engaged generation of creators. As artist Phạm Duy Thông argues: "Training and creation need to provide direction for artists to engage with the real-life social issues of the country, because artists cannot stand outside the process of national development." Despite this tendency toward aesthetic detachment, several prominent Vietnamese artists during and after the *Đổi Mới* period have boldly addressed complex social and political issues—highlighting corruption, inequality, and cultural taboos. Their work demonstrates that artistic engagement with societal problems need not sacrifice beauty; rather, it can amplify aesthetic experience while deepening social awareness.

One such figure is Lê Quang Hà, a provocative and skilled artist known for his daring treatment of sensitive domestic and international political subjects. Hà unflinchingly critiques political dysfunction, portraying grotesquely distorted figures such as obese, corrupt police officers and smug, sinister politicians with bulging eyes and sharp teeth—symbolic of the decay within systems of power. His works also touch upon global themes, such as terrorism, featuring controversial portraits of public figures including President George W. Bush and Osama Bin Laden (Colin, 2012) [Fig. 13]. These images function as sharp critiques of both Vietnamese and global socio-political dynamics.



Figure 13

Lê Quang Hà, Union, 2007, lacquer on wood.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.

Phạm Duy Thông, working in a fusion of realism and surrealism, also addresses political and social concerns, particularly in the realm of land management and state corruption. Works such as *Farm of Hope* (2014), *Waving to the Future* (2014), *Wordless* (2010), *The Brick* (2011), and *An Eating Contest* (2011) [Fig. 14] are visual protests against bureaucratic inefficiency and systemic exploitation. Thông's art reflects a strong moral standpoint, combining critical realism with imaginative symbolism to convey his disillusionment with political realities.

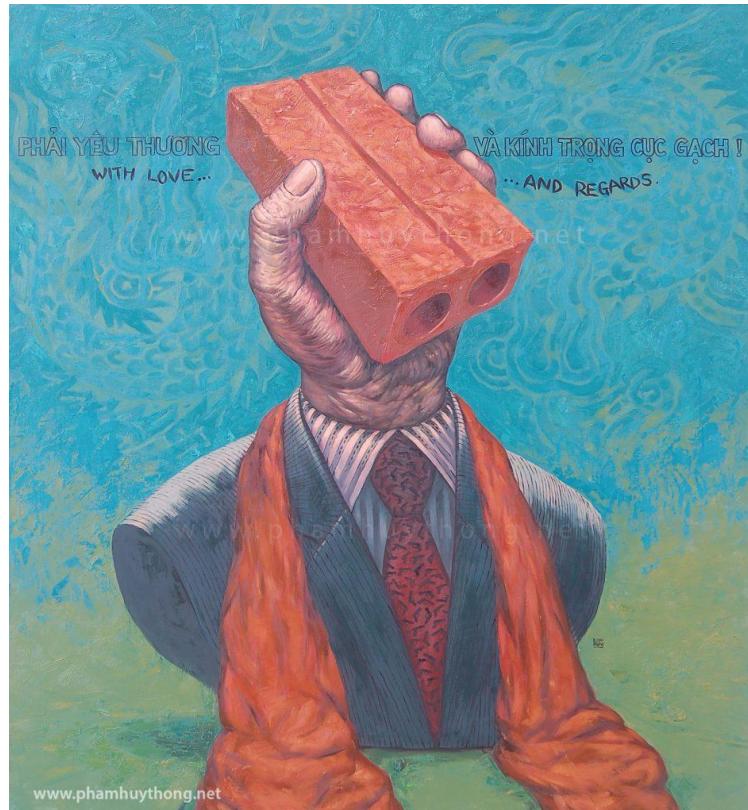


Figure 14: Phạm Duy Thông, *An Eating Contest*, 2011, acrylic on canvas.

Note. Photo by author. Used with permission.

In parallel, other artists have turned their attention to issues of gender and sexuality. Artists Đinh Ý Nhi and Nguyễn Châu Giang have highlighted injustices faced by women in Vietnamese society, challenging traditional gender roles and societal expectations through poignant and sometimes confrontational imagery. Meanwhile, Trương Tân has been instrumental in confronting taboos around homosexuality, with his work offering rare visual representation of LGBTQ+ individuals navigating cultural marginalization and societal resistance.

Importantly, these socially engaged artists have adopted a wide array of aesthetic strategies—ranging from Cubism and surrealism to expressionism and installation art. This diversity in form has contributed to the rich and distinctive visual language of contemporary Vietnamese art. Rather than detracting from artistic beauty, the engagement with pressing social realities has enhanced the communicative power and emotional resonance of these works.

Ultimately, art that reflects society does not abandon aesthetics; rather, it harnesses beauty as a vessel for truth. These socially committed artworks send powerful messages to the public, helping to confront and critique social injustices while promoting ideals of compassion, justice, and awareness.

Conclusion

Art that reflects society is a significant issue of current interest in Vietnam. In a context where most young artists show little concern for national issues—being indifferent to politics, environmental problems, urban challenges, and societal shortcomings—a notable number of artists stand out. Moving beyond the concept of art purely for decoration or visual pleasure, these artists have connected their creative activities with the destiny of the nation and the times. Through artistic imagery depicted in their works, employing various creative techniques, they contribute a voice to improving society, condemning

negative behaviors, and educating viewers about the spirit of responsibility between individuals in a fair society. They also ignite a humanitarian and communal spirit, contributing to the transformation of contemporary social life.

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