

KINGS Artist Run acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we operate. We offer our respect to Elders both past and present and extend this offer to all First Nations people.

KINGS

*Kannitha Lim*  
CULTURAL  
TRANSFORMATIONS  
THROUGH TIME AND  
SPACE

EMERGING  
WRITERS PROGRAM

Artist Run

Established in 2003, KINGS Artist-Run provides a location for contemporary art practice, supporting distinctive experimental projects by artists at all stages of their careers.

Open 12-5pm Thursday,  
Friday, Saturday, Sunday  
69 Capel Street,  
West Melbourne VIC 3003

“Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.”

—Lao Tzu

“Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth.”

—Hermann Hesse

Culture is imbued in our subconscious over generations, our ancestral legacy. Culture informs how we see ourselves, how we see each other, what we eat, how we dress, and what we create. Exposure to diverse cultures through travel or interacting within a multicultural metropolis can expand our understanding of our own cultures, while changing our perspectives on the world and ourselves. Engaging in philosophy and art history with a cosmopolitan perspective locally and an expansive perspective globally, Melbourne based artist Lan Anh Truong captures this cultural movement through time and space with echoes rebounding as futuristic warnings.

Art historian Terry Smith in his book, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (2011), writes of contemporary art becoming “an art of the world,” generating and expressing diversity while connected to a whole. Smith states this definition of diversity is a key characteristic of contemporary art and contemporary life, identifying several major currents in contemporary art today. First are artists and galleries involved in the re-modernisation and the retro-sensationalism of Modernism within North America and European countries and their colonies. Second is the postcolonial turn—art emerging from decolonial and post-colonial situations and struggles. Smith states, that this is “[art that is] content-driven, aware of the influences of ideologies, and conceding above all with issues of nationality, identity, and rights.” Third are the arts of contemporaneity, which are characterised by an amplified diversity internally and globally, with a greater connectivity than the previous currents. These are emerging artists working beyond re-modernism and postmodernism, and inheriting the political struggles of anti-colonialism and feminism. As Smith writes, ‘artists are focused on....questions as to the shapes of time, place, media, and mood in the world today.’ These artists are searching for their own locality and selfhood within the chaos of disruption and displacement, and at the same time imagining and building their own worlds to inhabit.

Truong’s work innately weaves lines flowing across continents, through time and place. She combines deeply rooted historical and cultural influences within a singular sourcepoint, while propelling it into a contemporary global sphere. Truong’s sculptures are immersive and meditative in nature, the work draws the viewer into a sense of the world, a sense of connectivity and an awareness of our living earth, and a vehicle to discuss the present and impending future.

We generally associate bonsai with Japan, though it originated in Ancient China and was known as penzai, pensai or pun-sai, and now penjing in modern China. The earliest preserved documentation of the practice was found in a tomb painting made for Prince Zhang-Huai in 706 AD, depicting two ladies-in-waiting offering shallow dishes holding miniature landscapes of rocky mountains and plants. Pun-sai spread to Japan and evolved into bonsai during the Kamakura Era (1185–1333 AD) as part of the centuries of cultural exchange between China and Japan. Earlier than this, the practice spread to Vietnam while under the Chinese occupation of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD). The eventual fall of the dynasty led the way for Vietnamese independence in 939 AD, when

the miniature landscape became the Vietnamese art and practice of hòn non bộ. Hòn non bộ is still popular in modern Vietnam, with a growing focus on single plant forms incorporating Japanese bonsai aesthetics and principles. Truong's sculptural practice is informed by her mother's bonsai garden.

When work is informed by a particular subject matter such as Truong's bonsai, it will always hold the history and evolving conditions that has brought the subject into the present context. It is through links to the past and the reframing of the context that its contemporary form is conceived. In an interview with researcher and curator Yasmine Ostendorf-Rodríguez for her 2023 book, *Let's become Fungal!: Mycelium Teachings and the Arts*, artist and activist Carolina Caycedo speaks of "geo-choreographies: an embodied knowledge, something that you have inherited for generations, which has been sophisticated throughout the generations and through the act of doing it every day." Repeated gestures, with intergenerational nuances in the action, "accumulated knowledge because it passes through generations" within muscle memory. In Vietnam the bonsai is sometimes linked to acquiring good fortune, obtaining a long life and strengthening family ties. Like bonsai plants inherited and cared for through generations, Truong's sculpture garden acts as a contemporary evolution of generational gardening.

Deft hands hold specialised tools to prune and shape branches, clipping foliage to promote new growth. Wire bending and curling round and round the soon-to-be gnarled and knotted trunk. The artist knows over time that the young green stem, so delicate and fragile, will merge with the wire, growing thicker, harder, darker and appearing decades older. While the trunk solidifies, new branches deviate in many directions—new growth finding new wires to follow, always climbing, bending and turning, opening up into the light. Branches bend as if caught in a windswept moment. Ever moving, ever still, captured in time.

Truong translates the practice of hòn non bộ / bonsai to her contemporary sculpture garden. With comparative cutting tools and wiring techniques, Truong reimagines her mother's gardens with the refuse of our modern world, including plastic garden stakes, florist wire, PVC pipes, and other found objects. These idle readymade components fit together in unfamiliar joints. Creating a relationship with her environment, Truong's sculpture gardens grow out of their architectural surroundings. Isolated from their mass-manufactured origins, these components are reworked through interlocking parts, often fitting together by chance in a playful interaction of experimentation and assembly. Each sculpture stands distinctly in their own individual colours.

Bonsai and Truong's sculpture garden are linked by the desire of their makers for control, while also being governed by natural forces. Both are gradually bent by gravity, in an inevitable dance between control and surrender. While the bonsai is forced upward with wire, Truong's sculptural forms gravitate toward the gallery floor, eventually surrendering to the beauty of impermanence and imperfection. Perhaps we could think of wabi-sabi here—a Japanese concept which embraces the ephemeral and imperfect with acceptance and tranquillity, celebrating a beauty resulting from time and transformation, age and wear. We could also include ma—another Japanese concept bringing meaning into the void, the silence and emptiness in the negative space between things. Ma is an invitation to accept and imbue the present moment. Truong's work is a celebration of wabi-sabi and a contemplation of ma. The empty space itself becomes its own presence, leading us to consider the spatial relationships between these forms. An invitation to be present in this moment, mindful and aware.

Both Japan and China's cultural thinking share the underlying principles of yin and yang—a concept pertaining to the theoretical observation and analysis of phenomena or energy. A constantly moving force relating all matter to itself—yin is softer compared with the harder yang, and vice versa. While continuously changing in accordance to its counterpart, at the precipice yin will transform into yang. These three concepts of wabi-sabi, ma and yin and yang are inherent in Truong's practice. The sculptural embodies the organic and the yin and yang dance begins, the softness of yin transforming

into the hardness of yang, organic nature translated into the inorganic structures changing again from their angular supports flowing into curved linear lines surrendering control to gravity and time. Truong's forms seek to examine the perpetual possibilities of their spatial arrangement.

As the tall, slender sculptures silhouette the gallery walls, it is easy to see Truong's background in painting as the linear sculptures appear drawn into three dimensional space. They resemble dancing figurines on a stage, lithe and graceful, with little hint of the labour of the performance and held within each component. Truong considers the human labour and environmental costs of mining, casting, fabrication, transport, and collection then finally through her own work, the remaking and reworking of this material into sculptural forms.

Truong states of her sculptures,

I do believe in the power of the work and the process of making to strengthen family ties. To me, this work represents labour in many forms. On one hand, the work embodies the mass labour of industrial production, as evident in the materials that I use. On the other hand, it honours the individual labour of my mother—a gardener—and my own role in continuing that tradition through adopting and reappropriating gardening processes in art. The word “labour,” evoking associations with childbirth, also accentuates this intergenerational connotation. It is through labour that we bond, and through labour we become interconnected.

Our sense of scale warps in the presence of Truong's sculptural gardens. We could be seeing a miniature landscape of bonsai or hòn non bộ suddenly expanding into giant spires of ancient prototaxites, enormous fungi existing 400 million years ago, one meter wide and eight metres high, overshadowing plants growing beneath a metre high. In his book *Entangled Life* (2020) Merlin Sheldrake writes of a previous eon when “living spires” were “scattered across the landscape.” We can feel ourselves shrinking in the presence of the microscopic fungi of Truong's mycelium.

Truong's mycelia rise above concrete floors, still embodying the natural world while holding their architectural form. As the gallery floor becomes earth, the landscape suddenly expands when facing miniaturised hòn non bộ / bonsai. We could be looking at the soil beneath the floor or watching giant mycelium emerge from below, thinking of shaggy ink cap mushrooms which can push through asphalt.

If we consider Truong's plant-like structures from a speculative point of view, they could sit inside what was once a gallery which has transformed over time into a museum, a mausoleum of trees long after the last tree has fallen. A post-apocalyptic future after environmental collapse, where sculptural structures become memories of plants—a warning reverberating back to the present. A plea to be actively conscious and mindful. As a tree falls and touches the ground the regenerative processes begin decomposing its material back to soil. This leads us from one sculptural landscape to another, where various plastics and plumbing refuse are reconfigured into mycelia. Yeast, a single-celled fungi can raise bread. Hyphae, a multi-celled fungi, create a tangled web of pipe-like structures that allow water and nutrients to flow through the mycelium network throughout an ecosystem. Mycelium mesh cradles the soil to prevent erosion from rain, allow trees to take root, transport nutrients, care for the young trees, and aid the sick. A truly community-driven mycelial network. Truong's mycelia reflect the transformation of time through death, decay, and renewal. As mycologist Giuliana Furci states, “there is no regeneration without degeneration.”

Ostendorf-Rodríguez implores us to awaken, arguing that with so much contemporary overstimulation, injustice and horror, we have become numb, “become zombies.” Re-opening our senses; touch, smell, taste, hearing and sight, we could implement the teachings of mycelium through sensitivity, understanding, and community. Then we can open our eyes and be unafraid to embrace and recognise the complexity and specificity required to approach our “patchy Anthropocene” and

all the layers of environmental, social, and justice involved. Furci requests we think with a mycelial approach as ideas also need to rot, to let them decompose, to ferment, “let them disintegrate and give life to new ideas.”

Truong’s sculptures have transformed hòn non bộ / bonsai into contemporary intergenerational works, crossing cultures, space and time. Truong’s practice invites us to quiet the mind, to reflect and immerse oneself in her sculptural garden. It is only through deep listening, when we become silent and open our senses, that we can begin to hear. Through this work, we can imagine forming mycelial networks while embracing the ephemeral and imperfect, flowing between formal and informal, control and surrender with acceptance and tranquility.

Exploring the vast tapestry of global discourse which emerges beyond Eurocentrism. Following hyphae threads and finding knee-deep webs of mycelia covering the forest floor. The web intertwines the histories and ideas of the world incorporating philosophy, science, activism, and contemporary art, bringing forth more integrated contemporary concepts, reflective, critical and aware. Water, nutrients, and fungal intelligence flow through the mycelia channels feeding and supporting artistic expression and finally exploding into fungus fields of an art movement awakening to a patchy Anthropocene. Through Truong’s sculptures, could we think of mushroom lighthouses networking together to find a way forward.

**Kannitha Lim** is an emerging arts writer and interdisciplinary artist living and working in Bunurong Country. This is a commission piece for the KINGS 2024/25 Emerging Writers Program. I would like to thank KINGS, Lan Anh Truong and my fantastic editor Amy Stuart for this wonderful opportunity.

The Emerging Writers Program was established in 2015 with the aim to provide publishing opportunities for emerging arts writers. This program is run in partnership with unProjects and in 2025 is supported by City of Melbourne.

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## Artist Statement

Lan Anh Truong

“Instead of revealing the Earth beneath our feet, we often seek to conceal it, regulating soil to a tool from which our ideal forms grow.”

—Victoria Pham, artist and evolutionary biologist.

Informed by my mother’s bonsai garden, my practice reflects our relationship with nature through our human desire to control. Gardening becomes a somewhat anti-ecological practice, one that places the human gardener in a position of authority, where imposed ideals govern natural growth. Nature often appears in gardening and agriculture as a construct — an “alter-nature” — that revolves around human desire and intervention.

Bonsai, in a similar way, represents a process of shaping and bending plant forms to conform to human ideals of beauty. My own sculptural gardens grow out of their architectural surroundings, consisting of components that often fit together by chance and are gradually bent by gravity, surrendering to impermanence and imperfection. Through playful experimentation and assembly I consider the relationship between the geometric and the organic, while experimenting with the perpetual possibilities of spatial arrangement. I reimagine the concept and practice of gardening through a reconfiguration of mass-manufactured objects, infusing a contemporary artistic approach into intergenerational gardening. As humans, it seems almost impossible to escape our reliance on plastic, much like our desire for power and control. By playfully exploring the humanistic tendencies ingrained in our thinking, behaviours, and consumption, I reimagine the concept and practice of gardening to reflect a human engagement with the natural world.

**Lan Anh Truong:** I was born in Ho Chi Minh City in 2002 and relocated to Australia in 2021 to pursue a Bachelor degree in Fine Arts, following my high school graduation in London two years prior. As a Painting student at the Victorian College of the Arts, I have taken part in several group exhibitions at the VCA Artspace, among which I curated two group exhibitions ‘F<sup>-1</sup>(x)’ in 2023 and ‘This Is Not (AIR)’ in 2024. Outside of art school, I have been involved as a volunteer for KINGS Artist Run and West Space galleries. My artistic practice spans painting, sculpture, and installation, focusing on reimagining found objects and the readymade. This often involves combining the rigour of geometry with organic forms in a playful exploration of colours, materials, and composition.