



'Shapeshifter', 2023

GILLIAN JASON GALLERY
MODERN & CONTEMPORARY ART BY WOMEN

**Michelle Nguyen:
Ode to Proteus**
8th June - 1st July 2023

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The title of Michelle Nguyen's first solo exhibition in London refers to the mythological figure Proteus, a god capable of assuming many forms. From his shapeshifting abilities comes the adjective "Protean", meaning "mutable" or "versatile", which has positive connotations of flexibility and adaptability. The concept of shapeshifting is central to Nguyen's production. This new collection of works investigates how change pervades every sphere of our existence, with each artwork touching upon a specific area: from the ambivalent nature of grief, to the evolution of cultural beliefs, through the study of morphing creatures, both mystical and natural, to the constant transformation of our own identity.

Rejecting the notion of static, monolithic reality, Nguyen believes that all things, visible, palpable, and abstract, are connected to each other and as such mutation and metamorphosis are profoundly human experiences.

Nguyen weaves the idea of personal transformation throughout her oeuvre, investigating how our individuality is not unchanging or grounded in a perpetual true self, but is instead invested in a state of flux. The lack of human faces throughout the series prompts the viewer to challenge the idea of pint-pointable identity as perceived by others. As an Asian woman, Nguyen in fact often feels bound by the preconceived notions that those around her bring, often in conjunction with prejudice and bias. In 'Ode to Proteus' Nguyen explores how, as humans, we constantly shed our metaphorical skin and leave behind older versions of ourselves.

In the words of the Buddhist author Breeshia Wade: "With each moment, the person who we are is dying to make room for the person we are becoming" (Grieving while Black). We constantly experience what Nguyen defines as 'little deaths', followed by new versions of ourselves.

The subsequent exploration of death and mourning are also central motifs in Nguyen's oeuvre, and her works often act as a "modern memento mori," in an attempt to engage viewers more fully with the notion of grief. The artist's aim is to encourage a dialogue around human mortality, in the belief that there is restorative value in holding space for mourning. If we are to understand that grief is not static, but a continuous and ever-changing process that accompanies our daily life, we can better appreciate Nguyen's idea that humans encounter death in a variety of different contexts.

For instance, we can see in works such as 'Altar for Hungry Ghosts' how Nguyen explores personal experiences of death and mourning by the use of her own roots and family history. Yet, through works like 'Smokescreen' and 'Flooded Fountain', Nguyen also addresses the wider understanding of ecological grief. This state of mourning is specific to our contemporary human condition, characterised by the despair of the loss of our natural environment and way of life due to climate change.

Throughout this series, Nguyen creates a poignant dialogue between life and death, destruction and regeneration, which at times seem to morph into one another and are always in the act of change.

Shapeshifter, 2023
oil on canvas
145 x 180 cm

£ 10,500



From the artwork's inception, 'Shapeshifter' possessed change and metamorphosis; Nguyen took an existing unfinished painting and gave it a new life. Nguyen often recycles her canvases with the importance of embracing the new. Even if it were impossible to distinguish the original work, the new over painting is influenced by the one beneath - the colours and composition of the older paintings are used as a guideline in the creative process. The conversion of images serves as a metaphor for human experience, and the understanding that what we do not see in someone might simply be hidden by our own experience.

This unseen element of identity serves to further underscore the faceless women present in many of Nguyen's work challenging the idea of the face as the seed of one's personality. Probing the mythology and symbolism of the face, Nguyen questions whether it can truly bear the weight of one's entire self. The artist is fascinated by the literature surrounding such a concept, especially in Fernando Pessoa's 'The Book of Disquiet' and Namwali Serpell's 'Stranger Faces'. Pessoa investigates how natural it is for us to look at the faces of others, contemplating how before the the mirror, we had to gaze at ourselves in the reflection of a body of water, kneeling down, adopting a humbling position. He notes, "The inventor of the mirror poisoned the human heart".

Serpell, on the other hand, discusses the emphasis that has been historically placed on the face as the most representative part of the body, as the gateway to identity. Common sayings such as 'the eyes are the windows to the soul' reinforce this notion. Yet, Serpell explains that the average person often incorrectly assesses another person's expression. By removing faces in her work, Nguyen questions this idea of the straightforwardness of identity as perceived by others. Rather than identity being something immovable and inherent to us, it is constantly in flux and created anew at every moment.

This notion is further symbolised by the ambiguity of 'Shapeshifter', where human limbs, animal parts and biomorphic tendrils intertwine and merge to create an enigmatic shapeshifting creature impossible to pin down as always on the verge of becoming something else.

Werewolves, 2023
oil on canvas
150 x 230 cm

£ 14,250



The ambiguity of 'Werewolves' lies in its subject matter. Human and animal forms are intertwined, their body parts merging until becoming indistinguishable, in a constant process of metamorphosis. It is impossible to know whether the female figures are turning into wolves, or the opposite, as limbs disappear and reappear, wolves bare their teeth ready to attack, and the central figure transforms. The scene appears in movement, perpetually in the act of change. This transformation appears painful and uncomfortable as change often is: bones are stretched, disembodied arms and legs seem to reach for help.

The notion of metamorphosis draws from Greek mythology, where gods and other supernatural beings often have the power to shift their appearance. The merging of the animal and the human, and the triptych format are themes and format derived from the impression left on Nguyen after seeing a Francis Bacon retrospective at the RA , London in 2020.

However, for Nguyen, 'Werewolves' is not only a reference to physical transformation but also to the omniscient idea of the changes in traditional and cultural beliefs throughout history. In this sense, the choice of the wolf is poignant: wolves have been constantly present in myths and legends as antagonists and were considered dangerous and expendable. Nowadays, many wolf subspecies are endangered and instead there is a move to protect them.

Finally, to Nguyen the ambiguity and transformation between animals and humans is a reminder of the impossibility to separate the two, and of the importance of acknowledging our animalistic nature. The artist and writer Jenny Odell reminds us of this in her book 'How to Do Nothing', one of the many sources of influence for Nguyen: "I'm lumpy and porous, I'm an animal, I hurt sometimes, and I'm different one day to the next. [...] And it takes a break to remember that: a break to do nothing, to just listen, to remember, in the deepest sense what, when, and where we are."

Vanitas, 2023
oil on canvas
120 x 120 cm

£ 5,750



In Nguyen's production, compositions such as those of 'Altar for Hungry Ghosts' and 'Vanitas' often recur. These are heavily influenced by the Buddhist altars that can be found in many Vietnamese households. Though varied in size and display, most of these altars contain similar elements such as photos of deceased family members, candles, incense, and food offerings such as fruit. Looking at such an investigation of Nguyen's heritage, two main, intertwined themes become apparent: food and grief.

Food is a pillar of Vietnamese culture; it becomes a tool for comfort, support and love, and an expedient to bring people together into a social or intimate setting. Where Nguyen's paintings portray food as the central subject, we can see this serving a similar purpose to such work as the Dutch 'vanitas'; or 'memento mori' - a reminder to the viewer of the ephemeral nature of everything.

Nguyen's eclectic arrangement of food items is richly symbolic of the history of colonialism and globalisation. Whilst initially appearing mundane, the pairing of corn, dragon fruits and Emmental conceals the centuries of land exploitation, exportation and colonisation that led to these items sharing the same space, being available all in one place.

The specific choice of elements is often driven by the chromatic palette, in addition to the food that Nguyen eats or craves in her everyday life: "I enjoy allowing a certain level of impulse and daily disposition to have a role in the work." (Michelle Nguyen)

Altar for Hungry Ghosts, 2023
oil on canvas
180 x 110 cm

£ 8,000



'Altar for Hungry Ghosts' explores the same themes as 'Vanitas', with a particular emphasis on symbolism, family, and grief. The pair of dentures on the bottom left refers to those belonging to the artist's grandmother that Nguyen's father placed on their family's altar years after her death. The artist was struck by this moment of vulnerability from her father, a normally very stoic and quiet man. Beyond the emotional attachment, the dentures, as physical impressions of the mouth, come to symbolise the absence of her grandmother's body, but also the continuous presence of grief that her passing brought into the Nguyen's household.

The dentures also become a prompt for a wider reflection on grief and its constantly shifting form. For Nguyen, her father's choice to place dentures, often considered repulsive, bodily objects, on an altar, signifies how there is no right way to mourn. To Nguyen grief is a fundamental part of human experience, and its presence in her works is meant to encourage viewers to engage with it fully. By including this relict in the composition, the artist investigates and pays homage to her heritage while reminiscing on her childhood memories:

"My memories of my grandmother are intertwined with memories of us spending time underneath the cherry tree in our backyard. I very much associate her with the dusting of pink petals drifting in a swirl of confetti in the springtime and eating cherries right off the branches in the summer. The altar is loaded with many of her favourite foods. And, on one's birthday, it is customary to serve the first piece of cake to the eldest in the family, often the patriarch or matriarch." (Michelle Nguyen)

The inclusion of the Lotus flower, the national flower of Vietnam, symbolises rebirth. The flower grows and rises from muddy waters, it blooms and then returns to the same depths once withered, sowing its seeds and continuing the cycle.

Nguyen creates a poignant dialogue between life and death, destruction and regeneration, which at times seem to morph into one another, constantly changing and evolving.

Cockfighting Vessel II, 2023
oil on canvas
60 × 50 cm

£ 3,250



The rooster has a multifaceted symbolic meaning for Nguyen, who, being born in the Year of the Rooster (1993), always felt a very close and personal connection to the animal. Nguyen's father also practised cockfighting, an activity that remains heavily ingrained in the artist's childhood memories. Nguyen's interest then further peaked upon learning that the chicken's early ancestor, the jungle fowl, was originally domesticated specifically for cockfighting as opposed to sustenance.

The Cockerel was treated as a sacred creature throughout many early human societies, admired for its fighting prowess. "Archaeologists have found people being buried with the remnants of chickens, rather than discarded as scraps. [...] (which) suggested that they had a cultural or social significance, which means that a desire for meat did not drive the domestication of the chicken" (Smithsonian Magazine 2022).

Fascinated by such anthropological findings, Nguyen started looking into the evolution of cockfighting from a perspective of tradition, colonialism, identity and change. For instance, in Bali, cockfighting was considered a "compulsory duty of citizenship" up until the Dutch invasion of 1908. It was only then, in fact, that it started being perceived as "primitive", "backward", and "unprogressive" (Clifford Geertz, 'Deep Play: Notes of the Balinese Cockfight', 1976)

Amuse-bouche, 2023
oil on canvas
20 x 20 cm

£ 1,750



Nguyen is interested in the paradox surrounding such tradition: bloodshed and violence on the one hand, love and affection on the other. The men who raise these cocks put a lot of care into their upbringing. The birds are fed special diets and are washed in a holy bath of anti-inflammatory qualities. They are also taken out for exercise in the same fashion as one would a pet dog.

“My father dabbled in cockfighting as a boy. He recalls tenderly wrapping his bird in a blanket at night while it slept to help it conserve its energy. He loved the bird and was saddened when it died in battle. There is an emotional sensibility to cockfighting that I initially was not expecting to find in a bloodsport primarily dominated by men — a tenderness and level of care that challenges one’s perception of gender and masculinity.” (Michelle Nguyen)

Fighting Cock Vessel, 2023
oil on canvas
40 x 30 cm

£ 2,500



The portrayal of the vessel is also highly significant. Firstly, it references antique Roman and Greek vases, which traditionally depict Hellenistic myths, a great source of inspiration for Nguyen. Yet, it is also strictly related to the concept of metamorphosis entangled in the process of art's sublimation.

Amphorae, though beautifully decorated, were primarily produced as objects belonging to the everyday-life, helpful to carry out specific tasks – such as storing oil and food or mixing wine and water. Throughout the evolution of mankind, these objects became archaeological artefacts, were placed in museums and eventually praised as invaluable, transformed into art and treated as such.

Weaving, 2023
oil on canvas
30 x 15 cm

£ 2,250



The motif of insects recurs throughout Nguyen's work. Insects exist in our everyday life, yet lead a parallel existence that often goes unnoticed to us. Nguyen has been drawn to these creatures from a young age, with a growing feeling of empathy and curiosity, and during the pandemic she started to take the time to observe and research them, appreciating the "privilege to observe nature and slow down time".

"I've always had a fascination with insects because of how different their existence seemed in comparison to mine. I remember spending my time after rainstorms walking around scooping up worms from the concrete and placing them back in the soil so they wouldn't get trampled. I had learned that worms had five hearts and could not imagine the pain they were capable of feeling. I had only one and I felt so deeply; I couldn't imagine what it would be like to feel with five hearts." (Michelle Nguyen)

Ambiguity however, is always paramount in Nguyen's work. In 'Weaving' what at first appear as human limbs are revealed to be a statue, as one can see a thin spider web hanging from the stone. The immobility and permanence of the stone is contrasted with the ephemeral nature of the spider web. Nguyen is captivated by the impermanence of the life of insects, and their constantly changing nature.

Moths, 2023
oil and acrylic on canvas
25 x 20 cm

£ 2,250



Insects can be considered the apotheosis of the process of change, as their life cycles often involve drastic mutation. Moths in particular are emblematic of shapeshifting as they undergo a complete metamorphosis during their lifetime, yet they often retain memories from their previous versions. Transformation myths such as that of the werewolf and those pertaining to Greco-Roman mythology, can easily be compared to the drastic transformation of many insects. The artist finds similarities with human experience which, for her, is characterised by constant mutation: we are always changing and leaving behind previous versions of ourselves.

The artist is also very interested in the subjectivity of the term “pest” and how some creatures are considered pests solely based on how human perceptions and beliefs change over time. For instance, mice (also often portrayed by Nguyen) were once considered a symbol of prosperity and are now associated with poverty and filth. Notions of change of thoughts and opinions throughout history are a recurring theme in Nguyen's oeuvre.

The motif of hands is ever present in Nguyen's imagery. To Nguyen, hands are not only emblematic of her practice as an artist, as the ‘ultimate tool’ of the creative process, but are closely associated with labour and class. Notably, her hands are symbolic of the intensive manual labour required of her parents to support themselves after immigrating to Canada, working in factories, restaurants and hotels. While her parents have no background in the arts, Nguyen believes that her own ability to create has roots in their dexterity with manual tasks.

Smokescreen, 2023
oil on canvas
40 x 40 cm

£ 2,750



'Smokescreen' and 'Flooded Fountain' respond to the growing, world-wide grief that accompanies the current climate crisis. With both flora and fauna bearing the scars of climate change, we observe a reality changing everyday, with catastrophic events looming. Witnessing this process, a little piece of us constantly grieves, having to mourn an ever-growing loss and disturbance to the fragile ecosystem of the natural life of our planet.

Both canvases portray lion/foo dogs statues, rendered in the style of ancient sculpture: one lion stares at the viewer with vacant eyes made of stone, while the other beast has water flowing out of its sockets. Yet, the statues almost appear alive with the movement of their wild manes and the sharp teeth sprouting from their half-opened jaws.

Historically, stone lions and foo dogs were placed outside of palaces, tombs, and places of worship, acting as guardians and protectors, much like the motif of the Gorgoneion in Greco-Roman culture.

Flooded Fountain, 2023
oil on canvas
40 x 30 cm

£ 2,500



However, these guardians can no longer offer protection from the contemporary world, as our planet is slowly being destroyed. The smoke and water coming out the mouths of the figures are a reference to the dire environmental conditions of British Columbia, where Nguyen lives and works.

'Smokescreen' and 'Flooded Fountain' symbolise, respectively, forest fires and floods that have become a frequent reoccurrence, especially in the last few years. "Heavy rainstorms in the winter have washed away entire stretches of road, and wildfires in the summertime are impossible to ignore when the smell of smoke rolls in with the frequent change of the winds", says Nguyen.

Both statues have mushrooms and musk growing on their bodies. For Nguyen, this reveals how objects people have built to stand the tests of time are now deteriorating. At the same time, the growing vegetation suggests a more positive meaning, connecting to the notion of mutation as omnipresent within reality. Even statues that are by definition immobile and permanent, constantly undergo change and evolution.

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