

Offering Body and Soul to A Radical Alterity

Elise Nguyen Quoc

3 May – 7 June 2024

Gratin is happy to present *Offering Body and Soul to A Radical Alterity*, Elise Nguyen Quoc's first New York solo show showcasing her most recent body of work.

Elise Nguyen Quoc's works defy categorization as mere paintings or drawings. Her works are mainly made from her photos. She selects photos containing elusive remnants—unnamable, bodiless, objectless, devoid of any recognizable iconographic language. Her works are records of activities that range from her empty ballpoint pens to the bottom of a paint tray.

Nguyen Quoc's source of inspiration for her work comes from everyday habits. She works from daily gestures, precise schedules, traces left behind, generated by someone else, by accident, by her own practice. She tracks things, catches the scent, and then something calls to her. And if the thing seems to have potential for inscription, the potential to be a signal, then she works on it. 'The less comprehensible the subject, the more attention is drawn to its technical production,' she remarks. 'The advantage of not understanding the what is that you explore the how. Her images' significance lies not only in the image represented, but also the image of the making, which is an integral part of Nguyen Quoc's practice and how it is perceived. The ordinary and archaic gestures that she puts in place stem from a whole regime of practices that are not necessarily artistic: they may resemble an office worker or a copyist....'

In this exhibition, she talks about "radical alterity"; it means something that is not her. When she reproduces an image that has been stopped in time, it allows her to see the world stripped of the meanings it has for her, to see it in reality. Nguyen Quoc subjects images to a strict protocol. Using invariably the iPad, images are zoomed, deciphered, every millimeter examined, then fragmented to be reproduced in larger formats. The artist uses these digital tools to seek out what the naked eye could never see.

Her ballpoint pen triptych is the result of total dedication, both mental and physical, and these works represent the image of making. They show the process at work; the length of the strokes reveals the length of the arms, and their color reveals the lifespan of each ballpoint pen. Nobody uses the ballpoint pen quite like Elise Nguyen Quoc. The stroke is powerful and far removed from the spheres in which the ballpoint pen is most popular, namely illustration, comics, and hyper-realistic drawing. One wonders: how many pens has she used? How long does it take till they give up the ghost? How long does it take for her to tire? What if she used their ink, without bothering with the pen? On this last question, Nguyen Quoc is quite clear: "it's simply the tool that everyone has in their kit!"

Nguyen Quoc's work is an attempt to express something, by referring to universal signs, that we understand instinctively no matter where we come from or what we know. In this way, her gestures express "wanting to say" more than "saying," to use the words of Giorgio Agamben, or "the power of meaning" more than "the act of signification." Writing pushed beyond communication becomes an existential trace and a self-affirmation, and also fantastical, a metaphor for the fabric of the world and its mysteries.

Establishing her own system of (re)production, Elise Nguyen Quoc searches for signs we can all recognize, even without having seen them before. These are signs that remind us of our human condition. Anchored in our contemporary daily lives, these signs, are the artist's way of connecting with others on a level that transcends language. Her work offers body and soul to a radical alterity.