

# Flesh of My Flesh (2020)

Trinh Mai<sup>†</sup>



*Belle's acrylic, charcoal, dirt collected from the garlic fields in which my (Trinh's) husband Hiên and his family labored with other immigrant families when first arriving in America to be compensated one dollar per bucket harvested, holy water, ink, Pacific Ocean water collected from the harbor of San Pedro, where Hiên served time in the immigration detention center, and tears shed for him as I considered the hardships that he has endured on paper; arrows crafted with indigenous methods using found branches, found feathers, found string, and wax. Drawing 42 x 94 1/2", installation dimensions variable.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>†</sup> I am humbled by the graciousness of the AALJ editorial team to be publishing this brief prelude to our more in-depth interview, and I offer my deepest gratitude for their compassion and understanding and for standing with us.

1. Trinh Mai, *Flesh of my Flesh*, in *Flesh of my Flesh*, TRINHMAI.COM (2020), <http://trinhmai.com/flesh-of-my-flesh>.

## I. FLESH OF MY FLESH

Many of the Psalms were written during times of war, lamenting suffering, rebuking those responsible for the suffering, protesting innocence, petitioning for divine assistance, anticipating collective response, and with sincere thanksgiving even through the turmoil.

This portrait was inspired by Psalm 91, a prayer of protection for the faithful and the suffering.

As part of the immigration crisis that has pervaded neighboring countries and our very own, ICE raids suffered by the households of refugee and immigrant families often take place during the still of the night when our families are most vulnerable. Injustice knows no time. These attacks occur night and day.

Psalm 91:5 and 91:7 (King James)<sup>2</sup> reads:

*Thou shalt not be afraid  
for the terror by night;  
nor for the arrow that flieth by day;  
A thousand shall fall at thy side,  
and ten thousand at thy right hand;  
but it shall not come nigh thee.*

While meditating on these verses, the prayer moves from faith into promise.

Perhaps the thousand and ten thousand are our fallen neighbors, or the arrows that have just missed their marks, preserving the lives of we who are the privileged—the ones who know freedom. As tens of thousands of Vietnamese American refugees have been detained since our arrival on American shores, many have been unlawfully deported back to a country whose communist regime regards them as defectors, agitators, traitors, enemies. They now face the very persecution from which they had fled during the war in Việt Nam in the 1970s.

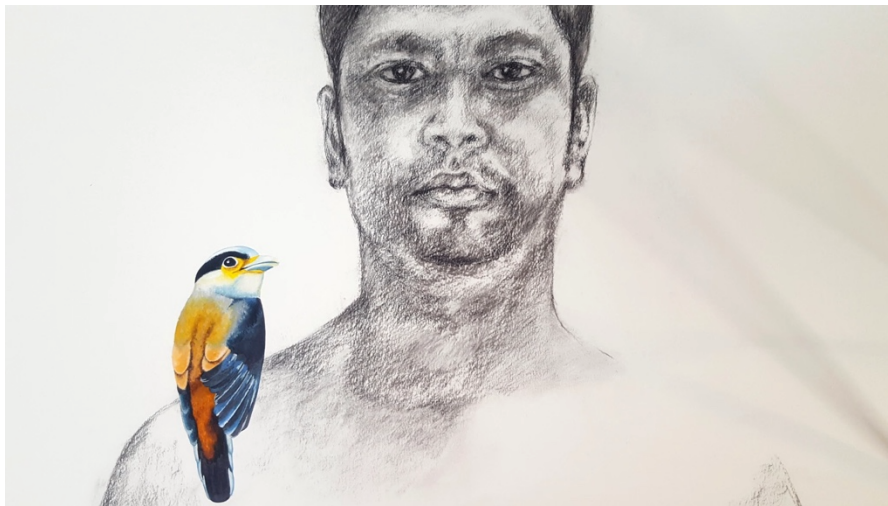
Some of the arrows are made with the feathers of the California great horned owl, a bird that is documented as a permanent resident of its territory. We can only hope for this same status. While the arrows aim to pierce flesh, my husband stands confidently amid the battle. This portrait serves as a visual prayer of protection for those who are teetering on the trembling foundation of justice, that we might stand firm in the active faith that will provide us with sure footing. In the artwork, three birds guard Hiên: an American goldfinch, a resident of the United States; a silver-breasted broadbill, native to Cambodia; and a Vietnamese greenfinch, only found in Việt Nam. One protects his mind from fear while blessing him with strategic, righteous, and compassionate thinking, another perches upon his shoulder

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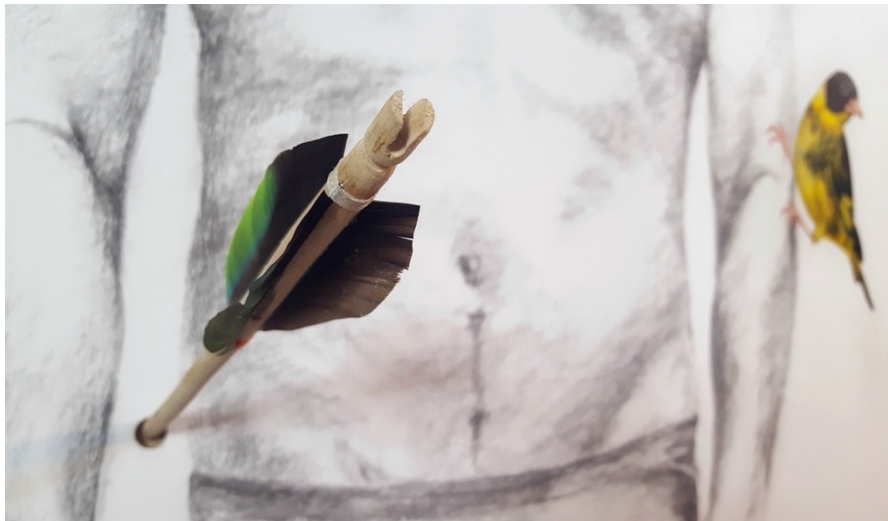
2. Psalms 91:5-7.

whispering wisdom into his ear, while the third guides his arms, reminding him to move in grace, even while displaying strength.

**Figure 1: *Flesh of My Flesh*, detail of silver-breasted broadbill, a native of Cambodia.<sup>3</sup>**



**Figure 2: *Flesh of My Flesh*, detail of handcrafted arrow made with parrot feathers found in Orange County, wherein resides the largest population of Vietnamese people outside of Việt Nam.<sup>4</sup>**



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3. Trinh Mai, *Flesh of my Flesh*, in *Flesh of my Flesh*, TRINHMAI.COM (2020), <http://trinhmai.com/flesh-of-my-flesh>.

4. *Id.*

Figure 3: *Flesh of My Flesh*, detail of American greenfinch and silver-breasted broadbill, a native of Cambodia.<sup>5</sup>



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5. *Id.*



**Figure 4:** *Flesh of My Flesh*, detail of Vietnamese greenfinch which is only found in Việt Nam.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 5:** *Flesh of My Flesh*, detail of arrow made with found wild turkey feathers.<sup>7</sup>



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6. *Id.*

7. *Id.*

**Figure 6: *Flesh of My Flesh* beside *And we shall come forth as gold*, as displayed in *Hostile Terrain* at Massachusetts College of Liberal Art's Berkshire Cultural Resource Center. Photo by Megan Haley.<sup>8</sup>**



**Figure 7: In *Flesh of My Flesh*, Hiền stands faithfully upon a mound of stones gathered from the Hoosic River in North Adams, MA. Photo by Megan Haley.<sup>9</sup>**



8. Photograph of *Flesh of My Flesh*, TRINHMAI.COM (2020), <http://trinhmai.com/flesh-of-my-flesh>.

9. *Id.*

## II. ARTIST STATEMENT

With deep respect as a descendent of Vietnamese ancestors, I bind inherited stories into my art practice, bearing testimony to history's recurrence of fracture and courage. As we stand brow-high in the persecutions, injustices, and tribulations that we have continued to face upon arrival, anticipated opportunities indeed await us on new horizons as we set our gaze upon home and promise.

My art practice serves as a passage through which I approach the humanitarian struggles that have existed throughout all human history—the war, loss, and grief that we have endured while staring into the unknown. Drawn from intimate experiences of heartache and triumph, of struggle and perseverance, and of loss and provision, I adopt both the joys and hardships that persist in these meandering liminal spaces wherein we usher the things we've witnessed into history, as living history. I document these true tales of triumph as a reminder of the blessings that we might have never been able to predict could or would come out of tragedy. In time and in hope, we've known this to be true.

The materials I incorporate speak to the delicate, enduring, and ephemeral nature of life—Pacific sea stones dappled with crude oil that recalls Bác Phoul's, (my father-in-law) work in the oil fields when first arriving in America; sun-bleached algae peeled from a dry riverbed wherein life previously abounded; scripture from Proverbs 31:8-9 that calls us all to be a voice for the voiceless; Ba Ngoai's (Grandmother) crucifix sewn into the hem of a translucent hand-sewn garment to unveil things carried during the escape; pressed flora over graphite self-portraits as I ponder upon things hidden, things revealed, and the wisdom to recognize the timing for both. This piece is an excerpt from my interview with AALJ, *History as Medium: A conversation with Artist Trinh Mai*, which has been shelved for the time being, until the season arrives for it to reemerge.

I meticulously interweave materials that hold histories of their own; this labor elevates my appreciation for both the significant things, and the quotidian, that often go unnoticed. Hoping to bring the unknown into the known, these laboring hands stitch together the stories and objects that coalesce into an attempt to acknowledge the things that we take for granted, and the quiet moments when the profundity of life speaks gently yet clearly to us, should we have the will and the patience to listen, even while encompassed by the noise of the world. In these intimate spaces, revelation abounds, leading us into the discoveries that can potentially flourish in mind and in heart made tender by affliction.

This is the heart of my current work—to orchestrate these abstract and physical elements into a visual aperture through which we can examine the stories of an enduring people, who were once invisible, but now have been

targeted worldwide, amid an immigration and refugee crisis. These are the hopefuls whose eyes flood with blood, but remain fixed on potential still.

Seeking comfort in hardship, I share a discovered faith, fulfillment, and freedom that have fostered us during these anguishing times. The end result is a work of art that invites us to sit together—in mourning, in joy, in the majesty of a silence that announces the peace that we've longed for since the beginnings. The work speaks on the potential for healing that occurs on an intimate and universal level, while we wade through the circumstances of life, striving to find meaning, and look to the passage of time and forgiveness to mend things fractured.

I have had the privilege to help amplify art's effectiveness in self-reflection, self-expression, and storytelling with various communities. Serving neighbors of numerous age groups, ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds has graced me with the opportunity to witness art's power in elevating the confidence of our communities as we learn to voice our own narratives together. While developing visual arts programming for diverse groups, including survivors of war, refugee and immigrant families, and children from impoverished areas, we have been inspired by the intergenerational dialogue and cross-cultural exchange that sprouts from the living narrative into visual art form, ebbing and flowing from heart to heart, household to household. Through various methods of arts engagement, it has been my honor to promote art as an effective tool in documenting our history to the succeeding generations, while helping to initiate and encourage the preservation of family histories.

Through arts education, I find great joy in helping to enunciate the voices who long to be heard. The creative process can water the seeds of empowerment sown within the hearts of the voiceless who have yet to hear themselves clearly. In serving the disadvantaged, the broken, the ignored, and the forgotten, we recognize that we once were them, and that they are us.

Collaborating with art and academic institutions to engage with Schools of the Arts, Humanities, Sociology, History, Literature, Anthropology, and Law has graced me with the privilege to reach toward new arenas to offer visual art as a substantial and reliable method in documenting history, transmitting information, and chronicling the experiences of our shared humanity. There is a profound symbiotic relationship between suffering and transformation, and I seek to know it more intimately. With an unwavering faith in the power of storytelling and art and its ability to repair the irreparable, my work is dedicated to bringing these discoveries into visual form to offer condolence to we who are heavy-laden.