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## Modern sculpture of Vietnam

Who? Where?

When? How?

*Through the view of Dao Chau Hai*

18/9/2018 interview by Quang Viet

**Quang Viet (QV):** *If you talk about modern Vietnamese sculpture, or more coherently, modern sculpture of Vietnam, how can you get started?*

**Dao Chau Hai (DCH):** Exactly, here we need to have the coherence of words. Now, people often use the word 'contemporary'. I always use the word 'modern', because I want to emphasize the system of art in general, and Vietnamese sculpture in particular. I also don't want to use Vietnamese as an adjective. Using the word 'of Vietnam' is perhaps more broadly, it corresponds to the modern spirit.

**QV:** *So, that also means, for example - a sculpture of you, Dao Chau Hai, a Vietnamese person - does not necessarily have to be identified as a specific Vietnamese character?*

**DCH:** What I need is through the work, people recognize an individual, along with his 'independent' values.

**QV:** *Oh! An international personality?*

**DCH (shrugs):** It's may be so.

**QV:** *It's not 'maybe', your idea is definitely like that. If not, we would not have interviewed you.*

*Dear Mr. Hai, according to you, modern Vietnamese sculpture, no, modern sculpture of Vietnam, when did it start?*

**DCH:** Sculpture of Vietnam is determining its position on the sculpture forum of the world in general. Only about 10 years ago truly modern sculpture of Vietnam has been started going on the path of development, recognized and named..., we are maybe paralleling with the world in terms of time, development, but not meaning truly paralleling with development level. Before that time, it had been groping.

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It can be said that Nguyen Hai and Le Cong Thanh were two predecessors who laid the first foundation to answer questions and issues about modernity. Nguyen Hai had 'Trois', 'Giong' and some other works. Le Cong Thanh started to create good works since 'Van Dai' statue.

I repeat, 'Sculpture of modern Vietnam was only started about 10 years ago'.

**QV:** *Historically, surely you did not forget: Nguyen Hai and Le Cong Thanh, the two predecessors, came from the artistic movement of socialist reality?*

**DCH:** Socialist reality? In our country? A simulation of socialist realism ... Well cool, there are undeniable reality values. That was a period of too little information, basically, because we only contacted with the world through a number of major Soviet magazines.

In my opinion, I think that in the reality period, no Vietnamese artist really deserved to be called an artist of socialist reality

I studied in Russia, studied in 'Academy', Surikov National Academy of Arts. At that time, I had thought of modernity. It was different from us, in Russia there were so much informations, and also unlike us, in Russia there was almost no one's gossiped and humiliated about modern schools. Russians are the ones who open up the most novel things for mankind.

**QV:** *Before Nguyen Hai and Le Cong Thanh, in your opinion, there must be someone else, right?*

**DCH:** Of course, it was Vu Cao Dam. Vu Cao Dam made a real contribution. To me, Vu Cao Dam was the first and only name of Vietnamese sculpture in the beginning years. I really like his two works 'The Man With a Hat' and 'The Little Girl With a Comb' \*

Diep Minh Chau, too, he had a genuine contribution to Vietnamese sculpture. Diep Minh Chau was very good at painting portraits.

Summary: After Vu Cao Dam, it was Diep Minh Châu. After Diep Minh Chau, there were Nguyen Hai and Le Cong Thanh, and now we are. Between that, about the modernity, there was a void space.

**QV:** *A gap? Between Nguyen Hai, Le Cong Thanh and you? Did you not mention Pham Muoi or Ta Quang Bao?*

**DCH** (laughs): Pham Muoi's "Vot Chong" is a decorative work. This strays from the topic we're talking about. About Tạ Quang Bạo, I have no answer.

**QV:** *Modernity and recent 10 years. Is that for sure your expression?*

**DCH:** Recent 10 years. Only about the last 10 years. Of course, including me

**QV:** *Does that mean there is a 'modern' Dao Chau Hai when being 'old'?*

**DCH:** I have gone ahead in a certain sense.

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**QV:** *So, what are the signs of 'modernity' over the past 10 years?*

**DCH:** Language, material, number of works are important factors. The number of exhibitions is very important. The awards are also important, including domestic awards (such as the first, the second prize at national art exhibitions, national sculpture exhibitions, as well as exhibitions of Vietnam Fine Arts Association)

As for the award, maybe there are still disagreements on some criteria, but at least it also assesses the essence of art

The sculptors I want to mention here are Khong Do Tuyen, Thai Nhat Minh, Nguyen Ngoc Lam, Tran Trong Tri, Nguyen Huy Tinh, ... They are mostly my students.

The 'New Form' working group can be seen as a 'brainwashing' art project, erasing the old, the backward, the other be far from the true visual language. There have been 3 joint exhibitions called 'New Form' (Nguyen Anh Tuan is a curator, I did not participate in it), from those exhibitions, they expand into individual exhibitions.

**QV:** *Clearly you have an important motivating role when most of the sculptors in that working group are your students. In your opinion, what is the result?*

**DCH:** The best thing is language, material (as mentioned) and idea, with artists and works that are different from before.

Of course, many awards for all those creative endeavors are also significant.

Along with the 'New Form' exhibitions, there is the Hanoi - Saigon, Saigon - Hanoi Sculpture Exhibition every two years, have collected young creative sculptors, and had 6 exhibitions on 12 years.

**QV:** *The Modern Sculpture of Vietnam, in your opinion, have started from these groups?*

**DCH:** Yes, that's right. And this beginning has also been reflected through the awards.

Regarding every two-year sculpture exhibition, Mr. Bui Hai Son, a lecturer of sculpture at Ho Chi Minh City University of Architecture, is the leader

Through these biennial exhibitions, many things have been gained, especially in professionalism. Sculptors meet together every two years, create an authentic trend, make money by the career and bring work arts to real life, achieve the state's orders ... Sculpture seems to occupy the upper hand, nationwide.

**QV:** *The sculpture exhibition 'Hanoi - Saigon' and 'Saigon - Hanoi', there must be some correlation, right?*

**DCH:** Hanoi Sculpture differ from Saigon sculpture in conception and language. The strength of Saigon sculpture is design, it's also language is more widely developed in society, more suitable to society. While in the North, Hanoi sculptures base on ideas, conceptions, individuality, and privacy.

Southern sculpture is more of a practical application, contributing in architecture. I want to combine both of them (the North and the South). If only developing personal view is actually old opinion, it must develop for the whole society to be new.

**QV:** *If you talk about individuality, who do you think is unique?*

**DCH:** All of them, their target is still ahead. In my heart, Thai Nhat Minh and Khong Do Tuyen, these two artists have individual language in composing, they are great potential in this regard.

**QV:** *How will you accompany on the road by these young artists?*

**DCH:** Both Mr. Bui Hai Son and I finished our tasks, end the roles, brought young artist to the highway. How far and how long they can go it depends on them.

My generation is different from that of Nguyen Hai and Le Cong Thanh. Because of some favorable objective conditions, we have accompanied the young artist, at least by the time they started. In the past everything was too limited, not even enough food to eat.

**QV:** *For researchers, historians, the autobiographical content of the artists by themselves is very important and reliable. To help readers understand more about modern sculpture of Vietnam, as an artist, do you want to share anything about yourself?*

**DCH:** I will not refuse this, if it is really helpful for readers. As everyone say: Critics always say thing artists never think about. Therefore, if there is a suitable opportunity, the artist also needs to directly say what he thinks, what he has done, wants to do, what he has experienced.

My observations are completely personal, always like that. I follow my personal path, a path that must take the breath of life, speak for the community, both mentally and psychologically, but it must be a selective, intellectual community.

Art does not have to be displayed near the end of time, art is a mixture of joys and sorrows, and it also is a lively, profound and interesting discussion of thought.



*Dao Chau Hai - Presence, 2016 Stainless steel, L.204cm W.400cm H.625cm.*

*National Place Museum, Taiwan (China)*

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**QV:** *Your sculpture is directed at subjective abstraction. So does it have any connection with nature?*

**DCH:** Surely, and It always will be. It is an opposite relationship, opposite of form, but similarity of sense.

**QV:** *Is that why you like using metal?*

**DCH:** Metal? It is a story telling the nature of the change in sculpture, completely different from soil - wood. (Regarding wood sculpture, Nguyen Nhu Y is indeed an heir of ancient folk masters.)

Soil - wood have been limited, not fully revealed the ideas, because of their structure, such in architecture, there are a big difference between building houses by brick or wood and by reinforced concrete ... Thanks to the Prize E'vaiste Jonchere, I had nearly two years of training (1997-1998) at the Metal Sculpture Workshop of the National College of Fine Arts in Paris. This was a decisive stage for me, because before I was rarely touched with metal.

Metal sculpture requires technology, money, a large factory. The recent exhibition of metal sculpture by Le Cong Thanh has been very good. A little regret, the cutting lines of metal still lack precision and sophistication of the technology.

Metal allows me to integrate faster with the world. In principle, with metal, anything can be done.

The 'New Form' project involves a lot of metal space organization. Metal is also a premise for me to attach sculptures to Installation, for example at the 'Ballad East Sea' exhibition.

**QV:** *Have you ever felt like you were chasing your own students, such as metal?*

**DCH:** Artists must be an intellectual. I have my own way, in many aspects.

Metal fits with my thinking, because of its strong, barbaric, and sharp.

Every material has its own voice. I already made a glass 'anvil',

I quite like it. The wood was covered by DIY paint with lacquer, I like it, and it is also awarded by the Taylor Foundation, for making large human heads, stereoscopic, with 70-80 cm high.

Particularly, in terracotta I failed.

I also made works by both rattan and bamboo, it was not painted, only smoked, and bought by Singapore Art Museum.

Metal sculpture is probably where I have 'parked' for a long time and still have many desires. In metal sculpture, I like Gonza'lez and Richard Serra very much. Khong Do Tuyen, Thai Nhat Minh also compose works with metal. If I'm not mistaken, 100% top prizes for artworks of the 'New Form' group were made by metal.

In addition to my students, I think it is necessary to mention some other young sculptors like Nguyen Duy Manh (who I discovered and helped him in terms of career), Ku Kao Khai, and Pham Thai Binh, ... are quite separate artists

Some Vietnamese sculptors living abroad such as Andy Cao and Dam Dang Lai are also very noticeable, their recent works associated with the ecological environment, which is very strange and touching.

**QV:** *In the last decade, in our country, how do you think about sculpture compared to painting?*

**DCH:** In the 90s of the last century and the first few years of the 21st century, about painting, we had a number of promising painters, while seemly there were no one in sculpture. However, the market has caused many artists paused, even in some cases, to be lose talent.

In my opinion, sculptors have been less affected by the market, partly because the market for sculpture is not very strong, mainly due to the sculptors' efforts. Everyone in this world must live, but the spirit of commitment to the art of some sculptors is clearly better than painters. From private creative activities, invisibly sculptors have attached art to, expanded art with society, with human life, created a strong voice of Vietnamese sculpture in both inside and outside the country. It is truly an achievement that must be acknowledged and worthy of researched.

**QV:** *Thank you very much, and I hope this interview will be well received by readers of Fine Arts Magazine.*



*Sculptor Dao Chau Hai (left) and Fine Art critic Quang Viet  
talking at the editorial office of Vietnam Fine Arts Magazine, September 2018*

*Note: (\*) Tittle of artworks*

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