

AUT GRAPH

Exhibition Audio Guide Transcripts Nhu Xuan Hua: Of Walking on Fire

1. Senior Curator Bindi Vora introduces the exhibition: Of Walking on Fire

Welcome to *Nhu Xuan Hua: Of Walking on Fire*, the artist's first major solo show in the UK. My name is Bindi Vora, and I'm the senior curator here at Autograph.

As you enter the exhibition, one of the first works you encounter is *Swan – Archive from the year 2000* which depicts a distorted version of an archival image of Hua and her mother surrounded by swans. The figures seem to dissolve into their surroundings, becoming almost invisible. This photograph is part of a larger series titled *Tropism: Consequences of a displaced memory* in which Hua reworks her family archive in an attempt to reflect on how the past continues to reverberate into the present, and is shaped by absence, silence and acts of remembering. Through these works, Hua negotiates the space between what might be inherited memory and what might be imagined.

Swans also holds personal significance. When Hua moved to London, she often suggested that people use the English word 'swan' to help pronounce her name, Nhu Xuan. Here, the swan becomes a poetic stand-in for the artist herself – a reference to the ways in which identity warps across languages and processes of translation, pointing to what is lost or altered in that process.

You can hear from the artist in further audio points as you make your way around the galleries. I hope you enjoy the exhibition.

2. Nhu Xuan Hua introduces the red altar

Hi, my name is Nhu Xuan Hua. It's a pleasure to welcome you to my show *Of Walking on Fire*.

Altars and monuments appear throughout my work as spaces to hold memory. In my childhood home, shelves were filled with objects of sentimental value – souvenirs and prized possessions. These altars are carefully composed environments, where objects are brought together, to be given attention. To celebrate the sacred through the ordinary. The act of composing a beautiful bouquet of fragile paper flowers, becomes an echo of the attention to detail my parents showed in caring for their homes, and the fragility, yet beauty of such simple memories.

Drawing from my Vietnamese heritage, there is a natural desire for harmony and balance in how these spaces are arranged. The work *Má - Archive from the year '88*, is placed as the central figure - she moves her hand as a conductor, trying to be

the bearer of harmony. I often question my obsession for symmetry, does it come from an inherited cultural place or does it reside in the way I mirror my parents' obsession for excellence?

3. Hua discusses her family history and experience of language barriers

I was born and raised in Paris, to parents who fled Vietnam after the war in 1978. I grew up feeling a distance from my own heritage, where questions about the past were often left unanswered. This loss of family history has also been reinforced by the fact that we lack a shared language across my family. While I was raised speaking French, Vietnamese was the primary language used in my household. My father is also deaf and uses a form of French sign language he learnt in his early twenties when he moved to Paris.

So, communication often existed in the gaps between these languages, and interpretation became a language in itself. Because of this, I became attentive to other forms of understanding – facial expressions, posture, silences, the energy one holds in a space. I learned early on, that meaning does not only live in words and that body language is often the first language we learn to read.

Across my work, I translate these silent conversations into a visual language. In the work to the left, I cast fingertips in wax and placed them onto yellow coloured paper. As I carefully removed the casts, the fragile wax cracked - emphasising the fragility of communication. These references to deafness and fractured communication are repeated across the show, sometimes through the incarnation of silence and sometimes through the incapacity to speak or be understood, which also explains the presence of the subtitles in some of my works.

4. The artist discusses the significance of flowers in her work

Some works in this gallery hold the presence of flowers. They stand as symbols of my mother. Nurturing flowers provided her with a quiet joy and a sense of peace. In this work - *Ses Geraniums, Les Siens* – I kept the possessive in the title to echo my wish for my mother to hold on to what soothes her, to reclaim it as something entirely her own, something no one could take away from her.

Ideas of liberation carry forward in the installation with the floor-based pieces I've called *The Guards*. They represent us as women, as daughters, friends, sisters, standing together.

This theme of liberation is carried into Gallery 2, where I observe how women of one lineage can grow strong and find renewal in the simple cycle offered by time itself. The seeds planted in Gallery 1 bloom in the next chapter, presented in Gallery 2.

5. Introducing Gallery 2 / A Poem by Nhu Xuan Hua

Welcome to Gallery 2 – the works on display here are intended to represent a space of renewal, honoring cycles of nature and the feminine figure as a restorative force. Hua reminds us that acts of looking and remembering are never fixed; they are continually reshaped and reimagined.

This can be seen in *Little Super in Versailles, Archive from the year '88* – displayed in the center of the gallery. Surrounded by ornamental motifs, this work imagines the figure of a young girl as a powerful symbol of resilience, carrying the weight of recurring family rituals and the endurance required to sustain connection across generations. This work and others here, are a direct message to the second generation and emphasizes the powers they hold.

The following reading is a poem Nhu Xuan wrote, to accompany the exhibition, *Of Walking on Fire*:

Of walking on fire
What grows now is built to last
The dance is clumsy
The wind doesn't listen
And goes all directions
Are we meant to stand on waters
Our feet are shape shifting
Pillars like legs between the ground and the sky
Standing on waters under the moon and sun
No one hears the music
Only the heartbeat works as a guide
Is it Rushing
Is it Slow
Does it beat at all
They're left thinking they are lost
A foot with no ear creates new routes
Senses the vibration on the trembling ground
Hands are swinging
Is it joy or is it panic
The silence is too loud
The wind chooses not to listen
But the heart does
Heavens, forests and seas
Make a cross on every window glass
This must not be, not this time
You are two steps away from the fire horse
Heart taping on heart
They, He, She chooses to listen now
Dreamers write from the in between
To point fingers at
On the compass the needle stopped
The only direction is forward
Familiar phantoms taking the mic
Trading skins to reappear unmasked

Tools sharper than ever
Willing to expel the unsaid
I was always told that my dragon skin was too thick
But if they'd look carefully
They'd see an armour made out of nothing else
but pen and paper that crumbles when the earth shakes
Will you one day be Mãn?
Mountains move forests
Forests moving the seas
Waters pushing spring
To return against all tides
To be changed
To be transformed
Mutated inside a new vessel
Transporting cultivated tales and beliefs
From tomorrows and many yesterdays
What grows now is built to last
If I cannot talk to you I will build a bridge
One that won't fall
Does it sound like a wish of immortality?
The Fire Horses are at the doors
With their hooves slamming
Entering the skywalk with no intention to leave.

6. The artist discusses her works *Promise of Spring* and *Lonely Table*

Promise of Spring is a self-portrait. The title references my name, with Hua Nhu Xuan translating from the Vietnamese meaning 'promise of spring'. Here, I am cast in jade, a stone associated with protection and continuity, a vessel of care as well as a marker of inner strength, passed on from a mother to her daughter.

Opposite is *Lonely Table*. Tables occupy an important role in my work – they are an invitation to gather, to reflect or to enter into conversation. But, here the table is uncanny and incomplete. It becomes a way to indicate that any of us can be the one to complete the other missing half through dialogue. Together, these works move from an attempt to reconnect with the past towards enlightenment and elevation, where a sense of balance and clarity – of being at ease with oneself – is finally taking shape.

7. Hua discusses *New Chapter – Archive from the year '85*

For this exhibition, Autograph commissioned 9 new works, which are on display in this gallery. These works continue to speak to some of the same issues which are addressed in my series *Tropism: Consequences of a Displaced Memory*.

The new work here titled *New Chapter – Archive from the year '85*, acts to both close the old chapter of the *Tropism series* and opens up a new one. This archival photograph was taken in Belgium in 1985. It is the only known image of my grandparents posing together and was captured on the day my parents became

engaged to be married. It marks a new departure for them and a new departure for me.

This work *New Chapter – Archive from the year '85* is available to acquire as a small edition through Autograph's online shop. For further information, please speak to a member of staff at the front desk.