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Tuan Vu Paints Vietnam Through the Haze of Memory and Imagination

In his solo show "Annam" at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, the artist interweaves memory, imagination, and history in his lush and vibrant vignettes.




Tuan Vu, *Miss Saigon* (2026). Courtesy of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

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In the paintings of self-taught artist **Tuan Vu**, memory, imagination, and history operate in much the same way as palette or composition, deployed contemplatively and stylistically. Originally from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, Vu relocated to Quebec, Canada, for both his undergraduate and graduate studies, and is where he continues to reside today. Despite living thousands of miles away for more than a decade, the artist's memories of childhood in Vietnam and considerations of the country's rich and complex history and culture continue to be a potent source of creative inspiration.

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Kristin Hjellegjerde

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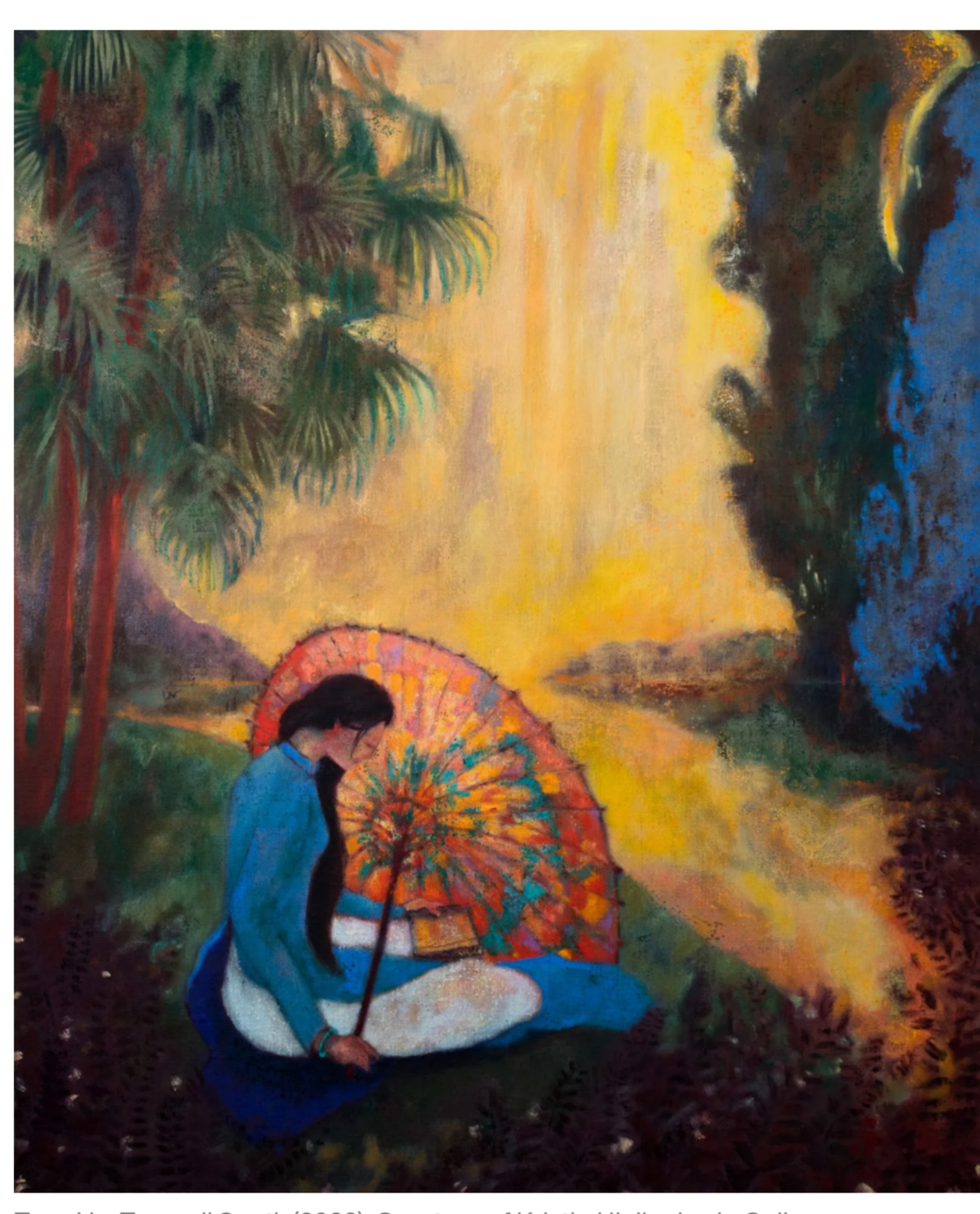
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At **Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery**, Berlin, the solo show "[Tuan Vu: Annam](#)" invites viewers into the vibrant, lush, and at times paradoxical world of Vu's recollections and imaginings of Vietnam.



Tuan Vu, *Tranquil South* (2026). Courtesy of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

The titled of the show, "Annam," alludes to the name used for Vietnam during the Chinese and French colonial periods. Drawn from a particularly fraught and painful time in Vietnamese history, Vu's use of the term points to the sense of distance and the inherent interpretive essence of memory and remembering. Direct translation of the term is "pacified South," but it is also indirectly translated as something else, which Vu taps for the title of one of the most meditative works in the show, *Tranquil South* (2026).

Here, a figure sits serenely just outside of the reach of a blaze of golden light, shaded by a traditional decorative paper umbrella. The juxtaposition of the title with the depiction of a proverbial paradise reveals Vu's identification of the shortcomings of memory alone, as well as his ongoing pursuit of a harmonious reconciliation between visual, expressive beauty and reality.



Tuan Vu, *A Usual Day* (2026). Courtesy of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

The imaginary bordering on fantastical slant of Vu's paintings is no more manifest than in the playfully titled *A Usual Day* (2026). Brimming with vivid hues, verdant plant life, and opulent décor—from meticulously painted planters to a luxurious embroidered curtain that appears to have just been pulled back for the benefit of the viewer—the scene is anything but usual, and instead otherworldly and dreamlike. An inky panther casts a curious eye in the direction of the viewer breaking the fourth wall, drawing the attention to itself as a symbol of freedom for Vu.

It is a composition that invites prolonged looking, exploring every detail and with it considerations of what the space might feel like, smell like. It also further underscores Vu's awareness of the discrepancies between memory, imagination, and reality.



Tuan Vu, *The Official Portrait* (2026). Courtesy of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

While historically Vu has focused predominantly on landscapes and interiors, in "Annam" figuration takes a leading role. In *The Official Portrait* (2026), figuration takes a complex, multilayered organizational structure, with not only the central subject—a richly attired queen—meeting the viewers gaze but the depiction within a depiction behind her of an Odalisque-inspired drapery, which is again backed by the rendering of a Buddha figure and another queen.

The Odalisque figure takes its inspiration from **Mai Trung Thu**, a 20th-century Vietnamese painter who synthesized elements of both Vietnamese fine and folk art, as well as took inspiration from Western artists. Vu takes up this line of inspiration and Western together. Vu Western and Eastern visual culture through form and motif—like in the tradition of **Les Nabis** and their use of color or Neoclassicists like **Ingres**.

Ultimately, the new body of work on view in "Annam" illuminates the full breadth of Vu's creative exploration, through art and cultural history, personal memory and imagination, and the processes of painting itself.

"Tuan Vu: Annam" is on view at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Berlin, through May 30, 2026.

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