

SEARS·PEYTON GALLERY NEW YORK·LOS ANGELES



Q&A with Vinna Begin

Untitled Art Miami Beach 2024

An interview with Meg Seal

You've had quite a literal experience of this theme "East Meets West" in your own life: What are your reflections on growing up in Indonesia, and the path that has led you to Montreal, where you live and work now?

VB: I was born in Indonesia, specifically West Java, in a small town near Jakarta called Cirebon. Cirebon is a cute little town; it's a port and there are boats coming in and out for delivering, selling stuff, so we lived near the water. I was there until I finished high school... Catholic upbringing [laughs]. And then, because there's not really a university or art school in Cirebon, I had to move to a bigger city. I got my bachelors in Graphic Design, with a minor in Printmaking and Painting, at a university in Bandung, another West Java town, so that was my early training. After, I went to work in Jakarta but was just so unhappy there; it was just so depressing to the point, like: "I hate this city, I hate the job! Why am I born here?!" - so I asked my mother to help fund me for six months to study in San Francisco at the Academy of Arts to study New Media. I lived and worked there for about a decade, and then my partner at the time got a job in Montreal, so that's what brought me here.

When I look back on the whole thing- Indonesia, then San Francisco, then Montreal- the whole experience was always centered around language, like, "Oh, I have to learn English now," you know, "Oh my god, how am I going to order, electricity in San Francisco?" I don't get to see their face, it's just on the phone! And then I repeated it again in Montreal; getting a croissant: "How am I going to get that one?" You know what I mean? So going through that, being so uncomfortable between the boundaries of cultural differences, being exposed... It was scary. More than half of my life has actually been in the western world but I feel like the root of everything is [in Indonesia]. I speak to my mom and sisters often. I never feel like I'm alone because I always have something to fall back on there.

Your work evokes such a strong sense of "environment"- in a physical sense and also in a spiritual or emotional sense; I'd love to talk about your influences in both of these aspects starting with where you grew up. What about your childhood environment resonated with you then when you were living there and now that you're living in Montreal, in hindsight?

VB: As a kid my mom and sisters would make fun of me, like, calling me a "mute" and a "loner" because I was just in my room, drawing all the time! I would draw a lot of faces... they would just come, like these individuals I wanted to meet. All of them were different personalities, like a cast of characters. I'd like to think that about my pieces now, that each one is its own individual that kind of

**Untitled
Art**

channels through me; something I welcome, and want to meet. I don't know where they came from! My family was also pretty musical; my dad owned a music store so I would go there every day. My sisters and I learned classical guitar (not really good at it, though!) and trumpet in high school and my brother learned the piano, we would sing and harmonize all the time- we were a musical family. So music is something that is natural. That is something very similar to visual art making, I think. There is an element of performance, with art making, and singing is just very direct. Your instrument is right here- I would like to make work that is as close as possible to that, naturally having material and tools that are a part of it, like an extension of myself. My goal is how can I make work that naturally feels like that?

Now, since I've been painting, I've been realizing that my dad introduced me to a lot of Eastern philosophy when I was a child that I think is showing more and more in my work. Like Lao Tzu and the Tao - he was actually living it. I would ask "Who are you praying to, dad?" and he was praying to my ancestors, and to higher- not specific gods- just being grateful, I guess. But he was a chill guy [laughs] he was amazing! I think I have that in me, but I also have my mom, you know, [gestures frantically] in me too! And those both come through in my work; sometimes my work is so quiet and sometimes it's so excited.

"East meets West," is such a broad, culturally- and historically-charged concept. There are so many ways in which that phrase can be interpreted and understood. What responses does this phrase and the context around it generate for you, personally, and how do (or don't) they reflect in your work?

VB: Right now, I consider myself beyond just "east and west". My experience is very multicultural, it's multitudes, it's beyond... I'm just not one thing. And then in my work I'm telling myself, "Vinna, sometimes you don't have to be saying everything at once!" It's ok to just have one little piece of yourself in this. To shove it all into one piece is impossible. That said, I've come to terms with the fact that I'm many things and I don't have to define myself with just one thing- it's like discovering every day.

I'm Indonesian, but my dad and my mom are first-generation Indonesian- their parents came from China. My mother's family were craftsmen, furniture makers, and my father's father was a calligrapher and literati painter. When I had my show in Sweden, the manager of the gallery was from China, and I asked her "Wow! Don't you think these look like Chinese paintings, like landscapes?" But I've never really thought "Oh- that is my background, those are my roots, why don't I do that in my work?"

In addition to your own life experience and memory, what else influences your work right now? Are there other mediums you're inspired by? Who are some artists that are important to you?

VB: I feel like in general, my work is positive, I don't know if it's coming out like that... In the beginning, my critical self was like "Does there need to be more gore, more darkness, more tension?" But there's a strength in this quiet feminine energy, like motherhood and the ocean, things that are deep and strong and constant. I also think, reflected in a lot of my work, is virtue, things that my mom and dad taught me, empathy, kindness. And I don't know if those are all "feminine" energies, but I embrace those in my work. Just goodness.

In my photography practice, I've always enjoyed the analog processes of that. Having my hand in the making of the prints and the work involved in that. I think in this way, it's similar to the enjoyment I find in the process of making my paintings.

As for other artists, the Japanese-American artist Miyoko Ito is amazing and the Italian photographer Luigi Ghirri- these are two artists who are on my mind now.

What guides you, or what are you exploring when you choose to work with different pigments vs watercolor or gouache, or oil?

VB: I was getting so caught up with oils or store-bought, industrial materials. For the past two years or so, I'm just using pigments, the source of what becomes oil, watercolor, acrylics - and I'm making my own paint because I have control over the grain and how they act. And I'll tell you they are all different guys! Different individuals! I'm like "Oh- you wanna be translucent because that's who you are? Go for it!"

Can you talk about your process? Where does a piece begin and end for you?

VB: The whole process is like grabbing a memory; like a state of daydreaming, but the painting as a whole is describing a memory that is almost gone- when you try to focus on one specific part of it, it disappears. People say my work is organic. I am a part of this, a part of the natural world. I am an organic being. Painting is making rules and breaking rules all the time. More and more, I'm asking: How bare can I be with a painting, with material, that it still speaks to what I'm wanting to say? I think the key is "does this come naturally to you, Vinna?" Forms, motif, color- I don't question anymore "Why does it look like this? Why am I using this gray?" I don't know! I like them! I have an affinity for them, I welcome them. It's all very intuitive, very natural. When a piece has presence, like in photography and you look in the viewfinder and you just feel "This has presence" and you grab it, it's very rapid; whereas in paint you are making it bit by bit - adding red, adding green... ok that red is too bright, you bring it down... I have to stop when the painting is almost overdone and I'm to the point of doubting myself - but most of them have kind of "done-ness" and it's interesting because that's very close to them being messed up. There is some mystery, like, why do you stop at that point? Until one day you just see that picture and bam! It's present.