

## ONE-ON-ONE WITH QUỖN NGUYEN-LE

U-T profiles of notable local people

## Telling Asians' and Asian-Americans' stories

BY LISA DEADERICK ■ PHOTO BY JOHN GIBBINS

When they were younger, Quỳn Nguyen-Le noticed that they didn't see people who looked like them — or the communities they grew up in — in movies. They wanted to change that, and started making films. Over the years, that focus has shifted a bit, and they've found filmmaking to be a nurturing source of power that allows them to be creative while also building within their community.

"In other words, it's not only a way for us to tell stories about ourselves to others, but to ourselves as well," said Nguyen-Le.

That kind of storytelling can be found in Nguyen-Le's 11-minute short film entry into this year's San Diego Asian Film Festival, "Hoài (Ongoing/Memory)," which is being screened at 5 p.m. Friday at Digital Gym Cinema in North Park. The festival, now in its 19th year, highlights Asian-American and international films at various locations in San Diego through Nov. 17. In Nguyen-Le's film, the title character returns home to live with her father after a breakup with her girlfriend, and in the midst of anti-immigrant protests.

Nguyen-Le is a 26-year-old independent filmmaker who lives in Normal Heights. They took some time to talk about their work, how their intersecting identities inform that work, and living close to some great Vietnamese restaurants.

(Quỳn Nguyen-Le is a queer, nonbinary, Vietnamese-American filmmaker who uses the pronouns they/them.)

**Q.** What is it about filmmaking as an art form that appeals to you?

**A.** I think that filmmaking has a great power to move people to action. For me, as the child of two refugees, there was a barrier of both language and war trauma between me and my parents. Although that gap has lessened as I got older, I think visual images are an effective way to bridge that gap. After my father saw the film "The Island" by Tuan Andrew Nguyen (which will screen with my film at this year's San Diego Asian Film Festival), he was moved for the first time to tell me and my siblings about his experience in the refugee camp on Bidong Island, where "The Island" takes place. This moment was so rare and precious for me, and I had no idea that an experimental sci-fi film could be the impetus for it!

**Q.** Why have you chosen to participate in the San Diego Asian Film Festival this year?

**A.** This is one of my favorite film festivals! A lot of our film crew, including myself, live in San Diego, and some of it was filmed here, so it's sort of like a homecoming for us to finally be able to share our film in our hometown.

**Q.** Tell us about your film, "Hoài (Ongoing/Memory)."

**A.** With all of my films, I try to start from a word in Vietnamese that has a double meaning. It's important for me to have both English and Vietnamese in the title, as well as in the film, to highlight the bilingual manner in which a lot of us from immigrant communities experience our lives. For this film in particular, "hoài" means both ongoing and memory, and we thought that the title was appropriate to talk about how the ongoing memory of the Vietnam War affects us today.

The short experimental film follows a small slice in the life of a queer, second-generation Vietnamese-American woman, Hoài, from which the title also takes its name, and her return home to her father's house after a breakup. From this point on, events both past and present collapse together and she continually wakes up from what seems like a never-ending dream to find her way back home.

**Q.** Where did the idea for "Hoài" come from?

**A.** My dad has this one karaoke song he always sings at parties, and a couple years ago, I noticed how sad the lyrics were. Thus, the seed for the film: How does this karaoke song about eternal loneliness connect to the Vietnamese diaspora's feelings around loss and leave-

ing a homeland? And how does it relate now, in the present, in the new places in which we have planted our roots?

**Q.** What did you want to explore in this film?

**A.** This film was difficult for me to make because I was, at the time, grappling with diverging feelings around what I'll describe as multiple levels of heartbreak: I wanted to figure out how to express how truly sad it is when a romantic partner breaks your heart, when your family breaks your heart, and when the country you live in breaks your heart, all at the same time. It could feel like these events have nothing to do with each other, but they all weigh down on you because they all happen to you.

**Q.** Hoài also returns home "in the midst of anti-immigrant protests"; why was that particular backdrop important to Hoài's story and her return home?

**A.** The co-writer, Ly Thuy Nguyen, and I felt like it was important to address because it was happening. We started from things that seemed unconnected on the surface. First was the political climate: the recent increase in anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric, especially anti-Muslim sentiment, reminded us of the same xenophobic rhetoric that led to the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans in concentration camps during World War II.

Then, there was the increased militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and attack on various communities, including Southeast Asian ones, through aggressive deportation policies.

Then, there was our mainstream Vietnamese-American community's unwillingness to take a stand against the xenophobia, despite many of us ourselves being from refugee families. For me, being Vietnamese-American doesn't mean that we were a refugee group that has been so "assimilated" into the mainstream that we no longer identify with the struggles of people experiencing forced migrations due to militarization and war. Additionally, there is an often separate conversation about the place of non-indigenous people of color, especially immigrants, on native land. And we wanted to use this small moment between father and daughter in our film to converge the conversations.

**Q.** Have you noticed any recurring themes in your work?

**A.** People tend to ask me, "Do you feel a responsibility to make films about queer Vietnamese-Americans?" "Hoài" will be my fourth one centering on queer Vietnamese-American characters. But to be honest, it's not confining to me to make films around this same group because it's my own experience and it's just the starting point, not a means to an end. We have so many kinds of stories to tell.

**Q.** And since this is about films, do you have a favorite movie?

**A.** My favorite recent film is Boots Riley's "Sorry to Bother You."

**Q.** What is the best advice you've ever received?

**A.** The best advice I've ever received about being an artist is that you have to imagine that you will make more than just one thing, and I think that's so hard to imagine, especially for filmmakers of color. We operate under the myth of scarcity: that there can only be one of us to succeed and that we will only have one chance at it. It was important for me to acknowledge that no one piece of work will encompass everything about me, my skill, and what I'm trying to say. And knowing that makes me freer in my creation process.

**Q.** What is one thing people would be surprised to find out about you?

**A.** I speak Spanish better than I speak Vietnamese!

**Q.** Describe your ideal San Diego weekend.

**A.** Going to the San Diego Asian Film Festival and being met with friendly staff who give me a bag full of snacks!



### What I love about Normal Heights ...

I get to be near all the great Vietnamese food in the Little Saigon neighborhood!

## PEOPLE

### Former first lady gets personal in memoir

Michelle Obama says she felt alone after a miscarriage 20 years ago and she and Barack Obama underwent fertility treatments to conceive their two daughters, according to her upcoming memoir.

In some of her most extensive public comments on her

White House years, the former first lady also lets her fury fly over President Donald Trump's "bigotry and xenophobia" — dangerous, deliberate rhetoric, she wrote, that risked her family's safety.

"For this," she writes, "I'd never forgive him."

But it's her deeply personal account of her marriage to the future president that shed new light on the Ivy League-educated couple's early struggle with issues of

family, ambition and public life.

"We were trying to get pregnant and it wasn't going well," Obama, 54, writes in "Becoming," set for release Tuesday. "We had one pregnancy test come back positive, which caused us both to forget every worry and swoon with joy, but a couple of weeks later I had a miscarriage, which left me physically uncomfortable and cratered any optimism we felt." The Obamas opted for

IVF, one form of assisted reproduction that typically involves removing eggs from a woman, fertilizing them with sperm in a lab, and implanting the resulting embryo. It costs thousands of dollars for every "cycle," and many couples require more than one attempt.

Obama writes of being alone to administer herself shots to help hasten the process. Her "sweet, attentive husband" was at the state legislature, "leaving me

largely on my own to manipulate my reproductive system into peak efficiency," she said.

"I felt like I failed because I didn't know how common miscarriages were because we don't talk about them," the former first lady said in an interview broadcast Friday on ABC's "Good Morning America." "We sit in our own pain, thinking that somehow we're broken."

Obama said they underwent fertilization treatments to conceive daughters Sasha

and Malia, now 17 and 20.

In the memoir, Obama also lets loose a blast of anger at Trump.

She writes that Trump's questioning of whether her husband was an American citizen was "crazy and mean-spirited" — and "dangerous." Trump suggested Obama was not born in the U.S. but on foreign soil — his father was Kenyan. The former president was born in Hawaii.

"What if someone with an unstable mind loaded a gun and drove to Washington? What if that person went looking for our girls?" she writes in the memoir. "Donald Trump, with his loud and reckless innuendos, was putting my family's safety at risk. And for this, I'd never forgive him."

As he left for Paris Friday, Trump responded, telling reporters, "Oh, I guess she wrote a book. She got paid a lot of money to write a book and they always insisted you come up with controversial." Trump instead changed the subject to his predecessor, Barack Obama, saying, "I'll never forgive him" for making the country "very unsafe."

Obama launches her promotional tour Tuesday not at a bookstore, but at Chicago's United Center, where tens of thousands of people have purchased tickets — from just under \$30 to thousands of dollars — to attend the event moderated by Oprah Winfrey.

### Ryan, Mellencamp announce engagement

Here's a little ditty 'bout John and Meg. Singer John Mellencamp and actress Meg Ryan are getting married.

The 56-year-old announced her engagement to the 67-year-old musician on Instagram. "ENGAGED!" is what she wrote. The post included a drawing of what appears to be the two holding hands. He's also holding a guitar.

They've been dating on and off since 2010.

No date was announced.

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