



# SCENT FROM HEAVEN

Portfolio | Hiền Hoàng





# Scent from Heaven

(2021 - 2023)

**“Scent from Heaven”** examines the paradoxical relationship between suffering and transformation through the story of the Agarwood tree, a fragrant and highly valued wood native to Southeast Asia. Agarwood, revered for its heavenly scent and symbolic associations with healing and redemption, is formed only after the tree endures prolonged pain caused by infection or external wounds. This project explores the contradiction between the **suffering of nature and humanity’s longing for healing and salvation**, reflecting on how beauty and value often arise from destruction and trauma.

The project draws on the **spiritual and cultural significance of Agarwood**, which is mentioned in the New Testament as one of the materials used to anoint Jesus’ body after the Crucifixion<sup>1</sup>. In this context, Agarwood becomes a symbol of both suffering and sanctity, embodying the paradoxical coexistence of pain and redemption. This duality mirrors the way humans exploit nature’s suffering to fulfill their spiritual, emotional, and material desires.

Through **scientific methodologies and immersive storytelling**, *Scent from Heaven* transforms this narrative into a sensory experience. Using **CT scans**, I visualized the internal scars and transformations within the Agarwood tree, revealing the hidden wounds that give rise

A piece of Agarwood is placed upon the chest of the dancer, who embodied the wood as a child born from the pain of its mother. The wood gives off a rich and warm scent when it gets burn, and supposed to heal one’s soul and bring them closer to the heaven.

<sup>1</sup> Refer to: Dr. Gathercole, S. (1988). Nicodemus and His Spices (John 19.39). In S. Dr. Gathercole, New Testament Studies (pp. 148–151). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



to its valued fragrance. At the same time, **EEG technology** captured human brain activity as audiences experienced the scent of Agarwood, highlighting the intimate but often exploitative connection between humans and the natural world.

The project’s central element is a **VR installation**, which invites audiences to enter the inner world of the Agarwood tree. Through abstract, sensory environments blending **data visualization, sound-scapes, and poetic imagery**, the work creates a multisensory journey. This immersive experience allows viewers to reflect on the **coexistence of pain and beauty**, drawing parallels between ecological suffering and universal human experiences of trauma, healing, and redemption.

Rooted in the cultural, ecological, and spiritual significance of Agarwood, *Scent from Heaven* bridges **scientific inquiry with emotional engagement**, challenging audiences to reconsider their relationship with nature. By making the invisible visible, the project emphasizes the intricate connections between **nature’s suffering and humanity’s search for meaning, solace, and transcendence**. Ultimately, it asks: what does it mean to seek healing and redemption when that process depends on the suffering of others—be it trees, ecosystems, or even humanity itself?

**More details to the films and research:**  
<http://hien-hoang.com/scent-from-heaven/>



A body of an agarwood tree with various injection sites. The injection is intended to prevent the wound healing and thus to force the tree to produce agarwood. Excerpt from research on a plantation in Quang Nam, Vietnam, 2021



The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John (1624–1625), by Hendrick ter Brugghen. @Metropolitan Museum of Art

- Upcoming pages:
1. Brain signal reading with EEG while inhaling Agarwood’s scent
  2. Drilling scene from an Agarwood plantation in Vietnam - inflicting pain on the tree is the first step to start the healing process of the tree which will produce Agarwood
  3. Performing CT-scan on an cut down Agarwood tree in the Ha Tinh Clinics, Vietnam
  4. A dealer in Nha Trang, Vietnam is taking care of a large Agarwood sculpture. Agarwood is supposed to protect it’s owner from evil, but is also a status of symbol. Nha Trang was one of the place where the first Agarwood in Vietnam was found.
  5. Excerpt from the VR installation for „Scent from Heaven“. 3D scans of trees and plantantions formed the space of the installation, while a CT-Scan of Agarwood floating in the space.

























### Scent from Heaven

Treescape-installation view  
with 3 film canvases stretched  
between trees, 6-channels-  
soundscape.

Venue: Planten un Blomen Park,  
Hamburg, Germany. 2023



Artist’s Biography

# Hiền Hoàng

Hiền Hoàng (b. 1990) is a Vietnamese-born, Hamburg-based multimedia artist whose work bridges the intersections of human memory, nature, and technology. Through a practice that spans scientific data, installation, video, virtual/augmented reality, and performance, she creates multisensory experiences that uncover unseen narratives and explore ecological and emotional connections.

Her projects often engage with themes of transformation, resilience, and the paradoxical relationship between humanity and the natural world. In 2023, Hoàng was a finalist for the Discovery Award at Les Rencontres d’Arles for her project “Across the Ocean”, which examined familial and political trauma through archival materials and performative installations. That same year, she received an Art Grant from the Hamburg Ministry of Culture and Media for “Scent from Heaven”, a project combining scientific methodologies (CT and EEG) and immersive VR to explore the suffering and transformation of the Agarwood tree.

Building on this, her 2024 project “Garden of Entanglement”, supported by an EU Commission S+T+ARTS Art Grant, interrogates the vibrational life of trees through dynamic measurements and sonification. Her ability to blend ecological narratives with innovative, data-driven artistic approaches earned her the prestigious Foam Paul Huf Award (2024), with a solo exhibition planned for 2025.

Hoàng’s work has been exhibited in leading art venues and festivals, including Les Rencontres d’Arles and CentroCentro Cibeles (Madrid). Her practice is deeply informed by interdisciplinary collaborations with scientists and technologists, reflecting on the paradoxical role of technology as both a tool for understanding and a force that distances us from nature.

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PRIZE, GRANT & NOMINATION (selected)

- 2024

**Paul Huf Award 2024**  
FOAM Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands
- 2024

**S+T+ARTS**, Residency & Grant  
by the EU Commission
- 2024

**c/o Berlin Talent Award** - Shortlisted
- 2023

**Les Rencontres de la Photographie d’Arles** -Discovery Award -Finalist
- 2023

**Art Grant: Art in Public Space**  
Ministry for Culture and Media,  
Hamburg, Germany

EXHIBITION & EVENTS (selected)

- 31.10.2024 - 02.2025

*Energy.* **FotoDOK**, Utrecht, Netherlands
- 23.10 - 25.10.2024

*WOPHA CONGRESS*,  
**Perez Art Museum**, Miami, USA
- 25.10 - 28.10.2024

*AiR Festival* - S+T+ARTS and Manifesta  
Barcelona, Spain
- 13.09 - 01.11.2024

*Infinite Rehearsal.*  
**SAVVY Contemporary**, Berlin, Germany
- 18.10 - 21.10.2024

*New Asia.* **T3 Photo Asia** -  
**Tokyo Institute for Photography**,  
Tokyo, Japan
- 17.10 - 10.11.2024

*Energy.* **Fotolreland**, Dublin, Ireland
- 02.05 – 30.06.2024

*Across the Ocean.* **Mucho Mas! Gallery**  
Solo Show, Turin, Italy
- 15.10. – 30.11.2023

*Scent from Heaven.*  
**Robert Capa Center**, Budapest, Hungary
- 05.07. – 05.09.2023

*She sang a song while I was dreaming.*  
**Photography Museum Braunschweig**  
Germany
- 02.07. – 30.08. 2023

**Les Rencontres de la Photographie**  
Arles, France
- 02.06 - 30.09.2022

*Hybrids.* PhotoEspaña,  
**CentroCentro Cibeles**, Madrid, Spain

ARTICLES WRITTEN ABOUT THE ARTIST (selected)

- Kim, Sunyoung.** *About „Scent from Heaven“.*  
Page 111-113. **Photo Art**, Issue 7. Seoul,  
South Korea. 2024

**Churchman, Fi.** *Future Greats 2024:*  
*Hiền Hoàng.* **ArtReview Magazine**, Issue  
Feb. 2024. Page 63 – 66. London, United  
Kingdom. 2024.

**Mishra, Tanvi.** *Curation text about artist’s ins-*  
*tallation “Across the Ocean”.* Louise Roederer  
Talent Award – Les Rencontres de la Photo-  
graphie d’Arles 2023.

**Mucsi, Emese.** *Modes of Spirituality. Inter-*  
*view with Hiền Hoàng.* **TRIGGER Magazine.**  
Issue 05. FOMU Antwerpen, Belgium, 2023.  
68 – 72.

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