

How to Touch the Elephant

Ecological Trauma in
post-Agent Orange
Landscapes in
Vietnam





Fig. 1: Hiền Hoàng. *Residue Transfer Study*. Corrosion residue from aluminium reacting to copper sulfate on photograph printed on copy paper. 6 × 10 cm. 2025. Original image: *Aerial photograph showing the effects of Agent Orange defoliation*, Vietnam, circa 1961–1971, in the courtesy of the Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

Project Statement

How to Touch the Elephant (2025–ongoing) attends to the ecological trauma of post-Agent Orange landscapes in Vietnam. This research-based, interdisciplinary project argues that the slow and multigenerational character of ecological violence needs to be attended to through shifting modes of witnessing, moving between studio-based and site-based practices.

Agent Orange was among the herbicides deployed by the U.S. military during Operation Ranch Hand from 1961 to 1971. It saturated the land, and the bodies living on it, with dioxin, one of the most toxic substances known. Decades later, the landscapes and the bodies still carry it. Yet juridical and forensic frameworks have repeatedly failed to establish legal accountability for this contamination. This research turns to practice-based artistic inquiry as an alternative form of witnessing. **It asks what it means to touch the post-Agent Orange landscapes, and to be touched back.**

The research carries personal stakes. My Vietnamese heritage is inseparable from the war's aftermath. **The bomb fragments inside my father's body have never been removed.** They are evidence of the war and traces of trauma, but also testimony to the capacity of matter and bodies to resist and refuse violence. Attending to the trauma of the landscapes is, in part, attending to that inheritance.

The practice is grounded in fieldwork across contaminated sites in Vietnam, where witnessing takes shape through direct, material engagement rather than documentary distance. On-site, the work proceeds through embodied drawing, soil mapping, and the recording of environmental and bioelectrical signals that are later sonified. In the studio, these encounters extend into material interventions that stage the slow temporality of contamination itself: metal corrosion, and the growth of mycelium and plants across and through collected matter. Corrosion and

(In clockwise order)

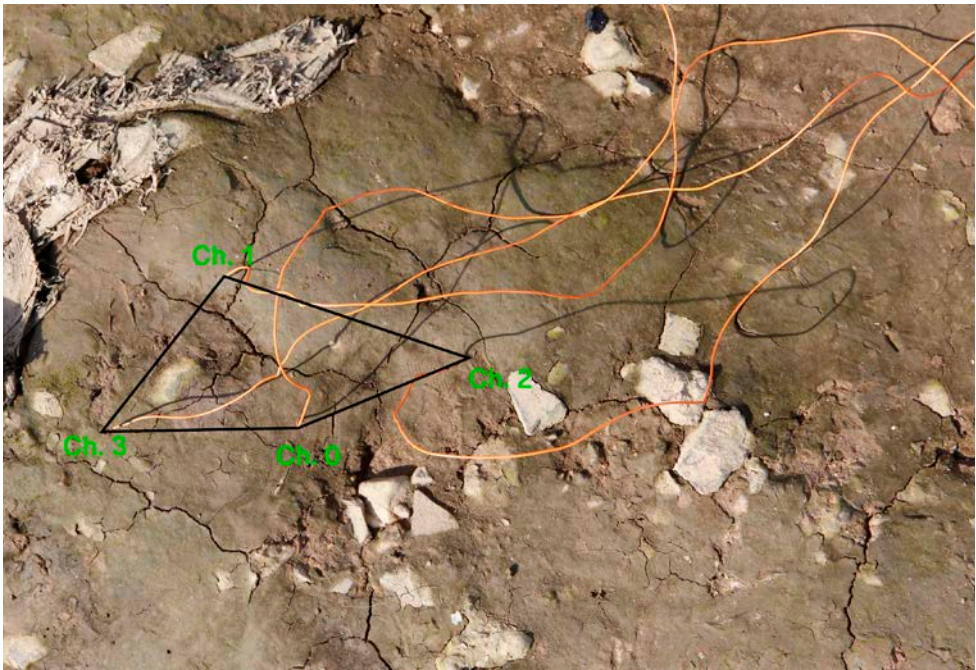
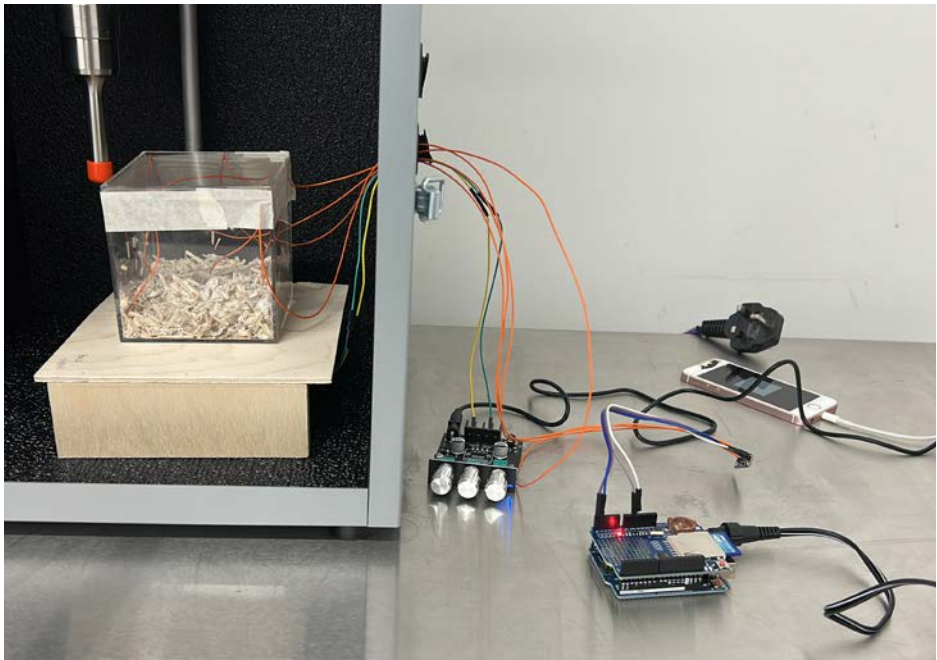
Fig. 2: Hiền Hoàng, soil mapping in Biên Hoà, Vietnam (2026). Mapping and data extraction conducted beneath the Hóa An Bridge over the Đồng Nai River.

Fig. 3: Hiền Hoàng, *Study of Living and Dying* (2025–ongoing), discarded tree log, corroded and bent scrap aluminum, donated small-leaf spiderwort (*Tradescantia fluminensis*) growing through and over. Installation view at Royal College of Art, 2026.

Fig. 4: Hiền Hoàng, *Mycelium Intervention No. 1* (2025), mycelium, wood, Arduino, ADS1115, amplifier, media player, copper, variable dimensions.

Fig. 5: Hiền Hoàng, *Corrosion Study No. 1* (2026), steel, copper sulfate, 17 x 9 x 1,2 cm

Fig. 6: Hiền Hoàng, position of the measuring nodes during the soil measurement in Biên Hoà, Vietnam (2026)



biological growth become collaborators, processes that continue their own transformations beyond my control, registering time, decay, and regeneration as the landscapes themselves do.

The outcomes take form as installation bringing together photographic media, sculptural and material objects, sonified data, and works on paper. Together they hold the site and the studio in tension, proposing an **expanded practice of witnessing** adequate to a violence that refuses to remain in the past.

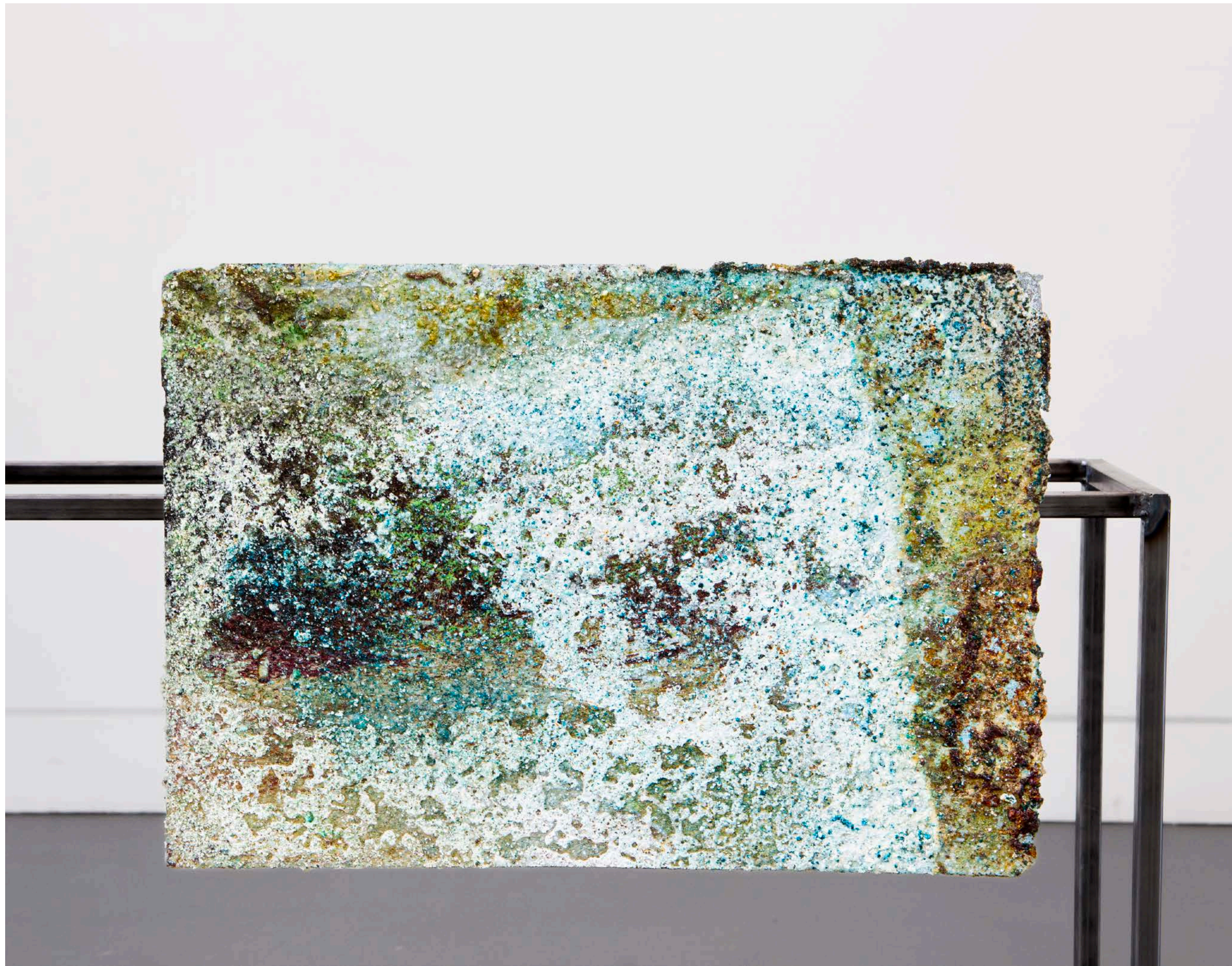


Fig. 7: *Constellation II* (2026), front side and detail view, showing *Corrosion Study on UV Print No. 4*, steel frame, corroded aluminum and UV print.



Fig. 8: Hiền Hoàng, *Constellation I* (2026), corroded aluminum and UV print, steel frame, magnet, 120 × 60 × 40 cm.



Fig. 9: Hiền Hoàng, *Constellation II* (2026), corroded aluminum and UV print, steel frame, magnet, front side and back side, 70 × 100 × 20 cm.



Fig. 10: Hiền Hoàng, *The Base*, part of *Slow Sculpture* (2026–ongoing), corroded steel (from left to right: right side view, left side view, back side view, 90 × 90 × 45 cm.



Fig. 11: Hiền Hoàng, *How to Touch the Elephant* (2026–ongoing), 2026 version, consisting of constellations of corroded UV prints and sculpture, variable in items and dimensions.



Fig. 12: Hiền Hoàng, *Slow Sculpture with the Living* (2026–ongoing), 3D-printed form, partly corroded steel frame, tube, tradescantia fluminensis, corroded scrap aluminum, discarded tree log, soil, detail views and front view (next page), 180 x 95 x 95 cm



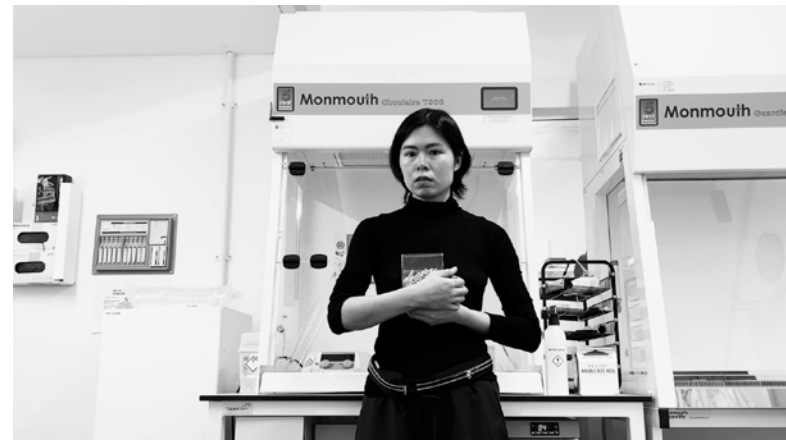


Fig. 13: Hiền Hoàng, *Lullaby* (2025), stills from performance documentation. Single-channel video with sound composed from electrical signals recorded from mycelium, interwoven with a Vietnamese lullaby melody, 5 minutes.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2m-Vb62E7zc>

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