

# THE DYNAMIC DUO: BETTY AND MICHELLE BUI OF THE BUI GALLERY

Text and photos by **Dave Lemke**







Located in a quaint Parisian house on Ngo Van So street in Hanoi stands The Bui Gallery - a space that sets itself apart with its contemporary art pastiche, constantly changing with the ebb and flow of its talented representatives. The success story behind this dynamic gallery is Betty Bui, who, assisted by her mother Michelle, has transformed the concept of what a gallery space can accomplish and how it operates as a platform for its artists to excel. East&West sat down with Michelle and Betty Bui to discuss art and life in Vietnam.

*D: When you were looking to open your second gallery, what made you choose Hanoi, or Vietnam for that matter?*

M: Well, our family background is from Hanoi, even though we have lived in Paris for so long. Betty grew up with her grandmother telling her stories of this city. Our pride in Vietnamese culture never waned in France! It was a daily part of our lives. And in terms of culture, Hanoi is full of it - if you open a gallery and are looking for artists, they are all here.

*D: The Bui Gallery has access to some incredible artists, but why did the gallery pursue these artists and why do the artists in turn select The Bui Gallery?*

B: Networking networking networking. I grew up in France and lived in LA for nine years. During this time I made a lot of connections with artists. I kept the contacts and forged lasting relationships with them. Generally, artists do not like to work with people they do not know. When I first came to Hanoi, people were very wary of me. They wondered who I was and what my plans were. But over time, I was able to gain

their trust and collaborate with them.

*D: Can you extrapolate a little more about your experiences when you arrived back to Hanoi?*

B: Well, you should know that I never wanted to open a gallery myself. For me, I just wanted to open a really beautiful space where contemporary artists could display their work - so I came to explore Vietnam. I saw many galleries, but none did art the way I saw it. I had confidence in myself to achieve what I envisioned, but it was not easy. Nothing was easy.

*D: Michelle, what is it like working with your daughter? And Betty what is it like working with your mom?*

M: In a western context, having your mom in your gallery everyday is considered weird. But in Vietnam, it's culturally acceptable.

B: I am really just here to help out - and since I left Hanoi when I was three, it was like returning to our family's roots. I think we complement each other very well, so there are no issues with us working together. I am the people person and I make sure all the small details of running a gallery are looked after.



*D: How has your mother assisted you in the success of The Bui Gallery?*

B: When I talked about making relationships with artists personal, here in Vietnam because of the language barrier, that was initially hard for me. My mom has helped a tremendous amount with the communication aspect, bridging and forging new relationships. In addition, she's able to express the Gallery's intentions and choice of artists to the censorship board, which in turn has facilitated my work. The artists in Hanoi, they have to trust you, and once mom made that connection with them, our life got a lot less complicated.

M: It's almost a 6th sense you cannot teach people about living here, especially when fostering relationships with the older Hanoian artists.

*D: Where do you gain your inspiration?*

B: Well, it's a fun job, and I get to travel. But really, it's the artists - I love meeting new ones - it's incredible. These people and their art, their creativity, that's what keeps me going. I see opening nights at galleries like being a part of the art. It's something that

cannot be reproduced. So every opening at the Gallery is different - being around creative people, you cannot help but feel inspired, and feel creative yourself.

*D: Can you describe the Vietnamese art scene? Do you see a particular movement occurring?*

B: There is a lot of performance art going on - but you know, right now in Vietnam there is lots going on, and the people here, they are really open to all kinds art. I like the "Zenai Gang of Five", but overall, I am really interested in the younger generation of artists - those of my age. Generally their art speaks to me in a more substantial way.

*D: If you could feature a Vietnamese artist at Art Basel, whom would you pick?*

B: Ha Manh Thanh, because he is special - he has a real language, a strong statement - and technically he is really good. I have many galleries in NYC and Sao Paulo that want to feature his work. This is very important for the artist, they cannot have just one gallery - they have to have a support network. I am lucky enough to have the network, and I really believe in Thanh.

*D: What are some of the challenges of being an artist in Vietnam?*

B: The biggest challenge is that there are not many galleries, especially ones that are willing to represent artists. There isn't a huge international platform, and the government does not necessarily support the artists.

*D: What does the future hold for the art community in Vietnam, Hanoi and The Bui Gallery?*

M: I see this country, and Hanoi, continuing to do really well - the dealers here are really motivated. It seems they come here and support the community because they themselves love Vietnam. The Bui Gallery will continue to be a very strong presence of contemporary art in SE Asia. For the next 2 years, I want to reinforce our presence here to give the artists we represent the best possible platform to succeed. And, as always, I'll be looking for potential new networks and opportunities. It takes time to become a part of the community, but over the past year, especially with my mom's help, we've really embraced Hanoi, and I hope, Hanoi, us. ■