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## New Visions, Continued Traditions

### »» Akira Le in conversation with VH Anthony Vue



#### about the artist »»

Akira Le is a local Brisbane photographer. Akira was born in 1978 in a refugee camp in Bangkok, before migrating with her family to Australia as part of the second wave of Hmong refugees in the early '80s.

Akira has been a professional photographer for 3 years. She is the recipient of a Silver (2015) and Gold (2016) award from the AIPP. The Gold Award was for her series *Planet Autism* which is a collection of in-camera double exposure images of her eldest autistic son, who's health at the time was deteriorating due to the onset of schizophrenia. Akira hopes her artwork can assist the promotion of Asian-Australians and people with special needs into mainstream media.

**VAV:** Hello Akira. First of all, thanks for sharing your work at *n.o.space*. The work you are exhibiting is a set of ten photographs of young Hmong-Australian community members. I'm interested to know what motivated or inspired you to capture these images, these individuals, and the environments in which they are located?

**AL:** *I wanted to show that our culture was modern, inspiring and not afraid to be known. For so many years, no one knew who the Hmong were, especially in Australia. This was a chance for me to make us visible using compelling imagery to propel us into mainstream media. Even as I wanted to break away from the 'poor nomadic' stereotypes, I also wanted to pay tribute to our humble past. I do this by consciously choosing my locations to help tell the stories in each photograph.*

**VAV:** To what extent did these individuals have in creating these images? Or, how much of a say did they have in the way they were portrayed?

**AL:** *I had a lot of creative control over this project. I pitched my ideas and my models and HMUA let me know what they were comfortable in doing, or made suggestions of how we could execute the shoot. I'm very fortunate I had willing participants who trusted me.*

**VAV:** In many ways, I think the representation of Hmong-Australians in the public arena has remained relatively fixed over the past few decades. Most prominent has been images of cheerful Hmong-Australians in 'traditional' attire, or as sellers and growers of fresh produce. These images of Hmong-Australians have often been used as markers of cultural difference and to promote multiculturalism. But how important do you think it is for Hmong-Australians to create images of themselves and their communities that expand beyond this? Images that are more inclusive of the Hmong-Australian experience?

**AL:** *I think that it's important that any community has representation out there in the world. I felt that my culture almost didn't exist when I was growing up because there was little to no representation of us out there. I remember how excited I was when I saw on an episode of *Doogie Howser: MD* where there was a Hmong family that required 'Western' treatment but refused until they were permitted to hold a healing ritual by a shaman in the hospital first. Then there was the portrayal of Hmong-Americans in *Grand Torino*.*

*As grateful as I was to see this in mainstream media, our stories were being retold by someone not from our culture. This leads to misrepresentation. So by creating images of ourselves for ourselves and the world, we take back that control.*



VAV: There are a few works that I think depart from those we often see of Hmong-Australians. The photograph *Mai Moua* for example, is an image that you won't see too often in mainstream media's portrayal of Hmong-Australians. In your photograph, the figure is placed within the Australian environment, blending in but also merging out of gumtrees. There is an air of confidence and determination that is exerted by Mai Moua's facial expression and bare, painted body.

Is this something you had in mind when you were creating this work? To assert the figure of a strong Hmong woman within a very Australian environment—the bush being a space which is historically associated with white Australian masculine identity. All the more unconventional if you consider that Hmong women, in Australia and elsewhere, have often been represented as carriers of traditional cultural identity, and portrayed as exotic figures in exotic environments.

*AL: Yes that's spot on. Mai Moua's shoot pushed our boundaries as artists. It was a risky move and I have a lot of respect for the courage Teana (HMUA) and Mai Moua showed in being a part of this photo shoot. Mai Moua plays an active part in changing perceptions of how Hmong women view their bodies and the importance of healthy living. I'm excited that I'm able to be a part of this and I hope my work is viewed positively.*

VAV: But then there are also photographs that, in my opinion, show these figures in much more traditional settings and poses. I think this is most evident in the works *Melinda* and *Lienna*. Do you feel that these photographs reinforce previous representations of Hmong-Australians, or do you consider them more as empowering?

*AL: I think there needs to be a bridge from what we know to where we want to be known as and these photographs are the bridges. And yet, I don't believe they are 100% traditional as there are elements that make them uniquely modern.*

VAV: In these photographs, you've also captured images of individuals with mixed cultural heritages and individuals who are not of Hmong heritage. Why do you think it has been important to include these individuals in your representations of Hmong-Australians?

*AL: To deny that our Hmong community includes people who are not of Asian Hmong heritage is to deny our place in Australia. It means I deny my children whose father is Australian Irish, my husband who is Vietnamese, and my friends. Hmong are historically nomads and we don't have our own country. Where we settled, we integrated and enriched our culture by adopting customs of the host country.*

VAV: Some of these photographs veer towards the fantastical (*Siblings*, *Water Spirit* & *Mai Moua*), whereas others are more portrait-like (*Sean and Mia*). I do gravitate more towards the former works, but which genre do you believe your greatest strength lies?

*AL: I dream that one day I can do a series of fantastical works on a large scale with enormous head pieces, epic costumes and crazy make up.*

VAV: What's next for your practice?

*AL: I've been healing from an operation so I don't have big projects planned yet. But I've been doing bits and pieces to keep the skills up. I'm fortunate to be surrounded by people with amazing talent and I love that I can be a part of helping promote them with my photographs.*

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