



‘Full Set’ Art Show Explores Nail Salon Life in Vietnamese America

The exhibit in New Orleans showcases the work of up-and-comers Christian Dinh and Kimberly Ha

<https://joysauce.com/full-set-art-show-explores-nail-salon-life-in-vietnamese-america/>

The “Full Set” show will run at Mortal Machine Gallery in New Orleans’s French Quarter through May 22.

Words by [Thuc Nguyen](#)

Nail salon life is a lived experience shared by many Vietnamese refugee families who came to the United States. In fact, [half of all manicurists in the United States are Vietnamese](#), according to the Vietnamese Students Academy. To honor this truth, New Orleans-based Vietnamese American artists [Christian Dinh](#), a sculptor and ceramicist, and photographer [Kimberly Ha](#) are joining forces with other Asian American artists for a group show titled *Full Set*, running through May 22 at [Mortal Machine Gallery](#) in the city’s French Quarter.



Kimberly Ha

Courtesy photo

Dinh, who grew up in Florida, has gained national acclaim recently, thanks to a feature in the [The New York Times](#), and fondly recalls spending time at his aunt's hair and nail salon growing up. Similarly, Ha, who moved to New Orleans from Texas, grew up with a single mom who ran a nail salon. These formidable moments are what shape their creations that center the Vietnamese American diaspora and women of color.

Full Set is in its second iteration, with a premiere group show that happened in late fall of 2022 that also included Dinh's art. Ha, who curated the show, intends for this to become a traveling exhibit and eventual book.

The photos Ha created for this show reflect the pop culture moments—with nods to *The Nanny*, *Casino*, and Outkast—she remembers from hanging out at her mom's nail salon after school.

Dinh's casts of nail salon display hands are less flashy, instead honed on the intimate details of workers' and refugees' lives. "The body of work focuses on the success of the Vietnamese American nail salon industry and how that reflects the success of the Vietnamese American community as a whole," he says.



Christian Dinh

Courtesy photo

With many first generation Vietnamese boat people refugees aging and subsequent generations having language and culture gaps, Dinh's art is even more important as a way to preserve the lived experience of this segment of society. These everyday objects used to show customers available nail types or designs are passed by on a regular basis and are easily disregarded. To the workers in the nail industry who struggle with language barriers, the hands become more. They become a mode of communication. Dinh states that "many immigrants rely on various means of visual representation to navigate the unfamiliar circumstances of life anew (in a new land)."

By taking these plastic display hands and casting them in porcelain, Dinh elevates the significance of these objects and the role they play in the lives of the nail salon workers, as a statement about ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, labor issues and more.

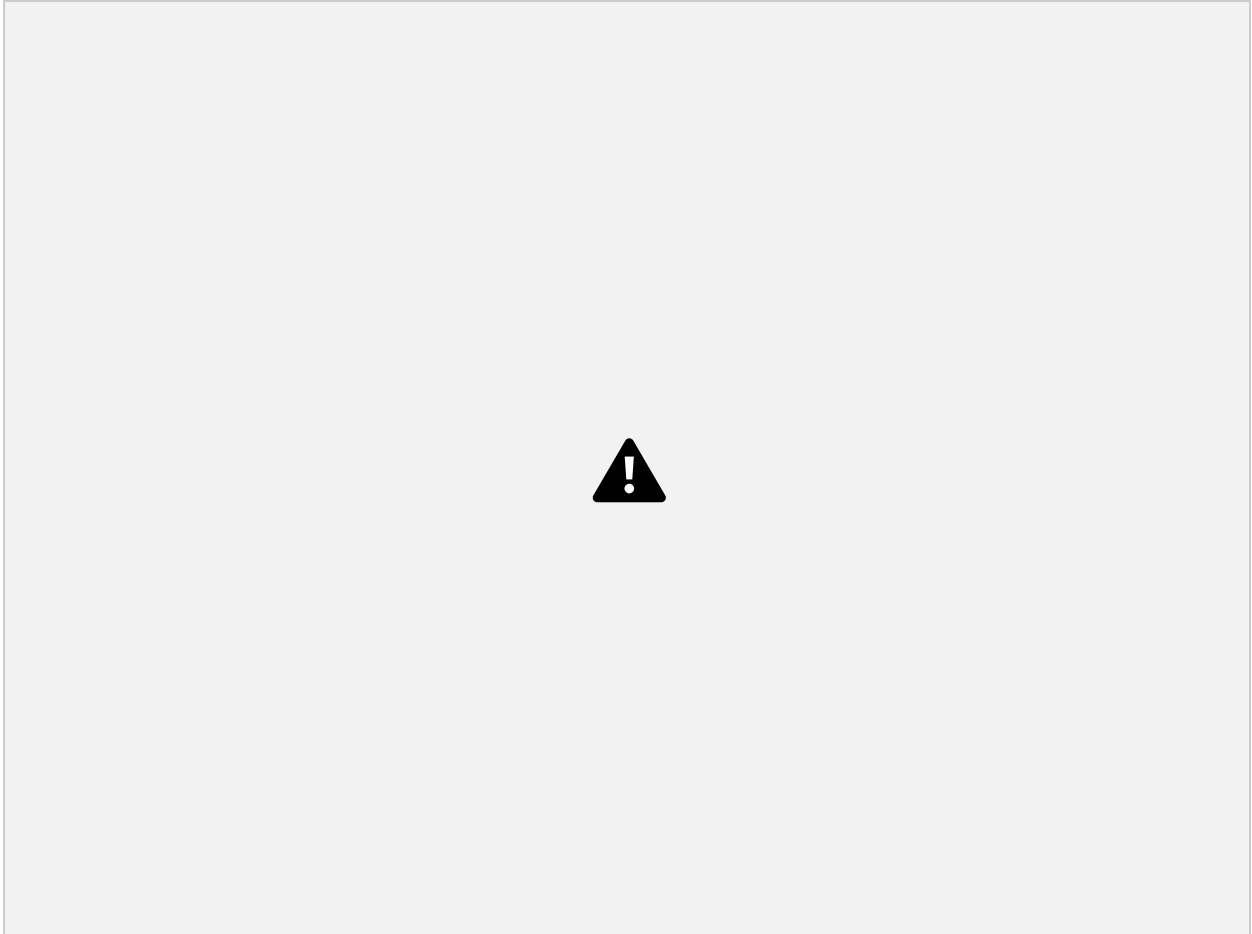


“French Tip” by Christian Dinh

Courtesy of the Ogden Museum

Historically, porcelain has been a valuable and highly sought after commodity in European countries, as collectible “exotica from the East.” These “fine china” collectibles are items that are put on display, in cabinets or shelving, to be presented as precious items. Dinh believes that within this context of “preciousness,” the work acts as a reclamation of a material that embodies Asian identity, directing the focus on what he believes should be recognized and seen as “precious items.” Vietnamese culture is at a delicate and precarious time with language and customs slipping through the generations with the country’s scattered diaspora around the globe. The materials Dinh uses reflect this vulnerability.

Dinh also puts a new spin on colorism within Asian cultures. His piece called *Yellow is Beautiful* consists of 108 different tones of the color yellow—in the form of ceramic nail polish containers, representing various shades and sizes of the Vietnamese people and diaspora. This is yet another example of how Dinh brings thoughtfulness, depth and social commentary to another seemingly mundane and commonplace object.



“Yellow is Beautiful” by Christian Dinh

Courtesy photo

In late August, Dinh will have a full scale solo exhibit, titled *Nail Salon*, at the [Ohr-O'keefe Museum](#) in Biloxi, Mississippi with older and new pieces. Art shows like these are still rare in The South and show that the region is more than Black and white. As for how Dinh feels about his installations, “I’m bringing attention to the experiences, objects, places and values that are part of the identity of the Vietnamese American people,” he says. “My artwork redirects stigma and celebrates Vietnamese American identity by confronting racism, stereotypes and underrepresentation.”

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Words by [Thuc Nguyen](#)

Thuc Doan Nguyen is a former child boat person refugee who was sponsored to the small town of Kinston, North Carolina. She grew up there, in Raleigh, NC and in rural Southern Maryland. She's lived in Europe and has an Irish passport, as well as an American one. Thuc is a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill. She's a writer and essayist for publications like *Vogue*, *Esquire*, *The Daily Beast*, *VICE*, *Refinery29*, *Southern Living*, *PBS* and now *JoySauce*, among others. She loves dogs and college basketball. You can find out more about her work at [ConsiderateContent.com](https://www.consideratecontent.com).