

HÙNG LÊ

Memory as touchstone

For Kansas City artist Hùng Lê, whose work expresses “the entanglement of personal and collective memories,” fiber seems an especially apt media in which to tell his stories.

Born in Đồng Nai, Vietnam, Lê graduated from the Kansas City Art Institute with a BFA in Fiber Arts and an Asian Studies certificate. His experience immigrating to the United States with his family at the age of 7 was a significant precursor to his interest in exploring how people keep hold of their individual memories amidst a broader societal narrative.

Lê recalls that as a child in a strange land, the English language “was incredibly hard to grasp and understand. My mother tongue felt like it had been rendered useless within this new environment.” As a means of overcoming this challenge, Lê explains that he began drawing, an act of self-expression that was the genesis of his artistic interest and a proxy for conventional written and spoken language.

Just as a log floating down a river has a specific shape, size and texture that remains relatively stable amidst the infinitely moving and transforming molecules of water, Lê’s concrete memories of his native country have evolved over time with the rhythm of a more nebulous culturally and socially influenced consciousness. Given enough time, even the unyielding form of the log, the personal memory, will metamorphose and succumb to the power of its environment.

Lê explains, “I used to remember Vietnam as more of a home that I could never fully return to, which has some truth since Vietnam has gone through a lot of changes since I left. In many ways, the Vietnam that I grew up in only exists within my memory.”

In contemplating whether personal memories are always condemned to be consumed by the pulse of societal meta-recollections, Lê has crafted a sprawling body of work since the start of his career a mere five years ago.

“My Mother’s Tongue Ties Me Together,” the recent exhibition of works by the three 2025 Charlotte Street Visual Artist Award winners at the Spencer Museum of Art, exemplified Lê’s quest to reconcile the personal and communal aspects of memory. Textile collages like “Người Bạn Cho Một Đường Dài,” drenched in indigo, give viewers a glimpse into how he seeks meaning in the amalgamation of his childhood version of Vietnam with the relentless march of time. Although the tapestry reveals ephemeral images of people and even a horse, these subjects remain partially shrouded behind stylized geometric patterns. Even as the contours of specific memories blur and soften, their essence persists.

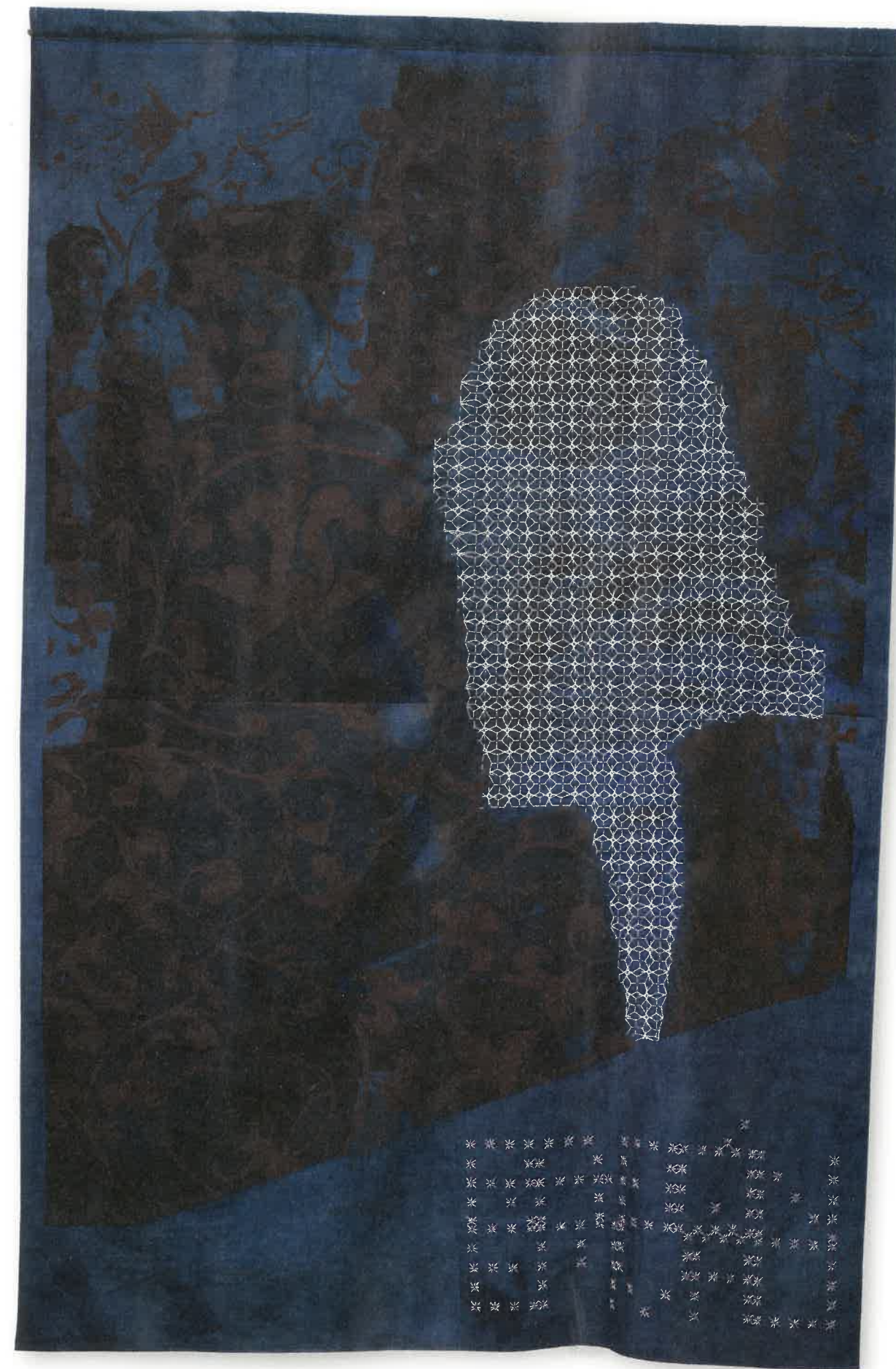
Another evocative entry in Lê’s catalog, “All That’s Been Said and Left Unsaid,” consists of two companion portraits of a young woman and man on hand-dyed indigo cotton and linen, with glass beads and cotton thread. And while the subjects’ faces betray a deep rumination, the nuances of each expression assimilate into the background of the textiles, in a haunting manifestation of Lê’s study of memory.

Lê cites his receipt of the Windgate-Lamar Fellowship in 2022 as one of his most important achievements. This funded a three-month research visit to Vietnam, where Lê had the opportunity to see the country from a new perspective. “This was the first time that I had gone back without my family with me. The fellowship drastically shaped my artistic practice and relationship with Vietnam and still continues to.”

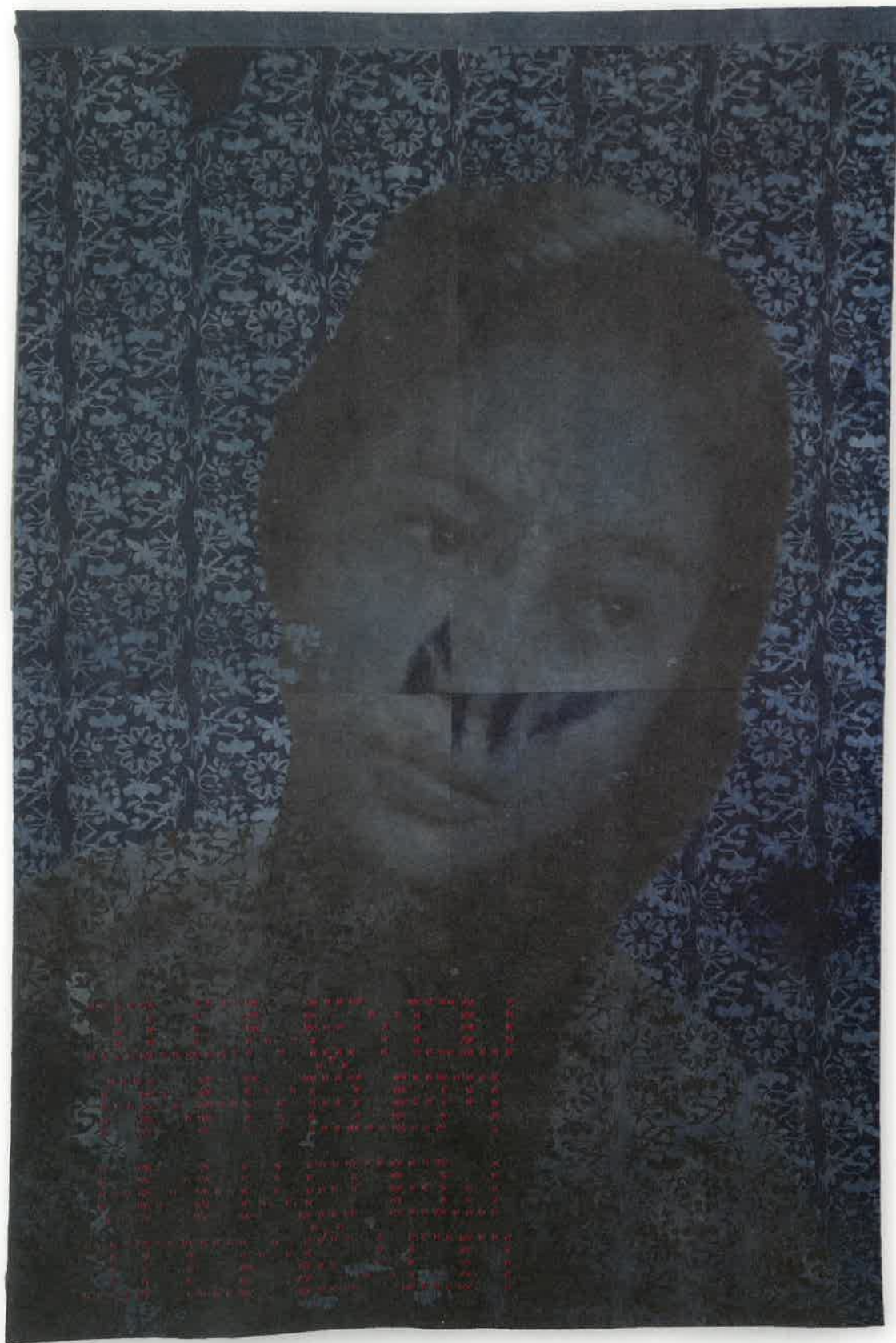
— Matthew Thompson

PHOTOS BY RYAN WAGGONER, © SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART, THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

“ALL THAT’S BEEN SAID” IS COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



“Rước Dâu” (2025), material/technique: hand-dyed cotton fabric; hand-dyed linen; indigo dye; embroidering, 60.75 x 40.5”

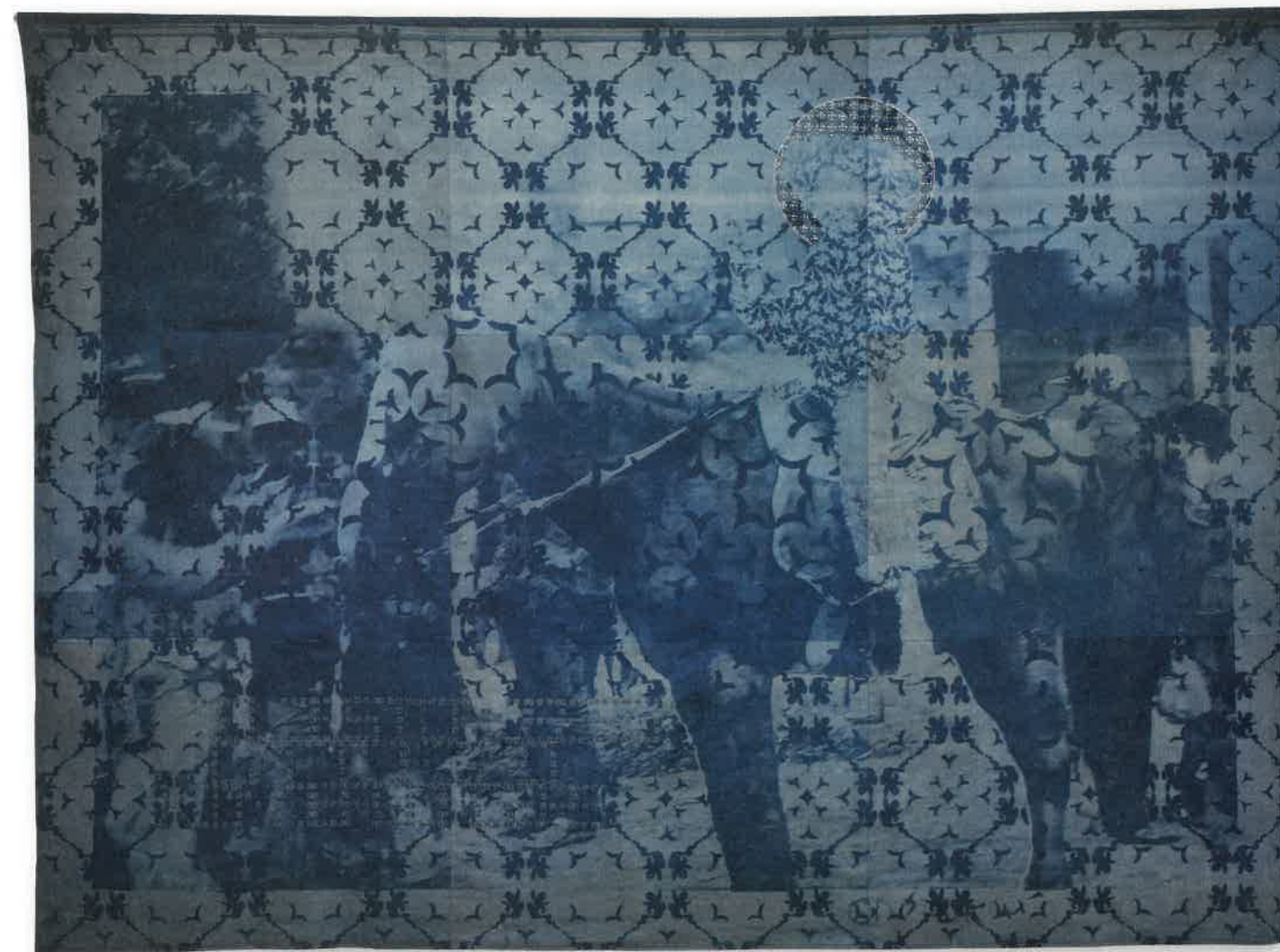


"All That's Been Said and Left Unsaid" (2025), glass beads, cotton thread, and hand-dyed indigo cotton and linen, 69.25 x 45.5" each





"Trở Lại Về Bờ" (2025), cotton thread and hand-dyed indigo cotton, and linen, 62.5 x 40.75"



"Người Bạn Cho Một Đường Dài" (2025), material/technique: hand-dyed cotton fabric; hand-dyed linen; indigo dye; embroidering; beading, 85.5 x 114.5"