

Nathan Beard  
& Lindy Lee  
*A dense intimacy*

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*A dense intimacy* is a body of work that processes the life of a man that Nathan never knew, Sompong, who was dead at an age younger than Nathan is now – immortalised and forever a memory of a young man in his early 20s. Sompong loved Country and Western music, owned a nice car – he was murdered by acquaintances, his body found in a local dam.

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It is an investigation of a relationship, of memory, the looking back on monumental shifts in the course of a person's life, and how lives before you were born have irrevocably shaped you. Nathan's mother, Noi, was married to Sompong for a time. She was pregnant when he died. In the years following the birth of her first child – after Sompong's death - she moved to Bangkok for work. There, she met Nathan's father, a white Australian, and moved away from Thailand with him. Nathan, Noi's youngest child, was born in Perth.

This narrative driven body of work, with Noi as protagonist, covers about a fifty-year time span, drawing a temporal line between Noi and Sompong's courtship, to her revisiting the site of his murder. Noi and Sompong's relationship only lasted four years, and she returns to the site of his death 47 years later. *A Remembrance* (2018) is a video work that tells the sort of story that is rarely afforded a platform, and in a way that offers an access point in to both Lindy Lindy's and Nathan's work more broadly. She also speaks of creating something out of a tragedy, of

being proud of being able to care for her son. Of karma coming back around from a great loss. The blunt description of Sompong begging for his life, of his body being found in a dam, of the baby she was pregnant with growing up to never get a chance to know their father. The devastation and greatest loss of her life – that so obviously still affects her some fifty years later.

*A dense intimacy* (2018), the artwork, is a found, hand-dyed photograph of Noi and Sompong on their first date. They both went out with a large group of friends, as was custom, as an excuse to be in proximity to each other. This photo captured them together, closing in on each other's orbit. It's the only remaining photo of them together as a couple.

This image is one that, in hindsight, marks the beginning of a chain of events that will forever change the course of Noi's life, lead to her arrival in Australia, and Nathan's birth. It's in an image that has a weight and emotional depth because of how this moment will go on to have huge ripple effects in other's lives. The couple in the photo don't know yet how dense and complex their relationship will be, even after one of them is killed.

Lindy Lee's *Following the Long Path* (2018), similarly captures her family in a historical moment before a great change. It's the last day her father spent in China before moving to Australia – where Lindy will be born. It's an image and a personal historical moment that holds a great weight for the artist. She will go on to be born in to a country that still hadn't dismantled the White Australia policy.



Nathan Beard, *A dense intimacy*, 2019, found hand-dyed photograph.

This is the intimacy between the practices of Lindy and Nathan. Both bodies of work are responses to the movement of their families before they were born, and their subsequent lives in Australia – ones defined by a seeming immovable racism towards non-Europeans. For Lindy, it was the 50s, for Nathan, it was the 90s during the height of anti-Asian sentiment and the first incarnation of Hansonism.

The trajectory of Lindy's work from the 80s to now shows the depth of how an artistic practice can provide strategies to process this sort of experience. She began by investigating through her family portraits and re-productions of European Old Masters how she was not only falsely European, but falsely Chinese, "assimilation... had erased our identities. I felt like a White Australian although I didn't look like one; whereas at Chinese club with my family, for instance, I looked like everyone there but didn't feel like them."<sup>1</sup>

*Following the Long Path* and *Traversing the Nine Sections of the World* (2015) use fire to pierce through images of her family history. Symbolic of Lindy's Chinese Buddhist and Taoist beliefs that she's been practicing for twenty years, this ritualistic burning of history speaks to what it means to create life from something left behind. In the course of her work there has been a coming to and integration of Chinese philosophies, which followed a period of navigating a lack of a sense of belonging anywhere.

So too in *A dense intimacy* as a body of work, there is a Buddhist drive from Noi to reconcile the life that was created for her and her family from something left behind.

That despite the tragedy, she has created something new from it. There's a complex intimacy with her memories of Sompong, of their short marriage, of the reality that if he hadn't been killed they would still probably have been together, and Nathan would never have been born. The resonant emotions in the wake of his death are more complex than just trauma.

Nathan's practice processes layers on layers of what it means to be the product of this sort of relationship, built on the necessity of deep loss for him to have been born in the first place. In the breadth of Nathan's practice over the past decade, this delves further than the tragedy of the death of his Noi's first husband. There are the added layers of his mother moving to a country with severe anti-Asian sentiment, of Nathan needing to distance himself a connection to his Thai heritage because of the conditional hospitality afforded to non-white foreigners in Australia.

I've had delicate but necessary discussions with other Asian artists who lived through the 90s and come from a family like Nathan's, with a Southeast Asian mother and white Australian father – informed by my own experience of being Filipino-Australian. A dense intimacy is formed between child and non-English speaking mother. You grow up in a cultural context that views women in these relationships as lesser-than, as weak, as exploited, as incapable of a complex inner life. A sense of shame about yourself and your family informs how you view your cultural heritage, and your mother. It can take a lifetime, and the sort of attention that comes through an art practice, to unpack

what that means.

Nathan's work approaches these deep issues with humour, intimacy and care. The disarming and emotionally resonant processes he deploys are the strength of his practice. In this latest body of work, centring his mother's pre-Australian life allows a deepening of how we understand the life of a non-English speaking migrant woman, and casting her as a protagonist affords her story a platform that is rarely seen in our cultural sphere – that she is the main character here in the first place is an anomaly, and the emotional depth of her as a person is a perspective that is rarely heard.

At the same time, Nathan himself is a player in the story behind the works. The process that he goes through in manipulating the found imagery places him in a relationship with them that brings him closer and makes apparent the tensions between himself and his Thai heritage that he navigates.

But to understand Nathan's work only as existing within a register of trauma is to do it a disservice. There is a sense of creating something new in-between his Thai and Australian heritage, and the playfulness in his work is more complex and nuanced than just an engagement with death, loss and the difficult upbringing that comes with being a non-white migrant in Australia.

*Sompong I and Sompong II* (2018) are striking images of Noi's first husband, with dichroic film forming a circular, shimmering void over him; Sompong looks out from underneath as a crisp image. The closer you get, the more you see your own face in the reflection; your shadow shifts the colours

that engulf Sompong. The voids exist as a floating presence – they cast a shadow over the images. As markers of memories for Noi, it speaks to the distance that memory creates, of the shifting understanding we have of people as time goes on, of creating a whole different life in the wake of his death.

There's a sense here too of Nathan, within the Buddhist ideals of his mother and of Lindy Lindy, creating something new out of a distanced connection to his cultural heritage. The obvious manipulation of the images by the artist is what anchors his presence in them. I imagine Nathan looking at *Sompong I* and *II*, seeing himself in the present in his own reflection, and seeing the past of a man who was murdered 15 years before he was born, in another part of the world. He too is creating a new life in the wake of Sompong's death.

*Noi* (2018) - a portrait of Nathan's mother with Swarovski elements that form waterfalls of tears – is indicative of a broader strand of his practice. With references to death masks, haute couture and iPhone covers, Nathan has bedazzled swathes of portraits of his mother, her Thai friends and of his extended family – all in Swarovski crystals. While there's a sense of searching for some sort of cultural authenticity in this physical engagement with his family's past, there's also a playful sense of creating something that is undeniably Nathan – a body of works about family history mediated through humour, intimacy, camp and high fashion.

Every found image in this exhibition has been manipulated by the artist, except for *A dense intimacy*, the eponymous work. The original image, the last existing of Noi and Sompong together, is presented as an object. The series

uses the intimacy between Noi and Sompong as a springboard to think critically about the intimate connection between Nathan and his mother, his cultural heritage, and his relationship to the work of other Asian-Australian artists. The Buddhist connection between the subject matter of Nathan's work, and the underpinnings of Lindy Lee's practice, asks what is left behind through the migrant experience, and what it means to create a new life and sense of identity out of a connection to one's history and cultural heritage.

Andy Butler 2019

**Nathan Beard** (b.1987) is Perth-based interdisciplinary artist who works across mediums including photography, video and sculpture. His practice concerns the influences of culture, memory and biography, in particular through the prism of his Thai- Australian heritage. Beard's work often includes intimate and sincere engagements with family and archives to poignantly explore the complex ways a sense of heritage and identity is negotiated.

**Lindy Lee's** practice explores her Chinese ancestry through Taoism and Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism – philosophies that see humanity and nature as inextricably linked. She employs chance and spontaneity to produce a galaxy of images that embody the intimate connections between human existence and the cosmos. Her works are meditative, often revealing themselves through time. With a practice spanning over three decades, Lindy Lee has a well established reputation in Australia, as well as widespread international recognition.

**Andy Butler** is a writer, curator and artist. His writing on art and politics has been published widely, including by The Monthly, The Saturday Paper, Art + Australia, Overland and Runway.

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Bus Projects  
25-31 Rokeby Street,  
Collingwood,  
VIC 3066 Australia.  
*[busprojects.org.au/](http://busprojects.org.au/)*

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