



Saigon Sophisticate

A new heritage and contemporary art space is bringing artists and visionaries together to exchange ideas. BY DIANA HUBBELL

IT'S FRIDAY EVENING AND THE BAND is warming up while a crowd of the fashionably dressed mills about. The performance is on the experimental side, a "cine-concert" consisting of the musical styling of a local indie group juxtaposed against a short film. When the murmur dies down, the amps crank up with a rising baseline, as trippy imagery flashes in the background.

I'm getting déjà vu of college basement parties except that I'm sipping nice wine with members of the Vietnamese café society in the former home of Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., who lived here when he served as the U.S. ambassador to the American-backed Southern Vietnamese government during the 1960s. He left behind a trio of adjacent French-Colonial houses decked out in the refined architectural style of a bygone era. After a painstaking refurbishment, one of these now hosts **Salon Saigon**, an interdisciplinary space blurring the line between a public gallery and a private meeting place for intellectuals, artists and influential types to rub elbows. Since it opened in November, documentarians, historians, filmmakers, visual artists and musicians have performed or given talks here.

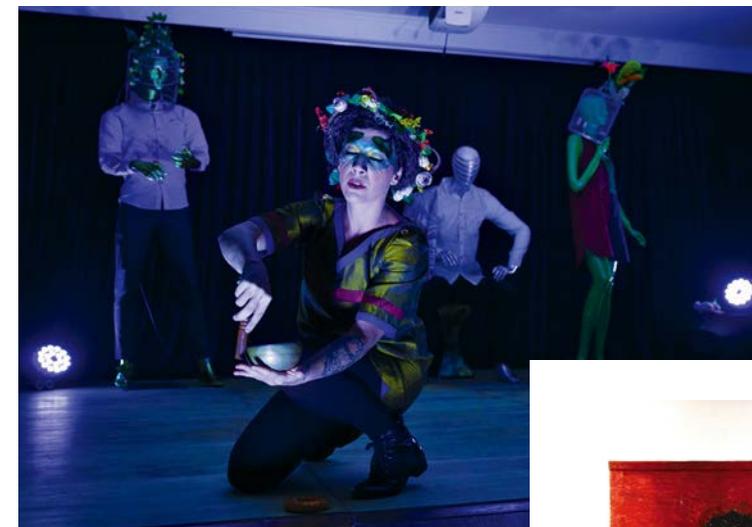
"This space has a mystery to it," says John Tue Nguyen, the salon's originator, whose parents live in another one of Lodge's



homes next door. "I wanted to do something that Saigon didn't have before." Nguyen, who as founder of travel company Trails of Indochina has made a successful career out of championing Vietnam's cultural heritage, turned to the French Enlightenment for inspiration. Just as Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau batted about ideas in the homes of well-heeled Parisians, creatives of various stripes have the chance to display and discuss different concepts here. "The salon started in 17th-century France as a meeting place. People in the arts, poets, playwrights would all come to these and get a bit drunk," says program coordinator Hung Duong, then adds with a laugh: "Well, we don't do that *too* often."

Duong is leading me around a collection of textured works on canvas and Vietnamese *dó* paper by Nguyen Cam. Although the Hanoi-born Modernist has displayed his work in Paris, this is his first exhibit in Saigon. "Hanoi is always seen as a culture capital, whereas Saigon is usually dubbed as the economic hub, but Saigon's art scene is growing. We don't

COURTESY OF SALON SAIGON (2)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF SALON SAIGON; DIANA HUBBELL (2); COURTESY OF SALON SAIGON



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Salon Saigon's peaceful library; a performance by dancer Emily Navarra; Sandrine Llouquet, visual artist and the Salon's curator; some of Nguyen Cam's textured work; intimate dinner settings; the house's airy exterior.



have the luxury of being completely overwhelmed by art, but because we're small, we have the advantage of being able to coordinate. It takes away from the time that we would spend competing against each other, and returns the focus to curating so the public gets a comprehensive sense of contemporary Vietnamese art"—contextualized within the country's history and traditions.

From an exhibit on hill-tribe costumes to a cultural talk by an up-and-coming historian or writer, a range of stars will take center stage here. "It can be someone interesting who might not otherwise have the opportunity to showcase their work," Nguyen says. And the historic home, while being an artistic preservation project in its own right, offers a convivial setting for creative exchange, which seems a particularly urgent need in a town rife with pressure to demolish historic buildings. "People are just beginning to be concerned with preservation and you have few cultural spaces," says curator Sandrine Llouquet, a French-Vietnamese contemporary artist. "I

think the scale of Salon Saigon and the fact that it is a house is an asset for us, because we can organize very intimate gatherings." Every month she brokers a meeting between one artist and five or six collectors. "It creates a particular relationship that doesn't often exist between an artist and their collectors with a gallery."

Whether visitors stop by on open-house Tuesdays or by appointment, a knowledgeable guide is always on-hand to lead them through the exhibitions. "We want to maintain this feeling of privacy and the sense of this space as a house," Duong says. "When you walk in, you're greeted as a guest. You're not just walking through aimlessly like in a museum without a point of reference."

It does feel more like stopping by for coffee at the home of a rather fabulous collector friend with an eye for aesthetics. A recent gala dinner event, "The Age of Enlightenment," paired a six-course meal with a retrospective exhibition *Lingering at the Peculiar Pavillion* by visual artist Vo Tran Chau, set to a live orchestral performance of 18th-century music curated by Saigon Classical. It's a fitting fusion between the French philosophers who left an ideological mark on the land that remains more than six decades since the end of colonial rule and the Vietnamese artists who are pushing boldly towards an uncharted future. Ultimately, establishing these bridges, between the past and the present, between the art world and the general public, and between creatives who might not otherwise meet, is what gives this unusual salon its *raison d'être*. 📍

Salon Saigon: 6D Ngo Thoi Nhiem, Dist. 3; 84-8/3933-3242; salonsaigon.com; entry is free, events may have a cover charge.