

PHONG BUI: SYMPHONIES AND MEDITATIONS
TO BE EXHIBITED AT CRAIG STARR GALLERY NOV 3, 2022-FEB 28, 2023



Phong Bui, *Symphony #3 (for Sir Isaiah Berlin)*, 2022.

Portraits: pencil on paper. Meditation Paintings: gouache, watercolor, and pencil on paper.
16 1/2 x 12 3/4 inches, each; 50 1/2 x 65 3/4 inches, overall.

NEW YORK – Craig Starr Gallery is pleased to present ***Phong Bui: Symphonies and Meditations***, on view from November 3, 2022, through February 28, 2023.

This exhibition brings together a selection of Phong Bui’s (b. 1964) recent meditation works and his iconic portraits of artists, writers, poets, and other art world dignitaries. The first focused presentation of Bui’s original body of work, the current display showcases his meditation paintings and portrait drawings within grids arranged by the artist, together with his meditation drawings installed in single columns or rows and as standalone individual pieces. These symphonic arrangements highlight the artist’s seminal practice of introspective abstraction and detailed representation as well as his commitment to the fundamental values of community, democracy, and independence.

In the *New York Times*, Roberta Smith counted Bui among, “[In] Jane Jacobs’s words, ‘people with ideas of their own,’ who help keep a city alive and moving forward on countless fronts in art and in life.” In 2000, Bui cofounded *The Brooklyn Rail*, one of the most important independent forums for arts, culture, and politics in New York. Eight years later he began to design his intimate and careful portraits to enliven the magazine’s interview section. Intuitive at first, Bui’s elegant line and modeling developed into a defined graphic style, always foregrounding the vibrant presence and his heartfelt sympathy towards his sitters.

Bui's portraits are a monument to the diverse and rich community of ideas and friendships he has cultivated over the years. From his earliest pictures of Robert Ryman, Brian Doherty, and Barbara Novak, he has produced at present more than 800 drawings depicting *Rail* interviewees, guest critics and even historical subjects such as Ad Reinhardt and Barack Obama. In the artist's own words, "What I have always tried to do is think in ways that allow me to become an *interesting* person, like how I am always attracted to [in the poet Delmore Schwartz's wordplay] *inner-resting* people. Whatever else follows is a matter of luck."

In counterpoint to his portraits, Bui's meditation paintings and drawings set aside the accurate imitation of life in favor of the expression of self-contained worlds of inner forces and emotions. Each painting features several layers of color lines over a black background, often structured in three regular vertical columns. In his meditation drawings, crosshatched lines are interwoven in a diagonal grid interrupted by subtle accentuations and shifts of the pencil. Abstract explorations of spiritual states, these works are created through a methodical ritual, scheduled in advance and often lasting hours at a time. The balance of rigor and spontaneity in these images illustrates the artist's interest in the rational and the irrational, the impersonal and the intimate, as complementary halves of the modern subject.

The current exhibition presents Bui's meditations and portraits within networks not unlike those of our new digital environments. For Bui, however, the grid structure responds not only to current social conditions, but also to a deep commitment to essential ideas and values. He refers to these arrangements as symphonies, aiming to capture how "each [part] exercises his or her inner freedom through the uniqueness of their instruments. This relates to our concept of liberty. But even though there are differences among the sounds, each is treated as equally important. Hence our concept of equality is also being celebrated."

A fully-illustrated catalogue will be published and will include a new essay by Charles H. Duncan, an art historian and Executive Director of the Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation, as well as an editor-at-large at *The Brooklyn Rail*.

About Craig Starr Gallery

Craig Starr Gallery is located at 5 East 73rd Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 11am-5:30pm, and by appointment. For general information please visit the gallery's website at www.craigstarr.com.

About Phong H. Bui

Phong H. Bui (b. 1964 in Huế, Vietnam; lives and works in Brooklyn) is an artist, writer, independent curator, and former curatorial advisor at MoMA PS1 (2007-10). He is also the Co-Founder, Publisher, and Artistic Director of the monthly journal the *Brooklyn Rail* and its imprint, Rail Editions. He was the host and producer of *Off the Rail* on Art International Radio (2010-15). He served on the faculty at Yale, Columbia University and University of Pennsylvania, as senior critic for their Master of Fine Art programs. He has taught seminars in the School of Visual Arts'

graduate program in writing and criticism, and their program in photography, video, and related media.

Bui has received numerous awards, including the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Distinguished Service to the Arts (2021), an Honorary Doctorate from the University of the Arts (2020), the Jetté Award for Leadership in the Arts from the Colby College Museum of Art (2019), the Lunder Fellowship from the Lunder Institute for American Art (2019), the Dorothea and Leo Rabkin Foundation Prize in Fine Art Journalism (2017), the Esther Montanez Leadership Award from Fountain House (2016), the Art in General Visionary Honoree (2014), the Annual Award in Art from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2003), the Eric Isenburger Annual Prize for Installation from the National Academy Museum (2003), the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship (1995), the Arcadia Traveling Fellowship (1998), the Hohenberg Traveling Fellowship (1987), among others.