

QUEERS TO THE FRONT

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Photo by Olivia Deng

Queer Vietnamese Artists Showcase Work at Vanguard Retrospective Exhibition

Aiden Nguyễn grew up in Dorchester, and for years he struggled to find a community of people like himself: queer and Vietnamese. Nguyễn said that he initially didn't feel comfortable embracing his queerness because he couldn't find support or resources.

After graduating from college in New York City, Nguyễn went back to Vietnam with his friend Thanh Nu Mai in 2014, with the goal of reconnecting with Vietnamese culture and finding a community of

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queer Vietnamese they weren't able to find in Boston or New York. On a bus ride from Saigon, they talked about ways to bring together the queer Vietnamese community with art.



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"We had this idea of creating a zine," Nguyễn said, inspired by the zine festivals he and Mai attended in New York City. They settled on the name *Vanguard* for the zine and planned on featuring art and writing from LGBTQ+ Vietnamese. "*Vanguard* is pretty much in an army, it's the very frontmen," Nguyễn said. "We want to be at the forefront of this art revolution, this queer revolution of Vietnam."

Five years after *Vanguard's* inception, zine co-founders Nguyễn and Mai will host the *Vanguard* Retrospective Exhibition at Dorchester Art Project, opening April 26, to celebrate the work of LGBTQ+ Vietnamese artists and the release of *Vanguard 5*. With more than 25 artists, the exhibit showcases their videos, installations, printed artwork, and paintings. The opening reception features dance, drag, spoken word, and violin performances.

Nguyễn prints the zines at his shared studio at Dorchester Art Project. The DIY aspect of zines appealed to both Nguyễn and Mai. "Zines have always had an underground feel, punk and freedom," Mai said. They added that zines were a relatively cost-effective way to assemble art and writing, then disseminate the messages.

"Our goal is to have the zine made by the queer Vietnamese community for the queer Vietnamese community," Nguyễn said. "We're kind of setting it up so that it becomes history, it becomes something that the future generations can look at when they're trying to find queer Vietnamese history or queer Vietnamese community. Because that's something I wasn't able to do, even in the age of Google. I was googling 'queer Vietnamese artists' and there wasn't a lot of resources, there wasn't a lot of connections to be made. I want this to be the platform for that."

Nguyễn said that they don't have specific submission requirements; the zine is open to artists and writers of all experience levels. The zine has featured short stories, drawings, watercolors, paintings, and digital art with topics including love, heartbreak, family, queer and Vietnamese identity, and the Vietnamese diaspora experience.

Mai added that they were also filling a void for LGBTQ+ artists in Vietnam who have run into censorship problems.

"Everything has to have a license. ... It always requires artists to self-censor before they get censored. So a lot of artists don't print their own artwork. They don't have any galleries to represent them. *Vanguard* is a platform for artists and writers to submit whatever they want to talk

about. ... I think that's one of the beautiful things about *Vanguard*, it's opened up so many conversations that people want to have but they don't have a place or platform to do that yet in Vietnam," Mai said. "Oftentimes LGBTQ Vietnamese artists don't have a platform for themselves already. A lot of the artists I've talked to in Vietnam have to draw children's books. They have to draw commercials to be able to make money, to make a living. ... What our zines want to do is increase visibility of queer Vietnamese artists."

Hosting the exhibit in Dorchester, home to one of the largest Vietnamese communities in New England, is significant, especially in a precarious time when gentrification threatens existing communities in neighborhoods across Boston.

"To be able to have a queer Vietnamese exhibition here in Dorchester is huge in terms of introducing ... this new me to an old home, or a community I have called home for the past two decades," Nguyễn said. "We want to bring together queer Vietnamese folks and introduce their artwork, so for artists and writers, this is an opportunity for them to showcase their art to a larger audience. A lot of our artists and writers who are based outside the US are mainly based in Vietnam."

Ngọc-Trần Vũ, a Dorchester-based Vietnamese multimedia artist, said that in the fight against gentrification, art plays an integral role in communicating stories and shaping narrative. "People are getting priced out, rents are rising, businesses are closing because it's getting so unaffordable. It's not just Dorchester, but the face of Dorchester is changing slowly," Vũ said. "Art as a form of engagement, art as community organizing, the role of art to create flyers, create graphics that attract people, to document and report narrative stories—a lot of that is super important to engage with. [And] also to help people heal and create their own narrative and stories in the form of empowerment."

The exhibit serves as a reminder of who's in Dorchester and why Dorchester residents' stories should be heard.

"It's [Dorchester] oftentimes left out of the conversation in Boston. Dorchester is labeled as a crime-ridden and very violent, but there's so much power in Dorchester," Vũ said. "There's so many stories, families, resiliency, and struggle. It's a really beautiful place and I definitely want to be a part of Dorchester, building it and transforming it."

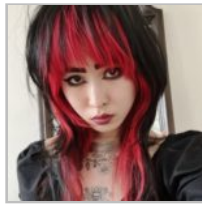
Nguyễn also looks forward to rallying the Dorchester community and continuing the *Vanguard* zine. He noted that since being away from Dorchester for six years, he was surprised but delighted to see people of his generation being more open, political, progressive, vocal about community issues, and involved in community organizing.

"I think this is the perfect time for me to come back here and also join that movement, join that community that is growing here in Dorchester," he said. "I'm excited to bring my queerness into this community. I want to be visible and I want other queer Vietnamese folks to be able to see other queer Vietnamese folks being open about their identity and being able to express themselves and to show the community that there are queer people in the Vietnamese community and that's not an exclusively non-Vietnamese thing, or exclusively American thing."

For Nguyễn, it makes sense to express queerness through art.

"When you think of queerness, queerness is about having an endless possibility of being. ... I think art also exemplifies that. There are so many different forms of art and there are so many different ways of expressing yourself through art. And I think queerness and art kind of just goes hand in hand. For queer people, to express themselves in art, it allows them to tap into that endless possibility of queerness as well."

VĂANGUARD RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION. 4.26-5.19 AT DORCHESTER ART PROJECT, 1486 DORCHESTER AVE., BOSTON. OPEN TO THE PUBLIC SAT AND SUN NOON-6PM. OPENING RECEPTION 4.26, 6-9PM.



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Olivia Deng is an arts and culture writer who also covers politics and social movements. Her work has appeared in DigBoston, WBUR, Boston Magazine, The Atlantic, Boston Art Review and more. She is also an illustrator and painter.

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