

# YELLOW MEMORY

A portrait of the painter Trần Trọng Vũ



A film by  
**François Kermoal**

**Production Media Jungle**

# Yellow Memory

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## Summary

*"Yellow Memory"* — a title borrowed from one of his paintings — tells the story of Trần Trọng Vũ, a French-naturalized painter born in 1964 in Hanoi, Vietnam, through the eyes, surprises, and observations of Dan, his eldest son, a young Frenchman born in Paris in 1999. Beyond the portrait of an artist in exile and the encounter between a son and his father, the film delivers a universal message: painting, and art more broadly, soothe misery and heal the wounds of war.

Duration: 52 minutes

Director: François Kermoal

Cinematography: François Kermoal, Trần Trọng Vân

Sound mixing: Mickaël Noiret

Color grading: Gabriel Hogsted

Production: Media Jungle

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# A Story of Resilience and Hope

How does one go from extreme poverty in a war-torn country to becoming an artist in France? By what miracle does painting have the power to heal a shattered childhood? How does one move from witnessing decapitated heads amid the bombings of youth to creating joyful, colorful canvases? The film offers answers to these cruelly modern questions, especially in light of current global events.

The film shows how Trần Trọng Vũ's work has been enriched over the years by his dual Vietnamese and French culture. Vũ became a naturalized French citizen in 2004 after having "fled" Vietnam, as he puts it.

Beyond the artist, we are touched by the person—and even more so when we come to know his family history. This film serves as a key to understanding his work, a way of preserving a testimony of his "arrival on Earth," as he describes it in his own words—for the world at large, and of course, for his children born on French soil.

On April 30, 1975, Saigon fell—or was liberated, depending on one's perspective... Fifty years later, *Yellow Memory* reminds us how that war, "that massacre of beauty," as Trần Trọng Vũ calls it, continues to influence his work, even though he was just a schoolboy at the time.

His paintings and installations are visually accessible and often humorous, absurd, childlike... Occasionally, they include references to his adopted country. But one cannot truly grasp their uniqueness, originality, and—perhaps most intriguingly—their lightness without knowing more about the artist's life story: the extraordinary journey of a poor child from Hanoi, born in the midst of the Vietnam War, who eventually became French through naturalization.

# From Paris to Hanoi: A Filmic Journey

Trần Trọng Vũ is filmed with special attention to his surroundings, as if his fate were dictated by the spaces in which he has lived and continues to live: the poor neighborhoods of his native Vietnam, the Fine Arts School in Hanoi, his brother's and mother's house—also in Hanoi—where he often paints, and his studio in Antony, which feels like an island in the middle of French society.

The images carry an informative dimension, satisfying our curiosity about the places Trần Trọng Vũ has inhabited and still inhabits today, but they are above all metaphorical. They reflect his wounds and ultimately raise the question of how those wounds have inspired the body of work we now recognize—the energy present in his paintings and installations. They suggest that any fracture can be healed through creation.

We discover the painter in his studio in Antony, but not only there. Some scenes, for example, show his canvases through the mock-ups of a future book dedicated to his work. We also see the artist painting a canvas from start to finish on the terrace of his brother's and mother's house in Hanoi.

In keeping with his work and the places where he creates, the screen is often filled with vivid colors and playful details: a sentence found in his studio that seems to announce the rest of the film, a portrait of a well-known French politician... His artworks appear within the frame, creating at times a humorous connection with reality. For instance, in his suburban Paris studio, the artist seems to be painting under threat—surrounded by shouting soldiers pointing rifles at him, as if urging him to finish his work. Of course, we hear none of this.

Trần Trọng Vũ is imbued with a certain solitude that the film seeks to convey on screen—through silences in his studio, punctuated only by the sound of brushes rubbing against canvas.

# Like a Narrative Poem

How do you tell the story of an artist's life without turning it into a dry catalogue raisonné? Trần Trọng Vũ is, above all, a voice. The film tries to preserve the magic and musicality of his phrasing, which instantly transports us elsewhere.

His off-screen voice, along with that of his son, is essential to the film's dramaturgy, giving it a unique tone from the outset. The film's structure is quite "musical," unfolding like a long, almost sung ballad—a narrative poem made of sequences like stanzas or verses. Each sequence invites us to journey, literally and metaphorically, into a new theme, a new perspective on his work: his escape from Vietnam (and his complex relationship with his homeland), the "home" of his childhood (if it can be called that), his early paintings in opposition to official art, the turning point toward color, the profound imprint left by his father, his work on memory—a word that frequently recurs in his speech, hence the film's title—the impact of war, or rather the wars of Vietnam, and his "theory" or method of working.

Each sequence is illustrated with works by the artist, whom we follow both in France and Vietnam. The film does not follow a linear path; instead, it alternates between scenes shot in France, where we see him painting in his studio, and in Vietnam, as if bearing witness to a continuous back-and-forth within his mind. His work exists only through this duality.

## A Dialogue Between Father and Son

Dan, his son, joins the narrative in voice-over during some sequences. He wants to understand how his father became the artist—and more broadly the man and the father—that he is today, while his father unfolds his life as a pretext for exploring memory. This dual voice-over becomes a kind of dialogue, illustrated by scenes from the artist's daily life in France and Vietnam during his regular visits to see his family.

It is not an interview, but rather two intersecting paths or monologues, with the film as witness.

Images and voices each tell a different story, though they remain intertwined. When Vũ talks about his childhood, we see images from the present day: a child riding a pedal-powered tank through a busy street in Hanoi... When he speaks of his dissident father's funeral, which drew hundreds of Vietnamese people paying tribute, we see him at his father's grave, with his mother and brother. In today's solitude.

Unlike his son, born in France, Trần Trọng Vũ speaks French with a strong Vietnamese accent, which reinforces the family's double cultural identity—Vietnamese and French. His voice, a character in its own right, carries a gentle melancholy, the tenderness of a father telling a story to his child.

At times, Vũ searches for words in his adopted language, but he recalls every detail of his childhood in Vietnam, never hiding the saddest or most sordid memories, and occasionally punctuating the narrative with a soft laugh—as if to exorcise the horror.

Dan's voice, by contrast, is almost cheerful, carefree, which heightens the contrast with his father's journey and life story. Through his tone, Dan reveals surprise, wonder, and at times even gentle disapproval, playfully engaging with his father's words and behavior—even teasing him occasionally.



## The Characters

### **Trần Trọng Vũ, the Child of Hanoi Who Fled His Country**

Trần Trọng Vũ, the main character and hero of the film, was born in 1964 in Hanoi, Vietnam, into a family of intellectuals, during the war with the United States, which supported the south of the country. His childhood was poor and tragic. His father, poet Tran Dan (1926–1997), was a member of the communist resistance against the French in Indochina. Later, in the 1950s, he became one of the leaders of a humanist movement advocating for freedom of expression and democracy. He paid a heavy price for this, as did his family. Arrested, sent to reeducation camps, imprisoned for several months in 1956, then placed under house arrest, he was banned from publishing—though this did not stop him from writing throughout his life. His poems, scribbled by hand, were secretly circulated. But he was never able to work again—at least officially. Struck by a stroke at a young age, which left him disabled, he took on translation work, paid through intermediaries, to support his family.

The family lived in barely 20 square meters in a poor district of Hanoi. They shared a water tap with other families. The lack of privacy is something Vû will never forget. “You could never be alone,” he recalls today. “There was always someone around, constant quarrels between neighbors. When I arrived in Paris, it felt like a liberation. Like recovering from a long illness.”

Vû was the youngest of the siblings. His brother and sister are a bit older than him and still live in Vietnam, as does his elderly mother, who now suffers from Alzheimer’s. His father died after Vû had already moved to France.

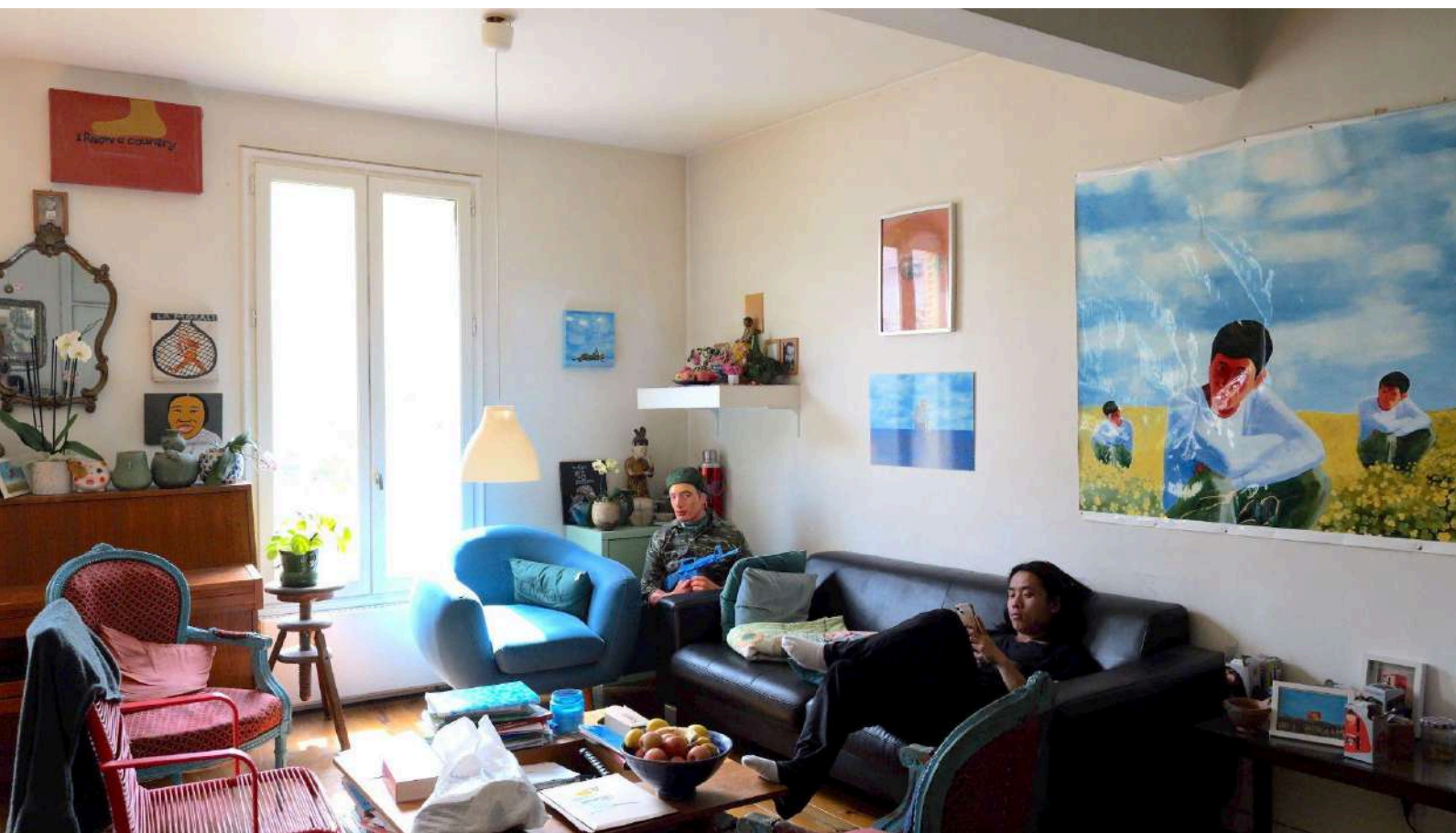
Almost by accident, Vû discovered drawing and painting at a young age, despite being more drawn to words—something still very present in his paintings today.

His mother, who taught children, was looking for illustrations. She brought some colored materials home and locked them carefully in a cabinet. Vû found them and began drawing, almost in secret.

When his parents came home and discovered the drawings, he thought they would punish him for using the colors. But his father immediately saw a spark of talent in those early drawings and encouraged him to keep going. They found an old Hanoi artist to teach him how to draw. This led Vû to prepare for the entrance exams to the Hanoi University of Fine Arts—an institution established by the French in 1925 (then called the École des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine).

He entered the school at 13 and didn’t leave until ten years later, at 23. Supported by teachers who saw his talent and encouraged by his father—who arranged for a close friend to teach him French—Vû eventually earned a scholarship to study in France. But for the Vietnamese authorities, letting the son of a dissident leave the country was unthinkable. After several attempts and help from contacts in France who lent him money, he managed to deceive the police and took an authorized flight to Tashkent (in Uzbekistan, then part of the USSR), then to Prague, Geneva, and finally Paris. He arrived in 1989, at the end of a long journey.

He studied at the Beaux-Arts in Paris and returned five years later to Vietnam for a few weeks. His passport was confiscated again, then returned. Eventually, he settled permanently in France, met Thuân (who would become his wife), and together they had two children: Dan and Mike.



## Dan Tr  n, the Son in Search of History

Dan is the eldest son of Tr  n Trong V  . He was born in Paris in 1999 and just completed film studies at Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle. He knows little about his father's history.

"It wasn't planned for me to take part in the documentary when Fran  ois came to talk to me about his project," he says. "Originally, I was just going to accompany him, be his support. After all, it wasn't a film about me! But during the first interview, I learned a lot I didn't know about my father: his troubled childhood, his persecuted family, his father's fight, the consequences of the war... There were elements I was vaguely aware of—things I had come across on my own in the past by digging around online or reading articles and interviews about him. During family meals, I would sometimes eavesdrop and pick up bits and pieces. But my limited understanding of Vietnamese held me back. I'd catch a word here or there, a clue now and then—nothing more.

That first interview was a kind of trigger. Since then, I've been trying to understand why. Why he never told me his story. Out of modesty? To protect me? To forget? His account contains so many striking and unique events that the 'pains' I experienced as a young person growing up in France in the 1990s now feel trivial. I wonder—if I were in his shoes, I would have rushed to tell my child such stories, maybe to lull them to sleep at night. Better than any

adventure tales. But he didn't. And I understand. During that first interview, I saw my father cry in front of me for the first time."

The decision to involve his son Dan in discovering this story of exile became a natural one. Dan carries both French and Vietnamese cultures. The film enables a dialogue that had not yet taken place in real life. Through Dan's questions, the viewer accompanies Vũ on a journey that reveals both personal transformation and a cultural collision. Beyond the images, this enriches each scene with perspective, a relationship to the past and present, and roots the film firmly in the here and now.

Dan's contribution allows the film to enter an intimate world that an outside observer could never access. Thanks to him, we step into the artist's world—gently, without intrusion.



# The Director: François Kermool



François Kermool spent his childhood in Bordeaux. After studying English, he became a journalist thanks to a master's thesis on New York writer Jerome Charyn. He approached the thesis like an investigative report—a revelation for him.

He then launched a magazine in Bordeaux with university friends, focusing on topics they were passionate about: music, TV shows, media... He began freelancing for national publications, then moved

into economic journalism, first as a reporter, then as editor-in-chief (notably at *Stratégies* and *L'Entreprise*).

In 2014, he left print journalism, went to The Guardian in London to study video production, and returned to France to launch his own audiovisual production company, Media Jungle/Steve & Cie. *Yellow Memory* is his first documentary as a director.

# A Film Born of a Meeting

*Director's Note – François Kermool*

I first met Trâm Trong Vũ in the late 1990s in Paris, at a contemporary young painters' fair called Mac 2000. About 150 artists were invited to exhibit their work at the Champ de Mars.

As I walked through the show, I stopped in front of a stand displaying figurative paintings with a childlike touch—both joyful and dramatic, as if the artist left the interpretation up to us. Often, a few words in French or English appeared on the paintings, adding to the contrast.

The artist, Trâm Trong Vũ—a slight, smiling man—quickly handed me a notebook filled with photos of more works, including one of a girl's face under a running faucet. The face expressed both the childlike joy of being splashed and a sense of torment. Once again, the artist seemed to offer a choice of interpretation.



Intrigued, I accepted his invitation to visit his studio in the Arts et Métiers district of Paris the next morning. Vũ worked in a cramped space filled with canvases of all sizes. I was immediately charmed and surprised by the mix of lightness and depth, joy and melancholy. I even filmed a few shots of him with a mini DV camera. Later, I met his wife, Thuân, and their baby, Dan. And so began a long relationship.

Soon after, the family moved to Antony, a suburb of Paris. Another child arrived. I would sometimes visit them, always stopping by the garden studio to see Vũ's new works.

During the 2000s, Vũ kept painting. He seemed to make a living from his art—"seemed" because we never really talked about it. In 2011, I was happy to learn he received the American Pollock-Krasner Grant, worth \$20,000, from the Jackson Pollock – Lee Krasner Foundation in New York. Some of his paintings started appearing in museums, including the Singapore Museum of Modern Art.

At the time, in addition to his canvases, Vũ was working on large sheets of plastic painted on both sides to explore the duality of things. He also playfully caricatured French political figures like Hollande and Sarkozy.

Time passed. In April 2023, after a long silence, Vũ told me he was now represented by a gallery specializing in Asian art. He invited me to the opening of his new exhibition. There, I reconnected with his son Dan, now 25, whom I hadn't seen in a long time. We exchanged a few words. Dan was finishing film school at Paris 3. I told him about my long-standing desire to make a film about his father and suggested we work together. He agreed, though neither of us had a clear idea of our roles at first.

To get started, we scheduled a joint meeting with his father, planning an initial audio interview—to begin without the pressure of the camera. Vũ simply had to tell his story in his own words, giving us a base to build on.

That day, Dan seemed to discover his father's story for the first time. We decided that this "discovery" of a father by his son would become the main narrative arc of the film.

In spring 2023, I filmed scenes in his studio in Antony, in the Paris suburbs. At the end of 2023, I accompanied Trần Trọng Vũ on a trip to Vietnam. We spent a few days in Ho Chi Minh City at a collector's home, where he was finalizing a book dedicated to his work, then a few more in Hanoi, with his brother and mother. This trip allowed me to better understand his art and how he became the artist he is today.