

Painter's homage to Hanoi

PHAM Luan paints Hanoi. He grew up there, lives there and has been painting since childhood, but still his brush has much more to say about the city of his birth.

"All the work I have done is not enough to say about Hanoi," says 40-year-old Mr Pham. "There is still a great deal that I am trying for."

And even if he eventually exhausts Hanoi's artistic possibilities with his vibrant street scenes and depictions of old buildings, trees and flowers, all of Vietnam awaits.

Mr Pham regrets that he has had little chance to travel, but knows it has many beautiful places waiting to inspire him. "I hope that next year I will be able to produce a lot of new work," he says through an interpreter.

Mr Pham is in Hong Kong for the opening of his first exhibition outside Vietnam. It's an exciting opportunity because although his membership of the Vietnam Association of Plastic Arts Workers entitles him to apply to travel overseas, this is the first time he has left Vietnam.

The reason is simple: "It's too expensive. But this time I was invited."

The invitation comes from Galerie La Vong, the only Hong Kong gallery specialising in Vietnamese art. Although the Lan Kwai Fong gallery has been operating for more than a year, this is the first time one of its artists has been able to come for his own exhibition.

It was Shirley Hui, one of the gallery's three partners, who "discovered" Pham Luan for Hong Kong buyers. She was in Vietnam in January, when Mr Pham was having a major exhibition of 70 works in a Hanoi gallery — his second solo exhibition in Vietnam.

She loved his work, and visiting French critics were raving about it so

Artist Pham Luan's show at the Galerie La Vong is his first outside Vietnam, writes Sue Green

she bought two of his paintings. They were snapped up and the gallery has since sold several more. Now 25 of his works — oil on canvas and gouache — are showing here, priced from \$5,500 to \$12,000, and Mrs Hui believes that his bright colours and bold, impressionist style will have wide appeal.

Most of his buyers have been Westerners, including French, Americans and Swedes, although the Singaporean ambassador to Hanoi is a friend and supporter and visits often, Mr Pham says.

"If I had the opportunity to associate or discuss with artists from overseas it would be good, I would like that very much."

He lists Western masters such as Monet, Van Gogh and Cezanne as key influences, with the State Library the source of much of his information about them. He would love to visit Europe if the chance comes, he says.

"I dream that in the near future I can travel overseas and show my new works. That is my dream. But what can make the dream come true is my skill and my hard work."

Mr Pham is not afraid of hard work. He spends almost every day in his studio — a flat on a Hanoi estate — and says: "Being an artist is my life. Even if I feel tired I try to paint and then I will feel well again."

"I feel happy when I can paint a picture which has been inspired in my mind by what I have seen."



First impressions . . . Pham Luan's paintings have been selling well. Photograph: Taras Kovaliv

Mr Pham says he paints quickly, but preparing to do so takes time. First he visualises his painting. Then, if the result does not match his expectations, he does it again.

Mr Pham is married, with an 11-year-old daughter who features in some of his works. His wife, who is with him in Hong Kong, is a solicitor with the People's Court.

He comes from an artistic family and has relatives working in film and theatre. But although he started drawing as a child, it was not until he was doing his military service in Hanoi from 1972 to 1975 that he began to paint seriously.

"I had more opportunity and a lot of facilities to enable me to start my life as an artist.

"I was assigned to dealing with propaganda art in a news magazine."

When he graduated from secondary school Mr Pham had wanted to study art at university, but the Hanoi fine arts university had relocated far from the city because of the war, and his parents were reluctant for him to leave to go there. Instead he studied at the teachers' college, returning there after his military service to graduate and then teaching there.

"I taught geometric painting. But the principal of the school likes art very much and likes me to have more time for this work, so I was allowed to stop teaching in the school and have time for my work at home."

Mr Pham is also one of the 18 artists featured in Galerie La Vong's

newly published *Fine Contemporary Vietnamese Art*. In it he summarises his philosophy: "Nature is my perennial source of inspiration. I love instantaneous moments which are now appearing, now vanishing, and not easily grasped by any person."

"I'm trying my utmost to paint the simplest and most impressionistic things which can convey the thoughts of the mind, the feelings of my heart, and the love of nature, life and man. But everything lies ahead."

Pham Luan's Hanoi is at Galerie La Vong, 13/F, One Lan Kwai Fong, Central, until November 2