

Sunshine & Shadows

Painter Pham Luan harmonises light and colour to capture the hues of Hanoi in his latest exhibit



"I know who I am and I know that only love and hard labor can carry me into the paradise of beauty," says painter Pham Luan, well-known for his landscapes of Hanoi, his hometown.

Some people say that Pham Luan's paintings, with their moody lighting and impressionistic strokes are reminiscent of Monet's famous landscapes. That's true in so far as both of them were self-taught painters and their works explore the contradiction and transition between light and shadow. But Pham Luan explores that beauty on the corners of Hanoi's old streets, while Monet preferred romantic natural scenery.

His paintings, with their air of romance and optimism, make it easy to guess that Luan leads a peaceful, happy life. In his paintings, the use of clear, bright colours and subtle shifts in the pitch of the intensity of light lend an appealing beauty to the old houses, crumbling walls and even the denuded trees standing lonely in the coldness of winter.

Still, a slight sadness is also evident in some of his paintings. This is the sadness of seeing a sunny, beautiful street without people, an instant when the soul suddenly cries out in full awareness of nature's beauty.

Luan's oil painting of Thanh Ha Street is one striking example of this sensation. The work shows a corner of an old street in late afternoon, when the last rays of sunlight are hurriedly slipping away and the shadow are lengthening. Canvas awnings used to block the sun become a stage for dancing beams of sunlight and direct the rays gently earthward, giving viewers the impression of the passing of time. In daily life, it is common to see old

red brick walls losing their decaying outer layer and spindly trees on old balconies, but here they appear with a surprising beauty.

Another gouache painting, "After The Night Rain," is unlike most of his sun-filled canvases but vividly showcases Luan's ability to capture beauty in a different face of nature. The arrangement is sim-



ple, but the viewer can sense something about the painter's deepest feelings with this depiction of everyday beauty. Here, Luan catches the loveliest moment in early evening after a storm, in the transitional season between spring and summer. The bare, black tree branches are like hundreds of lonely hands trying to catch the clear, purple sky washed clean by the rain. Yellow light emanating from nearby houses warms up the scene and balances the loneliness of the trees.

All of the colours – from the warm yellow light to the romantic purple of sky and the mysterious, lonely hues of the

naked trees – converge in a reflection in a puddle on the road, bringing a glistening beauty to the perfect harmony of colours.

Now 44, Pham Luan has been painting for almost 30 years. His success has surprised some painters, who used to look at him as an "unprofessional" painter because he did not graduate from a painting school but originally trained to be a college geometry teacher.

"To have happiness, one should enjoy all that one has and keep striving for new achievements," he says. True to his word, Luan is always quietly but confidently moving forward on his own path in art.

Unlike most successful contemporary painters in Vietnam, who lead an "artistic" life style involving drinking and all-night partying, Pham Luan uses the joys of success as his only encouragement for his tireless labour on his art.

■ Doan Bao Chau

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