

# FINDING THE SOURCE

EXPLORING HER IDENTITY THROUGH ART HAS BEEN A LIFELONG PURSUIT FOR MULTIDISCIPLINARY ARTIST MAI NGUYỄN-LONG.

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Artist Mai with her glazed clay works. "These are built by combining my Doba and Worana," she says. "Worana are worm-dragon-snakes [in Vietnamese folk religion]. The wormlike dragon is gentle. Snakes are protectors in the Mother Goddess realm. By combining my imagined attributes of Doba and Worana, my sculptures become contemporary talismanic protectors; agents for creative resistance." **FACING PAGE** Two works from Mai's Doba series. "Doba are forms that signify resistance to the violence. Their playful shapes are adapted from disused bomb shells and often have markings from endangered porcupine and chopsticks," says Mai.





CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT "I love moving things around as I develop my work, delighting in how the sculptures 'talk' to each other," Mai says; Mai uses different implements to incise markings on her Doba; "I mark my sculptures with objects that carry stories of their own," says Mai. "The quill is from a porcupine in Vietnam."; the specimen jars hold broken mirrors, painted seaweed, wine, tea, stones and more; "This bowl was made by colleagues in Bát Tràng in Vietnam," says Mai. "I bored holes and added brushwork with Bát Tràng underglazes. I've adapted Buddhist lotus motifs and reinterpreted wave patterns in response to histories of rupture and disrepair."



THE DAUGHTER OF A VIETNAMESE FATHER and an Australian mother of Irish-Samoan descent, Mai Nguyễn-Long was born in Tasmania but spent her formative years in Papua New Guinea and the Philippines. "I've had a challenging time developing a clear sense of belonging," says Mai, 54. "It's so simplified to say I'm half-Vietnamese and half-Australian, which I am, but things are very mixed within that."

Born in Hobart in the 1970s, Mai left Australia with her family at four, living first in Papua New Guinea for five years and then the Philippines for 10, due to her father's work as an agricultural economist for a multinational aid agency.

Upon returning to the country of her birth at 19, Mai enrolled in an art history degree and discovered art as a way of reconciling the complexities of her numerous identities.

She went on to complete a Master of Visual Arts in the late '90s and kept exploring her heritage and complicated themes of identity and belonging, but it wasn't until 2015 that Mai began working with her current medium of choice.

"Everyone's got a medium and for me, right now, it's clay," says Mai. "The materiality of clay is really powerful."

The physicality of working with such a tactile substance allows Mai to slow her thoughts down and connect with the clay in an experience that she describes as a two-way conversation. "If I have a preconceived idea about what I want to make, it always transforms," she explains. "It's something about the unpredictability of clay, promoting playfulness."

It's got a wisdom of its own, it's conversational. I am contributing but the clay is talking back... in a healing way."

Mai's latest body of work, *The Vomit Girl Project 2024*, is her largest collection and most ambitious installation yet, and was created for the 11th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, held at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA).

This project, although her most recent, features a motif that has appeared, uninvited, in Mai's sketches for more than 10 years. "I've always drawn a lot, and I noticed in 2014 a 'vomiting girl' kept appearing in my drawings," recalls Mai. "It was annoying to me at first, as I couldn't see her as a practical way to progress my art practice."

"When the figure reappeared yet again, I said to my partner, 'Look, it's Vomit Girl again', we both laughed, and the name stuck. I knew I had to listen to what she had to tell me."

Having spent much of her life feeling estranged from her Vietnamese heritage, after connecting and then disconnecting from it at different points, Mai was determined to unpack the character's origins and meaning. "Doing a PhD helped me to find the words to explain the context [of my work] and discover lost cultural contexts, particularly through my mother's writing and my father's photo archive," she explains.

"The three-and-a-half months of fieldwork in Vietnam was also critical, where I learnt more about the historical >



"The Asia Pacific Triennial project was so huge that there was almost no walking space left in my studio," says Mai. "I used makeshift tables to keep things more manageable, adding signs to remind myself to be careful. *Wrapped* (left) encapsulates the idea of a clandestinely revered figure, while the terracotta tiles are slip drawing works."

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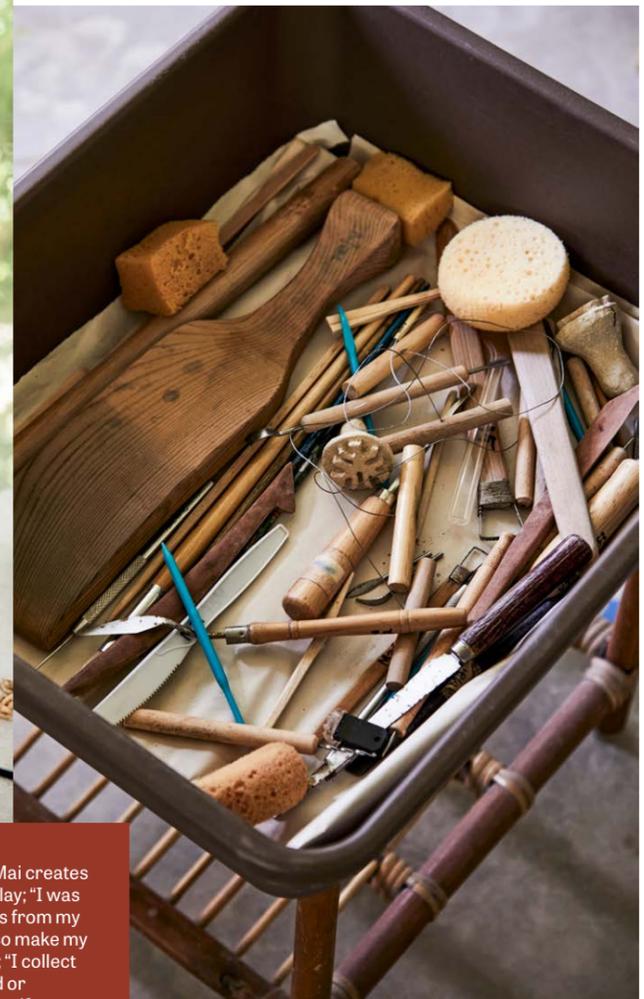
contexts and unspoken political movements that have shaped my Australian identity, too.

“It made me realise I am a product of a violent history, so Vomit Girl, instead of being the product of a psych ward, was connected to a broader community. Real, not imagined. She made sense finally.”

Giving Mai the space to express what she couldn’t put into words for a long time, the character has taken Mai on a journey of catharsis and acceptance; an ongoing process.

“I’ve come to think of the project as opening up a space in-between absolutes, and that’s a place of belonging,” says Mai. “She’s not just one thing, she’s many things, and that elusiveness reflects aspects of my own self.” *CS*  
Visit [mai-long.com](http://mai-long.com) and follow @mainguyenlong

*Mai’s work features in Country Style’s exhibition with Michael Reid Gallery in Murrurundi, NSW, from February 28-March 30, 2025. For more, visit [michaelreidmurrurundi.com.au](http://michaelreidmurrurundi.com.au)*



CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT Mai creates a flat coil using terracotta clay; “I was lucky to inherit a box of tools from my sister’s mother-in-law. I also make my own clay stamps,” says Mai; “I collect things from places I’ve lived or travelled, found, received as gifts, or bought,” says Mai. “I’m fascinated by folk religious artefacts. My modest treasures mostly come from Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines.”; Mai’s drawings, photos of village woodcarvings and books about art in Vietnam all feed the development of her characters. FACING PAGE Mai at work on a stoneware bowl in her studio.

