

Illuminated Stones

TRAN STOOD IN A WHITE ROOM EVERY DAY, HIS HANDS clasped behind his back, shifting his weight from foot to foot, looking at his watch and adjusting his glasses. Occasionally, he would say, "Please, no touching."

Before he began working as a guard at The Contemporary, Tran had been to an art museum only once, but that was as a fourteen-year-old on a school trip to Ho Chi Minh City. The piece he watched at The Contemporary didn't resemble anything he'd seen on that excursion twenty-two years before.

On the gallery wall, behind where Tran usually stood, a card read:

Illuminated Stones (1985)

Mixed Mediums; 30 by 184 by 184 centimetres

Warren Phelan 1939-

Born United Kingdom; Lives Vancouver, British Columbia

On loan from the Robert and Gwendolyn Mackenzie Foundation

Illuminated Stones was part of The Contemporary's current exhibition, *Strange Relief: Canadian Sculpture and Installation 1975-2000*. The piece was composed of 204 smooth palm-sized stones arranged in four concentric circles. The outermost ring was six feet in diameter, and in the middle of the inner ring, at the circle's centre, stood an eight-inch tall wooden platform supporting an upright flashlight with a burnt-out bulb.

Tran guarded the *Illuminated Stones* Wednesdays through Sundays. Traffic through his room was sparse, although weekends and Thursday nights (the museum was free after six) were more crowded, and for this reason, slightly less monotonous. Except for the occasional overtime shift in another part of the museum, and security work at two receptions, all Tran had done in his three months at The Contemporary was watch the *Illuminated Stones*. Before leaving Vietnam for Canada, Tran had feared that he would be cold and lonely; what he hadn't foreseen was how bored

he would be, that he would spend numbing and stupefying afternoons doing nothing other than standing and staring.

The Contemporary wasn't Tran's first job in Canada; a few days after his arrival, he had begun work in his cousin's donut shop. Tran had been an engineer in Vietnam, but accepted the Donut Boy's greasy metal carts, boiling oil, and mouse droppings without complaint. What was far more difficult to tolerate were his cousin's constant schedule changes and erratic issuance of paycheques. Tran stayed at the Donut Boy for six months, quitting the day following a late-night hold-up, citing concern for his safety. But it hadn't been the robbery itself that prompted his leaving, as his cousin blaming him for it, suggesting that he should have locked the door when he saw the men coming, and shouldn't have been so quick to surrender the money.

On his first day of work at the museum, Tran was issued a name badge and a slightly large The Contemporary jacket with the museum's logo, TC, emblazoned on the breast pocket. His new job was easy: there was no freezing dough or four AM shifts to contend with, nor was anyone going to come at him with a knife and demand he open the cash drawer. The Contemporary was clean, cool and quiet, a perfectly controlled environment in which he clocked in, clocked out, and did little in between except stand and watch. Unlike at the Donut Boy, it was not Tran's job at The Contemporary to produce anything—he was there to watch, to surveil, to preserve stasis.

Tran rarely spoke at the museum. Before moving to Canada, he had taken pride in his English and had acted as his office's unofficial translator, but now that he was amongst native speakers who talked quickly and used unfamiliar words, Tran realized that he wasn't as proficient in the language as he had thought. He could point people to the washrooms and provide the time, but could not explain the *Illuminated Stones*, elaborate on the museum's no photography policy, or recommend restaurants in the area. He was enrolled in ESL II at Mountview Secondary's adult extension, and in addition to his workbook exercises and dutiful scanning of the morning paper, listened to the museum patrons' conversations as a means of improving his English.

Tran rarely understood discussions about the museum's art, although the tenor of the visitors' feelings towards the *Illuminated Stones* was usually clear. Some, obviously uninterested, would breeze quickly through, walking around the piece and then out the doorway to the next gallery. Others would approach the *Illuminated Stones*, stand over it, and then step back, put their hand to their chin, squint and crouch down to look again. Tran watched people performing these rituals and wondered why they thought the *Illuminated Stones* deserved such attention. It didn't seem that there was a great deal to look at, nor that it took any particular skill to place a wooden stand holding a flashlight at the centre of a bunch of rocks. The knee-high platform was the only part of the piece that the artist had actually had to make himself, and it was nothing but an unpainted piece of plywood sloppily nailed to some two-by-fours.

Tran liked it when the museum was busy; in addition to the diversion a crowd provided, it made him feel that there was purpose in his endless standing. The only visitors he disliked were teenagers, specifically high school groups on field trips. They were often loud and impolite, and Tran worried that their unruly behaviour might reflect poorly on his performance as a guard. His fears in this area were confirmed one afternoon when a noisy class descended on his gallery just before break time. Tran watched the group nervously, becoming increasingly annoyed at the teens' hooting, swaggering and horseplay. He paid particular attention to two boys tussling over a backpack, whom he told to move on, but who ignored him. Tran was concerned for the safety of the *Illuminated Stones* and thought about radioing his boss, Thompson, but he did not want to appear weak or unable to fulfill his duties. Instead, Tran stepped away from the wall and turned around so that he was in front of the piece, as if he were a goalie defending it. The boys, still scarcely aware of Tran's presence, moved to the opposite side of the room. One then swung the backpack at the other, who attempted to catch it, but instead stumbled into the outer ring of stones and fell. As he went down, the boy hit the wooden platform, knocking it on its side and toppling the flashlight. Several stones skittered across the room, one coming to rest inches from Tran's foot. Before Tran could say anything, the boy hopped up, righted the fallen pieces, mumbled something, and ran from the room. Tran gasped and immediately began shoving the dislodged stones back into place.

The room cleared quickly and Tran concentrated on reconstituting the piece. He tried to remember the placement of the stones, but it was difficult to recall their precise arrangement. As he repositioned an irregularly shaped stone in the outer circle, Tran saw the museum's education director approaching. He pretended that he was at floor-level for purposes of tying his shoe and stood to greet her. As he did so, Tran realized he was still holding a stone and quickly slipped it into his jacket pocket. The education director, engrossed in the buttons of a walkie-talkie, nodded absently at Tran and moved on to the next gallery, home to a glitter-covered mound of tires, exhaust pipes and hubcaps. Tran watched her disappear from view but did not bend down and replace the piece he had taken from the *Illuminated Stones*.

At break time Tran went to the washroom. He looked in the mirror and noticed that his right jacket pocket bulged and sagged slightly. When he leaned over to wash his hands, the stone made a solid *thunk* against the counter and Tran quickly looked around. He was alone. He thought about putting the stone in the trash, but decided against it; what would happen if it were found? Tran returned to the gallery and his usual standing and staring. He examined the *Illuminated Stones* and wondered if the artist had placed each stone in a specific manner, or if the arrangement was more or less random. Was there a photograph or diagram in the museum offices showing how the piece was to be arranged? Perhaps the artist had set up the *Illuminated Stones* himself; what if he were to come in now, would he

notice anything wrong? Tran could feel the stone bumping against his thigh when he walked. He had the urge to replace the stone, to restore order, but also the counter desire to hold onto the stone, to conserve it, to appropriate it. Tran felt that he had established a connection with the stone, that he had in some way earned it.

At six, his shift over, Tran went to the staff room and transferred the stone from his blazer pocket to his winter coat. As he left the museum for the day, Tran hesitated as he passed Thompson's office. Thompson was the head of security, a big blond man with an open face who called Tran Cowboy. Tran wished he'd called Thompson when the incident had happened; it seemed too complicated to explain things now. On the bus ride home, Tran's regrets compounded: he should have told Thompson everything, including pocketing the stone, perhaps he would have been forgiven; now it was too late. Tran became so caught up in thinking about Thompson and the removal of the stone that he missed his stop and it took him an extra ten minutes to walk home. Throughout the ride and the trudge to his apartment, Tran kept his hand in his coat pocket, reaching through the hole in the lining so that he could feel the stone. He liked its smooth heft, its weightiness and solidity.

That night, in the room he rented from a retired transit worker, Tran placed the stone on top of his dresser. He enjoyed the way it looked sitting next to his Vietnamese-English dictionary and the small framed picture of his parents, brother, and sister. The stone was not spectacular, but its smooth, oblong shape was pleasing. As he lay in bed that night, Tran pictured the artist, whom he imagined as a large white man with a goatee and longish grey and brown hair, filling up bucket after bucket of stones on a deserted shore at dawn. But how did the rocks become the *Illuminated Stones*, and then come to be in a museum? Had the stones lain in the artist's studio for weeks or even months before he developed a plan for them? Or had he come up with the idea for the *Illuminated Stones* first, made a drawing of it, and then gone and scoured beaches until he found the materials he needed? Maybe the whole thing was pure chance: the stones had been intended for the artist's garden, but friends had come over for a dinner party and after much drinking and perhaps drug taking, they had decided to make a piece of art. Tran wondered if there was some standard operating procedure artists employed in these matters, or if they were on their own, just muddling along and hoping for the best.

When he arrived at work the following day, Tran was expecting to be summoned by Thompson and asked to explain what had happened to the *Illuminated Stones*. Tran decided that if confronted, he would provide no excuses or denials but would accept the consequences of his actions and offer his resignation. But Thompson said nothing, and the day passed not only without incident, but also with scarcely a visitor through the gallery. Tran studied the *Illuminated Stones* intently, looking at the colour, texture and shape of the stones. He also considered the wooden platform. Why

was it so amateurish? Surely the artist, or a carpenter hired by the artist, could have fashioned if not an elegant stand for the flashlight, at least a professional one, not something that looked as if it had been thrown together in a few minutes from scrap lumber. And why was the flashlight's bulb burned out? It couldn't be very difficult or costly to replace.

Tran mulled these questions over as he paced the gallery and then, just before five, he bent down to examine a smallish stone, turned it over in his hand, and quickly put it in his jacket pocket. He nudged the adjacent stones with his foot so that there was no gap. As had been the case following the removal of the first stone, the piece looked the same, although there were now 202 stones instead of the 204 of two days previous.

As he put the stone in his parka at the end of the day, Tran had a brief moment of panic: he was stealing, there was no question about it. The first time had been an accident, a mistake; he hadn't really meant to, it had just happened. But now he, Tran, employed by The Contemporary as a museum guard, was permanently changing a work of art by purposefully removing pieces of it. Tran felt sick, but it was too late to go back now, the doors to the galleries had been locked. As Tran left the museum, the stone in the right pocket of his coat, Thompson waved and told him to have a good night. Tran wanted to run, but instead raised his hand weakly in response, opened the employee exit door, and walked the half block to his bus stop. He felt that at any moment there would be a hand, Thompson's hand, on his shoulder, but when he turned and looked back at the museum, nobody was outside the door, everything was as usual.

Tran placed the stone next to the first one on his dresser, arranging them so that the space was divided lengthwise into thirds, and moving the dictionary and family picture to the back against the wall. The sight of the two stones pleased him: one stone by itself was a souvenir, a trinket; two represented something more. He turned off the lamp and lay in bed; light from the street settled on the stones, giving them a faint glow. Tran woke the next morning before his alarm rang, and again spent a few minutes looking at the stones, noting the way that the weak sun of a winter morning perfectly complemented their smooth grey form. As he dressed for work, Tran thought about how the dresser would look with three stones. An addition would allow for a more complex arrangement; there was only so much that could be done with just two stones.

Two days later, Tran took another stone, this one a slightly larger specimen with a black streak in its grey. He put it between the other two, dividing the dresser top into fourths and relegating the dictionary and photo to the windowsill. Tran was not wholly satisfied with this arrangement, however, and reconfigured the stones several times, alternating between a triangle and vertical line of three. Ultimately, he returned to his first placement, a horizontal row which he found the most forceful, although perhaps not as conventionally pretty as the other two.

The removal of a stone from the museum became a weekly ritual for Tran, and allowed him to create increasingly complex patterns on his dresser

top. As his collection increased, his attitude towards The Contemporary changed. His time spent there became highly charged: removing stones required discipline, planning and concentration. Tran also developed a new relationship with the art he was assigned to guard. He spent much time thinking about the *Illuminated Stones*: the choice of circles, the size of the stones, the use of the mass produced (the flashlight), in conjunction with the manmade (the wooden platform) and the natural (the stones).

Tran further used his time at the museum to meditate upon his own fledgling creation, imagining additions to and reconfigurations of the modest arrangement in his bedroom. As he paced The Contemporary, Tran would think longingly about his stones and wish that he were home so that he could work with them. Sometimes, however, Tran became disgusted with his project and wanted to throw his appropriated stones into the bushes by the highway exit near his apartment, so poorly did he appraise his own creative efforts. He resisted these impulses, and invariably returned to his stones the following day with a renewed desire to transform them, to make his mark on them, yet also to allow what was essential in them to come to the fore.

Two months after the removal of his first stone from the museum, Tran moved his collection from the dresser to the floor of his bedroom. He composed a rectangle, which with the addition of further stones over subsequent weeks, filled much of the space between the side of his bed and the wall. Tran also began to colour the stones, diluting water paints purchased at the drugstore in a plastic pail, and then dipping the stones in the resulting faint yellow or red solution. Tran had two versions of his piece: one had stones of alternating colors, the other had opposite sides of the rectangle composed of only red or yellow tinted stones. In both versions, at the centre, Tran placed an upside down Burger King cup and on top of that, a spent blue plastic cigarette lighter he'd found on the street.

As Tran's piece grew larger, Warren Phelan's *Illuminated Stones* gradually diminished in size. The only way to keep the stones touching each other was for the circles to be made smaller, and the outer ring ended up six inches further from the gallery walls than it had been when the exhibit opened. Tran stopped taking stones when his own collection numbered twenty-two, and *Strange Relief: Canadian Sculpture and Installation 1975-2000* was moving into its final weeks. Tran reasoned that he might be reaching a critical mass of missing stones, such that further removals would be particularly risky. More importantly, he had amassed so many stones that it was becoming difficult to navigate his small bedroom without disrupting his own creation.

Crowds for *Strange Relief* had been disappointing, but on the last weekend of the exhibit's six-month run, attendance was strong. Tran's gallery was particularly crowded—a feature on Warren Phelan entitled "Soft Rock" had appeared in the weekend arts section of the newspaper. The night of *Strange Relief*'s closing, Tran treated himself to dinner at the

Swiss Chalet near his bus stop. The meal was a celebration of sorts for Tran: that the museum exhibit was over, that he hadn't been caught taking stones, and that his own piece had been completed. While he waited for his food, Tran absently made sketches on his napkin of combinations of various routine objects: shoes and clocks, forks and doors, neon signs and scarves. Before he left, he tucked the napkin in his shirt pocket.

When he got home, Tran found a piece of cardboard that he had saved from a shirt package. Using a black marker, and with the help of his Vietnamese-English dictionary and a pamphlet from the museum, he printed:

Rock Rectangle (2004)
Found materials; 10 by 60 by 60 centimetres
Tran Van Lanh, 1967-
b. Vung Tau, Vietnam; lives Canada
Collection of the Artist

Tran leaned the cardboard against the wall next to his stones and used a disposable camera to take several pictures of the piece. He'd decided to make the version alternating red and yellow stones the definitive one, and did not photograph the other arrangement. On the back of the cardboard, he made a sketch of the *Rock Rectangle*, noting the number of stones that comprised each side (seven length; four width) and the piece's dimensions. Tran considered numbering the bottom of each stone and then designating an order for their placement, but decided that this would be too rigid; it would be more interesting were the piece slightly different each time it was assembled.

The next day at the museum, the Strange Relief exhibit was being broken down and Tran was assigned to move tables and chairs in the museum café. As he passed the gallery containing the *Illuminated Stones*, Tran saw the workers wrapping the stones in foam and placing them in wooden crates. The removal of the *Illuminated Stones* spurred Tran to dismantle his own piece when he got home. While he would have liked to keep *Rock Rectangle* up for several more weeks, Tran wanted to work on something new and so relegated his stones to cardboard boxes in the closet.

Tran's floor remained empty for several days—the open space was helpful in conceptualizing his new project. He taped his Swiss Chalet napkin doodlings and a few other sketches and notes to the wall above his dresser. Tran used these as aids in the composition of his new piece—an assemblage of chewing gum wrappers and found athletic shoes. Each day on his walk to and from the bus stop, Tran was on the lookout for these items. He also purchased another disposable camera, which he used to photograph pairs of old shoes that unaccountably had been tied together and flung over fifteen-foot high telephone wires.

During his days at the museum, Tran meditated on his new piece, on how to best combine the shoes, wrappers, and photographs. He'd developed a tentative title, *Running Mouth*, but there was still much work to be done. ☘

LINDSEY WIEBE

Sunday

Sunday mornings were mostly church programs on CBC to make us feel guilty about not being in church. Sometimes I did feel guilty and pretended I really was in church, standing when the congregation stood and not going for a snack until commercials. Afternoons meant three windows with pink sheers hanging impotent at their sides, the same view of snow banks, and sometimes a truck coughing diesel down the gravel road, trying to make a noise big enough not to be sucked up by the white sky.

Me and Shannon liked to lie with our backs to the grey carpet, faces to the grey ceiling watching TV with sideways eyes and legs pedaling the air like wobbly pinwheels. Once we tired of that we sat cross-legged, eyes perilous inches from the static crackle of the screen, an electric buzz that ran through our noses if we pressed them close enough.

In the new apartment my television collects dust. Sunday means waiting in bed until the final clattering heels leave the sidewalk, the last heavy doors shut behind them. Breakfast is eaten hunched over my computer, or perched on the windowsill, nose smearing the glass. I can feel the electricity of my shadow neighbours, pausing to look through their windows, turning sharp as razorblades. I like the static of their jerky fear, blinds that shut abruptly on the red brick eye of me, our shared guilt as the slatted sun crests and falls.