

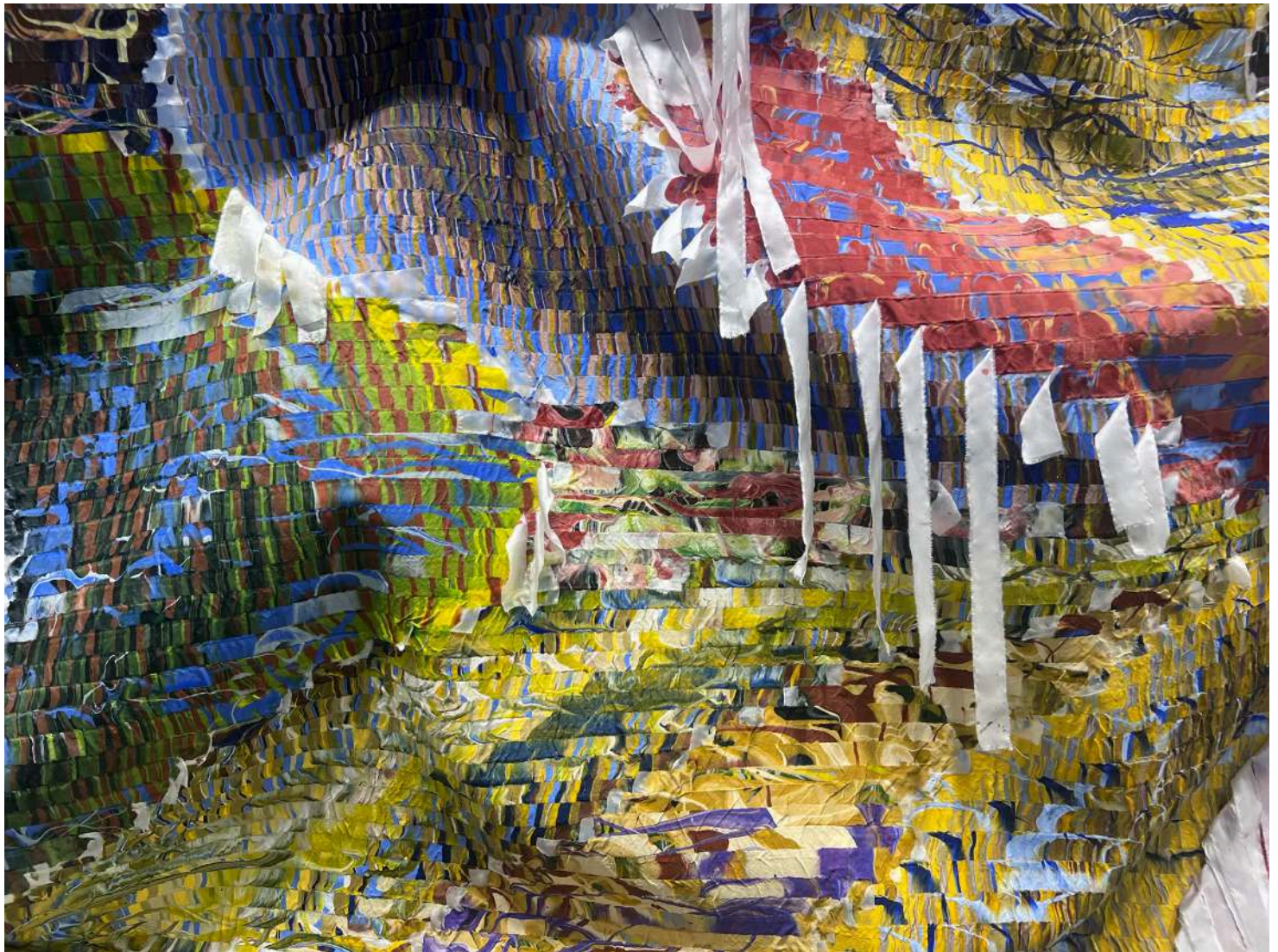
## Art Review

# Kenny Nguyen's Beautiful Refusal

People of color are often called upon to perform their identities, but Nguyen's lush tapestries largely avoid that trap.



Lisa Yin Zhang May 20, 2025



Detail of Kenny Nguyen, "Eruption Series No. 51" (2024), hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, mounted on wall (all photos Lisa Yin Zhang/*Hyperallergic* except where otherwise noted)

In a world in which history and technology conspire to deliver a ceaseless stream of the most incomprehensible imagery this species has ever seen, Kenny Nguyen's undulating tapestries feel like a miracle, offering a truly new visual experience through the most analog of means. They make the eyes swim in an experience I can only liken to the overwhelming output of the infinite algorithmic scroll, a [Refik Anadol](#) with a soul. Striated ribbons of color — sometimes hundreds



in a single piece — ripple in glitched patchworks that only yield more when zoomed in upon: ribbons of silk, their edges frayed and unraveling in real time; endless recombinations of hue, shape, and thickness, speckled by human accident and continually reshaped by the shifting conditions of the space.

Nguyen begins by laying out white silk so diaphanous that it billows with the slightest breeze before eventually succumbing to gravity. He makes small incisions into one end of the sheet with scissors before tearing it into strips. Each series employs a specific set and range of hues, and he mixes and pours those acrylic paints into streaks on a large palette. Then he lays each silk strip orthogonally in the mixture, letting them soak before using the wet paint to adhere them to raw canvas. These bands are often slightly offset from each other, creating the wave formation that makes the eye quiver. These are then manipulated into the tumescent forms before us, held tentatively aloft by pushpins. It is an accretive practice that reveals its facture: Pigment works double-time as both ornament and structure, while figure and ground become one. The result is an unmistakably singular presence rather than connected parts, sinewed rather than stitched.

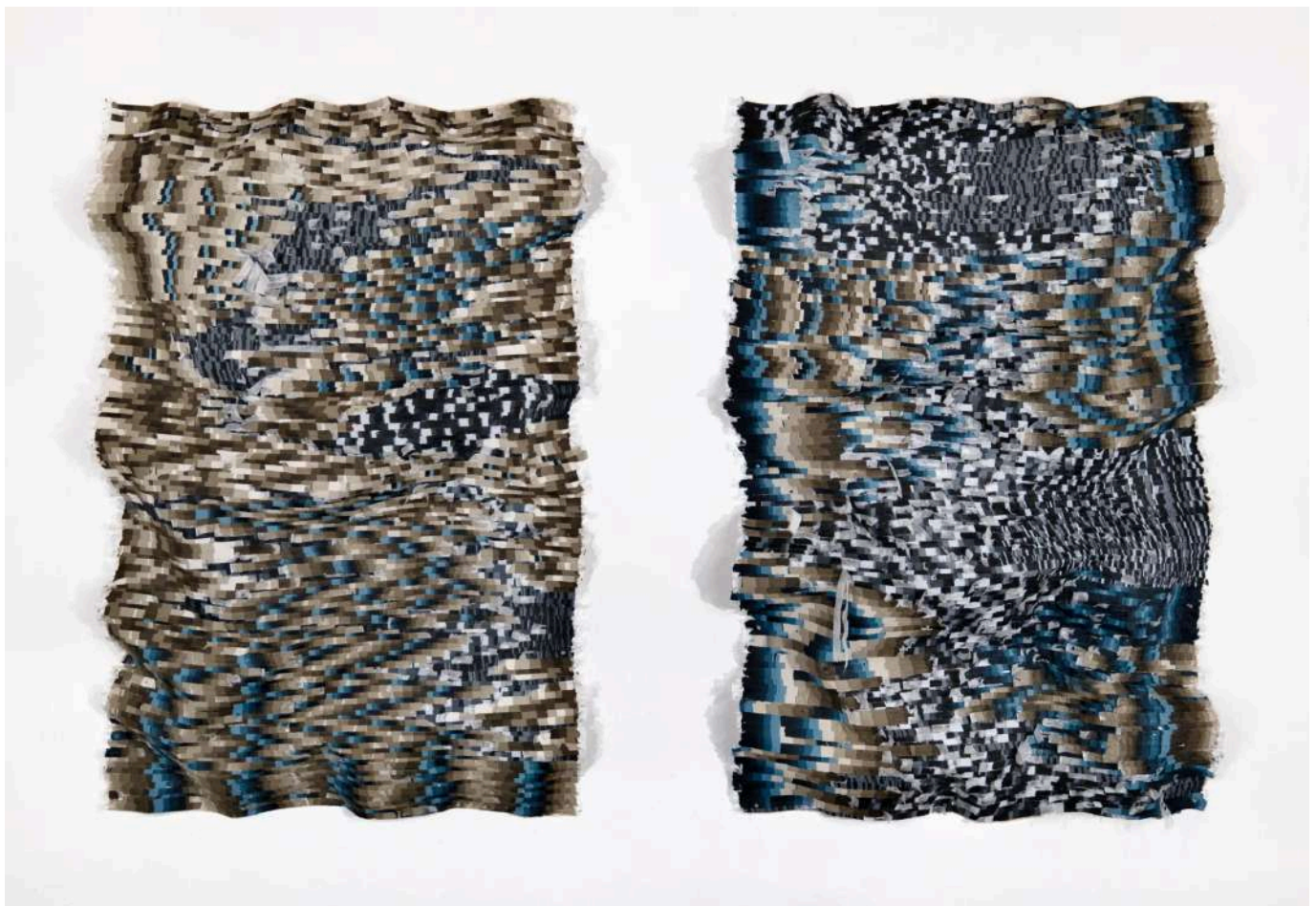


Kenny Nguyen, "Eruption Series No. 51" (2024), hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, mounted on wall

Raised on a remote coconut farm in Ben Tre Province in southern Vietnam, Nguyen moved to Ho Chi Minh City at 17 to study and work in fashion design. In 2010, at the age of 22, he moved to the United States with his family, and he's now based in Charlotte, North Carolina. "Unfamiliar with the English language," the press release reads, "he began creating art, employing painting as a form of communication." He draws from a vernacular of color he identifies in the press release

as specifically Vietnamese: *khói lam chiều*, literally “evening smoke blue”; a shade of yellow called *màu lúa chín*, or “ripe rice color.”

Nguyen also debuted a new series for this exhibition, *White Noise*, to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the **Fall of Saigon**. These abstract tapestries are drawn from his memories of the black and white footage and photos of the war so common in his childhood. I love that subtle but crucial distinction between documentation and *memory* of documentation. Works in these series employ shades of black, white, and most interestingly to me, those ambiguous transition colors between the two — tans, khakis, true blue, Payne’s gray — set in wavering columns that really do invoke the signature staticky graininess of a flickering image on a ’90s CRT TV. These works are not parseable as figuration — they refuse that infamous and “iconic” imagery of what is often called the “**first television war**.”



Installation view of two works from Kenny Nguyen's *White Noise* (2025) series (image courtesy Sundaram Tagore Gallery)

We people of color are often asked to perform ourselves. Most often this is a dictate of Whiteness, either directly, as when we are tapped to interpret or reflect on events supposedly definitional to our identity, or ambiently, because such an overwhelming majority of spaces are White that it can feel like there is no backstage. Partially as a result, we can become stuck in character, and even worse, forget this. We perform even to each other, such that that performance-cum-reality folds



into the very fabric of what it means to be said identity. This is particularly true for groups still trying to forge their foundational aesthetics, which I believe Asian Americans are.

The gap between documentation and memory in Nguyen's work — one that can be imperfectly overlaid on that chasm between “homeland” and nation — is where diaspora flourishes. Trying to close it by performing fluency or instrumentalizing certain perceived aspects of that so-called origin is antithetical to our existence. It paradoxically essentializes the very “motherland” we purport to care so deeply about, reproducing the same transgressions for which we rightly fault others, and constraining the wonderful and terrible complexity of diasporic experience.

That's why I take issue with statements like the following, which Nguyen makes in a video playing in the gallery: “I have to ignore that I learned English. I have to ignore what I've learned and try to remember what it would be like if I speak in these colors in Vietnamese.” I don't fault Nguyen or the gallery for framing his work in a way that offers some legible reference to some pure “motherland” — it's the standard we've collectively set for Asian-American art. Besides, artists and their galleries are often not the best-equipped to speak on even their own artwork — no shade, just a different set of skills. That's where we writers and critics step in, and we should do so more.



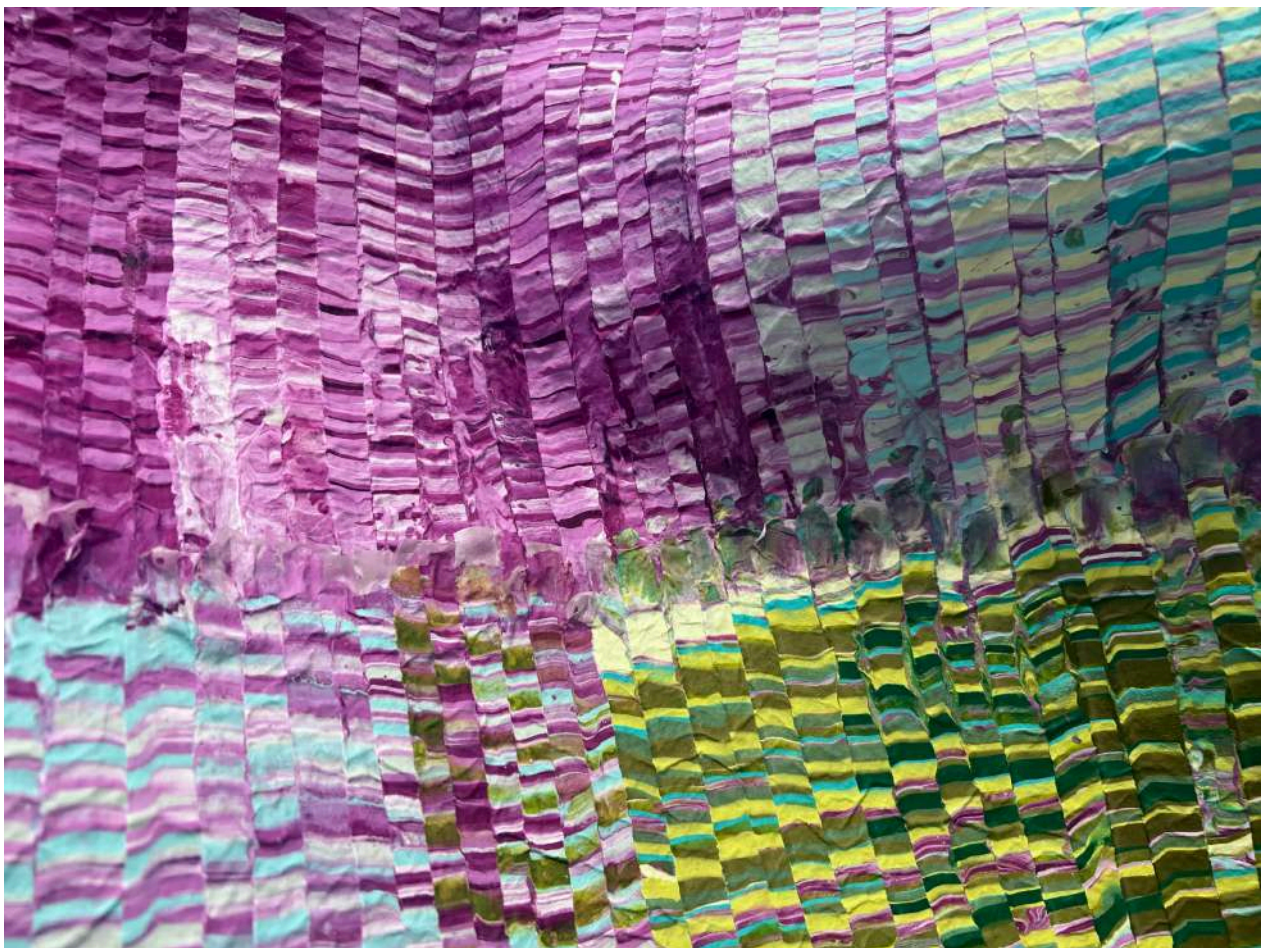
Kenny Nguyen, “Encounter Series No. 44” (2025), hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, mounted on wall



I want to be clear that I believe Nguyen's work embodies that very quality I seek in Asian-American art, and I take issue only with a somewhat throwaway line in how he frames his work to frame my own invective in turn. Earlier in the video, he defines "mother tongue" — the exhibition's title — as a way of arriving at his own language, one with "unspoken connections" to his cultural heritage. He talks about how his identity continues to shift, which in turn changes his use of language. Yes.

These works speak for themselves. I believe they do carry with them cultural authenticity — not a Vietnamese one, but rather a Vietnamese-American one. Their being made of silk, for instance, is interesting not because it is freighted with a long and weighty material history in Asia and specifically Vietnam, but because that history bore itself up to him when he studied and worked in fashion, and took on yet another layer when he embedded himself in the United States's distinct sociopolitical landscape. He carries that entire personal-historical apparatus into these works in the mere fact that he made them. They invoke an absent body in their swelling forms, or perhaps suggest that the body itself contains absence. They are elegiac but also alive.

Speaking now not to Nguyen but to our ilk: Let that work breathe, like his does. Keep making that beautiful, difficult, ambivalent art. Have a little faith in us, the critics of the world, to take care of the rest.

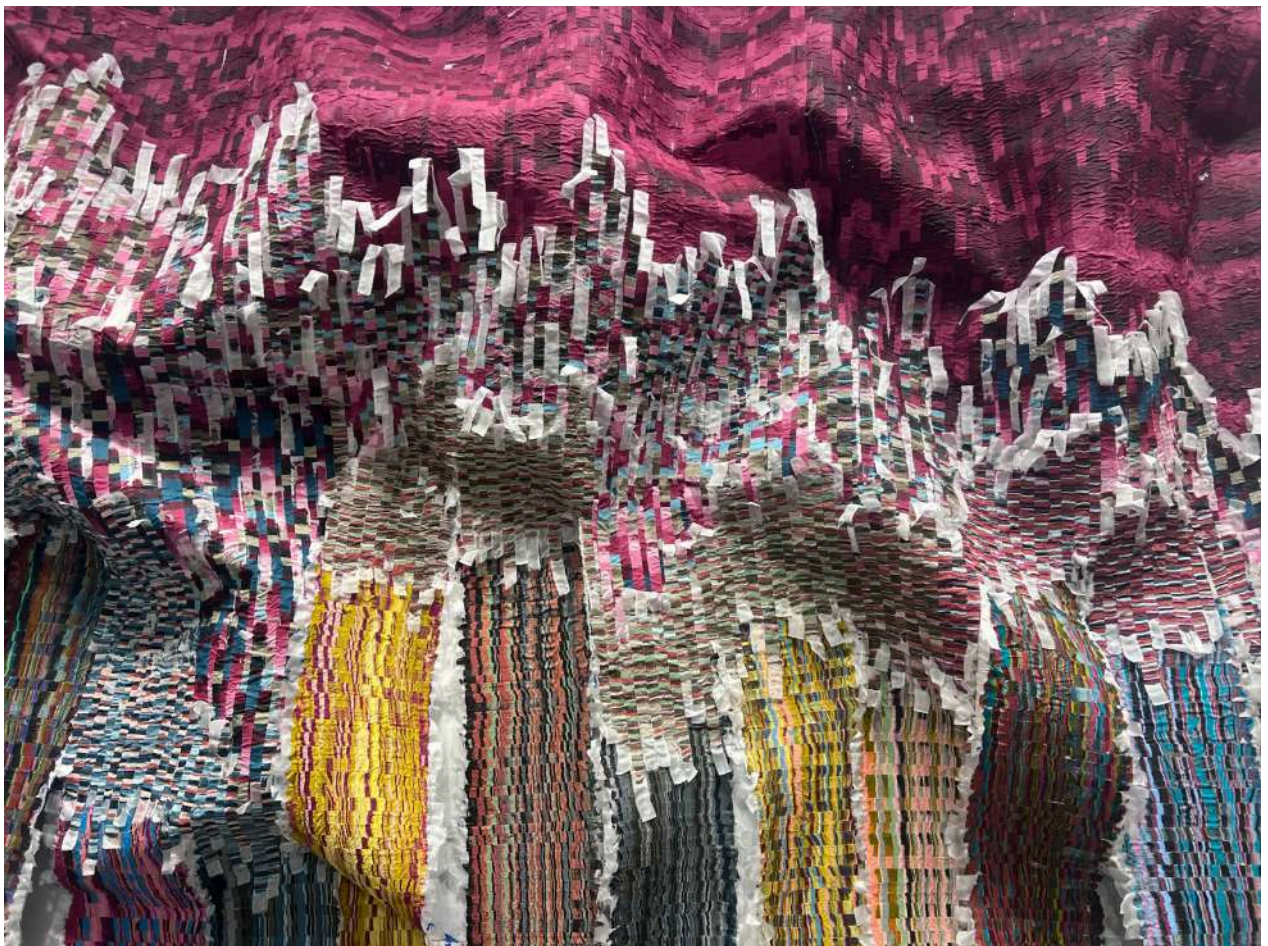


Detail of Kenny Nguyen, "Encounter Series No. 44" (2025), hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, mounted on wall





Kenny Nguyen, "Undecided Title" (2025), hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, mounted on wall



Detail of Kenny Nguyen, "Undecided Title" (2025), hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, mounted on wall



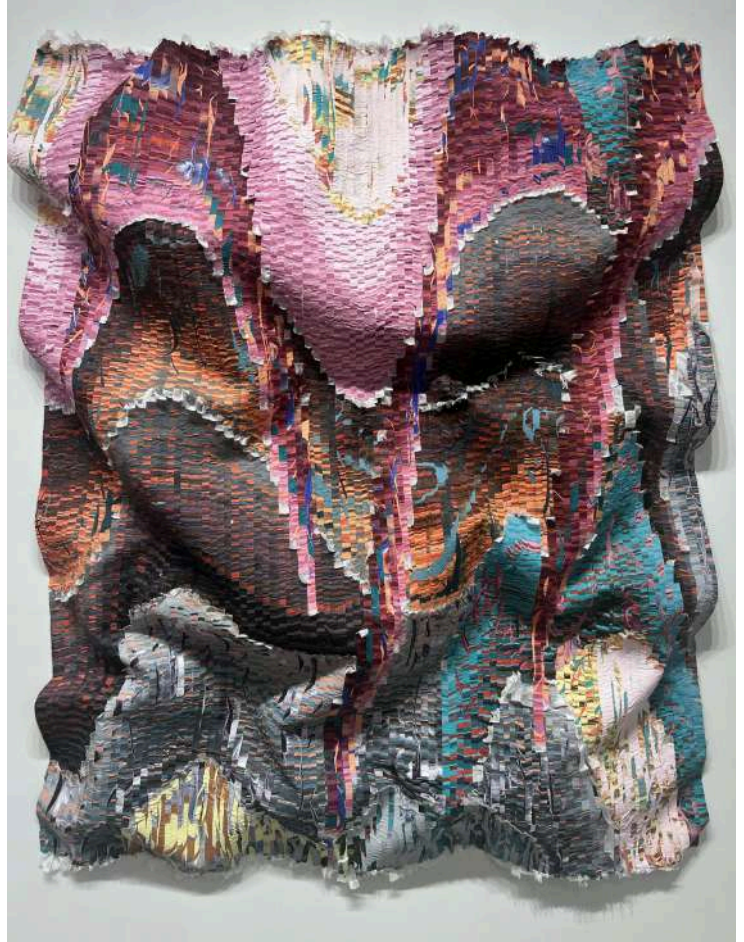


Left: Kenny Nguyen, "Nesting Ground Series" (2024), hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, mounted on wall; right: detail



Kenny Nguyen, "Eruption Series No. 78" (2025), hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, mounted on wall





Left: Kenny Nguyen, "Eruption Series No. 82" (2025), hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, mounted on wall; right: Kenny Nguyen, "Eruption Series No. 81" (2025), hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, mounted on wall



Video detailing Kenny Nguyen's process





Installation view of Kenny Nguyen, "Encounter Series No.51" (2025), hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, mounted on wall

**Kenny Nguyen: Mother Tongue** *continues at Sundaram Tagore Gallery (542 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through May 31. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*

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