

“A Real Miracle”: Anh-Tuyet Tran

2017. Acrylic on wood. 22 ¾" w by 8" h.

David Feinberg and Beth Andrews, with contributions from Storyteller Anh-Tuyet Tran and from artists Michelle Englund, Kimchi Hoang, Jennifer Hensel, Kristin Anton, Sima Shahriar, Paula Leiter-Pergament, Sara Feinberg, Julia Breidenbach, Jane Bollweg, and Annie Nickell.

Anh Tuyet Tran tried to escape Vietnam with her family on three different occasions, paying smugglers a hefty price for the trip. Her family and many others would wait for hours for a boat to arrive only to be arrested.

In 1989, Tuyet finally managed to escape when she made a deal with the smugglers that she would pay only after she and her family were brought to the boat. She escaped with her eight-year-old son and her five-year-old daughter. On the first day, they boarded a small boat steered by the smugglers. When they reached the larger boat, she gave the smugglers the promised \$15,000 dollars and boarded along with 94 other passengers. They had to wait four days before they were able to pass the international border.

When they reached the ocean, a category eight hurricane struck. Tuyet vividly remembers the up and down lurch of the boat during the storm, the water rising to rest just under her chin. The adults had to hold their children up on top level of the boat so they wouldn't drown. They had to bail the water out by hand. After finally passing the border, they were stranded on the ocean for 7 days, completely lost. Life was difficult on the boat; there was barely enough water and soup to sustain the 97 people. They also had to hide from pirates by keeping the boat's lights off.

The passengers prayed fervently for their safe passage; Tuyet believes two humpback whales answered their prayers. The whales each swam along one side of the boat, effectively protecting the passengers against the turbulent waters of the storm. Humpback whales are known for saving humans from drowning and other species from harms way. They only eat while they are in northern winter waters, storing up fat for the time they mate in the Vietnam's warm seas. After two days the whales left, and the passengers never saw them again.

After the storm, the people searched desperately for land. This is why Tuyet selected a green color for her piece. To her, the color represented the land and the people's desire to find it. After seven days, they came across an oilrig in Malaysia. The oilrig's passengers gave them water, bananas, and instructions to get to land. When they finally saw land (Indonesia, Cuckoo Island), they recognized the writhing shape of hundreds of flying birds and a simple bridge connecting the big island to the smaller island. Once they docked, the passengers were taken to a refugee camp where they stayed for three years and two months. In 1993, three years after leaving Vietnam, Tuyet left the refugee camp, traveling to the United States to visit her sister who had left Vietnam in 1975 to live in Minnesota. Ultimately, Tuyet also moved to Minnesota.