

DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN

A bloated plastic bag tied off with red tape expands and contracts—gulping breaths that disturb its sloshing contents and rustle the leafy surroundings. The film cuts to a close-up of blood-orange jelly stars, quivering within the bag's yellow, watery womb. These translucent shapes recur in Diane Severin Nguyen's *Tyrant Star* (2019), composed of three narratives that unfurl across static shots of garbage-choked landscapes, lonely domestic interiors, and a decrepit orphanage in Vietnam.

The film begins as a narrated stichomythia about separated lovers adapted from Vietnamese folk verse. The melodrama feels out of place, even absurd, set to images such as a durian being pulled slowly apart, or a VND 50,000 bill disintegrating in sinuous flames. As in Nguyen's visceral photographs of half-sucked sweets and napalm-burnt detritus, the degraded objects in *Tyrant Star* are associated with corporeal trauma. "The body is pain. I can't complain," a man intones as honey-hued slime drips in viscid streams over hacked up sugarcane.

The second act consists of an aspiring YouTube star's syrupy synth-pop version of "The Sound of Silence," its original lyrics on alienation compromised by the upbeat tempo and the LED smiley faces and hearts that spin around the girl's bedroom. Only the finale's faceless, voiceless orphans—who appear partially out of frame, reduced to a pair of twitching legs in braces, a tiny body rocking like a caged animal—have any visible claim to the narratives of suffering invoked in *Tyrant Star*'s first two segments. Yet this is presumption, based on a subjective interpretation of Nguyen's divulgements and potential misdirections. Brief and inscrutably sequenced, the shots are peppered with metafictional hints, including a "Tyrant Star" sticker, signaling the work's artifice. Nguyen leverages the temporality of film, splicing scenes of staged entropy with moments of realism to further destabilize the boundary between authentic and fake. What could we know of the feeling and substance in these truncated unfoldings, when their meanings are as slippery and moldable as jelly?

OPHELIA LAI