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LIFESTYLE | CULTURE | IDENTITY

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to Market Your Art

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Five Painters

Vietnamese Artists
Collective

Fashion Art

Still Life Photos Featuring
Top Model Bảo Hoa

Breakdancing with
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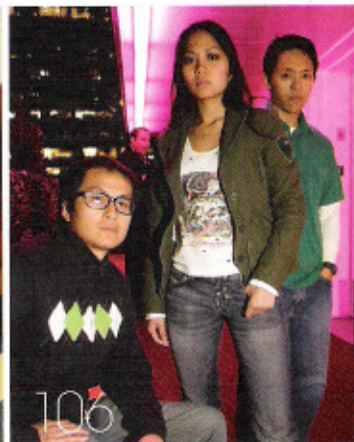
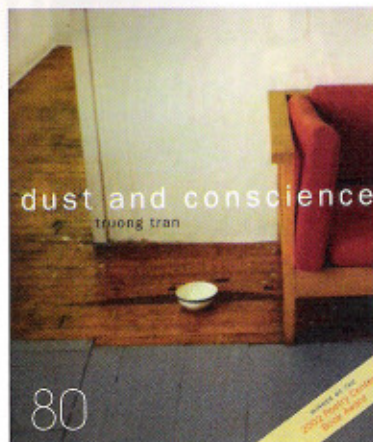


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The Ngô Club

by David Ngô | photos by Joel Marasigan



David, Ella, and Bee
are Ngô Club.

Throughout my entire career in the media arts, no one could ever pronounce Ngô correctly. Some of the most notorious mispronunciations of my last name include 'n-go,' 'nee-go,' 'ing-go,' and 'nuh-go.' Apparently, the *ng* sound in Vietnamese is completely unpronounceable in the entertainment industry. I used to try to sound out Ngô to colleagues, and the most common response I got was, "Yeah, that's what I said, 'nuh-go.' Right?" Tired of this broken record, I eventually started "correctly" pronouncing my own last name as 'no,' and this made life a whole lot easier. However, my faith in pronouncing Ngô properly was restored last year when I met two media artists named Bee and Ella—and we created Ngô Club.

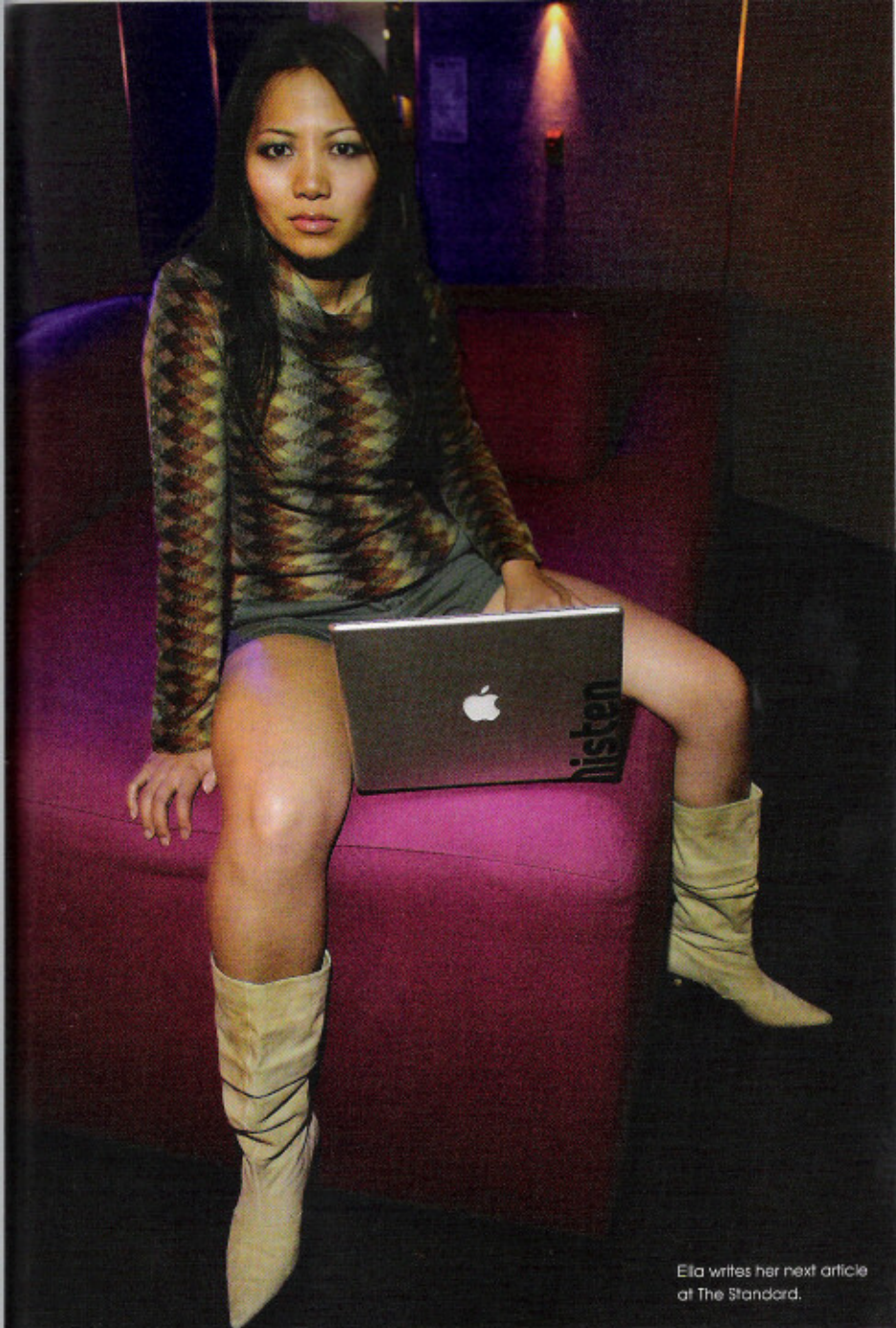
I first met Bee last summer at my day job at a celebrity-driven television network in Los Angeles, where I earn paychecks as a programming executive. (Yes, I get paid to watch TV.) I also have an unpaid career as a filmmaker, and at the time was working on an independent documentary with an editor who also worked at my day job. Taking a strategically-planned water break, I went to visit my editor at her edit bay one summer morning. There, I met a skinny, track-jacket-wearing producer who introduced himself as Bee Ngô (pronounced 'no'). I was stunned. Did I just actually meet another Ngô working in entertainment? And did he just purposely mispronounce his last name too? When we both discovered that we were two Ngôs, there was an instant camaraderie between us. After some generic small

THE EDIT BOY

career as a television producer. Regarding his career, Bee comments, "I have an opportunity to change the way people view television, so I'm happy with where I'm at right now."

Like Bee, I share his desire to create change and affect society, but aside from that, I am basically his alter ego. Although I went to an 85 percent Caucasian high school in the O.C. (Orange County), my parents had Little Sài Gòn on speed dial. As a child, my mom dragged me to Phước Lộc Thọ every weekend to buy bulk amounts of tiger balm. I went to Vietnamese language school until the 4th grade. I ate Vietnamese food for dinner nearly everyday as a kid. In high school, I was basically a nerd. I took honors classes and always worried about studying. I joined several campus clubs for the sole purpose of enhancing my college applications. (I was even president of one of them.) I had the worse haircut ever. Essentially, I was the polite Vietnamese boy that got good grades, stayed out of trouble, and was destined to become a lawyer. Today, I'm still that quiet Vietnamese boy who stays out of trouble, but somehow I missed the memo about law school. (My haircuts remain terrible though.)

Despite our different paths, Bee and I found ourselves at the same cable network and working towards the same goals. It's almost like when straight-laced Edward Norton randomly meets a rambunctious Brad Pitt on an airplane in *Fight*



Eta writes her next article at The Standard.

talk, I knew Bee was cool when he jokingly asked me, "So like, are we supposed to go grab *phở* now?"

When two Vietnamese people have lunch together, it is actually possible for them to eat something other than *phở đặc biệt*. Bee and I started having work lunches at Wahoo's Fish Tacos and Koo Koo Roo mainly because we could walk there. As I got to know Bee, I learned that he is anything but a typical Vietnamese American. Bee grew up in Kansas City with no exposure to an Asian American community. His family was the only Vietnamese family in the area.

According to Bee, "There were six Asian kids at my high school, and two of them were my siblings. My parents tried to maintain their Vietnamese values, but we were completely surrounded by Midwestern sensibilities." Additionally, Bee was never interested in getting good grades and joining campus clubs to improve his college applications. In Bee's words, "As a child, I was more into causing trouble and walking the fine line between right and wrong. And I've learned that it's not wrong unless you get caught."

Bee is someone who bucks convention, and this has manifested itself into a



Bee is the master of the edit boy.

Club. (Guess which character I would be?) Actually, the movie *Fight Club* became the impetus for the creation of Ngô Club—an inside joke turned social revolution. Bee and I started to joke about how we should unionize ourselves at work as a way to protect ourselves against “the man.” The two Ngôs needed to stick together in case something major ever goes down. Eventually, we named our organization Ngô Club and established some ground rules. The first rule of Ngô Club is that you must

come off as dweebs who e-mailed a total stranger simply because she shared our last name. However, we had a golden opportunity to increase our membership, so we took our chances. I sent Ella an e-mail that stated, “Bee and I saw your name in the server and thought that you’d be a potential addition to our Ngô Club. Bee is the president, and I am the club’s recruiter. Let us know if you are interested in joining the club.” After receiving this e-mail, Ella later told me, “I was skeptical at first

I was a good writer and entertainment was a genre I enjoyed because it helps people take their mind off of society’s problems.” Ella is definitely a person with substance, but as Bee and I would learn, she is also a woman with sass and style.

After our recruitment e-mail exchanges, Ella, Bee, and I met up for lunch a week later. Bee and I didn’t know what to expect from Ella, but we both realized that she would add immediate credibility to Ngô Club. As Bee eloquently told me, “We won’t look like two Asian geeks trying to start a computer gaming society with her in the club.” Bee and I jokingly assumed that Ella would either be a fob or a former Asian sorority girl before we met her in person. For our first Ngô Club lunch, we all met in our company lobby. I was the first to meet Ella, and immediately noticed her classy sense of style. She was clearly not a fob. Although soft-spoken, it became obvious that Ella has a sharp wit. When we realized that we both grew up in the O.C., Ella made some classic Little Saigon references to Lee’s Sandwiches and Bolsa. She may have also referenced those cafes where the old Vietnamese men drink coffee served by scantily clad waitresses too. Anyhow, it was clear that Ella had a sense of humor. As she and I got acquainted in the lobby, Bee arrives late (he’s always on Asian time) and we were finally off to our first official Ngô Club meeting.

At lunch, an instant chemistry formed between the three of us. Like the cartoon *Voltron*, we were three robotic lions that finally united to become one gigantic robot that could defend the universe. I haven’t met many peers in entertainment who can share in the Vietnamese American experience, and now I had two other Ngôs at my lunch table who did. For example, we all have similar stories about Vietnamese parenting. On the subject of names, Bee summed it up best when he said, “My parents wanted to give me an American name similar to Huy, so I ended up with Bee. Funny thing is I’ve always been called by various nicknames my whole life.” (To this day, my parents still only call me by my nickname too.)



David thinks about his next shot.

work in entertainment, not medicine. The second rule of Ngô Club is that your last name must be Ngô. Finally, the third rule of Ngô Club is that you must hate durian. Once these tenets were set, Bee and I were ready to recruit new members, thinking that this would never actually happen. What are the chances of meeting another Ngô at work?

Approximately two weeks after Ngô Club was formed (fall 2005), Bee comes up to me one day at work with a revelation. “Dude, did you know there is an Ella Ngô that works here?” he said. When attempting to send an e-mail, Bee had scrolled past Ella’s name in the company’s network server. I told Bee that we have to recruit Ella for Ngô Club, but then we debated this idea. We didn’t want to

because this could be really dorky or really cool. These two Vietnamese guys could be totally unsocial.”

Before Ella arrived at her job as a copy editor for our online division, she had an extensive background in print media. She has worked at several lifestyle magazines as a writer, copy editor, and managing editor. Despite her success as a journalist, Ella still faces many challenges as a woman in entertainment. Quoting Ella, “When I tell guys that I work in magazines, they always assume I’m an import model, but I’m actually smart and have something to say.”

Ella decided to pursue journalism as a teenager after considering several other career options. According to Ella, “At 10, I wanted to be a pediatrician and then later an anchor woman. However, I realized that

Besides our nicknames, we all could relate to the parental pressures of pursuing traditional Vietnamese American careers such as medicine, law, and engineering. During lunch, Ella remarked, "I still get pressured today to study medicine even though I'm pretty far into my journalism career."

Growing up, I always found it ironic that my parents would drop hints about attending law school while a Vietnamese melodrama starring Vietnamese actors written by Vietnamese producers featuring Vietnamese music played on our living room TV. Clearly, art is a vital element of Vietnamese tradition and culture. Those *Paris by Night* videos don't sell themselves. The career paths that Ella, Bee, and I have chosen are, in many ways, an extension of the artistic heritage of our ancestry. We're the current generation of Vietnamese artisans, except we've traded in the *áo dài* for track jackets and sneakers.

Don't get me wrong, I have a tremendous amount of respect for doctors and lawyers, and often times I'm envious of their paychecks. However, what drives me is the opportunity to excel in a career field where I can utilize one of my best strengths—creativity. If I was good in math, I would've been an accountant. In reality, I could never get an "A" on a math test in high school, but I always got "A"s on my English papers. In an ethereal way, I was destined to write scripts, direct films, program television, and write this very article. Similarly, my Ngô Club compatriots have found solace in the creative arts as well.

About his career choice, Bee said, "My first goal was to actually own a nail salon, but I ended up doing what I know best, which is producing, editing, and creating television for a wide audience."

When discussing the creative arts, Ella remarks, "As much as you want to please your parents and go into traditional fields, you're actually servicing the Vietnamese community by broadening the scope of what a Vietnamese American is capable of accomplishing."

Vietnamese people aren't all math nerds; we are creative people too.

Although we can help increase the presence of Vietnamese Americans in the media, Ngô Club understands the challenges that lie ahead of us. The Vietnamese community is very diverse and everyone has their own views on politics, religion, and society. Although most people assume we all live in San Jose, Vietnamese Americans reside in different parts of the U.S. at various socioeconomic levels.

Even though Ngô Club wants to "represent" for its people, we can't put the varying needs of an entire culture on our shoulders. Instead, Ella, Bee, and I have chosen to just be ourselves and share our own personal ideas and experiences in our work. Through this individuality, hopefully society can view the entire Vietnamese community as a group of persons rather than a series of stereotypes. Ella is a not a submissive masseuse. Ella is a girl who can eat like a lumberjack. Bee is not a PC technician. He is a thin guy who is constantly trying to gain weight. I do not play badminton. Actually, I played a season of ultimate frisbee in college. We are Vietnamese Americans, but our ethnicity does not define who we are as people.

As Ella once told me, "Be proud of your heritage, but don't make it the biggest issue because race ultimately doesn't matter. You matter."

Yes, if it weren't for our last names, Ella, Bee, and I wouldn't have united to become the cohesive media powerhouse that is Ngô Club. However, Ngô Club only exists today because of the camaraderie we have with one another. We're all friends who share a love for creativity and we're all trying to make careers out of this passion. We're serious about our goals, but at the same time, we're not serious about ourselves. Ella is striving to be a managing editor for a major media entity, and proudly displays her 5th grade spelling bee trophy at her desk to symbolize this goal. Bee wants to produce programming that changes the television landscape, but he is seemingly more determined to find a good bowl of *phở* in Los Angeles. Someday, I hope to make films that impact society like Scorsese, Spielberg, and Tarantino. For now, I'm just really trying to

save up money to buy some new clothes to diversify my wardrobe.

We don't take ourselves seriously because, after all, we work in entertainment. The Ngô Club is really all about sarcasm, self-deprecation, and style. In fact, when *NHÁ* asked me to provide photos for this article, I couldn't just send them family album photos of Ella, Bee, and myself. Instead, Ngô Club commandeered a photographer and did a full-blown photo shoot at The Standard in Downtown Los Angeles (That place looks amazing!). If given the opportunity to be creative, the Ngô Club will run wild with it, and that we did.

Hopefully, Ngô Club will be around to see the last name Ngô mentioned alongside such celebrated Hollywood surnames as Baldwin, Coppola, Douglas, and Barrymore (and pronounced properly too). During the photo shoot, I asked Bee where he thought Ngô Club would be in 10 years. Bee replied, "I think we're all going to be all right. We're all going to get there. At least Ella will."

Ella, Bee, and I do ultimately want to make our parents happy, and we believe the creative arts are our way to do so. Quite frankly, we'd all make pretty crappy doctors and lawyers, and no parent wants their child to have that type of reputation. With that in mind, Ngô Club will continue to do its thing in entertainment. However, we know that an entire young generation of Vietnamese American media artists is on the rise. If we can give some humble advice to any future Ngô, Trần, or even Huỳnh, it's that you should pursue your passion in whatever field you choose. However, if you do choose a career as a media artist, just know that basically everyone will pronounce your last name incorrectly.

The Ngô Club spends its Monday nights at The Standard in Downtown Los Angeles to symbolize its attempt at setting the standard. Also, The Standard has good fries and a great view.

David Ngô is trying to be a writer, director, television executive, model, actor, spoken word artist, and friend. He made his own website at www.doubleohthree.com.