

Berlinale
71st Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Encounters

Taste

a film by Le Bao



Cinema22 and E&W Films present

Taste

a film by Le Bzo

Vietnam / Singapore / France / Thailand / Germany - 2021 - 1h37 - 2.40 + 5.1 - Yoruba / Vietnamese

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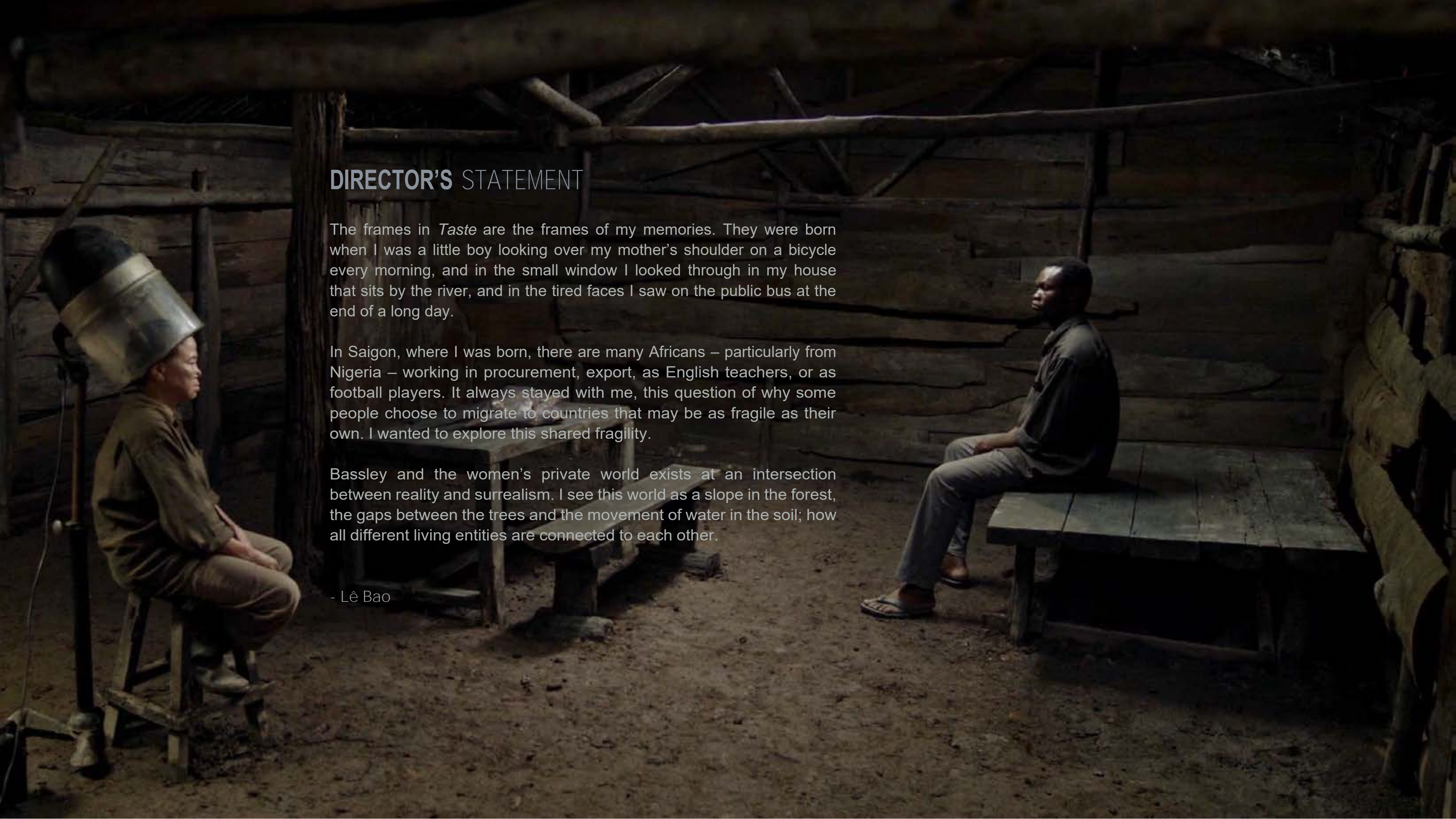
Photos and press kit can be downloaded from
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SYNOPSIS

Bassley, a Nigerian footballer living in Vietnam, has been unable to make a living since he broke his leg. He and four middle-aged women he sometimes works for decide to escape the disappointments of their daily lives. They go to an old house where together they create a special world for themselves.

But this intimate utopia cannot last forever...





DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

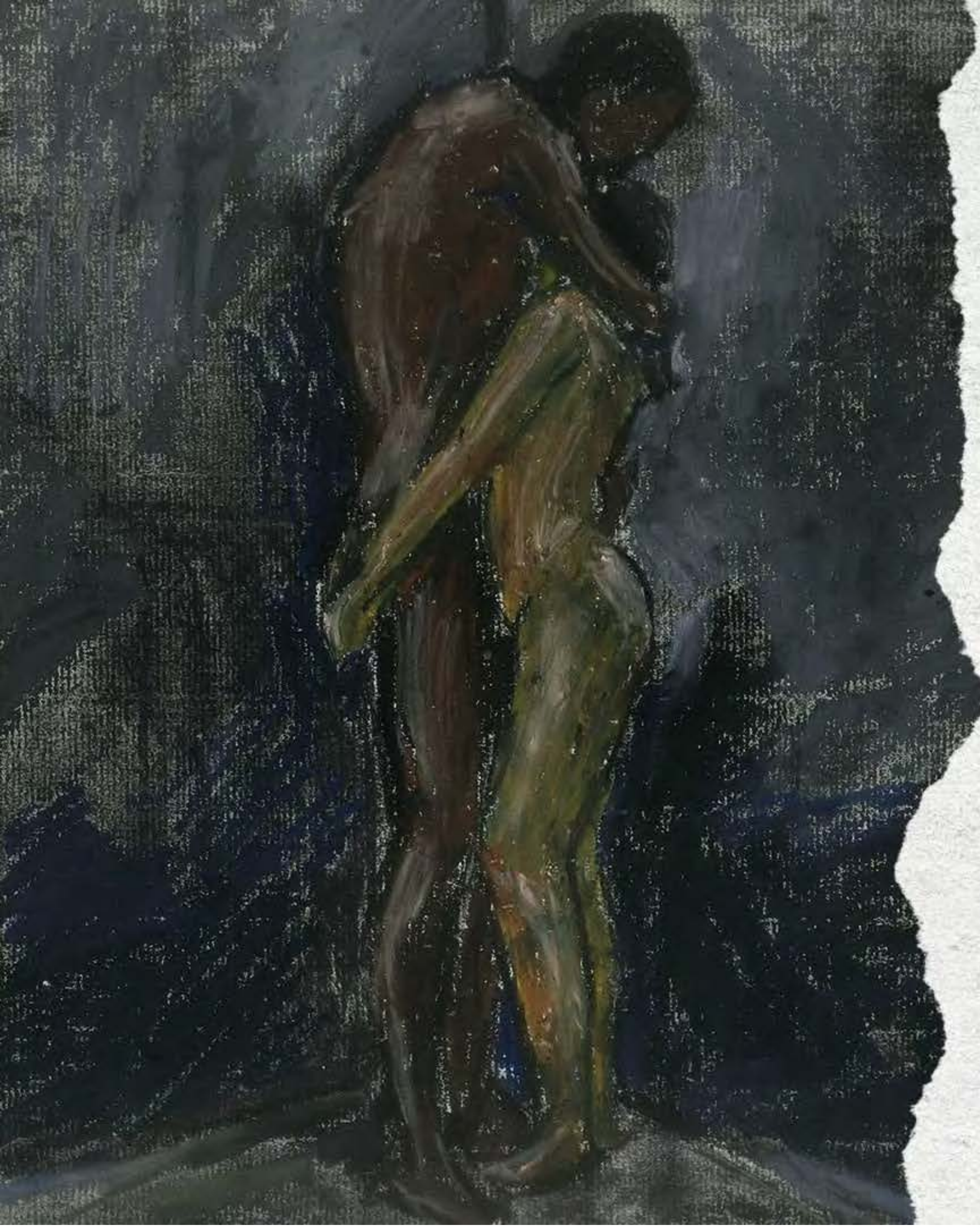
The frames in *Taste* are the frames of my memories. They were born when I was a little boy looking over my mother's shoulder on a bicycle every morning, and in the small window I looked through in my house that sits by the river, and in the tired faces I saw on the public bus at the end of a long day.

In Saigon, where I was born, there are many Africans – particularly from Nigeria – working in procurement, export, as English teachers, or as football players. It always stayed with me, this question of why some people choose to migrate to countries that may be as fragile as their own. I wanted to explore this shared fragility.

Bassley and the women's private world exists at an intersection between reality and surrealism. I see this world as a slope in the forest, the gaps between the trees and the movement of water in the soil; how all different living entities are connected to each other.

- Lê Bao





A CONVERSATION WITH LE BAO

How did you work on the script of *Taste*? The film consists of scenes, moments, vivid sketches – it's a series of interconnected vignettes strung together and finally what appears on screen looks like a cross between keen-eyed observation and a scripted, carefully choreographed dream. How did it all come together?

Initially, I wanted to make *Taste* in a documentary style with hand-held camera movement, something fast and realistic. I intended to describe the reality of African migrants in Saigon. But when I met the main actor, Olegunleko Ezekiel Gbenga, or Ezekiel, and when I continued to talk to the African community in the city, I realized that I had to change my approach. Everything should be slower, calmer. That's when my script slowly changed. The original script dealt with a lot of football because Ezekiel worked as a coach for a small club in Vietnam. But that, too, slowly changed; I don't want to put too many details into the script, not about football or anything. I rather want to tell the story of human beings.

While looking for funding, I spent a lot of time on sketching. Sitting with the sketching artist helped me see a clearer view of material, space and color. This is an important stage for me when I can observe my fantasies. To know what it is possible to realize, and what to do with this imagination – to change, modify or even discard it.

And with the script, how did you translate it into the visual language of the film? *Taste* has a specific rhythm, a steady, lulling rhythm, insistent and yet liquid in the way action and image flow from scene to scene.

When I see African people on a bus I'm reminded of when my mother took me to school on a bicycle. When I was on the saddle of my mother's bike or when I was growing up and taking the bus, we're always in the middle of a traffic jam. Everything seems to move so slowly, which may affect the rhythm of my movie. Rhythm is a characteristic part of my visual language.

When I imagine a specific image, it means I'm creating a tangible interaction. Like when I can't speak or confide in someone, I can talk to a "tree" – my tree here is the image. The tree is created and becomes very close to me. I feel like I actually own something.

I want to delve a little deeper into your visual style. Is there any specific influence? It would be simplistic of me to mention Pedro Costa or Roy Andersson as your possible references: I mean, it would be too Euro-centric and a decontextualized attempt to read your work, since what you've done in *Taste* and in your short films is not a transposition of European arthouse aesthetics to the squalor of Southeast Asia. Rather, it's an expressive, singular vision.

This is a difficult one to answer. My producer and I have discussed this, but we don't have a perfect answer. I only discovered Pedro Costa just before I started shooting *Taste*. But if you talk about what influenced my vision, I think it's the place I live in and grew up in, in Saigon. It's a poor working-class area. I know for sure that if it weren't for this place, all my senses and perceptions would be completely different. The taste of the people and the life here have made a huge impact on me. This is a place where all levels of emotions can be pushed to their extremes and then erupt with joy and pain at the same time. I got into a large hole after those explosions and gathered the debris. Count, chew and digest.

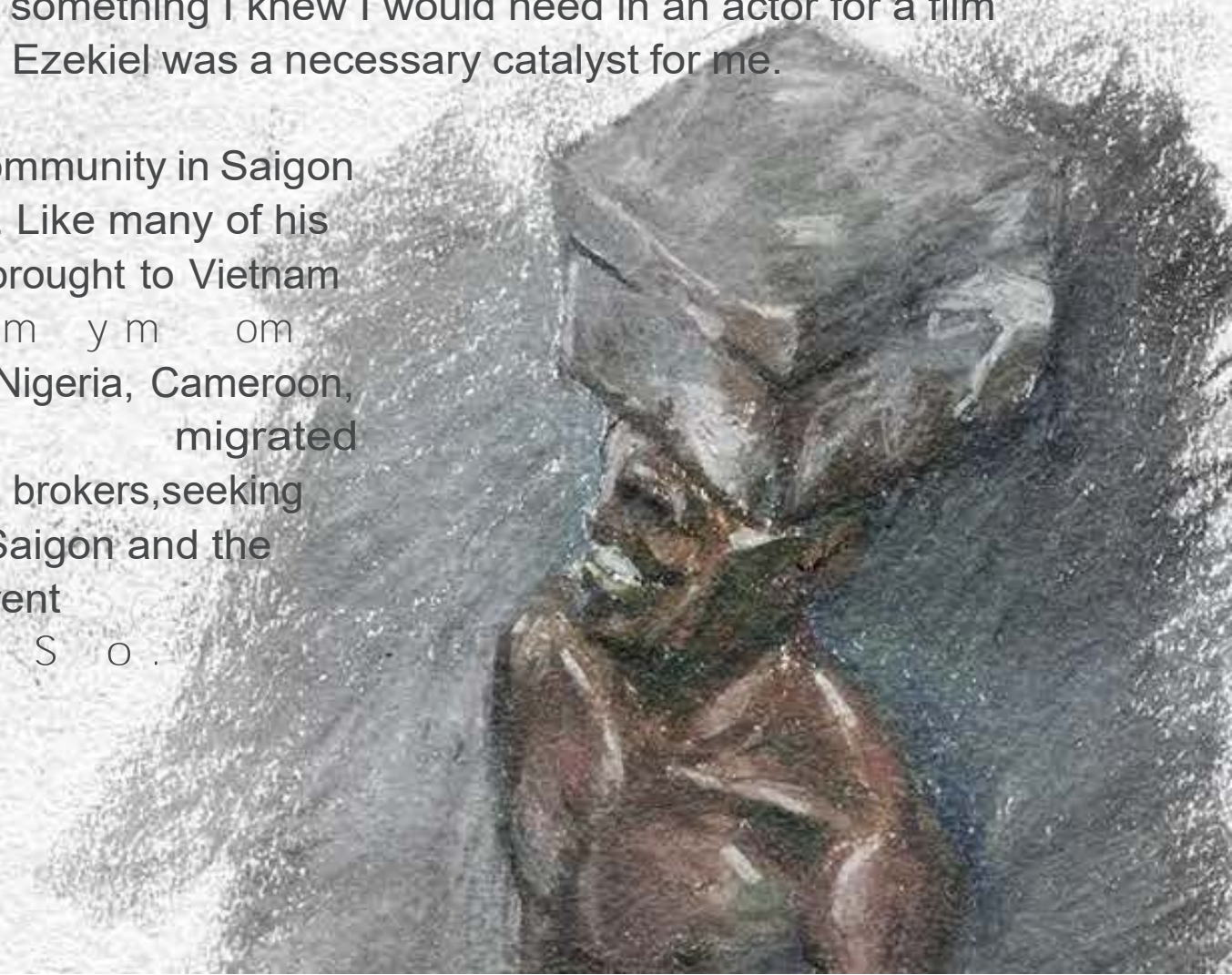
Picking up the debris and turning it into a story, into cinema.

My childhood was associated with the separation of my parents. The conflicts and violence between them and their rocky relationship created ruptures in my flow of thoughts and feelings. I came to the cinema late, but I think the way that I think about myself and the rhythm of the movie is influenced by my teenage life. Including things that I fear and desire, my longing and remembrance.

Let's return to Ezekiel, the African protagonist in *Taste*. Can you talk about finding him and working with him?

I met Ezekiel when he had just been in Saigon for nine months. I had been
ou m y o
migrants reside. Over cups of coffee with milk and soft drinks, night after night, they shared their fears and insecurities, sadness and loneliness. It was from these encounters that I was inspired to create another world in *Taste*. When I met Ezekiel and we started talking, what struck me was his composure and how good he was at listening - something I knew I would need in an actor for a film like this. The meeting with Ezekiel was a necessary catalyst for me.

At that time, the African community in Saigon was making a lot of news. Like many of his countrymen, Ezekiel was brought to Vietnam by
. S 2008 m y m om
African nations (including Nigeria, Cameroon, S migrated
to Vietnam through player brokers, seeking to become footballers in Saigon and the Southern provinces – current
umb bou 2000 S o .



It is seen as an easier alternative to being a migrant footballer in Europe and many come to Vietnam with the dream of being a football star, without knowing much about the local situation. Successful players are able to remit money back home to support families and hometowns, but those who become unemployed through injury or unfortunate circumstances find themselves stuck, having to make a living in Vietnam through alternate means. Many of the men face discrimination.

Before he came to Vietnam, Ezekiel didn't know much about where it was or what it was like. He got in touch with the African community to find a way to survive after the short tourist visa period ended. What he wanted was to participate in professional football again like many young people like him who came to Southeast Asia.

Taste requires an unshakable trust between you and your actors. Ezekiel, of course, but also the women who share the house with him. All of them are non-professional actors, and yet their acting, or should I say their presence, make up the emotional and physical texture of the film.

The way I interacted with Ezekiel and with the women are different. I talked with Ezekiel about different things and I had to convince him about what we were doing. Shortly after the meeting, we finished the set and one evening we decided to put him there. When he walked into the space, he instantly became part of the scene. He also saw that all of us, the whole crew, were serious about this.

With the women, the first thing I told them was that there were scenes in which they would appear naked. I told them what I would require them to do on the set. I treated them with respect, that's the most important thing for me. Then during the shoot, I spent a lot of time where they work, talking to them, drinking beer with them and listening to stories and gossip. Their stories and emotions emerged from there and I could see their real selves when they interacted with other women in the same profession. Once I had enough information and found the emotional boundaries I needed, at that point I kept a certain distance from the actors. I'm someone who doesn't want a too close relationship with the actor.

On set, because they are all non-actors, I had to be very patient. I had to give direction in the most simple and accurate fashion, so they knew what I wanted them to do. Another important thing is, I told them to be restrained and not to be too expressive.

The space presented in the film is a sanctum of privacy that seems to have been carved out away from society – or from reality. In this space the characters, Ezekiel and the women, are stripped to the essence of what they are, or what they dream of being. In this space they have created a home, though it's not home in a conventional sense of the word, especially in Southeast Asia, where the idea of home or family is rigorously observed and even revered.

To me, "home" does not mean reuniting; it's always about missing someone, sometimes my father, sometimes my mother. I don't see it as a tragedy, though. It's like feeling free or being alone in the house.

I like to think of "home" as something in a dream, but still a dream that cannot escape the reality of something absent. I mentioned before about the slums I grew up in. There, a house is always small, and always filled with "things". When I dream of a house, I erase most things and keep only what is essential. In the film, the women have a house but not many things inside, just a bed, a table and a chair. To me, the objects in the house are real, but the film itself exists in a dream. It's a private space in my mind.

Is it a good or a bad dream?

That I can't really tell!

By Kong Ritthdee

Kong Ritthdee is a film critic and deputy director at the Thai Film Archive. He regularly contributes to Cahiers Du Cinema, Cinema Scope, Film Comment, and Sight and Sound.



LE BAO ——— DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Lê Bao was born in 1990. He grew up in a small town in Vietnam. He was a little boy looking through the small window of his house by the river in the slums of Saigon. A self-trained cinephile, he learnt about cinema through watching foreign films on his computer and made his first short film when he was 20 years old. His first two short films *Coal* and *Scent* were shot in the underdeveloped areas where he grew up. *Taste*, his first feature, is also shot with non-professional actors in places he has known all his life.

FILMOGRAPHY

FEATURE FILMS

Taste (2021)

SHORT FILMS

Coal (2019)
Scent (2016)
Scent (2014)
Coal (2013)

MAIN CAST



OLEGUNLEKO EZEKIEL GBENGA (Bassley)

Olegunleko Ezekiel Gbenga immigrated to Vietnam 20 years ago. He wanted to be a professional football player but with scarce opportunities, he had to find other jobs to survive in Saigon. He is currently a football coach for Vietnamese children.

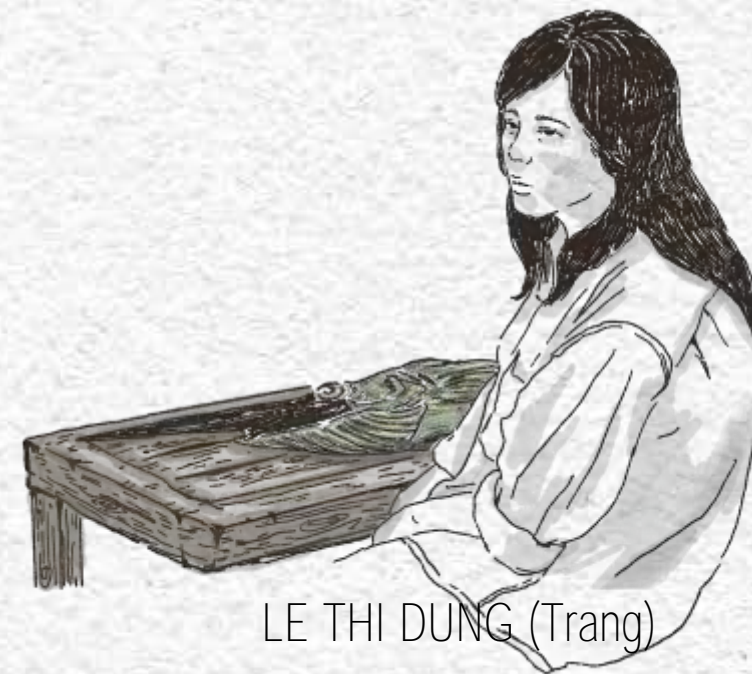
Taste is his first acting role. His character Bassley is a Nigerian immigrant in Saigon who loses his place in the football team after suffering a broken leg. Away from his son and isolated, desiring a greater sense of belonging, Bassley creates a special world for himself and those like him on the fringes of society.

Illustrations by Gwend Lim



KHUONG THI MINH NGA (Mien)

A single, working-class mother, *Taste* marks Khuong Thi Minh Nga's first time taking part in a film. Minh plays Mien, a woman stricken with a strange illness who lives in a household with no men. As her time approaches, her family makes arrangements for her final journey at an empty residence.



LE THI DUNG (Trang)

Le Thi Dung grew up loving singing and acting and *Taste* is her first time acting in a film. Her character Trang works as a fishmonger in a wholesale market and occasionally has sex with Bassley. Trang lives in an isolated house in a vast flatlands, hoping her husband and son who went missing years ago will one day return.



NGUYEN THI CAM XUAN (Hanh)

Nguyen Thi Cam Xuan joined *Taste* because she wanted to find "a new experience in life". This is her first time being an actress. Her character Hanh lives with her sexually distant husband in an abandoned pottery kiln, selling baked buns to make a living. They hardly speak a word to one another.



VU THI THAM THIN (Thuong)

A single woman in a house full of stray dogs and cats, Vu Thi Tham Thin's carefree nature and animal-loving personality mark her first time acting in a film. *Taste* is her first experience acting. As Thuong, Tham plays a vagabond woman who lives in a giant pot with a baby. One day, she disappears without a trace, leaving her pig and pot behind.



**Bassley
Mien
Trang
Hanh
Thuong**

CAST

Olegunleko Ezekiel Gbenga
Khuong Thi Minh Nga
Le Thi Dung
Nguyen Thi Cam Xuan
Vu Thi Tham Thin

**Written and Directed by
Director of Photography
Production Designer
Editor
Colorist
Sound Designer**

**Executive Producer
Producers**

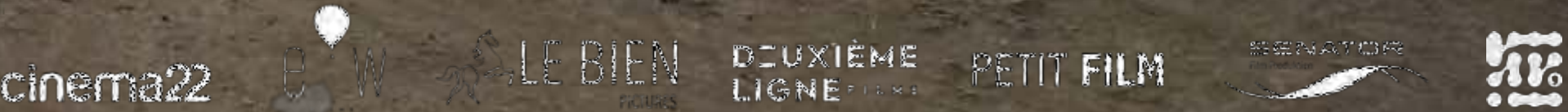
Co-Producers

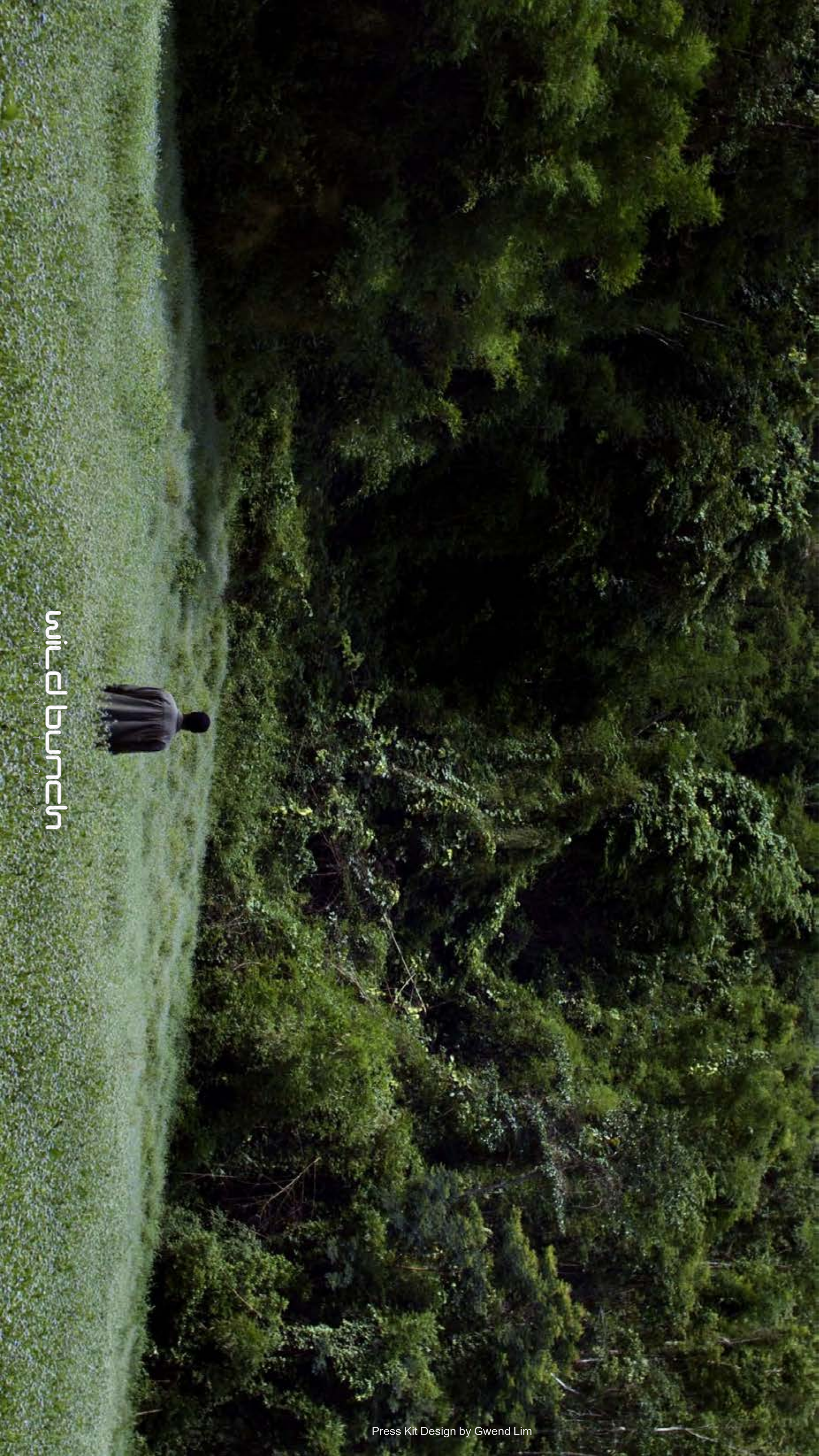
Associate Producers

CREW

Lê Bao
Nguyễn Phú
Le Van Thanh
Lee Chatametikool
Yov Moor
Vincent Villa

Chayamporn Taeratanachai
Lai Weijie
Oo Thi Puang Tao
Marie Dubas
Jean des Forêts
Markus Aldenhoven
Reik Möller
Shih Chin Hang
Elizabeth Wijaya
Amélie Jacques





THE FANTASY