Profile of An Artist: Binh Danh

By Alexandra Mac Taylor

Binh Danh, Yosemite National Park, CA.

For Binh Danh, a South Bay-based photographer and artist of Vietnamese descent, art has a specific aim. According to Danh: "Art is a vessel to embark on a journey of exploration, discovery, and education. The histories I search for [in my art] are the hidden stories embedded in the landscape around me. The processes used in my work represent my interest in the sciences and photographic techniques. In my search, I collect, preserve, and evaluate biological specimens and historical artifacts, in actual practice and metaphorical terms. My goals are to weave these findings into the larger society and explore our shared humanity."

Danh was born in Vietnam in 1977. Leaving the country as a second-wave refugee, Danh's family sought escape outside of post-war Vietnam. Fleeing the country via a fishing boat, the family traveled through Southeast Asia, finally moving to San Jose, California in 1980. Due to his young age, Danh cannot recall his time in Vietnam prior to his arrival in America. However, the artist's familial history, in combination with the Vietnam War itself, served as a continuous specter throughout Danh's early years. As a child during this time, Danh also became fascinated with sunlight, paying particular attention to the shadowed patterns the sun left in his backyard lawn. The Danh family remained in California throughout the artist's childhood— a period in which his interest in light, solar capability, and landscape, as well as in history and memory, grew immensely. Though his parents barely spoke of the Vietnam War and

their experience living through it, the war itself captivated the artist. In tandem with his interest in natural science and material objectivity, Danh's fascination with his own unspoken heritage and connection to landscape and the Vietnam War developed. These interests ultimately guided the arc of the artist's work to where it rests today.

Danh's intrigue with the patterns of light left by the sun and a desire to reconnect with his Vietnamese history led him to invent his own unique photographic printing process, known as the chlorophyll printing process. In the process, digital images are baked onto a natural canvas made up of materials such as leaves. In this manner, Danh creates his art by taking advantage of the natural process of photosynthesis: living leaves, pressed between glass plates with a photographic transparency, are exposed to sunlight for weeks on end. After enough time has elapsed, the exposed work is then encapsulated in a solid block of resin, making the natural material permanent. Once completed, the resulting works are referred to as "chlorophyll prints" by Danh.

Danh, Binh. "Holding #2" (2009).

The work Danh produces through this process— pieces such as "Mother and Child" (2001), "Ambush in the Leaf" (2004), "U.S. Soldier" (2008), and "Holding #2" (2009) — recall the dual intersection of interests which defined the artist's childhood: memory and natural materiality. In this work, Danh aims to evoke remnants of the Vietnam War by giving shape to memory, linking framed natural landscapes and material

objects like leaves to historical records and memory. As a result of this process, Danh produces photograph in which outlined images of natural objects serve as a base for over-imposed Vietnam War images. Holland Cotter of *The New York Times* calls Danh's work in this arena a "retrospective act of witness." Often, Danh's images are violent, uncomfortable, and demanding, as they force the viewer to recall the difficulty of the war itself. Yet, because these historical images are limited to material borders, Danh is able to link the pain of memory to the calmer confines of the organic object— thus subjecting both historical memory and nature to the same permanent form. This intersection of memory and materiality is essential to the artwork of Danh. The artist himself proclaims: "the [Vietnam] war is still part of the landscape… War doesn't go away. It lives on and becomes part of the natural setting; all of these materials have a memory to them. The images of war are part of the leaves, and live inside and outside of them."

Beyond creating his chlorophyll prints, Danh is also a master of the daguerreotype method. Wandering around American national parks like Yosemite, the artist traveled in a van nicknamed "Louis" after Louis Daguerre, inventor of the daguerreotype in the 1830s. His travels through the High Sierras were funded by a residency from Planet Earth Arts. Using the van as a darkroom, Danh coated sheets of polished copper with silver, and added iodine. The resulting work created is one of Danh signature effects: a super-reflective daguerreotype image. For Danh, the aim in this work is for viewers to "see themselves in the picture… [to] also become part of this land; that they, in a way, merge with the land — but they don't quite disappear into the land. That they still see themselves in it." Like his Vietnam War work, the daguerreotype

connects the viewer to mirror-like memory and nature in this manner.

Danh, Binh. *Yosemite Falls*. 2017.

Throughout his art, Danh's attentive care towards history and heritage, materiality and natural substance, light and solar power, is consistently apparent in the artist's extensive body of work. Finding his momentum through combining his interests, in his art Danh manages to recall the diverse intersection between art and other sectors. In so doing, the artist has been able to carve out a unique space for himself in photography and the broader art sphere.

In 2002, Danh graduated with his BFA in photography from San Jose State University. In 2004, he obtained his MFA in Studio Art at Stanford University. He has been featured in multiple exhibits and shows around the world, among them solo exhibits such as *The Khmer*

Rouge Enlarger: Light and Shadow in the Art of Binh Danh, The Photographic Show at AIPAD, Lisa Sette Gallery, New York, NY (2018), *This, Then, is San Francisco*, Haines Gallery, San Francisco, CA (2014), *In the Eclipse of Angkor*, Jordan Schnitzer Museum at University of Oregon, Eugene, OR (2009), and *Room for Contemplation*, Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA (2005). He is currently represented by the Haines Gallery based in San Francisco.

Danh has also been the recipient of numerous awards, fellowships, and residencies from 2001 onwards. Notably, in 2016 Danh was awarded the Evelyn Smith Endowed Professor of Art Award, School of Art at Arizona State University. In 2010, he won the Eureka Fellowship from the Fleishhacker Foundation in San Francisco. The artist has further retained residencies around the globe, studying at Lesley University, in Cambridge, MA (2018), the Sun Valley Center for the Arts, in Idaho (2013), and the Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Art Centre, in Gymea, Australia (2012), among others. The artist is further featured in the permanent collections of over 20 institutions, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Pilara Foundation Collection at San Francisco's Pier 24 gallery, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans.

Today, Danh continues to work and live in Gilroy and teaches photography at San Jose State University.

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