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Six Artistic Perspectives from the Vietnamese American Diaspora in Southern California

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Visual Studies

by

David Hai Goetz

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Cécile Marie Whiting, Chair
Associate Professor Linda Trinh Vo
Associate Professor Sohail Daulatzai

2014

DEDICATION

To

The countless Vietnamese “Boat People”

who paid with their lives while in the search for freedom

“Không có gì quý hơn độc lập tự do”

Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom

Hồ Chí Minh

“Tuyên Ngôn Độc Lập, September 2, 1945”

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Six Artistic Perspectives from the Vietnamese American Diaspora in Southern California

By

David Hai Goetz

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Professor Cécile Marie Whiting, Chair

The reunification of North and South Vietnam at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 was a tumultuous time. Many Vietnamese citizens, afraid of communist persecution, fled the country in search of political asylum and were relocated to new host countries throughout the world. The United States houses the largest such population of refugees in Orange County, California. This dissertation focuses on six varying perspectives from that community, in the form of visual voices of immigrant Vietnamese American artists, as they delve into representational issues that reflect the general diaspora, including themes of trauma and memory, sexual identity and gender role, displacement and alienation, and the concepts of allegiance and home.

From visual analysis of art work, personal interviews conducted with the artists, varying secondary resources, including art reviews and critical responses to

exhibitions, the project explores the viability of art as a communication tool that creates dialogue between the Vietnamese American diaspora and the larger society.

A NOTE ON CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

When speaking of *Vietnam*, the common understanding by most Westerners is that of the Vietnam War, and generally not of the nation itself or of its citizens. In this text, when referring to the actual country, the proper spelling of “Việt Nam” is used to provide emphasis and to differentiate it from the war.

Additionally, in Việt Nam, one’s surname is stated first, followed by the middle name or initial, and lastly by the given name. For example, one would be introduced as Smith M. John (instead of John M. Smith). Upon arriving in the United States, many of the Vietnamese people changed their names in order to assimilate into American society. Thus, artists like Pham Thi Hanh or Lê Q. Dinh are now known as Hanh Thi Pham and Dinh Q. Lê respectively, where their family names (Pham and Lê) come last. There are a few, however, that still maintain the traditional way, such as Nguyen Tan Hoang (Nguyen is the only one of the six artists in this dissertation that does not Americanize his name). To preserve and honor their choices, this text addresses the people to their own preferences and as they are commonly known. They will also be addressed by their last names, as is the customary tradition in the United States, such as Pham, Lê or Nguyen.

Furthermore, in Việt Nam people are addressed by their profession followed by the first name. Thus, doctor Jane Doe would be addressed as Dr. Jane. Many Vietnamese Americans, particularly the elders within the diaspora, still practice this method of addressing people (instead of saying Dr. Doe). When applicable, the paper follows American standards, except when quoting others.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Nước non ngàn dặm ra đi, nước non ngàn dặm ra đi,
Dù đường thiên lý xa vời, dù tình cô lý chơi vơi
Cũng không dài bằng lòng thương mến người.

Bước đi vào lòng muôn dân, bước đi vào lòng muôn dân.
Bằng hồn trinh nữ mơ màng, bằng tình say đắm hồi chàng.
Ước nuối rằng hòa bình trong ái ân.

Phạm Duy, *Nước Non Ngàn Dặm Ra Đi*¹

The Vietnam War culminated on April 30, 1975, with the final evacuation of remaining Americans and the fall of South Việt Nam to communist forces. Many Vietnamese became wartime political refugees who fled the country due to fear of persecution by the Communists. There were two distinct phases for the migration process, the first beginning in the weeks before the fall of Saigon, when approximately ten to fifteen thousand people who were American allies,

¹ Phạm Duy, *Nước Non Ngàn Dặm Ra Đi* (Endless Steps Away from the Homeland), Tiếng Hát Phương Dung, *Đố Ai*, Làng Văn Music and Video, LV108, 1992. The opening lyrics for the Vietnamese song above, by the preeminent Vietnamese composer Phạm Duy, describe the psychological difficulties and emotional turmoil faced by Vietnamese people as they choose to leave their motherland in search of freedom. Although the translation is not literal, the lyrics are equivalent to:

Endless steps away from the homeland, endless steps away from the homeland,
Even though the road is long, even though the path is lonely,
It cannot break our bond.

Thoughts of leaving you, thoughts of leaving you,
With the maiden's dreams, with the man's passions,
Longing for peace and freedom.

and sponsored by the United States government, left by plane. As the defeat of the South by the encroaching communist forces became imminent, approximately another eighty thousand were evacuated in the last days of April by military helicopters.²



Figure 1.1 Hubert Van Es. Evacuation of CIA station personnel by Air America on the rooftop of 22 Gia Long Street in Saigon on April 29, 1975. Source: UPI/Bettman.

In the days prior to the fall, as the North Vietnamese Army closed in on Saigon, Tân Sơn Nhất International Airport came under heavy artillery attack, preventing passenger planes from taking off. In those last few days of the war, under Operation Frequent Wind, American helicopters airlifted the remaining American civilians and many ‘high-risk’ Vietnamese from specific sites in Saigon.³ The campaign evacuated over seven thousand people, and according to the May 12, 1975 edition of *Newsweek*, it was a “logistical success . . . the biggest helicopter lift

² Hien Duc Do, *The Vietnamese Americans* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 26.

³ *The Fall of Saigon*, Elizabeth Deane (Producer), WGBH Boston Video, 1983, videocassette.

of its kind in history.”⁴ Through television news coverage and magazine publications the images of those fateful moments when helicopters took off from the embassy rooftop as countless desperate Vietnamese citizens fought to get aboard a flight, are forever etched in the memory of people around the world (Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.2 Françoise Demulder. Communist tanks mowed down the iron gates of Independence Palace in Saigon on April 30, 1975, just hours after the last American helicopters left. Source: Gamma-Liaison.

By midday of April 30, communist forces had entered the city and their tanks had mowed down the iron gates of the Independence Palace (*Dinh Độc Lập*), home of South Việt Nam’s president (Figure 1.2). Duong Van Minh, having only been president for forty-four hours, quickly surrendered to the Communists in the hopes of preventing any bloodshed among the population. Colonel Bui Tin of the Army of North Việt Nam accepted the surrender and stated,

⁴ Ibid.

“The war has ended today and all Vietnamese are victors. Only the American imperialists are vanquished.”⁵

Yet this assurance did not ease the minds of most South Vietnamese. While the day is known to most northerners as *Giải phóng miền Nam* (the liberation of the South), it is contrastingly defined as *Tháng Tư Đen* (Black April) or *Ngày Quốc Hận* (National Hatred Day) by many anti-communist southerners. To the Vietnamese from the South, the events of that ill-fated day became difficult ones to accept. An additional forty to sixty thousand people fled in small boats over the next two weeks and were rescued by American naval vessels off the coast of Việt Nam and transferred to Subic Bay and Clark Air Force base in the Philippines. Approximately 140,000 South Vietnamese political leaders, military officers, and skilled professionals and their families escaped during this first phase, with the majority being relocated to the United States. Even though Vietnamese refugees continued to leave Việt Nam between 1976 and early 1977, the numbers were small and not noticed by the media.⁶

The noticeable second phase of refugee flight began in early 1978, when approximately ten to fifteen thousand Vietnamese took to the open ocean in small boats each month, despite the insurmountable odds they faced, to escape political oppression and in search of asylum from communist rule. The refugees became commonly known as the “boat people” (Figure 1.3).⁷ In his text, *Hearts of Sorrow*, James Freeman interviewed refugees and provided voices for various

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ One of the reasons for the relatively small number of refugee outflow between late 1975 and 1977 is that initially life did not change drastically for the residents in the South. The communist government was worried of economic chaos and focused on increasing agricultural and industrial production even as they tried to reunify the two halves of Việt Nam. As social changes were made, more people in all parts of Việt Nam began to flee the oppression. See Sucheng Chan, ed., *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 66.

⁷ Do, 27.

members of the Vietnamese American community, in the form of personal accounts of their different experiences that were affected by war, loss of homeland, as well as the journey and adjustment to their new country.



Figure 1.3 More than a million Vietnamese refugees sought freedom on boats similar to this one after the fall of South Việt Nam. They became collectively known as “boat people.”⁸

One survivor relates his 26-day ordeal at sea, when many in his party died of starvation and massacre due to communist gunfire. Of the approximately 120 refugees that began the journey on that boat, only thirteen survived.⁹ Of these thirteen, none were women, children, middle-aged or elderly adults. He speaks of the memories of hunger and despair when his ship repeatedly encountered other vessels, all of which passed them by and refused to offer any assistance. A similar story is told in the 2007 documentary, *Bolinao 52*, where only 52 of the 110 refugees that started the journey survived. The boat remained adrift for thirty seven days, its

⁸ <http://lost-at-sea-memorials.com/?p=1006>. Accessed May 22, 2014.

⁹ James M. Freeman, *Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lives* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 329.

rescue refused by an American military vessel.¹⁰ Many of these boats were lost at sea, even as others drifted helplessly upon the open ocean for extended periods of time. The survival of the occupants was in the hands of chance; some eventually did arrive at safe shores.

Refugee camps were established in Malaysia, Thailand, The Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Hong Kong to house the mass exodus. Before they could arrive at their new homes, most refugees would have had to spend many long months, and in some cases even years in refugee camps, waiting to be processed and accepted by a host country. In her text, *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free*, Adelaida Reyes speaks of her visits to some of the refugee camps that were set up around Asia and of her interactions with the survivors. She describes the purposes of these camps as twofold: “the security and protection of those seeking asylum from Indochina, and their preparation for resettlement in third countries, mostly in the West.”¹¹ For the lucky ones, the resettlement process could happen within a matter of six to nine months. For others a number of years could be spent in a camp while waiting for sponsorship from a willing host country. Reyes comes to the conclusion that “for the great majority of Vietnamese refugees, camp life is part of the journey from their homeland. It is part of the string of contingencies that marked their lives in resettlement.”¹²

Over two decades, between 1975 and 1995, an estimated two million Vietnamese had left Việt Nam as displaced people and resettled in foreign lands. Due to its involvement in the Vietnam War, the United States became the major sponsor, taking in the highest number of

¹⁰ *Bolinao 52*, Duc Nguyen (Director), Center for Asian American Media, 2009, videocassette.

¹¹ Adelaida Reyes, *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 23.

immigrants. By 1985, nearly a half million Vietnamese had resettled in the United States.¹³ According to the 1990 census, California became home to the largest enclave of Vietnamese Americans.¹⁴ Dissimilar to most other émigrés that came to America and *chose to* immigrate, Vietnamese refugees *were forced to flee*, due to the combined fear for their lives and dread of political oppression by the Communists. The loss of their homeland, loved ones, and a way of life, all contributed to the *forced displacement* of the Vietnamese refugees. Also in contrast to other immigrant groups who came to the United States seeking economic and other opportunities, being assured of their final destination, most of the Vietnamese refugees, particularly the “boat people,” did not prepare for the migration that followed and had no knowledge of their terminus ad quem. For most, the survival of the journey, although based on fate, represented a better alternative than remaining suppressed under the rule of the communist regime. The aspects of a difficult voyage in search for political asylum, accompanied by numerous uncertainties, followed by the resettling and acculturation process into an unfamiliar new homeland, are all part of the Vietnamese diasporic experience.

This project investigates how artistic expressions by six contemporary Vietnamese American mid-career artists convey some of the representational experience of the community. Connected to the diaspora in Southern California, they are among the prominent visual artists to emerge from the population and have built the foundation for Vietnamese American arts and have paved the way for successive generations of Vietnamese American artists. Specifically, this dissertation will analyze three sets of comparisons: between Long Nguyen and Ann Phong,

¹³ Nazli Kibria, *Family Tightrope – The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 10-11.

¹⁴ Ibid, 11. According to the 1990 census, California was home to 46.5 percent of the Vietnamese population in the United States, with Texas following at 11.3 percent.

whose paintings highlight *trauma* and its effect on *memory*; between Hanh Thi Pham and Nguyen Tan Hoang, whose photographs destabilize *gender categories* and *sexual identities* (both repressed and actual); and between Dinh Q. Lê and Brian Doan, whose mixed media pieces contrast their respective senses of *displacement* and feelings of *alienation*.

These visual artists use a variety of media to address their experiences as refugees exiled from a lost homeland. All six were born in Việt Nam; however they immigrated to the United States at varying ages. Nguyen Tan Hoang and Dinh Q. Lê arrived when they were seven and ten, respectively, while Long Nguyen was a teenager. Ann Phong, Hanh Thi Pham, and Brian Doan were all young adults when they arrived in this country. While some ventured alone others came with their families. Pham and Doan flew to the United States; whereas the remaining four made the journey across the perilous seas and faced the dangerous journey as “boat people.”

Regardless of how they arrived, all went through the process of being acculturated into American society. They were all educated in the United States, each receiving an M.F.A. from a credited American university: Long Nguyen from San Jose State University in 1985; Hanh Thi Pham from California State University, Fullerton in 1986; Dinh Q. Lê from The School of Visual Arts, New York City in 1992; Ann Phong from California State University, Fullerton in 1995; Brian Doan from Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 2007; and Nguyen Tan Hoang from University of California, Irvine in 1996, as well as a Ph.D. from University of California, Berkley in 2008. Educated by the West and infused with Western ideologies, the work of each artist reflects his or her own interpretations of the plight of the Vietnamese American population and how it has been affected by the larger society. Some of the issues exposed in their works deal with trauma and healing, displacement and immigration, assimilation and alienation, personal identity and belonging, as well as gender and sexual issues.

The individual roots and childhood experiences of these artists as well as their common heritage, and national ties to Việt Nam became major influences in their art. In the article, *What is a Nation?*, Ernest Renan defines a *nation* as “a soul, a spiritual principle”¹⁵ that is anchored in the past while looking toward the future, consisting of shared values, an abundance of memories and myths, and common goals. Its strength can be enhanced through heroic history and noteworthy ancestry along with a shared vision. In their own ways, each of the six artists touches on these ideals in his or her art production.

Indeed, the concepts of “nationhood” and “nationalism” are porous and often difficult to define. Even Benedict Anderson in his seminal text, *Imagined Communities*, admits this: “Nation, nationality, nationalism – all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse [sic].”¹⁶ Ho Chi Minh and his regime from North Việt Nam, however, used the concept of nationalism as the impetus to drive out the Americans and to liberate their “Southern brothers.” In fact, Ho Chi Minh was merely continuing Việt Nam’s thousand-year effort to rid itself of foreign occupation: first, the dynastic Chinese, then the colonial French, the war-time Japanese, and finally, the imperialist Americans.

According to historian Patricia Pelley, the postcolonial period for Việt Nam “in terms of the intentions of Vietnamese revolutionaries” was during the August Revolution of 1945.¹⁷ On September 2, Ho Chi Minh recited Việt Nam’s Declaration of Independence in Hanoi to “an exuberant crowd of one million Vietnamese” as a celebration of the emergence of ‘the people’

¹⁵ Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?” in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 19.

¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1990), 12.

¹⁷ Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 1.

and to mark the end of the oppression by their French colonizer.¹⁸ Using the ideas of “nationalism” he incited the Vietnamese people to fight for freedom and self-governance, free from foreign occupation. The event was considered “especially poignant because the French had transformed the city into the headquarters of the colonial regime.”¹⁹ It markedly was the beginning of post-colonialism for Việt Nam. Nonetheless, it took another nine years before the Viet Minh, a communist and nationalist movement under Ho Chi Minh, were able to defeat the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and an additional twenty one years before Việt Nam was finally successful in driving out the Americans and uniting itself as one nation.

Today, nearly four decades since their resettlement in the United States, many in the Vietnamese American community, particularly the elders, still vehemently oppose the socialist ideals set forth by Ho Chi Minh. This is evident by the organized marches and gatherings by the community when it perceives threats of communist infiltration in the United States or when it feels threatened by socialist ideologies from the “new” communist Việt Nam. For the Vietnamese diaspora, nationalism is defined positively as a heroically shared common culture as oppose to the communist’s negatively outlined “united force against foreign invaders.” The responses by the community against perceived threats stem from a continued collective memory of *loss* and *trauma*.

Through the investigation of these six artists, who left their homeland to live as refugees among an unfamiliar people in an unknown culture, the project examines their artwork and analyzes how they reflect their experiences as displaced people. All six were living in Việt Nam

¹⁸ Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam & America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3-4.

¹⁹ Pelley, 1.

at the end of April 1975, so their lives were transformed by the war and its outcome. As displaced individuals, Long Nguyen, Ann Phong, Hanh Thi Pham, Nguyen Tan Hoang, Brian Doan, and Dinh Q. Lê address some of the challenges faced by immigrants as they try to cope in the new country. Their art touches on various themes pertaining to the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States and the processes of displacement and settlement.

CHAPTER 2

TRAUMA AND MEMORY

Memory is never shaped in a vacuum; the motives of memory are never pure.

James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory*²⁰

The traumatic experience of the Vietnam War, also known as the Second Indochina War, lasted for twenty long years (1955-1975) and left an indelible mark upon the memory of the survivors, one that continues to haunt them. Many have repressed the painful memories of the violence they experienced and witnessed during the war, including the loss of loved ones. The death toll is estimated to be more than three million over the course of the war, with approximately 430,000 civilian casualties in the South and 65,000 in the North.²¹ For many refugees at the end of the war, particularly the “boat people,” it was their escape from the communist regime, however, that would have caused unimaginable suffering, oftentimes leaving them to suffer in collective silence. For the refugees in the diasporic community it is difficult to revisit this past. Artistic expression is a viable way for a few within the community to create visual representations of their journey. It allows the resurface of repressed memory to bring forth a dialogue about the experience.

²⁰ James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 2.

²¹ Louis A. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors: Displaced Persons and Other Victims in Viet-Nam, 1954-1975* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 310.

California-based Vietnamese American artists Long Nguyen (1958 -) and Ann Phong (1955 -) are ideal study cases, since their paintings thematically deal with the subjects of *trauma* and *memory* of the Vietnamese “boat people.” Yet, when looking at the images of these two painters, both of whom were *primary witnesses*²² to the refugee narrative, including the Vietnam War, the flight for political freedom via the open sea, and the process of adopting a new homeland, there are distinct differences in their approaches. Though Nguyen and Phong are contemporaries, having been born only three years apart in southern regions of Việt Nam, and spent their childhoods there, they each left the country at different times under dissimilar circumstances. Nguyen fled with several family members in the immediate days following the fall of South Việt Nam, while Phong remained under communist rule for half a dozen years before deciding to leave on her own.

Additionally, their gender differences provide them with very distinctive perspectives toward the experience. Comparatively, Nguyen’s paintings reflect a more stoic masculinity in tones and style whereas Phong’s canvases bring forth a more feminine sensitivity of color and brushwork. Even as their artworks reflect their individual and gendered memories of the journey for political asylum, they also mirror the different attitudes the two artists adopt towards the past. Nguyen’s images appear to be for cathartic purposes, still entrenched in the trauma associated with the painful memories of the escape, while Phong’s canvases are more of a departure from the historic event, providing solace and a glimmer of optimism. In a sense, Nguyen’s paintings

²² *Primary witness* and *secondary witness* are respective terms used by the art historian, Dora Apel, to describe those who have actually experienced a traumatic event (such as the Holocaust) versus those who only know about it from secondary recounts. See Dora Apel, *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

allow him to *escape from* the trauma while Phong's provide her the freedom to *go to* a more hopeful future.

In the text, *Trauma Cinema*, Elizabeth Waites is quoted by Janet Walker as saying, "Memory for traumatic events can be extremely veridical."²³ This is because traumatic episodes tend to leave sharper and clearer imprints on one's memory, searing those incidents into one's recollect with dramatic clarity. Many scholars argue that traumatic episodes tend to leave sharper memories than quotidian events. For Nguyen the memories associated with the trauma at the end of the Vietnam War and his subsequent escape are veracious and perennial. As a *primary witness*, Nguyen lived through the difficult circumstances that entail seeing one's nation at war, losing one's home and having to leave one's country behind, fleeing to the open ocean where life and death hangs in the balance, surviving the journey with little food and water, becoming a stateless person, and facing an uncertain future in a new strange land. Consequently, when creating his canvases, Nguyen provides a personal perspective that is at the same time a *representative view* of the experience that other Vietnamese Americans could identify with.

At the time of his escape he was only a sixteen-year-old teenager, undoubtedly making the strain from the journey even more impressionable. As Nguyen matured, it is evident that these powerful memories from his exodus had become influential in his artistic creative processes. From personal interviews with Nguyen, Joanne Northrup, senior curator of the San Jose Museum of Art, recounts some of his ordeals as a boat refugee at the end of the Vietnam War:

After two days in the burning sun, lost at sea on the small oil tanker with a failed engine, one of the four thousand refugees crowding the vessel began to lose his mind. He started

²³ Elizabeth Waites, quoted in Janet Walker, *Trauma Cinema* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 4.

yelling angrily and walking over the other passengers, making his way toward the deck rail. . . . The refugee lunged for the guard's M-16, grabbed it, paused no more than a dozen feet from Nguyen and his brother Chinh, and fired once into the air. The crowd swiftly cleared a space around him. As if in slow motion, he turned toward Nguyen and his family, put the gun under his own chin, and pulled the trigger. For a split second, he looked normal, and then he fell into a twisted heap on his back. A small, tiny hole appeared under his chin where the bullet had entered, while the top of his head opened like a bowl, revealing its contents. Blood pulsed out of his body, ruining Nguyen's pants.²⁴

This was clearly a disturbing first-hand experience for Nguyen and left an unforgettable imprint in his memory, as is evidenced by his ability to recall it with such vividness. Having experienced these situations personally, he is able to rely on his own intense memories to communicate his thoughts through his paintings. Even though there is no specific work by Nguyen that alludes to the event mentioned, his many paintings bring forth the general trauma and anguish suffered by boat refugees within the diaspora. Though he may borrow from the collective memories of the Vietnamese American community, Nguyen's first-hand experience as a boat person allows him to personally reflect upon the journey in his art production.

His paintings, from the series *Tales of Yellow Skin*, can be seen as memorials to the victims of the Vietnam War and to the casualties of the "boat people." They are unsettling visions and strong reminders of the tremendous loss that was suffered by many Vietnamese during the flight from their homeland, in search of political asylum. Many lost family members, most of their belongings, and their sense of dignity along the way.

Similarly, Phong's boat paintings are traumatic reminders of the unease and torment one endures when leaving one's homeland for the high seas. Her memory of the Vietnam War, the fall of the South, and her subsequent flight is as vivid as Nguyen's. As a *primary witness*, she

²⁴ Long Nguyen, interviewed by Joanne Northrup in *Tales of Yellow Skin: The Art of Long Nguyen* (San Jose, California: San Jose Museum of Art, 2003), 13.

describes the difficult circumstances associated with the journey from first-hand experience. She tends not to recreate a particularly horrific experience as did Nguyen, however, but to reflect more generally on the conditions of escape:

Escape is not like going on vacation. It's so hard! You have to hide from the police, you have to hide from everybody. And you need to have money – secretly doing it with people who have boats in the countryside, because we lived in the city. So sometimes you make it, sometimes you don't. Sometimes [you need] the connections with people you know; you couldn't go directly to the seashore and talk to people. So there are some people in the middle. Those middlemen, some are honest, some are not. Sometimes we lost money, sometimes we didn't get connected, so there're a lot of things going on. And I wasn't the only one. The *whole* of South Vietnam went through that kind of trouble.²⁵

The main reason for the necessary stealth and secrecy is that if caught trying to flee, one would be labeled a traitor to the nation, and subsequently face the wrath of the communist regime, at the very least, in the form of a long and harsh prison sentence. Oftentimes, while imprisoned, the individual is physically tortured and psychologically brainwashed into accepting communistic ideologies.

Even when one's boat successfully makes it to the open seas, many of the vessels were not built to withstand the harsh elements they encountered, frequently leaving people floating aimlessly for many days, or worse yet, ending up at the bottom of the ocean. Additionally, other dangerous uncertainties such as thirst, hunger, and vicious attacks by pirates, doomed more than half of those who attempted to flee their communist oppressors.

In the 1986 documentary, *Rescue Mission on South China Sea* by the Boat People SOS Committee, the Vietnamese refugees are described as “frightened people, fearing bloody revenge from the Communists, and making every effort to flee.”²⁶ Though they often were met with

²⁵ Ann Phong, interview with the author (Santa Ana, California, September 25, 2012).

²⁶ *Rescue Mission on South China Sea*, John Dinh Xuan Thai (Editor), Boat People SOS Committee, 1986, videocassette.

starvation, drowning, and frequent attacks by pirates on the high seas, which often meant rape and murder, the hope of a new life free of communist control sustained their efforts. For many, the chance of a new life with personal freedom was worth the risk of losing everything, their motto became: “Freedom or death on the high seas.”²⁷ For nearly two decades after the Communists took control of Việt Nam in 1975, countless Vietnamese refugees continued to board perilous vessels for international waters in search of political asylum. Although there are no exact statistics, it is estimated that approximately sixty percent of those who attempted the escape did not survive.²⁸

Trauma and Its Effect on Memory

Even though Nguyen and Phong both survived their dangerous voyages on the open ocean and ended up in the United States, like many of the hundreds of thousands of other Vietnamese “boat people,” they allowed the trauma associated with the experience to recede into the recesses of their memory as they focused on surviving in a new country. After the initial reports covered by various media sources, informing the world of the trauma of the boat people, a long period of silence then followed, when both, the general public and the Vietnamese American community developed collective amnesia. This was most likely due to the tremendous *trauma* and feeling of *loss* associated with the event, which were too unbearable and overwhelming to speak of, as well as the desire to look towards the future.

In her text, *Memory Effects*, the art historian Dora Apel speaks of a similar amnesiac silence in the aftermath of the Jewish Holocaust at the end of World War II:

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Linda Hitchcox, *Vietnamese Refugees in Southeast Asia Camps* (Oxford: St. Anthony's, 1990), 11.

Immediately after the war, the act of bearing witness took place through the publication of photographs of Holocaust atrocities in the daily and weekly press, magazines, on radio broadcasts, and newsreels shown in movie theaters. Once the world was informed, a long period of amnesia followed, beginning in the 1950s, in which there was little public mention of the Holocaust for two decades. The reasons most commonly advanced to explain this vary, but tend to converge on the belief that an emotional numbing took place, causing a repression²⁹

Additionally, many survivors were trying to move on with their new lives and wanted to concentrate on settling into their new culture rather than rehashing the trauma of a violent past. Thus, most remained silent regarding their tormented experience.

Similarly, many Cambodian refugees in the United States share a repressed collective memory and decades-long communal silence resulting from war trauma. After the American withdrawal from the region in 1975, and in the wake of the ruthless brutalities perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge regime, more generally known as the Killing Fields, many survivors within the Cambodian American community have also suffered collective amnesia. Unfortunately, this was to the detriment of certain members' physical and long-term psychological well-being. In the mid-1990s, doctors began to see medical cases related to post-war effects thought to be linked to the Cambodian holocaust: the temporary blindness of some 200 women survivors then living in the Long Beach, California area. Labeled as "psychosomatic blindness" or "hysterical blindness" (hysteria being a "disease" long linked specifically to women), the temporary inability to see suffered by these women is believed to have been symptomatic of the trauma witnessed in the torture and slaughter of countless innocents in Cambodia.³⁰

²⁹ Dora Apel, *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 12.

³⁰ Alec Wilkinson, "A Changed Vision of God," *The New Yorker* (January 24, 1994): 52.

Evidently, the survivors of such intense episodes as the Jewish Holocaust, the Cambodian Killing Fields, or the experience of the Vietnamese “boat people” require a long passage of time before they can contend with the associated anguish and trauma, and an even longer time (perhaps the rest of their lives, if ever) to heal from those ordeals. Most simply want to move on with their new lives and leave the trauma and suffering behind them. Even with the lapse of time, these types of events are so traumatic and painful that invisible scars often persist throughout the remaining lives of the survivors.

Sài Gòn ơi! Ta có ngờ đâu rằng,
Một lần đi là một lần vĩnh biệt.
Một lần đi là mòn lối quay về.
Một lần đi là mãi mãi thương đau.

Nguyệt Ánh, *Một Lần Đi*³¹

Escape for Long Nguyen

When Nguyen and some of his family fled Việt Nam in April of 1975, even as the Communists were rolling their tanks into Saigon, the journey was very unexpected and unplanned. It was past the time of orderly evacuation. The Nguyen family, like countless hundreds of thousands of others in Southern Việt Nam, were left by the Americans and faced a terrifying and uncertain future under the new regime.

³¹ Nguyệt Ánh, *Một Lần Đi (Once Departed)*, Tiếng Hát Thanh Tuyền, *Gởi Người Ngàn Dặm (Sending to One from a Thousand Leagues)*, Thanh Lan Productions, TL55, 1993. The above lyrics by Nguyệt Ánh, composed in the United States in the 1980s, speak of the shared feeling of loss by most Vietnamese refugees upon leaving their homeland. The verses are equivalent to:

Oh Saigon! Little did we know,
Once departed, forever separated.
Once departed, there is no return.
Once departed, eternal anguish.

On the morning of their departure, a family friend had stopped by the Nguyen's home to announce that he had heard rumors of activities at Bach Dang harbor in Saigon. Nguyen and his older brother, Chinh, his aunt Thanh, and his three uncles Binh, Ninh, and Toan, made their way to the harbor to investigate. According to Nguyen's account:

When the group arrived at the pier at ten o'clock they saw two Vietnamese cargo ships, with a single armed guard positioned in front of the gate to protect them. In a futile attempt to keep people from storming the pier, the beleaguered guard fired shots in the air. Defying bullets, hundreds of people swarmed past him onto the narrow planks of the ships. Despite the ships' having been designed for carrying cargo, the desperate people co-opted them to serve as refugee transporters. As the first vessel became overcrowded, its plank was withdrawn, and the cargo ship motored away from the pier.³²

Nguyen's uncle Binh had attempted to return to the family home on their motorcycle to pick up the remaining members but was detained at one of the many checkpoints that had been set up by the incoming communist soldiers. There was nothing that Nguyen or his other family members could do but board the second vessel, named *Truong Xuan*, and headed to open waters. "Having brought no provisions with them, they resorted to tossing money down to the enterprising people remaining on the pier, who sent up dry ramen noodles and a two-liter plastic container . . . filled with drinking water."³³

Huong Nguyen, a fellow passenger on the same vessel, but of no relation to Nguyen, provided some additional details of the voyage:

I was on an oil tanker, the *Truong Xuan*, on an unscheduled, unorganized trip. The dirty tanker was crowded with all kinds of people, young and old, civilians and soldiers. It was not prepared for this many travelers. I was hungry and thirsty. There were (sic) nothing to eat or drink. There were no bathrooms. I really feel (sic) sorry for those people with children. A small tugboat pulled us out of the mud when we got stuck in the river. When the engine stopped working, the tug pulled us all the way to international

³² Long Nguyen, interviewed by Joanne Northrup in *Tales of Yellow Skin: The Art of Long Nguyen* (San Jose, California: San Jose Museum of Art, 2003), 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

waters in the Pacific Ocean and left us there The captain began sending out SOS signals. He sent for hours with no response. All we could see was the water around us. People began to panic, I saw a man jump in the water having told his friends he wanted to go back home. I saw another man shoot himself with a rifle³⁴

The *Truong Xuan* tanker was noted to be the last vessel to leave Việt Nam during the official take-over of South Việt Nam by the Communists on the 30th of April, 1975:

The last ship to leave, the *Truong Xuan*, departs (sic) Saigon at 1:30 PM with [nearly] 4,000 passengers. The story of the *Truong Xuan* voyage is the most harrowing. In the next two days, the *Truong Xuan* runs aground, its generator fails, and its engine room is flooded. The ship drifts to sea until finally on May 2, after all its passengers are transferred to a Danish ship, the *Truong Xuan* sinks in the East Sea (Vietnamese for South China Sea).³⁵

Nguyen, his family members, and fellow travellers were rescued by the Danish ship, *Clara Mærsk*. According to the shipliner's company website, the rescue became one of the highlights of the *Clara Mærsk*'s history, "On 2 May 1975, this vessel became world famous for the largest single rescue of human lives in history, when 3,628 Vietnamese refugees were rescued from the sinking M/V *Truong Xuan* and taken aboard."³⁶

Two days later the ship delivered the evacuees to a refugee camp in Hong Kong. Very quickly, with the help of the Red Cross, Nguyen and his family were able to get in touch with his aunt Kim, who was already living in Tennessee. They were then able to gain the sponsorship of a nearby Catholic congregation to come to the United States. Nguyen and his entourage were the first members of the immediate family to leave Việt Nam by boat. His remaining family

³⁴ Huong Nguyen, "My Journey to the New Land," <http://www.boatpeople.com/stories/Huong-Nguyen.html>. Accessed by Joanne Northrup August 6, 2002. See *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁵ C. N. Nguyen, "30 April, 1975," <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-439305>. Accessed October 7, 2013.

³⁶ Jonathan Wichmann, "Clara Mærsk and the Rescue of 3,628 Vietnamese Refugees in 1975," <http://www.maersklinesocial.com/clara-maersk-and-the-rescue-of-3628-vietnamese-refugees-in-1975/>. Accessed September 28, 2013.

members arrived in the United States over the course of three other separate trips, in 1980, 1981, and finally, in 1986.³⁷

Lội bùn dơ băng lau lách xuyên đêm.
Sương trắng rơi vai tôi buốt lạnh mềm.
Chim muôn buồn rủ nhau bay về đâu.
Ngẩn ngơ lũ vượn gọi nhau.

Đinh Miên Vũ, *Sương Trắng Miền Quê Ngoại*³⁸

Freedom for Ann Phong

The above lyrics by the late Vietnamese composer, Đinh Miên Vũ (1942-2010), is considered by Phong as one of the more memorable compositions because it reminds her of her own exodus from Việt Nam, when she had to wade through the muddy waters of the rice paddies in the middle of the night to reach her getaway boat. Unlike Nguyen, she did not leave Việt Nam in the days following the fall of the South. Instead, Phong remained with her family in the country, living under the new communist regime for six years. In a 2012 interview, she explained that her family consisted of commoners, without military or political affiliations to the fallen regime, “My family thought that when the North and the South united, it would be good

³⁷ See Northrup, 16.

³⁸ Đinh Miên Vũ, “*Sương Trắng Miền Quê Ngoại*,” (The White Dew of My Grandparents’ Land) in *Tình Ca Quê Hương* (Ballads of the Homeland) (Westminster, California: Nhà Xuất Bản Sống Mới, circa 1990), 112. The lyrics translate as:

Wading the muddy water, brushing the reeds, through the night.
The white dew drops on my shoulders, wet and damp.
Flocks of birds cajole each other to which end of the sky?
Unaware, the gibbons call to one another.

for the country, so my family stayed. The reason we stayed [is that] we didn't hold any high ranks in the military or anything, [we] just were common civilians.”³⁹

Born in 1955, three years before Nguyen, she was a young adult by the time the Communists conquered the South. Life under the communist regime, however, was not so good and Phong realized that there were few opportunities for her. When asked about her years of living under the new regime, she described them as a chaotic and difficult time with harsh and uncertain circumstances:

Living in Vietnam was so stressful, until now I still have nightmares. Because I never knew what'll happen tomorrow. The first year in 1977 when I couldn't get into any school or university, I didn't know what to do. I rode my bicycle around Ho Chi Minh City where a lot of people slept on the streets. One time, I rode by and a robber, he robbed someone and he ran past me. The police shot him [from] behind me, shot him and he fell in front of my bicycle. Blood [was] everywhere, imagine if the bullet [had] missed him and hit me. I was right there!⁴⁰

Always having been artistically inclined since she was a child, Phong tried to enter the only art school available in Ho Chi Minh City after graduating from high school. She was turned down because her family was not affiliated with the Communist Party, “I didn't get accepted, because I wasn't in *đoàn* (organization) or *đảng* (the party).”⁴¹ Furthermore, her artistic future in Việt Nam would have been bleak as best, since her talent would have been “used solely as an instrument of propaganda for the new Vietnamese communist regime.”⁴²

After being rejected from the art school, Phong studied for her teaching credentials and became a teacher when she was only twenty years old. This provided an opportunity for Phong

³⁹ Phong, interview with the author (Santa Ana, California, September 25, 2012).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Zan Dubin, “Freedom for Ann Phong—And Her Art” (*Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1995). http://articles.latimes.com/1995-03-15/entertainment/ca-42966_1_graduate-art. Accessed August 12, 2012.

to escape when one of her students approached her: “When I taught in that high school, *Phạm Văn Hải*, [I had a student and] she loved me because I wasn’t a Communist, so she trusted me! And then we had a good student/teacher relationship for a long time Her parents had a boat and she wanted to help me, and her dad said ‘yes.’ So I had a chance to escape.”⁴³

This was not the first time Phong attempted to escape from Việt Nam. Her previous attempts ended in failure. Phong was fortunate that she was successful in her last attempt, “So when my student connected me, that’s a real chance because her parents had a boat. That’s why I made it.”⁴⁴ Even so, the fate of each escapee was very precarious. Unfortunately, her student did not make it. She was captured en route to her family’s boat:

We went down to the countryside in Bạc Liêu. It took a couple of days. We took the little bus (*xe lam*) and the [big] bus (*xe đò*). And then we went on a little boat. There’re many stations to go [through] and we still have these middle people, [the] middle men, the guides. They took us [in groups, from] station to station and then they gave us to the next guide. Somehow her guide got exposed to the police, so she got caught and she was in jail for three years. I didn’t go [in] the same group with her. We separated and went down to the countryside.⁴⁵

After successfully leaving Việt Nam, Phong spent a year in a refugee camp in Malaysia before being sponsored to come to Connecticut by her sister, who was also a refugee that had arrived in the United States in 1977.

New American Lives and the Passage of Time

For Nguyen and Phong, the passage of time afforded them the opportunity as refugees to adapt to their new country and become familiarized with the different culture. While repressing

⁴³ Phong, interview with the author (Santa Ana, California, September 25, 2012).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

the memory of their traumatic experiences in their early years in the United States, both Nguyen and Phong embraced the various opportunities presented to them in America.

Nguyen and the family members that had accompanied him spent their first years in the United States in Tennessee. Nguyen's Aunt Kim, who was the wife of a South Vietnamese air force pilot, had left Saigon prior to the fall of the South and had settled with her husband in Memphis.⁴⁶ With their help the extended family was reunited there, where Nguyen enrolled in Memphis Catholic High School as a senior. "In 1976 Nguyen found himself enrolled in the private Christian Brothers College (CBC) in Memphis with tuition covered by a government grant," where he studied civil engineering.⁴⁷ Even though Nguyen was at a disadvantage, due to his poor English language skills, he nonetheless persevered, and by 1980 graduated with a B.S. in civil engineering.⁴⁸

Even as he practiced engineering during the day, Nguyen's interest in art began to grow and he started taking night classes in life drawing at Memphis State University. The following year, in 1981, he moved to Knoxville, "where he studied fine art full time for two academic quarters at Tennessee State University."⁴⁹

The year 1982 became a pivotal year for Nguyen. Several younger brothers and his father had recently arrived in the United States from a refugee camp in Thailand. Nguyen moved to San Jose, California, with his elder brother to be with the new arrivals. He then enrolled himself in San Jose State University's master of fine art program, which was "one of the largest

⁴⁶ Joanne Northrup in *Tales of Yellow Skin: The Art of Long Nguyen* (San Jose, California: San Jose Museum of Art, 2003), 17.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

on the West Coast, enabling Nguyen to study with such outstanding faculty members as Steve French, Tony May, and Barbara Rogers.”⁵⁰ There, Nguyen was able to hone his artistic skills and was influenced by the “expressive power of paint” of Bay Area Figurative painters such as David Park and Elmer Bischoff.⁵¹ Nguyen received his M.F.A. from San Jose State in 1985.

At about the time that Nguyen initially enrolled into the San Jose State M.F.A. program in 1982, Ann Phong had just arrived in the United States after spending a year at a refugee camp in Malaysia. With the help of a sister who had arrived earlier in the United States, along with the sponsorship of a local church, Phong joined her sister in Connecticut:

I stayed with my sister for a couple months, but she was a refugee like everybody else. She [had] started working around the second week. When the church sponsor for people to come over, they looked for jobs for them right away She started working in the second week and went to school at night, so she worked like fourteen hours, day and night. So when I came over, I looked at her family. I [felt that I would] become a burden for them if I stayed with them.⁵²

Consequently, at the behest of an old boyfriend from Việt Nam, who had arrived in the United States three years earlier, Phong moved out to California, where his family was residing:

So my boyfriend, my high school boyfriend, who came to America three years before me and he [lived] in California. He called me and said, “Why don’t you come to California? It’s easier to study, the weather’s not too extreme compared to Connecticut, and I will help you.” So I did! So after I stayed three months with my sister, I flew to California to stay with my boyfriend’s family.⁵³

Once in California, Phong began to build a new life for herself. In the beginning, however, it was still an uncertain time for Phong. She recalls, “So right away I went to the ROP (California’s Regional Occupational Program), the vocational school and . . . I look at the ROP

⁵⁰ Ibid, 19.

⁵¹ Ibid, 20.

⁵² Phong, interview with the author (Santa Ana, California, September 25, 2012).

⁵³ Ibid.

book and I didn't know what [profession] to do [choose].”⁵⁴ At the suggestion of some friends and in the hopes of earning a good living, she originally studied general biology and organic chemistry at California State University, Long Beach, to begin a career as a dental assistant. Phong recalls the importance that she originally had placed on the ability to earn a good living and the influence it had made on her decisions, “When I first immigrated, [first] came to America, money meant a lot. You needed to establish yourself before you can enjoy life.”⁵⁵

In 1987, however, Phong was involved in a car accident that became a life altering event. Lying in the hospital, Phong thought to herself, “Why did I come to America to pursue something I wasn't happy with? And I come here and go for the money?”⁵⁶ It was then that Phong decided to pursue her true passion in life, “The thing I love is fine art.”⁵⁷ She then dropped the dental assistant program in Long Beach and enrolled herself into the art program at California Polytechnic State University in Pomona, much to the chagrin of her boyfriend.

Phong speaks of her struggle to pursue a career in art against the wishes of her boyfriend and future husband, and of her commitment to her art, “I had to fight for it. I fight (sic) with my husband (at that time we [were] getting ready to get married). That was in 1987. He said, ‘No!’ since I was going to become a dentist, [and] make a lot of money!”⁵⁸ Phong's determination prevailed, however, “I needed to have a very strong mind When I graduated from Cal Poly, in the B.A. program, I was chosen as [the] outstanding student of the year. [This was] because I

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

made a commitment. I sometimes stayed in school until 2 o'clock in the morning to do my paintings."⁵⁹ After completing her B.A., Phong furthered her artistic studies by earning an M.F.A. at California State University, Fullerton, in 1995.

During her graduate studies Phong became interested in her roots in Việt Nam and in the portrayal of the Vietnamese woman. Unfortunately, much of the research that she found contradicted her own perspective, "I went to the Cal State Fullerton library and . . . researched about my own roots. I borrowed a lot of books about Vietnam, but those stories to me were not true, because they came from the North."⁶⁰ Phong disputed what she read in the library texts and the images that were presented, "So when I opened the books, [they showed] a lot of propaganda and they glorified the communist regime. They taught nothing about the South side . . . especially when I looked at their Vietnamese women, because when they portrayed the Vietnamese women [from] the North side, [who were] very healthy and big, and they carried guns" ⁶¹

Phong then began painting her version of the Southern Vietnamese woman, a more demure, feminine, and nurturing image than the gun-toting soldier or the liberating communist heroine from the North: "Because of that, I created my own version of [the] Vietnamese woman. So at the beginning of my paintings, when I studied for my Master's program, I looked to the [Southern] Vietnamese woman as the subject matter.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

To me, these Vietnamese women . . . are open books. [But] because we're so quiet, nobody knows much about us."⁶²

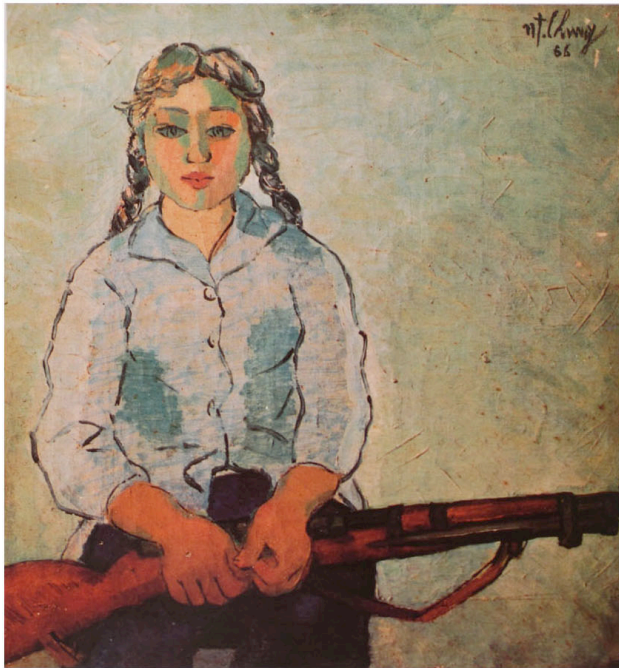


Figure 2.1 Nguyen Tien Chung, *Nữ Dân Quân* (*Militia Woman*), 1966, oil, 47 by 43 inches.

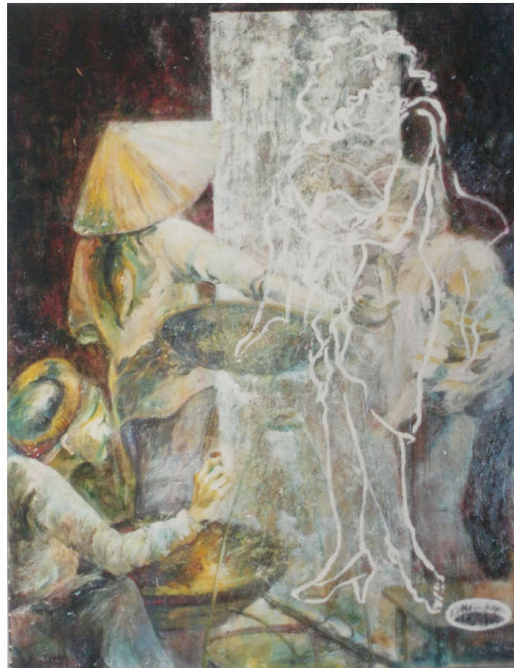


Figure 2.2 Ann Phong, *Yesterday*, 1995, acrylic, 84 by 60 inches.

Compared to an image of a North Vietnamese female fighter, provided by Phong herself, a clear difference emerges between the Communists' interpretations of the Vietnamese woman and Phong's. In Nguyen Tien Chung's 1966 painting, *Nữ Dân Quân* (*Militia Woman*, figure 2.1), the subject is that of a female soldier, part of the fighting forces of the North and is represented with political pride by the communist regime.⁶³ Even though she is in traditional clothing, dark pants and a long sleeve white cotton shirt, the subject is a robust woman able to handle a hefty military-issued rifle. The weapon itself seems heavy and large, clearly requiring

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Phong provided the author with this specific example as one of the images she found and disputed during her research for representations of the Vietnamese women.

a healthy person to carry it. Even though seated, she is in a solid frontal position, and does not at all seem shy or demure. The subject is clearly that of a specific, armed warrior who maintains a confrontational gaze towards her audience. She shows little fear and is very much a presence in the here and now, a strong propaganda icon for the party.

In contrast, Phong's 1993 image, *Yesterday* (figure 2.2), is a much dreamier rendition of the Vietnamese female. The image shows three different women. Two of these women, towards the left side of the canvas, are portrayed more clearly, showing an older woman crouching, and a younger lady, walking with a basket under her arms. Both are depictions of working women, wearing traditional Vietnamese clothing and headgears. They both have their backs toward the viewer and their faces cannot be seen. Neither one is confrontational nor identifiable to the audience, and thus, are more anonymous representations of Southern Vietnamese women. Additionally, their stances of crouching and walking with a basket make them more submissive subjects who assume traditional female roles than the militia woman from the North.

A third female figure is depicted in the center of Phong's canvas, but is shown as mere white outlines, suggesting perhaps a figure from the distant memory or from a hallucinatory dream, making her less conspicuous than the other two figures. With one foot in a high heel shoe while the other is on flat ground, she appears to be wearing some sort of Western style dress, much different than her two companions in their traditional garbs. According to Phong, this ghostly apparition represents Phong herself and other newly arrived female refugees, who are still in transitional modes, and therefore, are not whole or visible, "This painting is more about how I portray myself and other Vietnamese women who just came to America. We were

still in the process of transforming, so we were transparent, both in thinking and in the outer look.”⁶⁴

It is interesting to note that this painting was completed in 1993, nearly a dozen years after she first arrived in the United States, yet Phong still saw herself as a new arrival and a refugee. All three women depicted in Phong’s painting seem to be part of a story about a past, as is indicative by the title of the work, *Yesterday*, but also about a transitional moment into the future. It acts as an aide-mémoire for Phong and members of the Vietnamese American diaspora of how traditional Vietnamese women used to look like and suggests where the women are heading as they assimilate in their newfound homeland. Nonetheless, together the three figures represent Phong’s ideals of the Vietnamese women, small and gentle in stature, demure and non-confrontational in nature.

By the mid-1990s, however, Phong’s repertoire had expanded beyond representations of the Vietnamese female, becoming more inclusive, when it also covered the trauma of the Vietnam War and the experiences of the “boat people:”

When I studied [for] my series on the Vietnamese “boat people,” I was one hundred percent into it. I talked about all the trauma the Vietnamese people went through I couldn’t find many artists that talked about the war. And most of the [elder generation of] Vietnamese artists in Vietnam, or the [ones that] escaped and are living overseas right now, none of their work covered the war. So I . . . asked them, ‘Why [do] none of the artists talk about the Vietnam War?’ . . . And they told me: ‘Because it’s too painful.’⁶⁵

In contrast to those artists, Phong decided to tackle the subject matter head on, “Because to me, I just [need to] face it. If the Vietnam War affected me, why wouldn’t I face it?”

⁶⁴ Phong, email correspondence with the author, March 12, 2014.

⁶⁵ Phong, interview with the author (Santa Ana, California, September 25, 2012).

Since that time, Phong's work has focus on the plight of the "boat people" and the memory of war. Many of her "boat" paintings generate attention to the plight of the Vietnamese refugees in search of political freedom. Although the theme is traumatic, she employs dynamic brushwork and vibrant colors to engage her audience. From her education Phong brings forth Western techniques to her canvases and meld them with her Asian background and experience. Using her personal memory of the war and being a displaced refugee, Phong incorporates these concepts from the refugee narrative into her artwork, "I paint about the war and about the Vietnamese people and how I assimilated into American society. I present things in a Western way [artistically], but I use my Eastern thinking and culture in my paintings."⁶⁶

Time and "Tangled Memories"

As alleged by Phong, art has always been a passion for her. From her early childhood in Việt Nam to her newfound life in the United States, she has always enjoyed a sense of creativity and expression through her artwork. Like many other Vietnamese refugees that came to America, the new homeland provided Phong with opportunities for a better future and a chance for economically upward mobility. Unlike most that ascribe to the refugee narrative of economic success, however, she was not motivated by desire for wealth and a large income, choosing instead to focus on her artistic callings.

A similar thirst could be attributed to Nguyen. Although he did not profess to the same childhood artistic urges that Phong had, Nguyen, too, gave up a potentially lucrative career as a civil engineer in order to pursue a more precarious path in the arts. Like Phong, Nguyen followed his creative passion at the expense of personal wealth.

⁶⁶ Dubin.

Yet, neither began their new lives in the United States with the quest of artistic careers. Each was practical and realized that he or she had to assimilate and adapt to the new ways of life, including learning the language, getting educated, and earning a living. It was only after a period of time has lapsed that they responded to their own personal desires for artistic pursuits. It is arguable that this passage of time was necessary for Nguyen and Phong to process and deal with the personal trauma each suffered during his or her search for political asylum and individual freedom.

Half a dozen years or more had passed before each artist began painting about their personal experiences as related to the war and the exodus from Việt Nam. During that time, both Nguyen and Phong became educated in American institutions, absorbing Western concepts, ideas, and theories in the process. Additionally, American popular culture, such as television, films, newspapers, and other media sources undoubtedly helped to formulate these artists' individual perspectives to some degree.

In *Tangled Memories*, Marita Sturken speaks of Hollywood's depictions of the Vietnam War as having a great impact on the collective memory of the public and the altering effects of those films, sometimes even on those who actually witnessed the event:

Popular films not only significantly shape historical narratives but also provide a catharsis for viewers and, ultimately, for the nation. Reenactment is a form of re-experiencing; within the codes of realism, viewers are allowed to feel that they, too, have undergone the trauma of the war by experiencing its cinematic representation. Categories of experience become confused; the directors and actors of these films claim to have experienced the war on the battleground of filmmaking In their entanglement of cultural memory and history, Vietnam War films produce a catharsis for veterans, filmmakers, and the American public.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 96.

In the introduction to their text, *How the War was Remembered: Hollywood & Vietnam*, Cinema Studies professors Albert Auster and Leonard Quart speak of the inadequate job Hollywood has done to accurately depict the reality faced by American soldiers on the battlefields in Việt Nam, “While Vietnam has been the subject of a number of Hollywood films, few have gained even a partial handle on the surreal and real nature of the battlefield on which the soldiers fought and died, and almost all have left untouched the political logic (or illogic) behind the United States’ commitment there.”⁶⁸ Sturken further corroborates this finding as she cites Vietnam veteran, Henry Allen, and his response to the films as unrealistic:

Then the movies started coming out, such as ‘Apocalypse Now,’ ‘Coming Home,’ and ‘The Deer Hunter.’ People said I should go see them. They wanted to know what I thought. I’d tell them. “But it’s such a good movie,” they’d say. “How isn’t it like Vietnam?” I’d try to explain that it was just a movie, it was colored lights moving around on a screen. It wasn’t that these folks couldn’t tell the difference between a war and a movie; they didn’t want to⁶⁹

Even though Allen, a Vietnam veteran, may not have found Hollywood movies about the war very realistic, these films had a great impact on the general public and provided many with a sense of participation, engagement, and even redemption in a not so popular event in American history.

Nguyen, in a 2007 interview, cites several of these films as among his favorites of the genre, “A lot of people that I talk to hate those movies because of their portrayal of [the] Vietnamese people. And it’s sad in that light, but it’s funny because my three favorite films are *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Full Metal Jacket*.”⁷⁰ According to Nguyen, “feel-

⁶⁸ Albert Auster & Leonard Quart, *How the War was Remembered: Hollywood & Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988), xiii.

⁶⁹ Henry Allen, quoted in Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 96.

⁷⁰ Nguyen, interviewed by Martin Wong in “Yellowman: Skin, Brain, and Guts” *Giant Robot*, no. 47 (June 2007): 72.

goods” films become unoriginal and stale, “I think we are all lazy on a universal level. So most of the audiences want to see ‘*fell-good*’ (sic) films, then they complain that ‘*all*’ films are formulaic and boring. Most of the artists and producers also get caught in the circle of making money and therefore making ‘*safe*’ films.”⁷¹ When asked, Nguyen expounds on his reasons for preferring these particular films, “I love those 3 films because despite their flaws, each of them was fully invested with the director’s personal vision. In my opinion, that is one way to be in synch with the universal creative force which touch[es] all of us. I saw these films many times, they resonate and make me aware of some deeper meaning.”⁷² Although having witnessed first-hand some of the Vietnam War and the “boat people” experience, it is clear that Nguyen has been influenced by Western media and culture and is likely to have “tangled memories” that are no longer unadulterated.

As for Phong, in a 2012 discussion regarding her art production, she speaks of her time in art school and some of the possible external influences:

In the beginning, I read a lot of the art history books to learn, to absorb the knowledge. And I saw a lot of [the works of] pretty well-known artists, from Michelangelo to Picasso to Jackson Pollock. And then I questioned myself, “I’m not them.” They lived in a different country, a different world, a different time frame. So they created work that speaks up for themselves.

So as a Vietnamese American Asian artist, I had to look for my own way, my own path to walk. So that’s the way they influenced me in the educational level But their work doesn’t affect me directly. The person that influenced me the most would be Anselm Kiefer a German artist. If we look back to the German people in Germany during his time, they have a lot of trauma So the Germans carried a lot of burden And I look at my own time In my teenage time I witnessed the Vietnam War I carry that burden inside me. So Anselm Kiefer influenced me [in] that way.⁷³

⁷¹ Nguyen, interviewed by Bijan Tehrani in “*Cinema Without Borders*,” April 11, 2007. <http://cinemawithoutborders.com/conversations/1245-ham%2C-kieu-%26amp%3B-long-talk-about-%26quot%3Bjourney-from-the-fall%26quot%3B%C2%9D.html>. Accessed August 15, 2013.

⁷² Nguyen, email correspondence with the author, October 25, 2014.

⁷³ Phong, interview with the author (Santa Ana, California, September 25, 2012).

In another example, Phong speaks of a cultural bias that affected her, when she was labeled by Americans as a *boat person*: “I felt inferior and subhuman for a long time. But I try to convert that into something positive, like there’s nothing wrong with being a boat person; [after all] the boat saved my life.”⁷⁴ Even though Phong rose above the discriminatory label and channeled it into a positive thing, the incident has altered her perception and memory of the boat and the associated trauma.

Like Nguyen, Phong’s educational process and assimilation into Western culture has influenced her memory. Her exposure to Western institutions of higher learning and the influences from cultural adaptations has affected her memory of the trauma associated with the Vietnam War and of her escape, coupled with the passage of time, has resulted to a certain degree of “tangled memories.”

⁷⁴ Phong, quoted in Zan Dubin, “Freedom for Ann Phong—And Her Art” (*Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1995). http://articles.latimes.com/1995-03-15/entertainment/ca-42966_1_graduate-art. Accessed August 12, 2012.

Người con gái Việt Nam da vàng,
Yêu quê hương nên yêu người yêu kém.
Người con gái ngồi mơ thanh bình.
Yêu quê hương như đã yêu mình.

Em chưa biết quê hương thanh bình!
Em chưa thấy xưa kia Việt Nam!
Em chưa hát ca dao một lần!
Em chỉ có con tim căm hờn!

Trịnh Công Sơn, *Người Con Gái Việt Nam Da Vàng*.⁷⁵

Long Nguyen – *Tales of Yellow Skin*

The above lyrics by the late war-time Vietnamese composer, Trịnh Công Sơn (1939-2001), represent some of the common anxieties suffered by the Vietnamese people in a land torn by war and conflict. These sentiments of a war ravaged nation filled with anger and suffering are part of the cultural heritage of many Vietnamese Americans, including Nguyen, who has acknowledged this song as an inspiration for the title of his series of paintings.⁷⁶

Trịnh Công Sơn’s song not only presents the historical context of a war-torn country, but specifically talks about the senseless loss of life during war time Việt Nam. The subsequent verses, “*Người con gái một hôm qua làng. Đi trong đêm, đêm vang ầm tiếng súng. Người con*

⁷⁵ See Trịnh Công Sơn, *Những Bài Ca Không Năm Tháng* (Timeless Songs) (Ho Chi Minh City, Việt Nam: Nhà Xuất Bản Âm Nhạc, 1998), 174-5. These lyrics are from the song *Người Con Gái Việt Nam Da Vàng* (*The Vietnamese Girl with Yellow Skin*). The verses translate as:

The Vietnamese girl with the yellow skin,
Loves her country and loves her people no less.
The girl sits and dreams of peace.
Loves one’s country as one loves oneself.

She has not known a peaceful country!
She has not seen the Việt Nam of yore!
She has not sung a peaceful folk song!
She only has a heart filled with resentment!

⁷⁶ Thuy Nhat Diem Tran, *Long Nguyen: Identity Politics in Art and Cinema* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 2008), 33.

*gái chọt ôm tim mình. Trên da thom vết máu loang dần . . .*⁷⁷ further develops the tale but tells of the tragic death of the young girl. It is not surprising to hear of such sorrows, however, since it is believed that between one and three million Vietnamese civilians were killed during the course of the war. Many deaths during the war were of innocent civilians, unfortunate victims in the line of fire, as is the case with the story of this young girl with yellow skin, just walking across her village on one fateful evening and being hit by a stray bullet.

Nguyen's decision to use the "yellow skin" symbolism helps to incorporate this song about death and similar war-time tragedies from Việt Nam into his body of work, grounding it with the memories of a Việt Nam with much heartbreak and suffering. It also could be said that *Tales of Yellow Skin* is an allusion by Nguyen to himself and other Vietnamese, who often refer to themselves as a people that has "*da vàng máu đỏ*" (yellow skin and red blood).⁷⁸ In Việt Nam, the color yellow does not have the same negative connotation of the West as being cowardly. In fact, the "yellow skin" symbolism has a positive understanding in Việt Nam, and has been used historically by the Vietnamese to differentiate themselves proudly from the pasty white skin of their French colonizers.

Furthermore, the yellow color is also seen as a part reference to the South Vietnamese flag, which is made up of two primary colors: "*cờ vàng ba sọc đỏ*" (a field of yellow with three red stripes). Again, the yellow background represents the skin color of the Vietnamese people

⁷⁷ The lyrics from these next verses translate as:
The young girl crosses her village one day. In the night, the silence is broken by a loud explosion. The young girl suddenly clutches her heart. On her fragrant skin the red blood slowly spreads.

⁷⁸ The two primary colors, red and yellow, are employed by both, the now defunct South Vietnamese flag (still in use by refugee communities throughout the world) as well as the current communist flag. The Southern flag is a yellow field with three thin red lines running horizontally through the center. In contrast, the communist flag is a field of red with a yellow star in the center. Thus, to some, the colors also represent the two divided Vietnams: red for the communist North and yellow for the republic in the South.

while the red stripes stand for the country's bloodlines—the three regions that comprise the nation: *Trung, Nam, Bắc* (Central, South, and North Việt Nam respectively). In addition, the yellow hints at the soil of the earth, and at the land of Việt Nam and its ancestral heritage, while the red is traditionally seen as a color of bravery and heroism, alluding to the country's long history of heroes who defied the occupation of foreign invaders. Consequently, the “*da vàng máu đỏ*” reference is one that is made with great pride by the Vietnamese.

In *Tales of Yellow Skin*, Nguyen's paintings are typically large canvases of yellow, orange, and brown hues covered by skeletal body parts or entrails scattered across the field. Often surrounding these body organs are offshoots of flames that recall a battlefield. Although the fiery yellow color in the series is a recurring one, occasionally, there are deviations where a canvas is blue, making reference to water, or green, alluding to the rice paddies of Việt Nam. Regardless of the color scheme, they are assaultive to the viewer's senses. Additionally, the visceral body parts in these paintings reflect an intensity that speaks of anger and trauma. The series often employs decapitated heads, wounds, or limbs with painful looking gashes. In some cases, floating body parts, such as a spine, an ear, or an eye, become visual wounds themselves, creating much discomfort and anxiety for the audience.

Even without knowing the artist's background, the paintings are visually disturbing. In a review of one of Nguyen's exhibits, Kenneth Baker, art critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, recognizes the trauma associated with these images: “His ‘Tales of Yellow Skin’ series is a sort of sojourn in hell [yet] there is an urgency of vision about his work that burns through”⁷⁹ With knowledge of Nguyen's personal history and cultural upbringing, it becomes

⁷⁹ Kenneth Baker, “Bay Area Painters, Mexican Photographers,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (November 28, 1993): 50.

undeniable that the work is a reflection of his troubled past. In looking at his images, one can almost imagine the carcasses of the refugees who perished on the high seas strewn across these canvases. Referring to his paintings, curators Gaye Chan and Susan Hippensteele state that “Nguyen’s *Tales of Yellow Skin* is heart in hand, seeing each of his dismembered parts as a route toward salvation . . . Nguyen struggles with those [demons] of his past—his flight from Vietnam as a refugee and boat person.”⁸⁰

Elaine Kim speaks of Nguyen’s work as such: “His images of human organs and truncated heads half-submerged in the thick paint conveyed solely the torment of war.”⁸¹ Evidently the trauma of the war continues to haunt Nguyen and is visible on his canvases. These images are not only reminders of death and destruction from the war, they symbolize the loss of life for many refugees while on the high seas, brutal encounters with pirates, a sense of hopelessness, starvation, and cannibalism in order to survive.

In addition, the separated body parts conceivably could be read as a metaphor for the aural and physical impact of bombs dropping in the landscape. In his early years living in Việt Nam, Nguyen often had heard of the sounds of war and felt its affects, “Sometimes the fighting got really close to our city. You could hear the shelling at night and you didn’t know if it would hit you. One time I remember standing on a rooftop and seeing tiny bomb droppings. And I would count one or two seconds and then feel the heat from the bombs hit my body.”⁸² He certainly was aware of the ravages created by the hostility.

⁸⁰ Gaye Chan and Susan Hippensteele, *Sum of the Parts* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Art Gallery, 1994), 31-3.

⁸¹ Elaine H. Kim, “Long Nguyen in an Asian American Context,” in Joanne Northrup, *Tales of Yellow Skin: The Art of Long Nguyen* (San Jose, CA: San Jose Museum of Art, 2003), 43.

⁸² Long Nguyen, quoted by Joanne Northrup, 14.

Whereas a whole body in his painting might represent a complete nation, the detached parts could refer to a divided country. In 1954, the Vietnamese defeated their French colonizers at the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu, ending what is typically known as the First Indochina War. But under the Geneva Accord of 1954, Việt Nam was separated at the seventeenth parallel with the North under the control of communists and the South under the loyalist forces. Tension between the North and South continued and escalated into a long civil war that ensued for the next two decades. In the North, Ho Chi Minh's pro-communist regime garnered Russia's military support while the United States was involved with South, becoming increasingly more embroiled throughout the 1960s and early 1970s with military advisors and combat soldiers. Thus, Việt Nam had been two separate nations during all of Nguyen's early life and only became reunified in April 1975 with the Communists' final victory, an action that prompted his departure. Nguyen, therefore, did not experience a united Việt Nam. His paintings, though visually disturbing, are introspective visions dealing with the loss of one's home, history, dignity, and country.

In *Mourning Remains*, the introduction to the anthology on *loss*, David L. Eng and David Kazanjian reference Walter Benjamin's idea of the *acedia*, a process of empathy whose origin "is the indolence of the heart,"⁸³ where the mourner holds to an image of an "inexorable fixity" of the past. It is history's tendency to hold on to the transitory moments of the past "to create fixed and totalizing narratives from those fleeting images [that] precipitate despair."⁸⁴

⁸³ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, "Mourning Remains" in David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (eds.), *Loss* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Perhaps Nguyen, too, is holding on to an unyielding memory of his checkered past that harkens a sense of hopelessness and despondency in his images. The pain and anguish of loss suffered by Nguyen and members of the Vietnamese American community in terms of life, property, homeland, social and political status are all depicted by his gruesome renditions of body parts placed against charred backgrounds of intense fire-like hues. The loss is further magnified by the large scale of the canvases, emoting powerful yet unsavory sensations for the viewer. In addition, Nguyen's paintings are typically hung together in a large gallery or museum setting, amplifying the depicted pain and trauma.

When asked about the *Tales of Yellow Skin* series in a 2007 interview, Nguyen explains that it was started in the early 1990s, and that "The first 10 paintings have a lot of skulls and bloody things. The next 10-15 paintings are about what I believe in—a sort of philosophy. Then the figures and organs became more abstract. For the last five years, all those forms have become landscapes."⁸⁵ Of the earlier paintings, Nguyen states that they were: "Very literal. I don't know where the images came from, but they came out very fast: a soldier dying on the ground, helicopter flares in the night sky, or whatever."⁸⁶

Nguyen's *Tales of Yellow Skin* series reflects an anguish that commonly is shared by elders within the Vietnamese American community, one that persists despite the nearly four decades that have lapsed since the end of the war. Despite the new lives and opportunities that America has provided for these immigrants, the tremendous suffering by many within the community still has a strong grip on the diaspora's collective memory. The sense of loss and

⁸⁵ Nguyen, interviewed by Martin Wong in "Yellowman: Skin, Brain, and Guts" *Giant Robot*, no. 47 (June 2007): 72.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

trauma that accompanied this group of people and the persistence of the shared memories by the community is mirrored in Nguyen's body of paintings.

Nhớ khi chiều sương cùng ai trắc ẩn tấm lòng.
Biết bao buồn thương thuyền mơ buông trôi xuôi giòng.
Bến mơ dù thiết tha thuyền ơi đừng chờ mong.
Ánh trăng mờ chiếu. Một con thuyền trong đêm thâu.
Trên sông bao la thuyền mơ bến nơi đâu?

Đặng Thế Phong, *Con Thuyền Không Bến*⁸⁷

Boats: The Paintings of Long Nguyen and Ann Phong

When Nguyen and Phong each decided to flee Việt Nam in search of political asylum and to escape persecution from the communist regime, they both left Việt Nam via precarious boats on the open ocean, sailing into unknown harbors. The trauma related to their flights is imprinted into their memories, perpetual reminders of the difficult journeys they had to navigate to find freedom. Consequently, the boat has become an emblematic symbol for these artists and is a repeated theme on their many canvases. Yet, the meanings related to their vessels are dissimilar because of the different gender perspective each brings to his or her work.

⁸⁷ Đặng Thế Phong, "Con Thuyền Không Bến," in *Những Tình Khúc Tiền Chiến Tiêu Biểu: 40 Ca Khúc Chọn Lọc* (Representational Songs of Early Vietnamese Compositions: 40 Selected Songs) (Glendale, California: Nhà Xuất Bản Tinh Hoa Miền Nam, circa 1980), 36-7. The verses translate as:

Remember in the evening dew, we shared empathy of heart with one another.
With much sorrow and love the boat lets go and flows with the current.
Even with much dedication from the harbor, the boat should not wait or linger.
Under the dim light of the moon, a boat floats through the night.
On the wide river, which harbor does the boat dream of?



Figure 2.3 Long Nguyen, *Soul Boat #1*, 1990, oil on canvas, 66 by 66 inches.

For Nguyen, the boat is a craft that brings its passengers to an unknown world and possibly to new life opportunities. The sharing of that common goal of survival bonds the travelers together in stealth and unison. This necessary covertness is clearly exemplified in his 1990 painting, *Soul Boat #1* (Figure 2.3), where one sees a long, skinny boat adrift in the bottom half of the image, amidst a dark purple ocean. In the upper half of the painting there are numerous burning torches and a jungle of twisted, branch-like objects reaching out from the dark water, an indication of the many dangers that awaits the boat and its occupants. The boat itself is painted in varying shades of yellow with slight accents of red, colors that are indicative of life. Within the vessel there are half a dozen or so people visible, two or three of them smaller than the other, a probable sign that there were children on board. Yet, several people are painted with

an eerie ghost-like white glow around their heads, suggesting that perhaps these are closer to death than life, and unlikely to survive the journey. The boat itself is depicted similarly to a long body, with a head at the stern and feet-like features at the bow, a metaphor for the boat being an organic living structure. In a discussion with Margo Machida, Nguyen “recalls that hallucinatory journey, made in silence and darkness to avoid detection, it was as if ‘the boat and the people on the boat became part of one body.’”⁸⁸

It is probably true that similar conditions, too, applied to Phong’s escape, and survival was also the ultimately goal. Yet when she speaks of boats in her paintings, Phong’s work takes on a feminist approach. This is because in the Vietnamese culture, *women* are metaphorically represented as *boats* whereas *men* are spoken of as *harbors*. When asked if she saw her work as feminist, Phong’s responds in a diplomatic fashion that is more typical of a Vietnamese woman:

If we say feminist, it would be a very strong statement. I don’t consider myself all-the-way feminist. I bring up the issue of the Vietnamese woman because any Vietnamese woman who hasn’t gotten married by a certain age is likened to a boat with no harbor to anchor down. So in Vietnamese poetry, they call her *thuyền không cập bến* (boat without a docking harbor) or *thuyền chưa cập bến* (boat not yet docked).⁸⁹

The metaphor regarding boats and harbors is much more prevalent than Phong leads one to believe. In the male centric Vietnamese culture of the past, the destinies of women were often precarious and in the hands of the men in their lives. Women were expected to play subservient roles to their fathers and brothers and were presumed to marry quickly once reaching marrying age so that they could be “protected” and “cared for” by their husbands.

⁸⁸ Nguyen, quoted in Margo Machida, “Out of Asia: Negotiating Asian Identities in America,” in *Asia America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* (New York: The Asia Society Galleries, 1994), 70.

⁸⁹ Phong, interview with the author (Santa Ana, California, September 25, 2012).

Those that broke this norm were said to be “*ế chồng*” (unable to find a husband) and was seen as the equivalent of an old maid.

Similar allegories regarding boats and harbors are widespread in Vietnamese literature, poetry, songs, and other cultural media. One example is the above lyrics from the composition, *Con Thuyền Không Bến* (*A Boat without a Harbor*), by the early twentieth-century Vietnamese composer, Đặng Thế Phong (1918-1942). The lyrics allegorically speak of the relationship between a man and a woman, where it is suggested that the woman is spurned by the man and is left without a harbor. She is left floating on the wide river without a dock to cling to, and thus, without safety or protection.

In another example, from the popular saying, “*Mười hai bến nước biết bến nào trong biết sông nào đục,*” which roughly translates as, “With a dozen harbors to choose from, it is difficult to assert which holds clear water and which is murky,” the woman is again left with an uncertain fate. The implication here is that her lot in life depends on her luck, where a woman could be fortunate and finds a safe harbor with a loving and protective husband, or she could be ill-fated and winds up with an uncaring husband in an unhappy marriage.

These outdated modes of thinking were prevalent in the patriarchal society of Việt Nam of the past. Today, however, through more interactions with other societies, shifting gender roles, and changing cultural standards, the newer generations of Vietnamese women have greater autonomy and exercise much more independence. The same is true in much of the Vietnamese American diaspora in the United States, where radical changes in gender roles have occurred. Many Vietnamese American women now have more personal freedom and choices regarding marriage. Additionally, in this country, women in general are able to maintain professions and careers, giving them the financial security to be in charge of their own destinies. This is implied

in Phong's "boat paintings" by its omission of docks and harbors, and is further substantiated by her following statement, "If we live in America the harbor is a secondary thing. If you don't want to anchor down, you don't anchor down. So I use it [the boat] and I glorified it. So in a lot of my painting I painted a boat for a "boat person" and a boat for women I don't even paint a harbor to anchor down."⁹⁰



Figure 2.4 Ann Phong, *The Baskets*, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 24 by 30 inches.

Though Phong frequently employs the boat, she also includes other objects to bring forth feminine aspects in her images. One such canvas is the 2003 acrylic painting, *The Baskets* (Figure 2.4). The work is 24 by 30 inches. Here, Phong refers to the bamboo baskets that are used by working women all over Việt Nam. Most commonly used by women to carry their goods to the open air markets each day, a pair of baskets is usually balanced at opposite ends of a

⁹⁰ Ibid.

long wooden pole (*đòn gánh*). The pole is then shouldered by these industrious vendors as they make their way to the market stalls each morning to sell their fruits and vegetables to the general public. Sometimes, grain and crops are gathered and carried in these baskets from the fields to the home. Other times, women employ these baskets and wander the city streets in search of hungry customers wanting small meals or snacks and deserts. A conical straw hat (*nón lá*) is almost always part of the accessory as it keeps the sun and rain off these women in their travels.

In Phong's painting one sees a woman wearing such a hat to the far left of the image maneuvering her long pole. Towards the center of the painting is such a basket filled with some unidentifiable goods. Closer to the right of the image are several other smaller baskets and the clear shape of a small boat or sampan floating vertically on the canvas. In one of the baskets near the boat is a splash of orange and yellow paint. Due to her abstract brushwork, it is unclear if this is meant to be some sort of goods to be sold or if these fiery colors are a metaphor for the ravages of the war. In the background to the left, Phong paints faint images of several hands, suggesting that these are working hands, reiterating that the woman depicted has a labor-intensive life. The fact that these baskets and the boat are placed together in this painting under a collective title, *The Baskets*, shows Phong's interchangeable intent of these types of vessels. Furthermore, the painting is indicative of the protective nature of these vessels for their loads.

The basket and the boat are symbols often employed by Phong. In the 1998 painting, *Blue Ocean* (Figure 2.5), she uses the basket as a substitute for a boat. Phong produces a colorful image, dominated primarily by blue and white hues. The canvas, 36 by 48 inches in size, employs bright acrylics to create a range of dynamic emotions, from bewilderment to agitation, and moves from vagueness to fantasy throughout the canvas. According to Collette Chattopadhyay, Phong's work "Travel[s] the razor's edge between illusion one moment and



Figure 2.5 Ann Phong, *Blue Ocean*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 36 by 48 inches.

abstraction the next . . . conjur[ing], manifest[ing], and extinguish[ing] images of reality, memory and nightmares.”⁹¹

In the lower right corner of the painting is a basket of fruit, an analogy to a boat filled with people. The variety of tightly packed fruit in the container is not different than how unrelated refugees were often crammed into escaping vessels heading to the open sea. A couple of the fruit is depicted nearby, but outside of the actual basket. This conjures the image in one’s mind that some of the refugees may have fallen out of the boat in the storm and are clinging to the vessel. The basket and its content are painted in lighter hues of blue than their immediate surrounding space, intimating life amidst the cooler and darker ocean. Yet, the unnatural blues used in depicting the fruit may also be read as a coldness that is enveloping the people in this

⁹¹ Collette Chattopadhyay, *The Art of Ann Phong* (Houston: Viet Art Gallery, 2006), 4.

storm, both physically and emotionally. Throughout the painting are small strokes of white, perhaps an indication of falling rain, adding to the chill in the air.

Due to the dynamic brushstrokes and the numerous swirls that are employed in the painting, coupled by its title, *Blue Ocean*, Phong tells the viewer that this is not a calm or serene setting in a small pond or lake. Rather, she subtly points out that this basket of fruit is adrift in a seemingly boundless and raging expanse of water, and that it is under an extremely precarious situation. With knowledge of Phong's background, personal history, and her other paintings, the image becomes more apparent as a reference to a refugee boat in a turbulent ocean. The lower half of the image tends to be covered by darker colors whereas the upper is filled with brighter tones, suggesting the separation of ocean and sky, respectively. Throughout the image Phong uses forceful brushstrokes to create a sense of motion on the canvas, alluding to the constant movement of the ocean's currents. Even the organic swirls of white in the upper portion of the image are likened to rainclouds in a stormy sky.

In the upper left corner is a splash of bright yellow and orange paint, not unlike the sun in the sky. The use of these contrasting warm colors amidst the cooler hued canvas creates a noticeable focal point in the image, drawing the viewer to it. Yet there is uneasiness, as some of the small segments that make up this yellow section are geometric rather than organic forms, as though this sun is not necessarily life sustaining, but is life contracting. The work is a powerful metaphor for the small struggling vessels amidst an ocean of endless water.

In her article, *Figuring Vietnam: Ann Phong and Boat Stories*, Cam Vu addresses Phong's employment of the boat in her paintings, "Boats are one way for Phong to frame the experience of many Vietnamese in the U.S. They have transported not just their bodies, but their

very livelihoods to a new home, one that has not so much held a welcome banner as it has provided an alternative to what is considered too terrible to endure.”⁹²

Similarly, Nguyen’s 1990 painting, *Blue Dream*, is a depiction of an open ocean (Figure 2.6). Covered by a sea of dark blues, this 66 square inch work is oil on canvas. The painting is a field of undulating water with a few of Nguyen’s usual icons afloat in the upper half, a small cyclone, a spine, a heart-like organ, and a decapitated head. Surrounding these objects is a turf of lighter blue, not unlike a blanket of fog above the ocean. The floating objects then have a mystical quality to them, hovering freely in the open space.

Although the floating body parts are visual wounds, creating sentiments of trauma and pain, Nguyen has adopted the various organs as symbols to convey his philosophies. The heart, for example, is one of five organs that he frequently uses in his paintings, and it expresses the emotion tug of war between happiness and sorrow. The five body parts are linked to Nguyen’s understanding of Chinese Taoist belief system:

The five organs and emotions are linked to a philosophical . . . system [that] relies on the balance of opposing principles—Ying/Yang—and features five important human organs and the positive and negative emotions associated with each of them. Traditionally, the lungs are associated with the emotional state of being carefree as well as worried, while the kidney connects with both courage and fear. The liver embodies calmness and nervousness, the heart is connected to joy and sadness, and the spleen is associated with stability and instability.⁹³

Likewise, the spine in Nguyen’s image could be read as a representation of the whole person or a congregation of all five organs, and thusly, the related range of emotions. To the unfamiliar individual, the frequently used bodiless head is often read in a negative light, with

⁹² Cam Vu, “Figuring Vietnam: Ann Phong and Boat Stories” in *Charlie Don’t Surf: 4 Vietnamese American Artists* (Vancouver, Canada: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2005), 87.

⁹³ Colleen Hanson, quoted in Thuy Nhat Diem Tran, 83.

pain and suffering as the only possible understanding, “Solemn, even dignified in its humiliation, the recurring head and its trancelike expression symbolize the resignation of the spirit”⁹⁴



Figure 2.6 Long Nguyen, *Blue Dream*, 1990, oil on canvas, 66 by 66 inches.

For Nguyen, however, the head has become another icon for the whole person, “. . . heads, hands, or other items—may represent a person with both harmonizing and conflicting emotions.”⁹⁵ With these understandings of Nguyen’s icons, the image is less mystical and

⁹⁴ Casey FitzSimons, “Long Nguyen,” *Artweek*, no. 23 (March 19, 1992): 20.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

becomes more of an emotional statement, where the span of human emotions is at play for those lost at sea.

Even though both, Nguyen's *Blue Dream* and Phong's *Blue Ocean*, are paintings that borrow from the artists' respective memories of boat journeys in search for freedom, the executions of the paintings are quite different. By calling the image a "*Dream*," Nguyen has distanced himself from the actual boat experience, giving it a hallucinatory effect or the equivalent of a dream-like remembrance, whereas Phong's more literal title, "*Ocean*," grounds the viewer in a more definite geographical space.

Surprisingly, however, Phong's painting is the more abstract of the two works, where her ocean, sky, and horizon are all blended together by dynamic, if not violent, brushwork. Phong clearly has mastered the use of brushstrokes and composition to create the different range of responses, from placid feelings to forceful emotions. She speaks about the technical aspects of her work as an important part of the creation process, "The formal qualities of my work are equally important. I use thick and thin layers of pigments, ambiguous and conflicting spatial arrangements, powerful and energetic brushstrokes versus tranquil lines to enhance an overall dynamic outlook."⁹⁶

To the contrary, Nguyen's waves are much more defined and the ocean's current appears calmer. Additionally, Nguyen's square image is larger and uses a higher degree of personal symbols to convey his ideas of conflict and turmoil, whereas Phong's rectangular canvas becomes a more concrete landscape, in which she employs a fruit basket as a metaphor for a boat.

⁹⁶ Ann Phong, "Artist Statement," in *Charlie Don't Surf: 4 Vietnamese American Artists* (Vancouver, Canada: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2005), 83.

In both cases, these artists are making images that deal with the collective memory of a community that has suffered much pain and trauma. Nguyen speaks of his art production, however, as more of a cathartic process for himself, “For me, art is a way to be myself. As a refugee, you’re a survivor. You try to hide, you try to blend in, and you repress a lot of your thinking. Art’s the best way for me to live my life and say what I like.”⁹⁷ Contrary to Nguyen, Phong sees her work as a chance to share with the community, “My art reflects the feelings and



Figure 2.7 Ann Phong, *White Boat*, 1995, acrylic mixed media on canvas, 84 by 60 inches.

⁹⁷ Nguyen, interview with Martin Wong, 73.

thoughts of people who have experienced hardship in their lives. Many have suffered through difficult living conditions while being uprooted from their homeland”⁹⁸

To further illustrate the differences in the attitudes employed by these two painters, a second comparison is made here between Phong’s 1995 painting, *White Boat* (Figure 2.8) with Nguyen’s 1990 work, *Soul Boat #2* (Figure 2.9).



Figure 2.9 Long Nguyen, *Soul Boat #2*, 1990, oil on canvas, 66 by 66 inches.

⁹⁸ Ann Phong, “Artist Statement,” in *F.O.B. II: Art Speaks* (Santa Ana, California: Vietnamese American Arts & Letters Association, 2009), 25.

Another 66 inch square canvas, Nguyen's *Soul Boat #2* has a literal depiction of a vessel in the bottom half of the image, with dark water covering the rest of the landscape. There is no visible sky, making this a very claustrophobic and restricted scene. A small amount of yellow and red paint on the boat indicates the relatively small lives amidst the great raging ocean. At the bow of the boat is a skeletal-like head while on the boat are numerous plant growths. In the water, by the stern, is another human head. The human heads in the painting represents human lives, referring to the refugees, both in and out of the vessel. In the upper half of the image a human organ, perhaps a heart, seems to be afloat, suggesting a range of emotions vacillating between joy and sorrow. The various plants on the boat are supposed to represent a renewal of life or hope for the future. Although the many symbols employed in the image are recurring ones in Nguyen's work, the painting, nonetheless, has an unnerving quality. Margo Machida speaks of the image:

In an eerie, nocturnal image of a tiny raft like craft . . . with a living human head at its prow and its deck sprouting fresh tropical vegetation, Long Nguyen suggests both the unity of purpose that had galvanized all aboard, and how the act of departure amid nightmarish turmoil could also carry with it the already germinating hope of a new life abroad.⁹⁹

Conflicting emotions are clearly at play for these boat people. While the danger they faced on the open sea were many and very likely traumatic, the possibility of a new future incites unison among the members of the group. Nguyen's depiction of the vessel and his icons, however, are visually disturbing, intimating the unsettling feelings shared by these travelers. In her text, *The Shock of Arrival*, Professor Meena Alexander reflects on Nguyen's paintings, "Memory is painfully at work in Long Nguyen's paintings. . . . The terror of passage in an old freighter is

⁹⁹ Margo Machida, "Out of Asia: Negotiating Asian Identities in America," 70.

brought out in his *Soul Boat*. The tiny craft becomes a living body with head and arms, floating in a dark and hellish water.”¹⁰⁰

Phong’s 84 by 60 inch canvas, *White Boat*, in comparison, is much less sinister. The background of the rectangular canvas is vibrant with multiple colors ranging from bright yellow to varying patches of green to some deep blue and black tones. Her use of opulent hues and lyrical brushstrokes brings forth this assessment, “For Phong, rhythmic strokes, thick textures, and lush colors are all used as tools of psychic liberation, conveying unspeakable memories with gestured immediacy.”¹⁰¹

In the center of the image are two small sampans, one in color and one in white, a metaphor for the living and the dead. She clearly differentiates the two boats, portraying those who survived the journey by the use of many bright colors, such as yellow and orange. To the contrary, for the depiction of those who perished at sea, Phong applies thick coats of white. In much of Asia, including countries like China, Japan, Korea, and Việt Nam, white traditionally has been a color of mourning. Therefore, by employing white for the one vessel, Phong is lamenting for the deceased, “When the people die, when they escape, the boat becomes white so I have a white boat, when the boat makes it I have a colorful boat. It’s more like metamorphosis for me.”¹⁰²

In a review of one of her exhibits, her work is described as such, “Phong conveys her thoughts through superimposing images on top of one another. This technique highlights the fragmentary nature of Phong’s overall aesthetic: a dislocation between fact and memory and

¹⁰⁰ Meena Alexander, *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 154.

¹⁰¹ Dubin.

¹⁰² Phong, quoted in Cam Vu, 87.

their dynamics.”¹⁰³ Here the suggestion is that Phong’s memory is disjointed or fragmented. This is an unlikely reading. For those who have survived such trauma as Nguyen and Phong, the harrowing memories are more coherent and vivid than one can imagine. Nevertheless, those memories can be fragmentary and be filtered through their experiences in the United States.

Even as one reads Phong’s *White Boat* as a memorial for the boat victims that perished on the open ocean, one must remember that Phong’s depiction of any boat continues to act as a metaphor for the Vietnamese female. Towards the top section of the painting is a transparent figure outlined in white, representing a woman. She appears to be holding open her garment to the viewer. Regarding the Vietnamese woman represented in the work, Phong states: “I focus[ed] on her strength. When she lift[s] up her jacket, you see the whole ocean inside her. That’s how I see the heroic part of the boat people.”¹⁰⁴ Again, the Vietnamese woman is presented as nurturing and protective, even in the wake of death. Additionally, Phong sees the courage of all those who ventured forth in search of political freedom as “heroic,” whether or not they survived.

When looking at the boat paintings of these two artists, Phong and Nguyen, both of whom were *primary witnesses* to the refugee narrative, including the Vietnam War, the flight for political freedom and the process of adopting a new homeland, there is a tremendous amount of difference in their approaches. Nguyen’s paintings appear to give him the ability to *escape from* the pain and suffering of the past while Phong’s gives her the freedom to *move forward* to a potentially hopeful place. Nguyen’s images tend to be more subdued and filled with personal

¹⁰³ “Ann Phong and Lori Lipsman at LA Artcore” (LA Artcore Union Center for the Arts, March 2012). <http://downtownartwalk.org/ann-phong-lori-lipsman-at-la-artcore/>. Accessed August 12, 2012.

¹⁰⁴ Phong, email correspondence with the author, March 12, 2014.

symbolism. The canvases perhaps become therapeutic and cleansing tools for the artist. Darkly painted, there is a false sense of doom that is surprisingly contradicted by the mysterious but positive symbols employed.

Conversely, Phong's vibrant and colorful images create a sense of confidence. Unafraid to tackle the difficult subject, she connects with her audience through her ability to create engaging images. Even when the subject matter is dark, her lively palette and animated brushwork brings forth a hopeful dynamic. She speaks of this optimism, "We Vietnamese, in particular, have developed complex emotions, especially about the past. To survive in these desperate situations, we try to strengthen ourselves with optimistic attitudes."¹⁰⁵

Long Nguyen: Following an American Tradition

While it is true that Phong's paintings are more colorful and present a livelier sense of expression, Nguyen's images are, nonetheless, equally engaging. In his series, *Tales of Yellow Skin*, Nguyen demonstrates that he has become an American and is no longer a refugee. Even though the work is mired in the trauma and memory of the war and its aftermath, Nguyen has adapted to the new American culture and has embraced his new country. Educated in American institutions, he is armed with Western ideology and has a repertoire of American artistic traditions at his disposal.

Susan Landauer, the chief curator for the San Jose Museum of Art, has compared Nguyen's work to that of the late American abstract painter, Frank Lobdell (1921-2013), who "experienced firsthand the horrors of combat—in his case, the Allied front of the Second World

¹⁰⁵ Phong, "Artist Statement," in *Charlie Don't Surf: 4 Vietnamese American Artists* (Vancouver, Canada: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2005), 83.

War. Nguyen most likely never saw Lobdell's paintings of the late 1940s, but much like Nguyen's 'Tales of Yellow Skin,' they too feature bones, tendons, and intestinal coils, the results of recurring nightmares"¹⁰⁶ Regardless of whether Nguyen had actually seen any of Lobdell's work, his exposure to American institutions of higher learning has infused Nguyen with a Western perspective in regards to the arts.

Additionally, Nguyen's experience as a *primary witness* of those traumatic events provides him with a certain degree of first-hand memories. Like Nguyen, Lobdell was a *primary witness* to some of the horrors of war, specifically World War II, and was able to rely on his own personal memory of the trauma he witnessed when painting his images, adding an extra dimension of reliability to the horrors being portrayed.

In the United States, there has been a tradition of painters that employed the human figure to deal with traumatic events throughout the twentieth century, drawing on the traumatic and melodramatic qualities from those occurrences. Beside Lobdell and his World War II paintings, others include Italian-born American painter Rico (Frederico) Lebrun (1900-1964) and American artist Leon Golub (1922-2004). Lebrun created a series of paintings and drawings in the mid-1950s, entitled *Concentration Camp*, to memorialize the victims of the Jewish Holocaust. In this series Lebrun painted the human figure to create a sense of pathos for the victims of the Nazi regime. Regarding his use of the human body, Lebrun states: "I wanted to remember that our image, even when disfigured by adversity, is grand in meaning: painting may increase it by changing what is disfigured into what is transfigured."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Susan Landauer, "Foreword," in Joanne Northrup, *Tales of Yellow Skin: The Art of Long Nguyen* (San Jose, CA: San Jose Museum of Art, 2003), 7.

¹⁰⁷ Rico Lebrun, quoted in Paul J. Karlstrom & Susan Ehrlich, *Turning the Tide: Early Los Angeles Modernists 1920-1956* (Santa Barbara, California: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1990), 82.

Similarly, starting in the 1960s, Leon Golub employed the disfigured human form for comparable purposes, emphasizing on wartime violence and trauma, perpetrated specifically by the Vietnam War. Painted during the escalation phase of the Vietnam conflict, many of his images show the vulnerability and frailty of the human body, particularly when exposed to aggression, struggle, and power. Of his work, Golub states: “I’m painting citizens of our society, but I’m painting them through certain kinds of experiences which have affected them. I can describe some of them – Dachau, Vietnam, automatized war”¹⁰⁸ Golub’s paintings, like Lebrun’s and Lobdell’s before him, speak of the aftermath of war through a rhetoric of violence, and by the inclusion of disfigured bodies.

Nguyen’s paintings fit into this tradition of primeval and melodramatic imagery. Similar to Lobdell, Lebrun, and Golub, Nguyen too employs visceral body parts to conjure images of trauma in the wake of war violence. Nguyen reflects upon the early works of the series in his artist’s statement, “In the beginning, the paintings were influenced by memories of the Vietnam War. They have slowly transformed into a personal diary and a personal collections of symbols and stories. These paintings contain images of human figures, body parts and organs, organic and natural forms, all immersed in a watery and fiery inner landscape.”¹⁰⁹

Nguyen’s *Tales of Yellow Skin #2* (1991, Figure 2.10) is a depiction of a subject matter about which the artist has a personal understanding. It is an impressive 66 by 66 inch square canvas. The background is an abstract yellowish brown field while the main focus is the human figure in the center and foreground of the painting. This figure is one that seems to have been

¹⁰⁸ Leon Golub, quoted in John Bird, *Leon Golub: Echoes of the Real* (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2000), 25.

¹⁰⁹ Nguyen’s artist statement, quoted in Thuy Nhat Diem Tran, 26.



Figure 2.10 Long Nguyen, *Tales of Yellow Skin #2*, 1991, oil on canvas, 66 by 66 inches.

skinned, where one can see the muscles and tissues that are not usually exposed. A big gash has been opened down the center of the body, from the chest to the groins, painfully opening the insides of the body and exposing some of the internal organs. With the right hand holding the cavity open, the person reaches inside with his left and is either rearranging or feeling the body parts. Similar to Lobdell, Lebrun, and Golub before him, Nguyen is using the scarred body to bring about discussion of a traumatic past. Laura Elisa Pérez describes this work specifically, “This body is an enigmatic sign, a hybrid whose impassivity is at odds with the itinerary of pain

recorded on its skin.”¹¹⁰ Although the work seems quite gruesome and painful on the surface, there is a mysterious sense of calm and composure in the composition, creating a perplexing strangeness to this self-portrait.

Nguyen paints himself with his whole body cut open and exposed for the audience to see. Even though it is not a realistic rendition of Nguyen’s body, it nonetheless gives a personal glimpse into the painter’s psyche while his physique remains the central focus. When asked about the many organs afloat in his paintings, Nguyen references this work explicitly as a critical work:

One painting really turned my whole style around. I actually painted a self-portrait of myself, and all the skin is flayed. The figure is actually cut open, and he is reaching inside to touch his organs. That was me saying, ‘I don’t believe in anything so far.’ I was very deliberate, reaching inside the body, touching the organs, and seeing what I was made of. And the figure was castrated but calm.¹¹¹

Even though at first glance the image conveys a sense of extreme pain for the audience, it nonetheless, has been considered cathartic for Nguyen, providing him with a sense of “calm.” Nguyen’s work, therefore, presents a complexity that is not always easily understood. In reference to Nguyen’s painting, Meena Alexander states, “the image of one nightmarish body comes alive in his painting”¹¹² Yet, for Nguyen the images have slowly turned from just nightmare memories of the war to more of individualized memoirs and intimate iconography.

¹¹⁰ Laura Elisa Pérez, “Flesh of the Inscrutable (On Long Nguyen’s *Tales of Yellow Skin* #2),” in Joanne Northrup, *Tales of Yellow Skin: The Art of Long Nguyen* (San Jose, California: San Jose Museum of Art, 2003), 11.

¹¹¹ Nguyen, interviewed by Martin Wong, 73-5.

¹¹² Alexander, 154.

Nguyen further speaks of this painting as a liberating process, allowing him to break from what he has learnt in art school:

Finally one day, I made a breakthrough painting [*Tales of Yellow Skin #2*], and this was the beginning of my series *Tales of Yellow Skin* In the whole new series . . . I will put away all of my studies to just do whatever I feel. So in this one painting, I allowed myself the freedom to just do whatever I had been training myself *not* to do.¹¹³

In regards to *Tales of Yellow Skin #2*, Nguyen created this work at a low juncture in his life, when he was searching for some self-identity. According to Northrup, at the time of this work, “he had recently lost his adjunct lectureship in UC Berkeley’s prestigious art department; he longed for companionship; and he was searching for a sense of identity.”¹¹⁴ Nguyen explains that the figure, while appearing as that of a victim, “he understands his situation and ultimately prevails.”¹¹⁵ It brings to his mind the Vietnamese saying, “*Cẩn rằng chịu đựng*,” which translates as “to grit ones teeth and bear it.”

Nguyen explains that there are Taoist symbolisms employed in the image, including the “cleansing of one’s organs for purification and renewal.” Additionally, the seedpods in each corner of the painting also signify a sense of hope.¹¹⁶ Clearly the painting has many hidden personal significances for Nguyen beyond the initial obvious interpretation of pain and trauma. In the end, the series of paintings helps Nguyen to overcome some of the ordeal of his troubled past, including his previous status as a “Vietnamese refugee,” and help him to progress as an American citizen and artist. Of Nguyen’s *Tales of Yellow Skin* paintings, Los Angeles-based art critic and curator Peter Frank states that the work “ultimately concern only the artistic

¹¹³ Nguyen, interviewed by Thuy Nhat Diem Tran, 34.

¹¹⁴ Northrup, 25.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

consciousness, and evolution, of Long Nguyen himself: the securing of his identity as an artist, his self-recognition as an American—and a California—artist. . . .”¹¹⁷ Clearly Frank sees Nguyen as an American and a California artist, and not merely as a “boat person.”

Like thousands of other Vietnamese refugees who flooded to the United States at the end of the Vietnam War, Nguyen had to assimilate, learning a new language, culture, and ideas. In the process, particularly through his education, Nguyen became exposed to American modes of thinking and articulation. His artistic expressions not only allowed him to create powerful and imaginative messages for his audience, but also helped to bond him to a tradition of American painters who have used the visceral body to address issues of war and trauma.

Homage to a Troubled Land

Over the years while human organs and scarred body parts often filled the canvases of Nguyen’s *Tales of Yellow Skin* series, among his early works is a 1989 painting, *Homage to a Troubled Land* (Figure 2.11), where there are relatively few body organs. The stark contrast suggests that Nguyen’s paintings are not always easily deciphered and that some tend to be more elusive than others, requiring better understanding of the symbolism employed.

The image is a darkly painted 79 by 67 inch canvas with a mixture of abstraction and realism. The background consists mainly of gloomy shades of gray with a wide band of murky red and orange running through the bottom third of the canvas. Throughout the work float more recognizable objects, such as boats, cyclones, plants, and pyres of fire. The painting, in vertical format, may not necessarily be read as a landscape, but is more of an amalgamation of Nguyen’s

¹¹⁷ Peter Frank, “Long Nguyen: The World through Yellow Skin,” in Joanne Northrup, *Tales of Yellow Skin: The Art of Long Nguyen* (San Jose, California: San Jose Museum of Art, 2003), 49.

personal lexicon of symbols. Tony May, a former professor of Nguyen's at San Jose State, speaks of his paintings: "I am attracted to his work's complexity, its richness. It doesn't look like it has a manufactured complexity to it; one becomes familiar with that in some contemporary abstract paintings Many of his paintings have lots of layers, with an elaborate build-up."¹¹⁸



Figure 2.11 Long Nguyen, *Homage to a Troubled Land*, 1989, oil on canvas, 79 by 67 inches.

¹¹⁸ Tony May, quoted in Joanne Northrup, 21-2.

As a precursor to the *Yellow Skin* series, *Homage to a Troubled Land* initially seems to make reference to Việt Nam, Nguyen’s checkered homeland. The oblique title, without an explicit reference, however, gives the work an enigmatic sense of allusiveness. Due to its non-specificity, the work may be read as a more universal representation and may stand in for any “troubled land,” providing a general deference. The muted colors and reserved palette initially make the canvas seem restrained. A closer inspection, however, draws the viewer into the somber yet unusual composition, creating a curiosity that commands further studying. Landauer speaks of this work as “seemingly modest and undemonstrative, [yet it] exudes a quiet power that grows with each viewing.”¹¹⁹ Unlike the many paintings from the *Yellow Skin* series, where pain and trauma are clear initial readings, this canvas does not provide with such a resolute understanding but instead requires more investment from the viewer.

In looking at such an image, one must spend the necessary time to search for the keys to the metaphors that are not so easily discernable. To understand the work, one must invest the effort and learn Nguyen’s symbolisms. Northrup has likened his paintings to an archaeological dig: “As in the process of excavation, layers are revealed over time—some areas are visible to the naked eye, while others remain obscure. It is impossible to understand these works at first glance. One must learn Nguyen’s vocabulary in order to comprehend their significance. . . .”¹²⁰

When viewing *Homage to a Troubled Land*, one sees a row of cyclones that appear to the central left portion of the canvas. In Việt Nam, a country where approximately one half of her border meets up with the South China Sea, cyclical typhoons and monsoon floods are natural and frequent occurrences. Cyclones and twisters, however, are not typical Vietnamese weather

¹¹⁹ Landauer, 7.

¹²⁰ Northrup, 23.

events. They are probable influences from Nguyen's time in the United States, particularly from his stint in Tennessee. Whirlwinds and cyclones, typical affairs in the United States' Midwest weather, are devastating and unpredictable, often obliterating the land and anything in their paths. It is likely that Nguyen employs the cyclones to give his (mainly American) audience a more recognizable symbol of destruction. These twisters may be read as the whirlwinds that have been a part of Nguyen's troubled past but perhaps also metaphorically as the ravages of a war-torn land. The relatively small size of the twisters in contrast to the canvas suggests that he has taken control of the storms or perhaps has emotionally reconciled with these past traumas. Their presence, however, could be argued as an indication that the scars of these memories are still present.

Northrup describes Nguyen's cyclones as representing "a mysterious force that one cannot fully understand, such as the human impulse to wage war, or strong desire." She explains that Nguyen's study of Taoism has given him a better understanding of life, teaching him to realize the futility of confronting or struggling against such unexplainable forces. Rather, Nguyen has learned to let such forces pass: "Although the cyclone still appears in his paintings, it is a far less prevalent feature of recent work, suggesting that he has opened himself to its energy and allowed it to move through and past him."¹²¹

Toward the center right of the painting there are two small but distinct white boats. These are possible literal references to his journey across the ocean, the boats providing passage for Nguyen and the other refugees to new lives. They could, however, also be read metaphorically as vessels of fate. In Western art, there has been a long tradition of unmanned boats on water to represent human's inability to control fate, their powerlessness when

¹²¹ Ibid., 18.

confronted by destiny. Similarly, Nguyen and his fellow travelers were at the mercy of chance when they boarded the *Truong Xuan*. Colleen Hanson of the Hillstrom Museum of Art at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota has another interpretation of Nguyen's vessel, "The boat can also be seen as symbolic of a person whose body forms a vessel for organs, and whose spirit encompasses a multitude of emotional responses, memories, and dreams."¹²² Hanson reads the boat as representing a whole body holding within it the people that make up its internal organs as well as its non-tangible hopes.

The flower at the center of the painting can be interpreted as a symbol for life itself, blossoming in the mist of all the chaos that surrounds it. In many cultures flowers and plants are seen as life nurturing, providing the necessary oxygen for human life. In China, the bamboo is esteemed also for its flexibility and perseverance. In Japan, the plum plant is able to withstand the cold elements of winter, often blooming at the earliest sign of seasonal changes. In Việt Nam, the lotus blossom is sacred for its ability to bloom despite the muck from which it grows, and is therefore revered by many Buddhists. In the Western world, many of the flowers and plants renew themselves with the coming of spring, a time for new life. Even though the bloom in this image is darkly painted, it too represents the rejuvenation of life.

Surrounding the flower, in the midst of the abstract background, there is an allusion of water. This is made more apparent by the two boats. To the top portion of the canvas there are numerous hand-like objects coming out of the dark water, holding up torches of fire. With the co-existent of fire and water in the same vicinity, one could read these as opposing forces at work in one's life, creating positive and negative impacts. Similarly, Hanson suggests that,

¹²² Colleen Hanson, quoted in Thuy Nhat Diem Tran, 83.

“Both fire and water may be used to represent fear and destruction,” yet she also believes that “each can represent nourishment, cleansing, and the forces of nature.”¹²³

Nguyen’s *Homage to a Troubled Land* is more elusive and complex in term of its rendition and symbolism. Arguably also a landscape, the composition is much more abstract and ephemeral. Elaine Kim speaks of Nguyen’s paintings as becoming increasingly abstract over time, “The first time I visited Long Nguyen’s studio more than a decade ago, he expressed concerns that critics and viewers seemed to be straining to read his life story into his paintings . . . Over the years, however, Long Nguyen’s paintings have become increasingly abstract, and recognizable images have gradually disappeared.”¹²⁴ Perhaps the increase in abstraction is an indication that Nguyen is emotionally detaching himself from the horrors and trauma of the past. The symbolic images now function more as a roadmap of his life, keeping some of those memories alive within him, but allowing him to slowly escape from their traumatic suffering.

His employment of symbolic objects is more personal and not easily defined. These symbols are complex and intimate; they can be revealed or shrouded by the artist as he chooses what to share with his audience. In an interview with Martin Wong, Nguyen describes his art production process as a personal one, “For me, it’s a diary. You write for yourself, and later you explain to the viewer how much you want to explain. But the initial painting is very private.”¹²⁵ Nonetheless, these personal symbolisms are based on Nguyen’s firsthand knowledge of the Vietnam War and the trauma associated with his life experience. The boat is a vessel that carries one to freedom but is also symbolically seen as one’s inability to control fate. The cyclone, an

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Kim, 43.

¹²⁵ Long Nguyen, interviewed by Martin Wong, 75.

understood symbol of chaos in the United States, is used to metaphorically address Nguyen's own personal upheavals. As a Buddhist, Nguyen's usage of the flower is seen as representing a rejuvenation of life, particularly his own life. Even though this is an amalgamation of symbolisms, borrowing from the various cultural and religious pools, both West and East, it demonstrates Nguyen's own diversity and multiculturalism.

Nguyen recalls being asked once if he could erase his memories of the war, would he: "Somebody once asked me if I can swallow a pill to forget all the painful memories of the Vietnam War, would I do it? My answer is, 'Absolutely not! For those memories are the emotional fires behind my earlier works.'"¹²⁶ While some recollections are painful and persistent residues of unhappy events, they are reminders of the experiences that help to shape the person. In Nguyen's case, those remembrances help to provide the passion for his art production. To forget one's difficult or painful memories would leave one's psyche empty. Additionally, without retentions of one's suffering there would be an absence of a measureable scale, to which a comparison could be made against the happier moments. Subsequently, it would be impossible to reflect the good events alongside the bad ones, leaving one with little appreciation of either.

Furthermore, without a past, it is hard to identify who one is in the present and for one to have hopes and expectations for the future. Andreas Huyssen, in *Twilight Memories*, attests to this notion, "Remembrance shapes our links to the past, and the ways we remember define us in

¹²⁶ Long Nguyen, in *Long Nguyen at Mid-Career* press release (New York: Asian American Art Center, October 2001).

the present. As individuals and societies, we need the past to construct and anchor our identities and to nurture a vision of the future.¹²⁷

An Optimistic Future

Ann Phong expresses an optimistic view of the future, bringing her further away from the memory of trauma and suffering. In recent years, her paintings have extended far from the boat experience of the past, dealing with more contemporary issues. In a September 2014 email correspondence, Phong communicates that she has completed her last boat paintings, “I just finished 2 new pieces that belong to the “Boat” series. They may be my last artwork about the Boat People.”¹²⁸

Indeed, much of her art has moved beyond the trauma of the boat journey. In a 2005 painting, *Bananas* (Figure 2.12), she playfully addresses family issues, specifically her own. The 36 by 48 inch acrylic painting is of a garden with multiple verdant shades of green. Towards the bottom center of the canvas are two little children. Far to the left one can see bunches of yellow bananas still on the stalk. Two bananas are broken off and are half-way peeled with part of the fruit missing, floating serendipitously above the heads of the children, as if they were angelic beings sent to protect the crouching forms. Perhaps to indicate the fruit as being consumed, there are swirls of dissipating white paint emitting from the peeled skins, which hang over the heads of the two young ones.

¹²⁷ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 249.

¹²⁸ Phong, e-mail correspondence with author (September 8, 2014).



Figure 2.12 Ann Phong, *Bananas*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 36 by 48 inches.

The whimsical composition is Phong's way of dealing with her children's apparent "whiteness" despite their yellow skin. Having been born in the United States in 1989 and 1996, both of her daughters are very much American in speech, behavior, and thinking. They have little understanding of their parents' Vietnamese heritage, and as young children, are even less interested in learning about that culture for fear of being ridiculed by their friends as being different. As a first generation immigrant, Phong is distressed that her children have distanced themselves from her roots and culture. She laments that they are just like bananas, "yellow on the outside but white on the inside."¹²⁹ In an artist statement, Phong touches on the difficulty that Vietnamese Americans have in the new country, where immigrants "have trouble in

¹²⁹ Phong, interview with the author (Santa Ana, California, September 25, 2012).

redefining their family values when living in a new country and facing a completely new culture.”¹³⁰

As new generations of Vietnamese Americans are born in the United States, Phong shares a realistic dilemma with many other refugee parents, the balancing of keeping ones family heritage alive while allowing the new generation the flexibility and freedom to embrace its own culture. From a discussion with Phong, Robert Seitz of *L.A. Artcore* surmises that many of the teens within the Vietnamese American community face an identity predicament due to conflicting familial and societal expectations: “. . . especially the children of Vietnamese refugees, [who] go through an identity crisis . . . the parents are so concerned with making money they forget to spend the time teaching traditions or getting to know the new culture their kids are experiencing.”¹³¹

Moving beyond the boundaries of family issues, in spring 2014, Phong exhibited a new series of paintings, *Yesterday's Precious*, that address the wider societal concerns of environmental health and America's wasteful consumption habits.¹³² Most of the new mixed-media panels are much smaller than her previous paintings, ranging from only fourteen inch squares to eight by twelve inch rectangles, and included items rescued from the trash, such as soda cans and discarded toys. Even though the themes of water and boats are still present, an indication that her past will continue to ground her art, however, they are relegated to the background as Phong tries to communicate with her viewers of her ecological concerns. With

¹³⁰ Ann Phong, “Artist Statement.” In Cao Tung, *Encounter 1996: Vietnamese Artists Group Exhibition* (Pasadena, California: Pacific Asia Museum, 1996), unpagued.

¹³¹ Robert Seitz, “Ann Phong” *L.A. Artcore Webzine*, March 16, 2012. <http://www.laartcore.org/Webzine/2012/03/16/ann-phong/>. Accessed April 28, 2014.

¹³² The exhibit was a three-woman show held at the Los Angeles Brewery annex between April 3 and April 27, 2014.

the inclusion of the found objects, she calls attention to the trash that is filling America's landfills and overflowing into its rivers and oceans.

To contrast the different cultural norms, in one example, Phong compares the consumption habits in Việt Nam, where food is often wrapped in naturally found and degradable banana leaves, to that of the United States, where plastic containers that end up in landfills is the standard.¹³³ In another case, Phong speaks of how America's tendency to use of disposable items, such as paper cups and plastic forks and spoons, and quickly discarding them into the garbage can after a single use. She rhetorically asks, "Yes, we are a more civilized society, but at what cost?"¹³⁴ Phong is being charitable by using the term "civilized," implying that the United States is a developed, first-world society, merely concerned with hygiene and cleanliness. Perhaps the more appropriate description of America's wasteful consumption habits might be *elitist society*, where little regards are given to harmful environmental and ecological ramifications.

Of her previous paintings, Phong feels that she has been working from behind a mirror, one that reflected her personal experiences and her past. Regarding the new work, Phong states that she has "pushed the mirror aside, so that I can now see from a wider perspective."¹³⁵ She is able now to address issues beyond the scope of her personal and familial histories. For Phong, the ability to use her art to thematically discuss contemporary subjects, such as social issues faced by the younger Vietnamese Americans or ecological anxieties faced by the larger society, shows the range of her repertoire. From the depiction of the Vietnamese

¹³³ Phong, conversation with the author (Los Angeles, California, April 27, 2014).

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

female to the story of the boat people, from new issues affecting Vietnamese American lives to addressing environmental concerns, Phong has used her artistic abilities to communicate, resolve her trauma, and move beyond the memories of pain and suffering to a more optimistic future.

Escape from the Past

Since the completion of his *Tales of the Yellow Skin* series, Nguyen has moved into a different direction, focusing on a film making career, co-starring in and producing many independent features. As a prolific actor, Nguyen has participated in many of the films produced by a new generation of Vietnamese American filmmakers that has emerged from the West. These films postdate the fall of Việt Nam by some thirty years and are reflections upon the past from the early twenty-first century. This new generation of filmmakers composes mainly of second-generation Vietnamese Americans reflecting on the history of the community and trying to record some of the experiences by the Vietnamese American diaspora, capturing the essence of the Vietnamese American experience and what it means to be Vietnamese American.

Nguyen has appeared in the following films: Timothy Linh Bui's *Green Dragon* (2002), a story of the immigrants' experience at Camp Pendleton, California, during the time immediately after the fall of South Việt Nam; Victor Vu's *First Morning* (2005), a story of a family still suffering from alienation from the larger society and the difficulties of assimilation faced by an immigrant household; Ham Tran's *Journey from the Fall* (2006), a moving account of a family's separation when the Communists entered Saigon, with some members leaving for the high seas while one remains behind and is forced into a re-education camp; Le Van Kiet's *Sad Fish* (2009), a narrative about a disenchanted gay Vietnamese American man trying to cope with traditional family pressures while searching for a way to be true to himself; and Minh Duc

Nguyen's *Touch* (2011), an enchanting tale set in Little Saigon, depicting the relationship between a Vietnamese American nail salon worker and a Caucasian automobile mechanic with grease-stained hands and oil-crusted fingernails.

In some of the more recent films Nguyen has also worked under the direction of non-Vietnamese directors, such as Ian Gamazon's *Living in Seduced Circumstances* (2011), a violent, psychological feature in which a man has been kidnapped, tied up, tortured, and is forced to confess to his sins by a pregnant woman who he has wronged, and Sean Delgado's *Little Saigon* (2012), a comedy thriller about a real estate sales agent in Little Saigon whose life spins out of control as he tries to lure new customers by networking at funerals.

Even though the themes of the above films are varied, they deal with different aspects of the evolving Vietnamese American culture and provide glimpses into the experiences within that diaspora. With the exception of *Green Dragon* and *Journey from the Fall* these films tend to be seen by a limited audience, mostly Vietnamese Americans, as is evidenced by the lack of wide distribution and popular appeal available outside of the community.¹³⁶ Additionally, they tend to be screened in small venues with the diaspora in mind, such as The Vietnamese International Film Festivals organized by VAALA (Vietnamese American Arts & Letters Association).

Many of the roles played by Nguyen in these films are thematically different than his *Tales of Yellow Skin* paintings, which focus mainly on his memories of trauma and exodus. For Nguyen, it appears that the paintings have allowed him to work through those painful memories and provided him with a way to escape from the trauma associated with a

¹³⁶ These films are not easily found in remaining Blockbusters or other mainstream video stores, either for rental or purchase. *Green Dragon* and *Journey from the Fall* are, however, available through Netflix as of September 2011.

difficult past. His new path into films appears to widen his discussion of the Vietnamese American experience.

However artistically motivated they may have been, Nguyen and Phong are among the few fortunate refugees who have discovered viable venues to express their traumatic experiences. It is through these artistic expressions that have allowed them to unlock their respective repressed memories of the tribulations of their pasts. Their new lives and new education afforded them viable perspectives to create engaging and thought provoking work, allowing them to *escape from* the past or *go to* new and different dimensions. So many others, even having escaped political persecution and having arrived at new beginnings, remain prisoners of their unlocked traumatic memories for numerous years, some for the remainder of their lives.

CHAPTER 3

SEXUAL IDENTITY AND GENDER ISSUES

Je ne sais pas s'il existe une culture lesbienne. Je suppose qu'il vaut mieux en avoir une. Qu'il y ait des lesbiennes productrices de culture, cela est indéniable.

Nicole Lacelle, *Le lesbianisme: une culture de choix?*¹³⁷

For most within the transplanted Vietnamese American community, the United States represents a new start that includes opportunities for a new home, the pursuit of higher education, better standards of living, more job and career opportunities, chances at the American dream of success, and the ability to lead happy and fulfilling lives. Yet, for a small percentage within that community, the new country affords them additional prospects, including the opportunity to explore one's sexuality, the chance to investigate one's gender identity, and the capacity to be true to oneself, which includes the ability to love whomever one chooses.

From within the Vietnamese American diaspora in Southern California, there have been some artistic endeavors to visualize the issues of gender roles and the exploration of one's sexuality. It is critical here to differentiate between the concepts of gender roles and sexual preference. Sexual identity is an *inherent* trait that one is born with, whether a person is heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, he or she has *no choice* in the matter. There has been

¹³⁷ Nicole Lacelle, "Le lesbianisme: une culture de choix?," in Natacha Chetcuti and Claire Michard, eds. *Lesbianisme et féminisme: Histoires politiques (Lesbianism and Feminism: Political Histories)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), 183. (183-190). The quote translates as: I do not know if a lesbian culture exists. I suppose that it is better if there is one. There are lesbians producing culture, that is undeniable.

much debate about this with various oppositional theories of *nature* versus *nurture*. Arguably the consensus among scientists and scholars is that one's sexuality is an *inborn* trait. Conversely, gender roles are *social constructs*, such as whether the man becomes the breadwinner for the family whereas the woman maintains the home is all part of a fabricated societal paradigm. In the Vietnamese American diaspora, gender roles do not always follow these expected constructs. As family members often were challenged by their transitions into the new country, each adapted accordingly for the general betterment of the family unit. Among the earliest and most notable in the Vietnamese American community to broach these subjects are the artists Hanh Thi Pham (1954 -) and Nguyen Tan Hoang (1971 -), whose photographic images address similar themes but in drastically different manners.

As members of the Vietnamese American population, both Pham and Nguyen belong to a generally Christian, Republican community with conservative ideologies. The Vietnamese American diaspora in Southern California, while diverse in its composition, is mainly under the leadership of community elders who typically maintain conformist right-wing values. Consequently, the messages of young artists regarding diverse sexual identities and their proposed challenges to the traditional gender roles within a firmly entrenched patriarchal society are often met with skepticism and, at times, even hostility. While both created images that revolve around sexual identity, Pham's work has the additional dimension of being highly *brazen* and *feminist*, often directing her critiques against traditional patriarchy and American imperialism. In contrast, Nguyen Tan Hoang's homoerotic photographs and videos depict *sensual* and *seductive* Asian men, centering the visibility of the gay Asian male and luring the audience into the world of a submissive homosexual identity.

In addition, the age and gender differences of Pham and Nguyen have provided them with distinctly different experiences, even if both are representing the homosexual perspective. Even though Pham and Nguyen were originally Saigonese (from Saigon, the former capital of South Việt Nam), Pham, born in 1954, was an adult and understood her sexual desires by the time her family was evacuated from Việt Nam by the Americans at the end of April 1975. Admittedly she already had sexual attractions and desire for other women prior to leaving Việt Nam. In contrast, Nguyen was born in 1971, and was only a young child of seven when he and his family fled by boat in 1978. He did not develop his sexual awareness until after his arrival in the United States.

Furthermore, Pham held deep resentments toward traditional patriarchy and American imperialism, both systems she blamed for forcing her to give up her birth identity in order to escape Việt Nam with her family. Nguyen did not have the same complications and antipathies. This is evidenced by Pham's often unabashed and blatant compositions as compared to Nguyen's much subtler and more serene depictions, even when both are dealing with issues of sexual identities.

In the late 1940s, American biologist and sexologist Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956), founder of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, studied and wrote about his findings regarding human sexuality, providing a better understanding into homosexual behavior.¹³⁸ Over the years, many scholars have come to accept his conclusion that approximately ten percent of the general population is made up of lesbians and gays. Based on

¹³⁸ Kinsey completed *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948 and followed up with *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* five years later, in 1953. These two texts became better known as the Kinsey Reports.

those numbers, it is acceptable to suggest that lesbians and gays also comprise about ten percent of the Vietnamese American community.

Yet, the Vietnamese diaspora is highly conservative and homophobic, making it extremely difficult and challenging for lesbians and gays within the community to be open about their sexuality. Additionally, the long established patriarchal tradition tends to keep women in submissive roles while the ancestor-worship custom of Vietnamese culture promotes the continuity of family lineage, thereby, disallowing alternative sexual lifestyles. Consequently, Pham and Nguyen are among the exceptions that dare to voice different opinions and to challenge the status quo. They make ideal study cases since their artistic work gives visual voice to those suffering from gender inequity, as well as to the sexually oppressed, within the Vietnamese American population.

La emergencia de un discurso sobre “familias gays” apareció en la década de 1980 en Estados Unidos y en Gran Bretaña. Este discurso formaba parte de un cambio de actitud del movimiento homosexual que trantó de sustituir la política de la identidad de las décadas precedentes por otra basada en la diferencia con respecto al mundo heterosexual.

Olga Viñuales, *Identidades Lésbicas: Discursos y prácticas*¹³⁹

America: An Unexpected Opportunity for Sexual Awareness

The United States offers gay and lesbian immigrant artists, such as Pham and Nguyen, some additional liberties that they would not have had in Việt Nam, such as the freedom of expression and the ability to vocalize their opinions. With this newfound autonomy, they are

¹³⁹ Olga Viñuales, *Identidades Lésbicas: Discursos y prácticas (Lesbian Identities: Discussions and Practices)* (Barcelona: edicions bellanterra, 2000), 130. The quote translates as: The emergence of a discourse regarding “gay families” became apparent in the 1980s in the United States and Great Britain. This discussion, formed in part by a change in the attitude of the gay movement, which sought to replace the political identity of previous decades for another one, based on difference in respect to the straight world.

able to openly discuss their sexuality. In exchange for these liberties, of course, they paid the heavy price of giving up friends, family, homeland, and history.

For Pham, the history she had to forfeit is her own personal one. In April 1975, Pham and her family were evacuated from Việt Nam and were among the last of the evacuees. She recounts, “I don’t really remember the exact date but my parents always said that it was the last day before . . . the *Tân Sơn Nhất* Airport was bombarded [by the Communists]. So we left Saigon in 1975, at the end of April, on an American C-41 airplane to the Philippines.”¹⁴⁰ At the time, the American Embassy had decreed that children who were twenty-one years old could not accompany their parents, “When I left Vietnam, the people from the . . . American Embassy [had] said that children that are twenty-one . . . or older cannot leave Vietnam”¹⁴¹ Pham, who had just turned twenty-one, was forced to give up her personal identity in order to leave with her family:

I could not go to the United States with my parents and my siblings So my father had to . . . change my name and my age. That’s why . . . I was haunted by that. Here you are, taken out of country, you have to leave, you’ve lost everything. But not only that, you’ve lost your identity. Even your own name, you cannot have. When I went to the airport, the G.I. would call from the list of the family names. When they called my name, it was not my name! Even though I’ve rehearsed, I only responded to my name, and it was not called. So they left me behind.¹⁴²

Pham’s father had to exit from the vehicle on the airport tarmac, waiting to transport the departing passengers to the airplane, and speak with her, “Hanh, wake up! Wake up! You’re not

¹⁴⁰ Hanh Thi Pham, interview with the author (Encino, California, April 13, 2014).

¹⁴¹ Pham, quoted in Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie, “Hanh Thi Pham: Contemplating *Expatriate Consciousness* #9,” in Elaine H. Kim, Margo Machida and Sharon Mizota, eds., *Fresh Talk Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 135.

¹⁴² Pham, interview with the author (Encino, California, April 13, 2014).

Hanh Thi Pham. You're somebody else. But you have to remember that. You have to learn to be somebody else, you cannot be yourself.”¹⁴³

She finally responded to the name that was foreign to her and was allowed to join her family. Pham's parents had not foreseen the traumatic effect of losing her identity and did not realize how negatively it would have affected her, “They did not anticipate this, that I would be that traumatized and forgot that I was supposed to forget myself. But I resisted . . . because it wasn't true!”¹⁴⁴

Pham and her family arrived at an evacuee processing center set up in the military base at Camp Pendleton, in San Clemente, California, and eventually were sponsored to resettle in the city of Claremont, in Southern California.¹⁴⁵ The trauma that Pham endured by sacrificing her individual identity, however, continued to haunt her for many years and became an unrelenting scar, prompting her to later revisit it in her art production. She speaks of how she had to sacrifice her personal identity in exchange for refugee status in the United States, “So this identity [or] loss of identity . . . where you only have a green card . . . the papers that legalize you as [a refugee]. But in terms of who you are, the name that you [were given], from how your parents named you is very important. When I left Vietnam I could not have that.”¹⁴⁶

In exchange for her sacrifice, however, Pham's life in the United States eventually afforded her an unexpected newfound freedom, the ability to explore her sexual identity. Even

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ For a fictional account of this experience, see Timothy Linh Bui's 2002 film, *Green Dragon*. Set in a refugee processing center at Camp Pendleton, California, the film depicts the state of bewilderment and despair that the Vietnamese immigrants were often confronted with when they first arrived in the United States.

¹⁴⁶ Pham, interview with the author (Encino, California, April 13, 2014).

though Pham was aware of her proclivity for women while growing up in Việt Nam, the sexual climate there was much more conservative and did not allow for much physical experimentation. Pham speaks of a different understanding and of much less sexual indulgence while she was still living in Việt Nam:

Actually I did not know how to define gayness or lesbianism. There's no such term in Vietnamese When we were in Vietnam, I always loved girls . . . [but] in Vietnam the sex progresses very slowly. Sometimes you can kiss each other for years in the dark, like in the cinemas. You go to the movies and then you touch each other. And that is very sexual already. You smell each other's skin, that's very private. Or when you get to touch people in the different parts of the body, like giving them a massage or something, that is exploring the body intimately. But it's not entering the organs of the body, to want to be inside the body. Because many times it is very romantically poetic that we think that our minds get inside of each other's minds. So you are in my world and I am in your world. That's how sexual [contact was] to us.¹⁴⁷

Pham expands on the problematic conditions in Việt Nam, such as space, class, income, societal expectations, and the lack of general knowledge, which did not allow for much sexual exploration:

In Vietnam you have very little space because everybody can see you through your windows, in close proximity. You don't have the time to escape to some vacation place where you [can] spend time together. All of that, it has to do with class, money, status So love, even though it is deep, it's defined very differently according to the circumstances. That is why Vietnamese are known to have *friendships*. They put it under the umbrella of *friendship*, like your best friend who is a girl, and that is your *sister*. There is a word for sisters [*chị em*] and it's family. And that person can be blended into your immediate family. So it's understood, it's accepted. But what you do in private is private . . . [even though] you don't know how to define it! How to talk about it!¹⁴⁸

Pham provides an explicit example by speaking of an affair she had with a French female *friend* while still in Việt Nam and how that relationship progressed sexually when they were reunited later in the United States:

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

[In Vietnam] I had romantic intrigues going on with . . . girls, especially my girlfriend from France, because I studied French so I could tell her about my poetry. And she gave me some books that I can read about the poets, so we jived together very well. That's why we had a connection.

So it [the relationship] grew when she came to [visit me in] the United States from France. That's when the sexuality started. We slept with each other, we had [sexual] contacts. In Vietnam, we only kissed and we held hands. But in the United States, it's really fun to explore the body of the one you love.¹⁴⁹

When she first arrived in the United States, despite her knowledge about her homosexuality, Pham had tried to conform to the expected role of young women within the Vietnamese American culture. She became engaged and was to be married to a young Vietnamese man who had been a family friend. Instead of showing compassion and understanding for her difficulties in trying to adapt, however, her fiancée physically struck Pham when she discussed with him her feelings toward women: "He was very upset so he hit me in the face. I was never hit by a boy I was not really interested in boys, and this was the first boyfriend that I was interested in. I . . . loved him very much, but for him to hit me in the face, that was unacceptable to me."¹⁵⁰ When she broke off the engagement the man began to stalk her. In addition, her family expressed disappointment in the situation. These things caused Pham to feel insecure and to be despondent.

At the time, Pham was attending a community college and was learning English. With few for her to confide in, Pham turned to her English professor, Timothy O'Sullivan, when he inquired about her obvious emotional transformation. His comfort, benevolence, and protectiveness of Pham led the student/teacher relationship to change into a romantic one and to their eventual marriage. She recalls telling her husband: "I marry you because you're kind.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

You can teach me English. That [Vietnamese] boyfriend doesn't work anymore. He hit me. It will only escalate. He's going to hit [again]. So, no more!"¹⁵¹

The marriage lasted for twelve and one half years. Eventually, however, Pham realized that she had to be true to herself and filed for divorce. After the separation, what she benefited from was a newfound empowerment, "But then after my divorce, I was on my own, and was able to gain my own living. [It] started to bring out the capacity that I have as a human being: taking charge of my own life, of not being controlled so much by what other people think [of] what I should be."¹⁵²

Pham notes that since that time she has had the freedom to explore her sexuality. Yet, there is still a great deal of homophobia in the Vietnamese community, particularly from within her own family:

They [my siblings] don't want anything to do much with me. . . . When my nieces and nephews were younger, they [my siblings] were always afraid that I would influence them and they would become gay or lesbian. So that's why they don't want to talk too much about auntie Hanh. They don't allow me too much space to interact So I don't go to family meetings all the time. That is [what it's] like in the [Vietnamese] family. The acceptance is not there for gays and lesbians.¹⁵³

When still alive, her parents tried to dissuade Pham from a life of homosexuality. They held the misconception that her sexual preference is a choice. Pham recalls, "Even though my parents knew that I am different, that I was courageous and outspoken, but they said, 'Hanh, it's going to be a hard life, so why don't you change?'"¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Pham, quoted in Erica L. H. Lee, "Breaking through the Chrysalis: Hanh Thi Pham," in Russell Leong, ed., *Amerasian Journal* (Vol. 20: No. 1, 1994): 130.

¹⁵³ Pham, interview with the author (Encino, California, April 13, 2014).

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Pham sought to change, but not in her personal sexuality. Rather, she started to employ art as a way to make a change in the understanding of sexual difference, “I change things so that things can be better but I do not change what is oppressed, what has been repressed. I’m very privileged to be able to go to school, to go into the arts, and I will do this [make a change] through my art.”¹⁵⁵ In her text, *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler cites the philosopher Luce Irigaray as claiming “that the question of sexual difference is *the* question of our time,” whereby implying that this “sexual difference should be understood as more fundamental than other forms of differences, but that other forms of differences might be *derived* from sexual difference.”¹⁵⁶

Today, homosexuality continues to be a contentious subject in contemporary American society and homophobia is still entrenched in the Vietnamese American diaspora. Despite her family’s treatment towards her, Pham’s personal experience in the United States, however, has been one with more freedom for sexual experimentation than had she remained in the traditionally conservative Việt Nam.

For Nguyen Tan Hoang, sexual exploration in the motherland was a non-issue as he was only a young child when he and his family escaped. The exodus, however, was fraught with fear and trauma that continued to haunt Nguyen into his young adulthood, affecting his sexual awareness and understanding. Nguyen speaks of his family’s boat journey from Việt Nam in 1978:

We immigrated to the U.S. when I was seven . . . part of the boat people We were attacked by seven different pirate ships [while] we were at sea for eight days . . . and finally we were rescued by a West German ship. And then we were brought to Malaysia, to a refugee camp.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Rutledge, 1993), 167.

¹⁵⁷ Nguyen Tan Hoang, interview with the author (Irvine, California, October 15, 2012).

Nguyen recalls that he and his family remained in the Malaysian refugee camp for an extended amount of time before being sponsored by a family member to come to the United States, “I think we stayed there for about eighteen months. We were sponsored by one of my uncles who emigrated in ’75. That’s how we came to the U.S.”¹⁵⁸

Even though the family survived the voyage and were able to resettle in the United States, the trauma associated with the passage continued to plague Nguyen’s memories of the event, eventually manifesting in the form of homosexual fantasies:

. . . I made a video about our escape, but using a lot of found footage in my video. So using *Paris by Night* [a Vietnamese American musical and entertainment show produced in Southern California] clips, using Hollywood movies, using footage I shot of myself with my friends dressing up as pirates and sailors, referring to the encounters with Thai pirates and being rescued by German sailors . . . it becomes sort of like my own fantasy. You know . . . taking poetic license and recreating what might have happened.¹⁵⁹

The 2000 video, entitled *PIRATED!*, is further discussed in detail later in this chapter. It is necessary to point out here, however, that like Pham, Nguyen too gave up his friends, home, and history in exchange for a new life in America. Perhaps his greatest sacrifice is his innocence, having only been a tender age of seven when scarred by the trauma of the departure. Of course his new life in the new country afforded him all the same opportunities that other Vietnamese boat refugees were given. As a gay Asian male, however, he was provided with the additional prospect of becoming aware of his sexuality and the chance to explore those desires.

When asked of what his life might have been like in the more reserved Vietnamese society, where homosexuality tended not to be an approachable subject, Nguyen professes unfamiliarity, “I don’t really know. I don’t know enough about Vietnam to know what it would

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

[be like].”¹⁶⁰ He adds, however, that from his visit back to Việt Nam in 1999, and from spending time with a Vietnamese cousin who is gay, there probably would have been many societal and familial challenges:

I have a young cousin who’s twenty-two When I visited him, he showed me around and . . . took me out to the queer hot spots I know he has difficulty because we talked about it . . . there’s pressures in his family for him to settle down, get married, and he’s finished with his schooling I don’t have enough information about Vietnam to imagine what would have happened to me if I had remained, in terms of sexuality.¹⁶¹

Whether Nguyen does not know for certain or does not want to admit the possible difficulties of living a life in Việt Nam as a gay man is a moot point. From his testimony regarding his gay cousin’s experience, homosexuality in Việt Nam still seem to pose many challenges for Vietnamese gays and lesbians, particularly familial ones.

In the text, *Gays and Lesbians in Asia and the Pacific*, sociologists Gerald Sullivan and Laurence Wai-Teng Leong suggest life for gays and lesbians in Asia as one filled with trepidations and is much further behind in progress than one in the West:

Many experience a great deal of fear about coming out to family members or in wider social milieux. There is much work to be done to establish gay pride and a sense of community. In many parts of the region there is a great need for legal reform and changes to social attitudes towards homosexuality, not only to remove sodomy statutes where they exist, but also to ensure freedom from discrimination, equality of opportunity, parenting and inheritance rights, and the whole host of issues which Western gay rights activists pursue. In many parts of Asia and the Pacific, social action in these areas is but a dream for the future as gay men and lesbians begin work on the cultural right to exist.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Gerard Sullivan and Laurence Wai-Teng Leong, eds., *Gays and Lesbians in Asia and the Pacific* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995), 3-4. See John Scagliotti’s 2003 documentary, *Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World*, for possible negative ramifications to coming out in third world countries, including Việt Nam.

For lesbians and gay men in most parts of Asia, their mere existence is still tenuous and is often not accepted by society, as familial coercion forces them into straight marriages and procreation.¹⁶³

In the United States, particularly in the Vietnamese American diaspora in Orange County, there is a collective denial of the existence of homosexuality among Vietnamese men. From a 1992 study on sexual behavior within the community, it is found that known cases tend to bring shame to the families involved. Often the blame is placed on Anglo-American culture or on the white men who “seduced” these Vietnamese men:

There appears to be a general belief in the Vietnamese community in Orange County that the homosexual behaviors of Vietnamese-American men are mostly the result of their being seduced by Anglo-American men. One of our heterosexual respondents stated his belief this way: “In Vietnam, homosexuality did not have a chance to develop because of Vietnamese culture and morals . . . Vietnamese society does not accept homosexuality.”¹⁶⁴

It is apparent that the acceptable behavior for Vietnamese men in the diaspora is to marry and have children.

Nguyen admittedly faced similar pressures from his traditional Asian family, to get married and carry on the lineage, “I’ve gone through the same thing [family pressures] . . . growing up in the U.S. and being part of a Vietnamese family.”¹⁶⁵ He augments, however, that over the years, his parents have come to terms with his sexuality and it has become an unspoken acknowledgement within the family:

¹⁶³ For a fictional but representational depiction regarding this issue see Ang Lee’s 1993 film, *The Wedding Banquet*. Even though the film has a comedic tone, it nonetheless provides a sense of the family pressures that Asian homosexuals often face.

¹⁶⁴ Joseph Carrier, Bang Nguyen and Sammy Su, “Vietnamese American Sexual Behaviors & HIV Infection,” in *Journal of Sex Research* (Vol. 29: no. 4, November 1992). 552.

¹⁶⁵ Nguyen, interview with the author (Irvine, California, October 15, 2012).

I've never officially come out to my parents. Basically, they know. This is the way, I think the Asian way or maybe the Vietnamese way. My partner and I have been together for fifteen years and they've known him. Probably two or three years [after] we started dating they met him and he's a part of the family.¹⁶⁶

As the sole son among seven siblings, the pressure for him to carry on the bloodline by marrying and providing an heir would have been much greater in the Confucianism entrenched society of Việt Nam, where ancestor-worship is of paramount importance.

In the article, *Man-Eating Butterflies*, a fellow gay Vietnamese American man, Thanh Do, recounts coming out to his parents and having the feelings of dread associated with the process:

“Thanh, you have to just tell them . . . there's never a good time, and it's eating you up inside . . . just tell them!” This thought kept playing in my head, over and over again. I felt this nausea throughout my body, especially in my stomach, whenever I thought of coming out to my family.

It was June 1997, and I was 23. I just graduated from college, and it was time to come back home to live with my family . . . working and going to graduate school full time. I could handle the stress of working and going to school, but nothing tired me out more than the fear of my family knowing and the possibility that I would be disowned and kicked out of the house.¹⁶⁷

In this particular story, Do was a fortunate gay man whose family was understanding and willing to embrace him despite his homosexuality. Do recalls his father's response when he told him:

“He started to talk about his military days and talked about fellow comrades who were gay. He fought to find other examples of possibly gay people in his past life in Vietnam to comfort me, to tell me that I was not that different, and that he knew that homosexuality existed.”¹⁶⁸ Initially his father told Do that he would pay for his operation, thinking that every gay man would want a sex

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Thanh Do, *Man-Eating Butterflies: A Coming Out Story*.
<http://www.vietlgbt.org/ComingOutHome/Coming%20Out%20Story%2012-05-06/>. Accessed February 12, 2013.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

change operation. His father later realized his misconception. Do adds that in the ten years since he came out to his family he has not regretted it and that the experience has brought him closer to his family members.

Do's story, however, is an exception from the norm and he is one of the lucky ones with an accepting and supportive family, which generally is not the case. In the United States, when Asian American parents with gay or lesbian children become aware of their children's sexual preferences, they often blame it on the assimilation process or on Anglo-American culture, where homosexuality often is considered to be "a white disease." In one cited example, the parents of an Asian lesbian blamed her sexual preference to being raised in a manner that was too "American:"

One lesbian's parents blamed their unconventional treatment of her (being the first born, she was treated like a son) for their daughter's homosexuality. The way they raised their daughter was a deviation from the Asian norm, and they saw themselves as acting 'more American,' and believed this was the reason for their daughter's homosexuality. Their reaction supports the notion that the traditional Asian community believes that homosexuality is a White issue.¹⁶⁹

Occasionally there are a few parents that have a more accepting and supportive outlook. Lucy Nguyen, a Vietnamese American immigrant in her fifties and of no relations to Nguyen, comments regarding living in America, where the more liberal attitudes have allowed her own two gay sons to come out:

In an environment like this—with all the gay activities—I think I'm [a] lesbian. You know, I'll be honest. When I was young in Vietnam[,] society was so strict. Yet, I had a really close friend, I loved her. That was just a friendship[,] nothing else. In my mind

¹⁶⁹ Joanne M. Chao, *Self-Concept, Self-Esteem, and Coping Strategies of Lesbian and Heterosexual Asian American Women* (San Francisco: California School of Professional Psychology, 2001), 89. Dissertation.

now, I say, well this country is freer. There's no restraints, so that's why I accept it [homosexuality], whatever they [my sons] are.¹⁷⁰

The remark, although supportive on the surface, is a fallacy that assumes lesbians and gays exist *because* of an accepting and hospitable environment, as opposed to one's genetic make-up and being born that way.

It goes back to the argument of *nurture* versus *nature*, and is based on the belief of *tabula rasa* (where a newborn child starts with a "blank slate"), and the fallacy that homosexuality is a *choice* that is learnt, rather than *being inherent*. Sociologist Gina Masequesmay cites an anonymous Vietnamese American lesbian, demonstrating the necessity to educate the community about the 'naturalness' of homosexuality:

[Vietnamese] don't accept these kinds of things, we think it's unnatural, and socially not accepted, but this is how we are, we're born with it, you know. We want some support. We know it's not just only us. We are not some weird ones. It's a lot of people just like us, means that it's in the gene. It's something that's in us, not just, you know, we're just like that. It's not like we choose, but we're born with it. That's the difference, between choose to be like it, and born to be like it. It's two different things.¹⁷¹

The above sentiment of non-acceptance and lack of understanding is further echoed in Lucy Nguyen's following words, as she adds that she had lesbian classmates in her all-girl high school, who were frowned on, "They were looked down upon, because this isn't normal."¹⁷² Her remarks suggest that although she appears to support her gay sons and do not blame America for their sexual preferences, nonetheless, homosexuality is abnormal in her eyes. She also admits

¹⁷⁰ Lucy Nguyen, quoted in Alice Y. Hom, "Stories from the Homefront: Perspectives of Asian American Parents with Lesbian Daughters and Gay Sons," in Russell Leong, ed., *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay & Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 39.

¹⁷¹ Gina Masequesmay, *Becoming Queer and Vietnamese American: Negotiating Multiple Identities in an Ethnic Support Group of Lesbians, Bisexual Women, and Female-to-Male Transgenders* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, 2001), 56. Dissertation.

¹⁷² Lucy Nguyen, quoted in Alice Y. Hom, 40.

that the Vietnamese diasporic community is much less tolerant of its homosexual members, but professes that she is speaking out with the hope of broadening the minds of Vietnamese Americans within the diaspora, “They won’t accept it. Because for a long, long time they say they [gays and lesbians] are not good people”¹⁷³

This antiquated homophobic belief system was widespread in Việt Nam of the past, particularly under the repressive communistic Việt Nam of the 1980s and early 1990s. It would not have given Nguyen much in terms of sexual liberty had he spent his adolescence there. As a gay Asian male, Nguyen has benefitted from his migration to America and from his newfound life in the United States. Despite the persisting homophobia within the Vietnamese American diaspora, he has been provided with a more indulgent environment in which to grow. In this country, with some erosion of the traditional Vietnamese beliefs, coupled by the greater emphasis on personal freedom (including sexual freedom), Nguyen has been granted the unexpected chance to explore alternative sexual mores and the ability to love whomever he chooses.

Other Opportunities

Besides providing sexual freedom, the United States also afforded Nguyen and Pham other prospects, including the option to pursue higher education and the freedom of expression, both of which they exercised. Pham and Nguyen both received master of fine arts degrees, with emphasis in photography. Nguyen even proceeded further, attaining a doctorate degree in film studies. Armed with Western ideologies and modes of expression, Pham and Nguyen negotiated their way through the art arena, becoming recognized nationally and internationally.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

When Nguyen and his family arrived in the United States, they settled in San Jose, California. He recalls growing up in a Catholic home with six sisters:

I think my experience wasn't that unusual from other Asian American, Vietnamese American youth who came here by boat. Nothing out of the ordinary . . . I did have support from my family because I had such a huge family and so we stuck together. Also we were very Catholic growing up so we had that . . . community through the church My parents were very serious about our studies. They emphasized the fact they sacrificed a lot for us to be here, to have a better life. So schooling was very important for us. I think . . . they did a great job because . . . all seven children went to college.¹⁷⁴

Nguyen left home when he was nineteen and enrolled at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he studied art and art history, graduating with the highest honors in those fields. He recounts that his interest in the arts began even as a child and was solidified in high school when he had positive experiences, “[The arts was] something that I always had been interested since I was a kid . . . like drawing and painting. In high school I had really great art teachers who were very encouraging.”¹⁷⁵

After his undergraduate studies, Nguyen entered the University of California, Irvine, where he received his M.F.A. in studio arts in 1996, and at the University of California, Berkeley, where he received his Ph.D. in film studies in 2008. As encouraged by his parents early on, education became an important part of Nguyen's development and career choices, providing him with the necessary tools in his art production process.

The United States provided similar educational opportunities for Pham when she and her family arrived and settled in Claremont, California. She recalls:

Claremont is a city very close to all the Pomona colleges. We had very good sponsors that wanted us to attend community colleges. And my younger sister attended high school. That was a really good experience because we didn't have to go to work right

¹⁷⁴ Nguyen, interview with the author (Irvine, California, October 15, 2012).

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

away. We entered college or high school and we worked part-time to survive. So that gave us a door to enable us to become functional as American citizens.¹⁷⁶

[Later] I worked in a factory while I went to school. It took me ten years to study English. And then after that I attended Cal State Fullerton where I got my Bachelor of Arts in Design. And then Bachelor of Fine Arts, and then finally, Masters of Fine Arts in Photography.¹⁷⁷

Pham speaks of the post-traumatic syndrome from the war that continued to haunt her during her early years in the United States, “At night time . . . I would go to sleep and all this post-traumatic things surfaces. I was crowded by fear from the residues of the war I missed my country and my people and my relatives and my grandparents. My grandfather [had] died a few weeks before we left Vietnam.”¹⁷⁸ The nightmares and memories became an impetus for Pham to pursue photography as a way to deal with the trauma, “When I attended Cal State Fullerton, that’s what I wanted to do, in terms of photography. I wanted to address these dreams, these things that haunted me. I thought that if I could not get this out of my system, I might go crazy.”¹⁷⁹

Pham speaks about her excitement regarding photography as a medium, allowing her to express herself, “Through photography I was able to write a script I can draw the pictures that lead me to making the photographs. So I was very excited about that point. Here is a person who is addressing her own issues with something visual. And with the visual, or the photograph, it will be seen by people.”¹⁸⁰ Curator Machida describes Pham’s start in photography as a way for her to come to terms with the trauma associated with the Vietnam War:

¹⁷⁶ Pham, interview with the author (Encino, California, April 13, 2014).

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

Pham studied photography not only to support herself, but also as a means to come to terms with the indelible memories of that violent era. Soon she began to create highly manipulated color photographs in which she strove to confront the life she was forced to leave behind in Asia as well as the unresolved legacy of decades of fierce internecine struggle whose aftermath still plagues Vietnamese communities in America.¹⁸¹

Similarly to Nguyen, education also played an important part in Pham's development in the United States. It provided her with the technical knowledge to be able to create a visual voice for herself, giving her the opportunity to articulate her opinions through artistic expression. Like Nguyen, Pham was able to capitalize on some of the opportunities provided in the new country. Through the liberal art curriculums attained from the Southern California university systems which encouraged the production of artistic work that promoted a sense of individual agency, coupled with the newfound freedom of expression, Nguyen and Pham were able to explore viable artistic ways, namely photography and the visual arts, to powerfully convey their points of view.

The devil appeared in the forms of both men and women witches, but when a specter assaulted a victim in a sexual way, it was always in the shape of a woman.

Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women*¹⁸²

Hanh Thi Pham – Photographer and Lesbian Activist

As an internationally recognized artist, Pham's work has been widely exhibited in the United States and abroad. In the introduction for Pham's 1997 exhibit at the Fukuoka Museum

¹⁸¹ Margo Machida, *The Poetics of Personalities: Art, Identity, and Communities of Imagination in Asian America* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 2002), 265-6. Dissertation.

¹⁸² Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 115.

in Japan, art historian Machida speaks of the lack of a proper term for ‘lesbian’ in Vietnamese. Thus, she states that Pham has coined the Vietnamese expression, “*Nữ-Yêu Yêu-Nữ*,” which translates literally as “woman who love[s]” and “demon woman,”¹⁸³ as a fitting Vietnamese term for lesbianism. Pham, however, is not labelling lesbians as “demons,” rather she is using it as a term of empowerment.

In the Vietnamese American community, there continues to be an absence for such a term. As recent as spring 2012, in *Asian Week*, one of the oldest Asian American newsmagazines in the United States, based in the San Francisco Bay Area, the staff writer still contends that there is no word for homosexuality or lesbianism, “The Vietnamese language and culture has no word for homosexual or lesbian. It lends to derogatory terms or descriptions.”¹⁸⁴ This lack of recognition for a whole class of people suggests that the Vietnamese American community continues to deny the mere existence to its homosexual members.

In the United States, particularly in the larger patriarchal society of the past, even though lesbianism has been recognized, it often has been perceived as vile and immoral. Not unlike Pham’s recalling of lesbian affairs in Việt Nam being labelled as *friendships*, relationships between women in America existed under a similar disguise. In her text, *Disorderly Conduct*, historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg provides a glimpse into the history of same-sex relationships that existed between women in Victorian America, ones that created strong lifetime emotional bonds and attachments despite the insurmountable odds of great distances, family obligations, and societal expectations:

¹⁸³ Margo Machida, “An Expatriate’s Consciousness: The Photography of Hanh Thi Pham,” in *Hanh Thi Pham: A Vietnamese: Her Body in Revolt* (Fukuoka City, Japan: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997), 7.

¹⁸⁴ “Vietnamese Activist Vuong Nguyen to be Honored by APIQWTC,” *Asian Week* (March 21, 2012). <http://www.asianweek.com/2012/03/21/vietnamese-activist-vuong-nguyen-to-be-honored-by-apiqwtc/>. Accessed May 25, 2014.

An intriguing and almost alien form of human relationship, they flourished in a different social structure and amid different sexual norms These two friendships, intense, loving, and openly avowed, began during the women's adolescence and, despite subsequent marriages and geographic separation, continued throughout their lives. For nearly half a century these women played a central emotional role in one another's lives, writing time and again of their love and of the pain of separation.¹⁸⁵

She adds that in contemporary time, such relationships have been argued as being both, carnal and nonphysical, "Paradoxically to twentieth century minds, their love appears to have been both sensual and platonic."¹⁸⁶

Regardless of the physical aspects in these relationships, it is apparent that in America women have long aligned themselves with other women, despite the overwhelmingly male-centric society that tends to keep them suppressed. In the United States, the 1970s saw the beginning of the feminist movement, which emboldened women in their fight for equality. Sometimes these feminist groups include disenchanted and indignant lesbians who saw themselves as oppressed and wanted to challenge the misogyny that continued to be perpetrated against women in contemporary society. In her article, "From Rage to All the Rage," feminist writer Kathy Miriam corroborates with this perspective:

But against the prevailing cultural (male) definition of lesbianism as evil, perverse and sick, *feminists* (including lesbians who came out before and during the movement) declared that women should step out of line and defy the boundary of their sex role. Feminists *reclaimed* lesbianism as *woman loving* and redefined woman loving as a *political* love inciting outraged resistance against a woman-hating culture.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 55.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ Kathy Miriam, "From Rage to All the Rage: Lesbian-Feminism, Sadomasochism, and the Politics of Memory," in Irene Reti, ed., *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties* (Santa Cruz, California: HerBooks, 1993), 7-8.

Pham, an affirmed lesbian and a staunch feminist, uses her art as a political tool to challenge patriarchy in both, the Vietnamese diaspora as well as the society at large.

Her photographic installations deal with gender issues, the process of assimilation in the new diaspora, and diverse sexual identities. Her work, from a feminist viewpoint, redefines the traditional gender roles within Vietnamese culture and speaks of how assimilation into Western society has allowed women to take control of their own lives and destinies, defying the current male-dominant societal trend. Pham speaks of her art production, “As an activist artist, I continue to construct lesbian-specific imageries (sexual and non-sexual) and to explore metamorphic Asian identities; I am organizing my collaborative work to become even more brutally honest, more inflammatory when need be, and all the more blatant to bring about change.”¹⁸⁸

In Pham’s native Việt Nam prior to 1975 the subject of lesbianism was obscure and almost never publicly spoken of. In fact, until recent times lesbianism has been invisible in most Asian cultures. In her 2001 dissertation, *Self-Concept, Self-Esteem, and Coping Strategies of Lesbian and Heterosexual Asian American Women*, psychologist Joanne Chao asserts that the expected role for women of Asian societies is to get married and to procreate; to be a dutiful wife and a nurturing mother: “Traditionally, in Asian cultures . . . women are expected to marry men and have children. Alternative choices concerning family life and sexual matters (e.g. remaining single, remaining childless in marriage, and having a same sex partner) are not discussed.”¹⁸⁹

Chao further affirms that even among contemporary Asian lesbians in the United States, little in

¹⁸⁸ Pham, quoted in Margo Machida, “An Expatriate’s Consciousness: The Photography of Hanh Thi Pham,” in *Hanh Thi Pham: A Vietnamese: Her Body in Revolt* (Fukuoka City, Japan: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997), 7.

¹⁸⁹ Joanne M. Chao, *Self-Concept, Self-Esteem, and Coping Strategies of Lesbian and Heterosexual Asian American Women* (San Francisco: California School of Professional Psychology, 2001), 1. Dissertation.

terms of exploration and investigation has been done, “Research focusing on Asian American lesbians have been conducted only within the past decade, and is still rather rare.”¹⁹⁰

Alison Kim, an Asian American lesbian, corroborates Chao’s assessment by illustrating the lack of information she faced when researching for a project, “I began compiling information for a workshop I wanted to facilitate for Pacific/Asian Lesbians I thought that all [that] existed was the six books and two articles I owned.”¹⁹¹ With inadequate research, dearth in available texts, and a scarcity in role models, Asian American homosexuals find themselves with conflicting identities and often are at odds. In her article, *Maiden Voyage*, sociologist Dana Takagi states, “. . . Many of us experience the worlds of Asian America and gay America as separate places—emotionally, physically, intellectually.”¹⁹² There tends to be a false belief that one is either homosexual or one is Asian, but not both simultaneously. Akemi, a Japanese American lesbian, speaks of experiencing such a dilemma:

Ever since I knew I was a lesbian I felt ‘different’. I couldn’t feel comfortable in the Asian community because I thought I was the only one; looking around at lesbian gatherings confirmed this feeling. There were lesbians and there were Asians, but there weren’t any Asian Lesbians. I needed someone to understand both parts of me. Not just my Asian half or my lesbian half, but my Asian lesbian whole. As I was growing up I was very involved in the Asian community. What I realize now is that the Asian community is very homophobic. Being Asian was/is very important to me, so when I knew I was a lesbian, I thought I had to make a choice. I had to either be Asian or lesbian.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Alison Kim, “Pacific/Asian Lesbian Bibliography,” in C. Chung, A. Kim and A.K. Lemeschewsky, eds., *Between the Lines: An Anthology by Pacific/Asian Lesbians of Santa Cruz, California* (Santa Cruz, California: Dancing Bird Press, 1987), 49.

¹⁹² Dana Y. Takagi, “Maiden Voyage: Excursion into Sexuality and Identity Politics in Asian America,” in Russell Leong, eds., *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of Gay & Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 25.

¹⁹³ Akemi, “Claiming an Asian Lesbian Identity,” in C. Chung, A. Kim and A.K. Lemeschewsky, eds., *Between the Lines: An Anthology by Pacific/Asian Lesbians of Santa Cruz, California* (Santa Cruz, California: Dancing Bird Press, 1987), 17.

Similarly, for Pham, an avowed Asian lesbian living in Southern California, the process of coming out and confronting the homophobic Vietnamese American community, as well as the old gender traditions of Việt Nam that persists in the new country, is a difficult and trying challenge, at times casting her into an “outsider” status.

In 2009, during the organization process for Little Saigon’s annual Lunar New Year (*Tết*) Parade in Westminster, the Vietnamese American LGBT group’s first attempt to march in the parade encountered vehement disapproval by the elders within the community. According to anthropologist Natalie Newton, who was also a major organizer for the LGBT group, the “leaders of the Vietnamese diasporic religious community in Orange County called homosexuality [as being] ‘against Vietnamese culture’ (*trái văn hóa Việt Nam*),”¹⁹⁴ labeling gays and lesbians as abominations against Vietnamese traditions. The Vietnamese American religious coalition, business owners, and political leaders of Westminster’s city government even threatened to boycott the event, which is the largest parade in the Vietnamese diasporic community since it was first celebrated in the late 1970s. New York based feminist Purvi Shah concurs that by keeping reformist groups from participating in community events, the elders within a community help to silence those voices and to maintain the status quo, “The separation of politics from culture is . . . used to silence activist messages, by barring progressive groups from participating in community events and constructing a sanitized version of culture that suits elite interests and power.”¹⁹⁵ Newton further adds that the Confucian ideals that are deeply

¹⁹⁴ Natalie Nancy Newton, *A Queer Political Economy of ‘Community’: Gender, Space, and the Transnational Politics of Community for Vietnamese Lesbians (les) in Saigon* (Irvine, California: University of California, Irvine, 2012), 75-6. Dissertation.

¹⁹⁵ Purvi Shah, “Redefining the Home: How Community Elites Silence Feminist Activism,” in Sonia Shah, ed., *Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire* (Boston: South End Press, 1997), 46.

entrenched within Vietnamese culture ensure no tolerance for homosexuality, “Vietnamese tradition is viewed as homophobic and patriarchal due to Confucian influence.”¹⁹⁶

Nonetheless, Pham recognizes the necessity to contest the homophobia and narrow-mindedness within the diaspora and has not been discouraged by the daunting task. She speaks of homosexuality in Việt Nam and its expression generally as a “deep” and loving one, even if done in secrecy, “Going back to the history of the people, no matter what country they’re from, there will always be gays and lesbians, or women who align themselves to other women. The women who are in love, their love is always very deep. But how they express it in term of actions is sometimes defined differently [than] in the West.”¹⁹⁷

Sociologist Gina Masequesmay, in her 2001 dissertation, *Becoming Queer and Vietnamese American*, sheds light on a small Southern California community of Vietnamese American lesbians and bisexual women who call themselves *Ô-môi*, after a Vietnamese tropical fruit, mainly due to the fashion it is consumed.¹⁹⁸ According to Masequesmay, the term was a slang that was “popularly used to refer to lesbians in the late 1960s to 1970s in Saigon . . . [and has] re-emerged as the name for a newly found support network of Vietnamese lesbians, bisexual women, and female-to-male transgenders [living in the

¹⁹⁶ Newton, 76.

¹⁹⁷ Pham, interview with the author (Encino, California, April 13, 2014).

¹⁹⁸ The *ô-môi* tree has the scientific binomial name *cassia grandis*. In English it is known as the Pink Shower Tree and in Spanish it is referred to as *carao*. Besides Việt Nam, the tree is also found in Central American nations such as Cuba, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cassia_grandis. Accessed May 7, 2014.

Los Angeles and Orange counties of Southern California].”¹⁹⁹ Whether the Vietnamese American diaspora approves or disavows homosexuality, clearly Vietnamese American gays and lesbians do exist. When asked, Pham affirms that she is aware of the *Ô-môi* group and is happy that such a group exists in Southern California.

Since living in the United States, Pham has had the freedom to explore her sexual desires and experiment the different ways to express love. No doubt this freedom has provided Pham with the perseverance to oppose the current homophobia within the diaspora. In doing so, however, the process exposes the Vietnamese American experience as a problematic one, which continues to hold onto antiquated belief systems. The fact that she is able to produce politically charged artwork, nonetheless, demonstrates how the diasporic experience in the United States also can be an empowering one, providing Pham with a powerful visual voice and the ability to contest the status quo.

¹⁹⁹ Gina Masequesmay, *Becoming Queer and Vietnamese American: Negotiating Multiple Identities in an Ethnic Support Group of Lesbians, Bisexual Women, and Female-to-Male Transgenders* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, 2001), 56. Dissertation. Masequesmay further adds that an alternative reason for the original use of the term *Ô-môi* was “because it [phonetically] sounded almost similar to the French term ‘homo’ as in ‘homosexuelle.’”

Rice. A life-sustaining staple of Asian cultures for thousands of years that's served as a side-dish on Western menus.

Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture + Politics, Song Cho²⁰⁰

Nguyen Tan Hoang – Gay Artist and Educator

As a gay Vietnamese American, Nguyen uses his art to make visible the invisible homosexual Asian male. In the United States, the gay culture has been predominantly portrayed as “white,” whether in the media, cultural or political spheres. Gays and lesbians of color have been marginalized and are rarely seen. That becomes even more profoundly so in terms of “Asian queers.” The dearth of the gay Asian male in mainstream culture prompts Nguyen’s artistic production as he advocates for more representation of queer minorities.

Even though the political fight for the equal treatment of the LGBT population in the United States has made significant progress since its inception at the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York, gay rights has often been equated as rights for “white” gays and lesbians. In his 2000 article, *Gay Rights for Gay Whites?*, law professor Darren Hutchinson speaks of the “comparative approach” used in discourse in regards to gay rights, where “sexual orientation discrimination” has frequently been compared to “racial discrimination.” Whilst there is some viability in this method, Hutchinson states that it also impedes equality for *all* homosexuals, and suggests one of the consequences is that the gay and lesbian community is seen as a predominantly white one:

Specifically, the comparative approach marginalizes (or treats as nonexistent) gays and lesbians of color, leading to a narrow construction of the gay and lesbian community as

²⁰⁰ Song Cho, “Introduction,” in Song Cho, ed., *Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture + Politics* (Toronto, Canada: Queer Press, 1998), 1. Cho further expands that in gay culture, “Rice is also a metaphor for gay Asians and how [they] are consumed by a white gay culture as exotic ‘tricks.’ The term rice queen, for example, refers to white men who fetishize Asian men.”

largely upper-class and white. Such a comparative discussion of race and sexuality in pro-gay and lesbian discourse reflects a broader marginalization of persons of color (and women and the poor) who are excluded from essentialist queer theories and politics.²⁰¹

Consequently, the tendency of the larger society, when discussing the subject of homosexuality and the related gay experience, has been relegated to the understanding and empowerment of white lesbians and gays.

For Nguyen, who initially came out at the age of nineteen, the process was a difficult one, filled with disenchantment because he did not fit in and lacked queer Asian role models. He recounts his coming out process, “I was first coming out [while] I was in college and there were no, what you’d say, role models, or Asians who were gay or lesbian. It was very white at the time I came out.”²⁰²

In his text, *Looking for My Penis*, author and video producer Richard Fung substantiates this notion with the following statement, “Although a motto for the lesbian and gay movements has been ‘we are everywhere,’ Asians are largely absent from the images produced by both the political and the commercial sectors of the mainstream gay and lesbian communities.”²⁰³ Fung adds that even his homosexuality has been questioned simply because he is Asian:

I remember having to prove my queer credentials before being admitted with other Asian men into a Toronto gay club. I do not believe it was a question of a color barrier. Rather, my friends and I felt that the doorman was genuinely unsure about our sexual orientation. We also felt that had we been white and dressed similarly, our entrance would have been automatic.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Darren Hutchinson, “Gay Rights for Gay Whites?: Race, Sexual Identity, and Equal Protection Discourse,” in *Cornell Law Review* (Vol. 85: no. 1358). 1360.

²⁰² Nguyen, interview with the author (Irvine, California, October 15, 2012).

²⁰³ Richard Fung, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” in Russell Leong, ed., *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay & Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 183.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

From Fung's account, one can see that there is a false belief that homosexuality can be identified with being white but not with being Asian.

Due to an absence of Asian queer images at the time, Nguyen began to focus on the subject even as an undergraduate in art school at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and continued while completing his M.F.A. at the University of California, Irvine:

When I was an undergraduate, making photographic works and when I was here [UCI] doing my M.F.A., it was very important for me to create images of Asians, queer Asian men. That was very important to me . . . because at that time there was a lack of images, lack of presence in popular culture²⁰⁵

Nguyen's photographs and videos were produced with the intention of bringing about an awareness of the gay Asian male identity to his audience. For Nguyen, however, they are viable vehicles for the co-existence of his two personal halves, his Vietnamese-ness and his homosexual self, "[They are tools that] bring together my Asian identity as well as my gay identity."²⁰⁶ In the text, *Explorations into Gay Asian Culture + Politics*, Song Cho discusses the terms "Asian" and "gay" in the context of white racism, where he does not consider the two as "natural" disparities, but as being "highlighted and hierarchically ordered . . . in order to be exploited."²⁰⁷ What Cho suggests here is that racism does not exist because there are difference races, but rather, the different races exist due to racism. Similarly, the "Asian" and "gay" communities are pitted as incongruences in order to divert attention from white racism against these minority groups.

Nguyen speaks of the recent appearances of prominent Asian male actors in American popular media, the representation of the Asian male as a sexual creature is still virtually non-

²⁰⁵ Nguyen, interview with the author (Irvine, California, October 15, 2012).

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Song Cho, "Introduction," in Song Cho, ed. *Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture + Politics* (Toronto, Canada: Queer Press, 1998), 4.

existent: “Despite the recent critical attention and popularity of Asian male actors . . . into Hollywood (represented by such actors as Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Chow Yun Fat, and directors such as Ang Lee and John Woo), the representation of Asian men as sexually appealing scarcely figures in mainstream American popular culture.”²⁰⁸ This suggests that even representations of heterosexual Asian males are lacking in mainstream Hollywood and that the Asian male generally is not viable as romantic leads in American cultural media. This castration of the Asian male, whether he is straight or gay, can only be concluded as a blatant form of misandry by the Hollywood machine.

Besides trying to combat Hollywood’s exclusion of the Asian male and creating sensual images and seductive videos to propagate a gay Asian identity, Nguyen is also an educator who teaches Film Studies and often lectures regarding the gay Asian male. Nguyen speaks of his experience within academia, “I am a professor of Film Studies Not [film] production, but the history and theory of film, teaching students how to analyze film and do research about film.”²⁰⁹ Even though he relishes teaching English and Film Studies at the women’s liberal arts college of Bryn Mawr in Pennsylvania, the hectic schedule precludes his art production, limiting his current level of output. Nguyen laments, “It’s been difficult for me to juggle both, being an academic and a practicing artist at the same time.”²¹⁰ Nonetheless, his roles as educator and artist provide Nguyen with the opportunity to demonstrate a wide range of talents as he reconciles his diverse Asian and homosexual identities.

²⁰⁸ Nguyen Tan Hoang, “The Resurrection of Brandon Lee: The Making of a Gay Asian American Porn Star,” in Linda Williams, ed., *Porn Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 225.

²⁰⁹ Nguyen, interview with the author (Irvine, California, October 15, 2012).

²¹⁰ Ibid.

The mainstream LGBT community is enmeshed in expensive political machinations to secure the rights of gay and lesbian marriage through a media campaign that sanitizes our lives in order to make us palatable subjects worthy of the rights of citizenship

Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies*²¹¹

The Photographs of Hanh Thi Pham and Nguyen Tan Hoang

As accomplished and noted photographers, both Pham and Nguyen employ the self-portrait as a viable mean to discuss their sexuality and gender identification. Pham's photographs are undisputedly assaultive and confrontational, becoming self-empowering messages against an established society of misogyny, homophobia, and racial discrimination. In contrast, Nguyen's images are seductively sensual, coyly drawing attention to the absence of gay Asian masculinity within the mainstream media. Despite their contrasting methodologies, these self-portraits discuss homosexuality from the perspective of the Asian American community.

Being "homosexual" is not the same as being "Asian" since the previous is something that one can shroud from society by choosing to "stay in the closet,"²¹² whereas the latter is usually something one cannot conceal due to the skin color, facial features, or other identifiable markers that one wears. Psychologist Joanne Chao speaks of the difficulties of coming out to one's family, particularly in the Asian community due to the associated feelings of shame and guilt:

Asian families have difficulties accepting homosexuality, which can be seen as shameful for the family and therefore something to be kept secret in order to avoid ridicule.

²¹¹ Juana María Rodríguez, "Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (Duke University Press), (Vol. 17: 2011). 332.
http://www.academia.edu/3994392/QUEER_SOCIALITY_AND_OTHER_SEXUAL_FANTASIES. Accessed May 20, 2014. LGBT is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered.

²¹² To stay or remain "in the closet" is a term that describes when a member of the LGBT community chooses not to share his or her sexual preference with family members, friends, co-workers, and/or the general public due to the possible negative ramifications.

Coming out to family, especially parents, has been difficult for lesbians of color because of fear of rejection, the invisibility of homosexuality in their ethnic culture, and losing family and community support.²¹³

Pham has faced this rejection, not only from her family, where ignorance and shame has excluded her from family functions and gatherings, but also from the Vietnamese American community, where homophobia has made her an outcast. Despite facing these difficulties, Pham has chosen to “come out of the closet” and has used her art production to help her in the process. In her photographs she references her father and the patriarchal society that still persists within the Vietnamese American diaspora and challenges the notion of what is acceptable behavior by this community.

In the form of self-portraits, her photographs are subtle contestations of accepted gender roles. One example is the 1985 black-and-white photograph, *Self-Portrait/Hairy/Pipe* (Figure 3.1). The sharply focused image shows Pham with conventional long flowing black hair and bangs, and dressed in a traditional *áo dài*, a Vietnamese dress that reaches to the shin level and is split on the sides from the waist down, covering a pair of pants worn underneath. She is seen smoking a pipe. The image presents subtle yet stark contradictions in gender roles. For a Western audience, who may not understand the hidden cultural meanings, the photograph simply is that of a pretty Asian woman with a pipe. With knowledge of the Vietnamese codes of fashion, however, the image proves a more complex statement about identity.

The photograph was taken when Pham was already into her thirties, traditionally at a time when she should be a mother and a wife. In this case, the virginal white *áo dài*, typically worn by school girls, and the long flowing black hair, an archetypal style for young unwed ladies, does

²¹³ Joanne M. Chao, *Self-Concept, Self-Esteem, and Coping Strategies of Lesbian and Heterosexual Asian American Women* (San Francisco: California School of Professional Psychology, 2001), 89. Dissertation.

not seem appropriate. This is not to say that Vietnamese women do not wear the *áo dài* or don long hair styles. In fact, the *áo dài* is a Vietnamese national dress that can be worn by all, including men during certain traditional functions, such as weddings, funerals, or during *Tết* (the Lunar New Year).²¹⁴ The color code, however, is extremely important. Whilst men typically



Figure 3.1 Hanh Thi Pham, *Self-Portrait/Hairy/Pipe*, 1985, chromogenic print, 40 by 30 inches.

²¹⁴ For men, the dress is called *áo gấm*, a brocade version of the *áo dài* and is made of a thicker fabric than the often sheer material used for women.

wear a dark color, such as navy blue, brown or black, the pure white is reserved specifically for young female students. Due to its design, the dress makes it difficult for one to exert too much physical activity. This form of constriction is meant to teach girls proper behavior and to ensure they conduct themselves in a lady-like manner. By the end of their high-school years, young ladies graduate into bright pastel colored dresses, often with printed or embroidered designs. As they take husbands and start families, primary colors tend to be more appropriate and the shades continue to gradually darken and become simplified, paralleling their aging process. Professor Nhi Lieu speaks of the importance of this national dress for the Vietnamese American community and how it ties feminine beauty to Vietnamese heritage and nationalism, “Symbolically, the *áo dài* invokes nostalgia and timelessness associated with a gendered image of the homeland for which many Vietnamese people throughout the diaspora yearn.”²¹⁵

Just as the appropriate color should be used for one’s *áo dài*, the accompanying hair style is of equal importance. The long flowing hair with full eyebrow-length bangs that is donned by Pham in this portrait is typically fashionable for unwed women, particularly “available” girls, from young adolescence (around fourteen) to adulthood. Pham had been married when the image was taken, making the hairstyle inappropriate. Vietnamese music and literature often cites the beauty of young women’s long flowing hair and the care they take of it in order to enchant one or more suitors. In many cases, the girl is seen combing her hair by a window, and an accompanying comb (sometimes pinned to the hair) emphasizes the availability of the lass to the men in search of wives. In other traditional tales, once married, the wife severs her long beautiful locks as a gift for the husband, and sells it to a wig maker in order to provide financial

²¹⁵ Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 60. In the United States, so culturally important is the *áo dài* to the Vietnamese American community that contests are held periodically within the diaspora, most notably, the annual contest in Long Beach, California.

resources for her husband's travels, such as to a national examination or to the warfront. The sacrifice is seen as the tremendous love she holds for her spouse. For women who do not need to cut their hair, it is worn tied up or often is rolled into a bun.²¹⁶

In contemporary times, with many Western influences, short hair and modern fashion has eroded much of these traditional protocols in Việt Nam and even more so in the diasporic community. In her self-portrait, Pham's costume, nonetheless, is atypical for her age, and is a challenge to traditional definitions of appropriate decorum. Furthermore, by typical societal standards (be it Asian or otherwise), the smoking of a pipe by Pham heightens her anti-tradition stance. Even though one can observe women smoking cigarettes, the smoking of a pipe is usually relegated to men. Here, Pham references her father and the patriarchal society that dominates and represses women's positions. In this self-portrait, she takes on the dominant male role despite the feminine clothing. Though usually relegated to men, in rural Việt Nam it is not uncommon for women, particularly elderly women, to indulge in pipe smoking. In a 2014 lecture, Pham speaks of witnessing her grandmother smoking a pipe on many occasions, "I saw my grandmother smoking a pipe regularly."²¹⁷ Pham's *Self-Portrait/Hairy/Pipe* is a challenge to Vietnamese gender traditions by her mere mien. It speaks primarily to a Vietnamese audience who would know the proper codes and would understand that she is defying the proper norm for acceptable appearance and behavior for a woman her age.

Whereas Pham's self-portrait is filled with contradictions regarding gender roles, Nguyen presents the audience with a more sensual and seductive image of himself. In his self-portrait,

²¹⁶ The author's maternal grandmother, when in her mid-sixties, had hair that reached approximately seven feet in length. Despite its salt and pepper colors, it was always kept in a bun, except during its care.

²¹⁷ Pham, lecture at Long Beach City College, California (May 28, 2014).

entitled *Camp* (1993, Figure 3.2), from the *Cologne Ads* series, the photograph follows the tropes of advertisements for fashion and cologne, turning the image into a marketing venture.

Nguyen's countenance is framed by darkness and fills the top half of the composition. Unlike Pham's crisp and focused *Self-Portrait/Hairy/Pipe*, Nguyen's *Camp* is photographed using a soft lens, making it blurry and out of focus. Even though his face is lit, the eyes are visibly closed. His lips are full and bright red, becoming the sensuous focal point in the picture. Despite being out of focus, it is clear that Nguyen is clean shaven. Centered on the page towards the bottom of the image is the large and capitalized word, "CAMP," suggesting the gay vernacular definition of playfulness and outrageously feminine behavior and taste. Immediately underneath "CAMP" are the smaller words, "re-live the fantasy..." which invites the viewer to experience and re-experience desire for this exotic Asian male.

Nguyen's utilization of "camp," however, is a double entendre. Besides the gay understanding of the term as referencing outrageous and over-the-top taste, he is also referring to the literal definition of the word, as a place where temporary shelters are erected. This is evidenced by his inclusion of three locations at the bottom edge of the image. Unlike many fashion advertisements that tout sophisticated and leading centers of *haute couture*, such as New York, London, Paris, Milan, or Tokyo, Nguyen chooses Tule Lake, Pulau Bidong, and Da Nang. These localities are strategically chosen as sites that evoke traumatic memories about war time in the twentieth century.

Tule Lake, located in the northern part of California is a dry, arid, and barren area that was a camp site for the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, for fear of possible Japanese espionage, then President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 in February 1942, authorizing

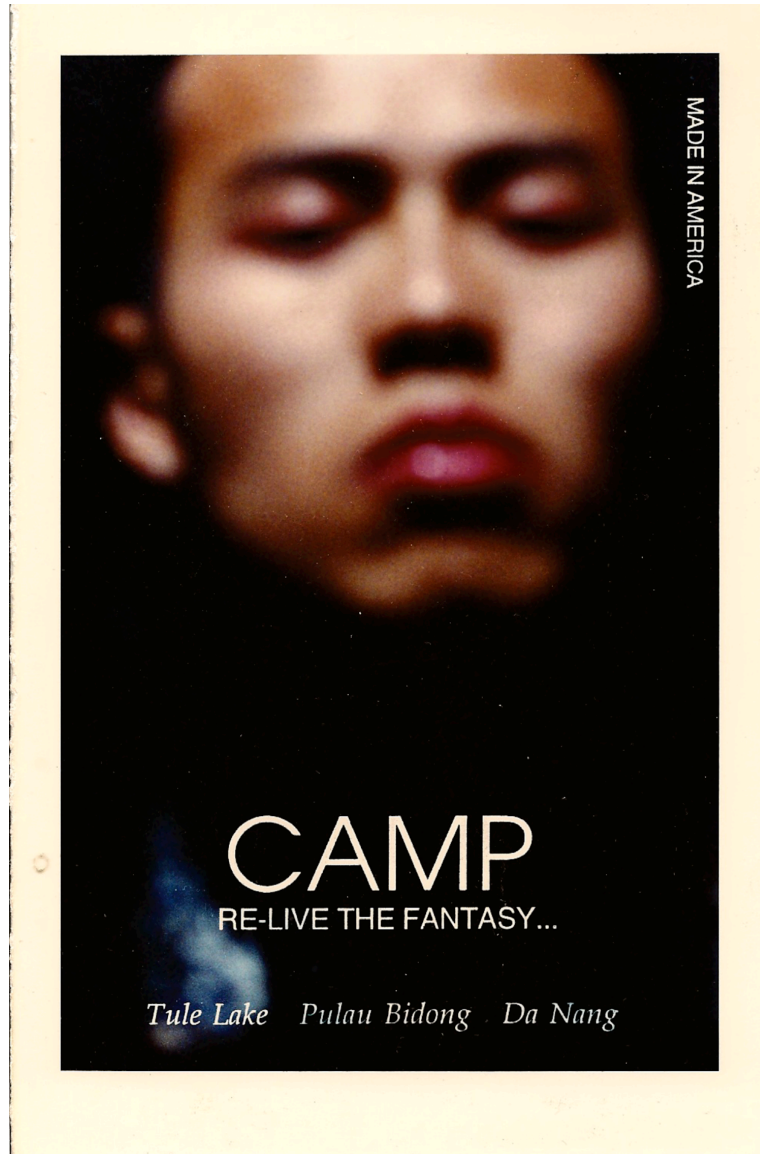


Figure 3.2 Nguyen Tan Hoang, *Camp* from the *Cologne Ads* series, 1993, chromogenic print, 40 by 30 inches.

the imprisonment of Japanese Americans under the guise of an “evacuation.” Over 110,000 Japanese Americans, two thirds of whom were American born, were interned at various

detention camps located in Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming.²¹⁸

Although there are numerous publications regarding this event, Allen Hendershott Eaton's 1952 text, *Beauty Behind Barbed Wire*, focuses specifically on the Tule Lake camp. Using photographs and text, Eaton expresses empathy toward the plight of the Japanese Americans and shows the internment experience as a grave wartime error by the United States government. In recognizing the injustice, Eaton clearly states, "This evacuation, regardless of its military justification, was not only, as is now generally acknowledged, a great wartime mistake, but it was the most complete betrayal, in one act, of civil liberties and democratic traditions in our history"²¹⁹

Pulau Bidong is located on Bidong Island, Malaysia, and was a refugee camp site for the Vietnamese boat people between 1978 to 1991. Though the site originally had the capacity to accommodate 4,500 refugees, during some of its peak periods, the camp had sheltered approximately 40,000 people.²²⁰ According to a website hosted by Refugee Camps, Pulau Bidong was overcrowded and the living conditions were difficult:

Latrines and wells were inadequate; tropical rainstorms sent rivers of filthy water through the camp; all food and clean water had to be imported from the mainland. Water was rationed at one gallon per day per person. Doctors were abundant, but medicine was in short supply. Sanitation was nearly non-existent and hepatitis was rampant.²²¹

²¹⁸ Karin M. Higa, *The View from Within – Japanese American Art from the Internment Camps, 1942-1945* (Los Angeles: The Japanese American National Museum, 1992), 15. According to Higa, "There is little agreement on the terminology to describe the incarceration of Japanese Americans. . . . Many Japanese Americans simply refer to the incarceration and the experience as 'the camps'" The terms "internment camps" and "concentration camps" have been used as general terms in various publications regarding the Japanese American incarceration. The Smithsonian Institute refers to them as "detention camps."

²¹⁹ Allen Hendershott Eaton, *Beauty Behind Barbed Wire* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1952), 176.

²²⁰ Refugee camps. <http://www.refugeecamps.net/BidongStory.html>. Accessed June 5, 2014.

²²¹ Ibid.

One visitor nicknamed the camp site as “Hell Isle,” after witnessing the living quarters of the refugees, “[Refugees] lived in makeshift huts two and three stories high made of salvaged timbers from wrecked boats, plastic sheets, tin cans, and corrugated iron sheets.”²²² Nguyen and his family lived at Pulau Bidong for eighteen months before being sponsored to the United States by another family member who had immigrated in 1975.

Da Nang is a major city port located in the central part of Việt Nam and between 1957 and 1975 served as the site of a major military air base for the Republic of Vietnam Air Force. Located near the seventeenth latitude, where the demilitarized zone separated the North from the South, the United States also shared the site and stationed many of its troops at this strategic location during the Vietnam War.²²³ Today, Da Nang is the largest city in the South Central Coast of Việt Nam.

Even so, Da Nang is hardly a fashion and advertising center of the world. Neither are Pulau Bidong nor Tule Lake. Nguyen’s utilization of these locations in his image is in part to call attention to these former sites of Asian struggle, and also to broach his own personal history as a gay Asian male, often repressed by the larger mainstream culture.

Nguyen’s *Cologne Ads* series melds together elements of art, advertising, and soft porn to proliferate the Asian American male figure in a sexually charged fashion. He describes the series, “My homo-texts explore the homoeroticism of the Asian male body. Playing off mainstream American media representations of Asian men as computer nerds, threatening kung-

²²² Ibid.

²²³ The author’s American father was a military advisor during the Vietnam War and spent a significant amount of time at the Da Nang Air Base. His maternal family also originated from this region of Việt Nam.

fu masters, and ruthless businessmen, I employ the codes of art, fashion, advertising, and institutional pornography to situate the Asian male body in a sexual field.”²²⁴

To further substantiate Nguyen’s approach is a second example, *Black Belt* (1993, Figure 3.3), where he presents an anonymous Asian male subject, who has his back to the viewer, filling the entire image. Utilizing the same soft lens and out of focus techniques as in *Camp*, Nguyen provides little clarity to the identity of the figure while creating a feeling of mysterious seduction. In fact, it is difficult to tell if this back belongs to an Asian or Anglo, a male or a female. In keeping with his series on gay Asian male identity, however, it can be assumed that Nguyen used an Asian male subject for the photograph. Cast across the back of the figure are several long dark shadows, presumably representing the “Black Belt” that is boldly captioned across the top of the page. Although the words “black belt” instantaneously suggests the idea of a ‘kung-fu master,’ the figure in Nguyen’s image does not engage in physical activity or martial arts. Ironically, the figure is immobile and is posed in a quiet and serene way. Immediately underneath “Black Belt” are the smaller words, “*For men,*” and “*For the body.*” From reading the text, the advertisement becomes an attempt at homoerotic seduction, where the sensual Asian male body presented is the object of sexual desire “*For (white) men,*” and “*For the (white man’s) body.*” At the bottom of the page, in very small text, is a continuous list of male toiletry items, “fluid body talc shave foam deodorant shower gel bath soap.” The sequence employed by Nguyen becomes suggestive. For instance, “fluid body” brings added attention to the depicted body, cleaning it and arousing the smells and fluids of the body. Nguyen speaks about this series of images, “While it is interesting to ‘include’ Asian men in visual representations traditionally

²²⁴ Nguyen Tan Hoang, “Artist Statement,” in Song Cho, ed. *Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture + Politics* (Toronto, Canada: Queer Press, 1998), 38.

reserved for non-Asian/white men, it is even more important to problematize these culturally b(i)ased criteria of what constitutes hypermasculine sex appeal and strength.”²²⁵

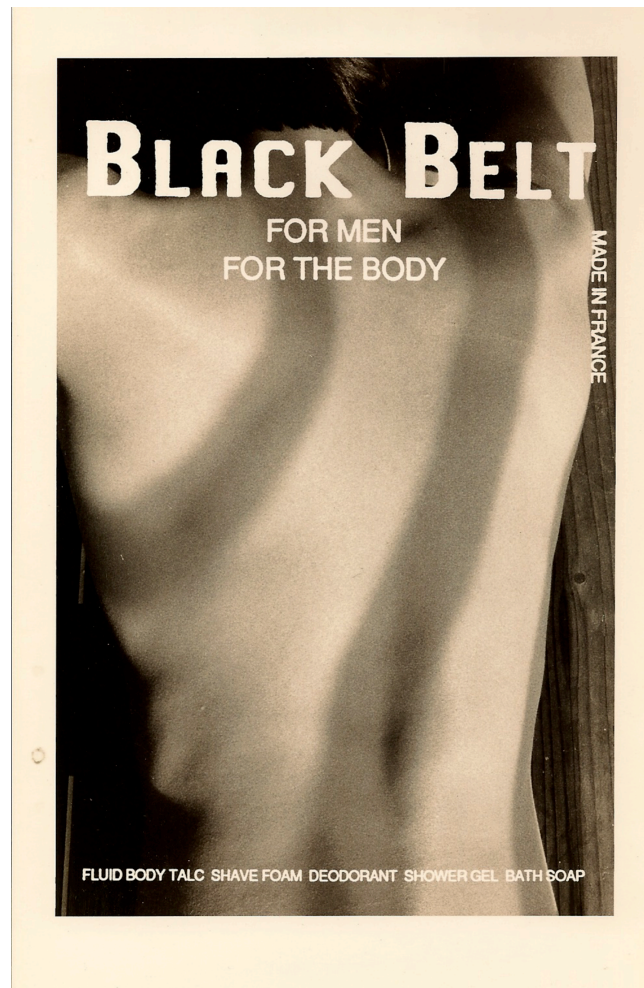


Figure 3.3 Nguyen Tan Hoang, *Black Belt* from the *Cologne Ads* series, 1993, chromogenic print, 40 by 30 inches.

In reality, Nguyen’s fictitious ads are greatly different than the actual magazine ads for men’s cologne and create significant contrast to the mainstream definition of sex appeal. In the majority of advertisements for colognes, the male tend to be virile and white, exuding a high amount of testosterone. Oftentimes they are anonymous but ruggedly handsome specimens. In other cases, famous white males that well embody the cultural definition of masculinity, such as

²²⁵ Ibid.

strong sportsmen (Andre Agassi, David Beckham, and Joe Namath) or noted film leading-men (Matthew McConaughey, Ewan McGregor, and Tom Selleck) are employed to sell the fragrances (see Figures 3.4 to 3.7).

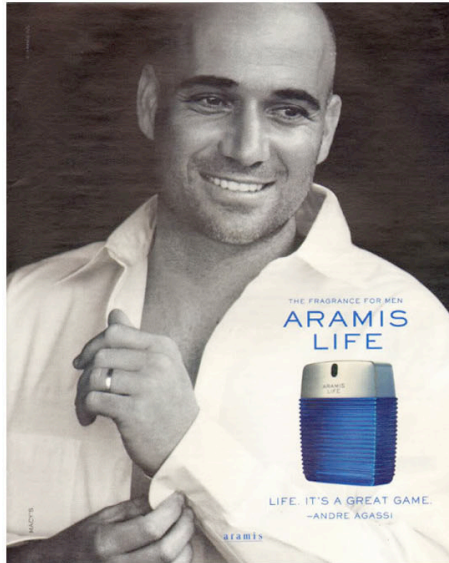


Figure 3.4 Andre Agassi, *ARAMIS LIFE*, 2004.



Figure 3.5 David Beckham, *INSTINCT AFTER DARK*, 2008.

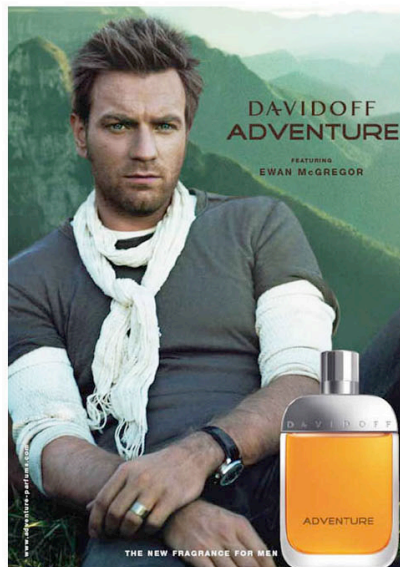


Figure 3.6 Ewan McGregor, *DAVIDOFF'S ADVENTURE*, 2008.

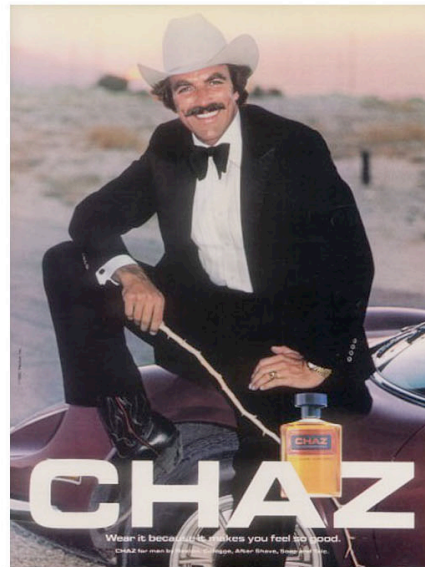


Figure 3.7 Tom Selleck, *CHAZ*, 1979.

Frequently these men sport some facial hair, such as a mustache, a goatee, or five-o'clock shadows, an unmistakable indication of their masculinity. In almost all instances, the photographer's lens sharply focuses on the male subjects as they gaze towards the direction of the camera. Contrastingly to Nguyen's portrayal of the Asian male in *Black Belt*, there are very few instances, if any, in the actual advertisements when these masculine white figures are presented out of focus or with their backs to the viewer.²²⁶

In fact, the depiction of the male figure in history has tended to favor a frontal posture, particularly when in the nude, such as Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* and Delacroix's *Male Academy Figure*. Following the tradition of nudes in the arts for both genders, the greater tendency has been a frontal pose. The rarer back view, when used, tends to be reserved for the female, such as in Ingres' *The Grand Odalisque* or Toulouse Lautrec's *Nude Woman in Front of a Mirror*. Nguyen's Asian male in *Black Belt*, with his back towards the camera is non-confrontational, thereby, making the figure not only homo-erotically seductively but also sensually submissive.

Surprisingly, there is a 1969 advertisement for men's cologne called "Black Belt" (Figure 3.8). In this vintage ad that features a rare Asian theme of male masculinity in the form of a martial arts expert, nevertheless, a *white* man is depicted wearing a karate costume with a black belt and is simulating the breaking of multiple wooden blocks. The camera lens has focused sharply on the anonymous *white* subject who is facing the audience. Clearly the ad is referencing the man's prowess and his expertise in the martial arts (the black belt is typically the highest color belt one can attain and is an indication of one's competency level).

²²⁶ The author randomly surveyed one hundred cologne ads that span the last three decades. An overwhelming 51% employ the image of a single white male; 20% use a white couple; 14% is only of the product; 7% has a single white female; 3% use an interracial couple (black man and white woman); 2% utilize a Hispanic male (singer Enrique Iglesias); 2% targets "gay" or "bisexual" males; and 1% exercises the image of a single black male. In none of these specific ads is an Asian male featured.



Figure 3.8 Vintage advertisement for BLACK BELT after shave and cologne, 1969.

The texts in the ad sell masculinity with these accompanying statements: “Black Belt is made for men who don’t have to prove anything to anybody. They know their power. And that’s that;” and “Some men will wear the Black Belt. Some Won’t.” The clear message to the male consumer is that only those who wear Black Belt are “real” men, ones that do not have to prove anything or answer to anyone. Though this testosterone laden image is a clear contradiction to Nguyen’s *Black Belt*, it is also the exact stereotypical depiction of the Asian male that Nguyen is trying to combat.

Other pieces in Nguyen's *Cologne Ads* series include unusual names that reference Asian exoticism, such as *Monsoon*, *Tsunami*, or *Rice Dream*, and follow his practice of using the soft focus to picture the submissive male. Even though monsoon and tsunami are natural, dramatic, Asian weather effects, the innuendo is that the Asian men depicted in these images would also provide additional excitement for those who engage them. Nguyen speaks of the work as representing the Asian male physique caught between the East and the West, "In the cologne ad series, the Asian male body takes the place of Calvin Klein's pretty white boys and girls, under exotic Oriental product names, dis-placed and in traffic between the First and Third Worlds, from Ho Chi Minh [City] to Honolulu."²²⁷ Even though the work may represent displacement and inconsistencies, nonetheless, its homoeroticism lures the viewer into the arena of the sensuous gay Asian male.

In contrast, Pham's brazen images, while also dealing with issues of sexuality, are much more abrasive. She challenges the stereotype of Asians as being quiet and submissive, and fitting in with the expected norms of the larger society. In her confrontational photograph, *Misbegotten No More* (Figure 3.9), she provides an uncompromising self-portrait. As one of nine images from the installation, *Expatriate Consciousness (Không là người ở)*, the work was completed between 1991 and 1992. In this color photograph Pham is seen in profile, with her breasts exposed as she distinctively flexes her biceps in a masculine "up yours" manner, expressing both antagonism and strength. Her face maintains a fierce grimace, causing the image to "convey anger, pain, and an emergent sense of personal power and pride."²²⁸

²²⁷ Nguyen Tan Hoang, "Artist Statement," in Song Cho, ed. *Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture + Politics* (Toronto, Canada: Queer Press, 1998), 38.

²²⁸ Sharon Mizota, in Elaine H. Kim, Margo Machida and Sharon Mizota, eds., *Fresh Talk Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 67.



Figure 3.9 Hanh Thi Pham, *Misbegotten No More*, from the installation, *Expatriate Consciousness (Không là người ở)*, 1991-2, chromogenic print, 24 by 20 inches.

Beneath Pham's flexed arms is an upside down image of American Western-hero Buffalo Bill, with a large black 'X' running across it from corner to corner. William Frederick "Buffalo Bill" Cody (1846-1917) was one of the most colorful personalities from American West history and embodies the quintessential Wild West masculine 'hero' persona. Even though he is celebrated as such in American history, as a bison hunter and a civilian scout for the United

States Army during the American Indian Wars at the end of the nineteenth century, he was “an enemy of not only the buffalo but also the Native Americans whose land he invades.”²²⁹

Pham’s option to turn Buffalo Bill’s image, an American hero, upside down is a clear challenge to Western imperialism and male chauvinism, making her image highly feminist and anti-imperialistic. Visual artist Sharon Mizota speaks of Pham’s inversion of Buffalo Bill as a negation of the American West’s “manifest destiny”: “By negating this icon, Pham indicts the ‘manifest destiny’ at the heart of U.S. imperialism in the developing world”²³⁰ Machida further adds that, “the marring of this archetype of the American cowboy is a warning that she [Pham] is not an Asian who would passively accept Westerners’ notions of superiority.”²³¹

To the far left of *Misbegotten No More* are the partially visible Vietnamese words to the phrase, “*không là người ở*,” which literally translates as “not a servant.” Given that it is in Vietnamese and only understandable to readers of Vietnamese, it would seem that the image addresses the Vietnamese patriarchal systems. When exhibited, however, the image is accompanied by an English translation, allowing the general public to grasp her disenchantment while apprising the viewer of her background. Pham’s statement indicates her refusal to be subjugated to a subordinate status by America’s patriarchal and imperialist systems. Regarding the image, Pham states, “[I]n the picture, I no longer want to be a servant of the system, and I can be my own self. I’m a lesbian. I’m very proud of myself as a woman. I’m very proud of my

²²⁹ Elaine H. Kim, “‘Bad Women’: Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min,” in *Feminist Studies* (Vol. 22: No. 3, Fall 1996): 582.

²³⁰ Mizota, 67.

²³¹ Margo Machida, “An Expatriate’s Consciousness: The Photography of Hanh Thi Pham,” in *Hanh Thi Pham: A Vietnamese: Her Body in Revolt* (Fukuoka City, Japan: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997), 8.

own body, the muscles of my body, and my intentions as a person. [This is] my empowerment, given to me by myself.”²³²

There is a possible second reading of the text in the image. Since it is only partially visible, the rest of the missing text could be completed as, “*không là người ở đây*,” which would translate as “not the person who lives here.” Although written in her native Vietnamese and the work seems to target a Vietnamese audience, Pham’s work always is displayed with a translation to allow English speakers to understand. With such a reading, the statement could represent Pham’s feelings of displacement and non-belonging. Concurring with such an assessment, Mizota states, “It suggests that the United States is not really Pham’s home—she does not belong here.”²³³ Of course Pham has been quite vocal about her displeasure with the American system of racism and imperialism, repeatedly writing in her artist statements, “In Amerikkka, I exist as a Vietnamese War refugee directly legalized as an American citizen, but stigmatized as an alien.”²³⁴ Pham’s purposeful misspelling of “America” highlights the racist aspects of this country as she references the ultimate white supremacist group, the Ku Klux Klan. In the process, she broaches on the racism perpetrated against minorities.

In her essay, *Bad Women*, Elaine Kim expands on the social issues in Pham’s work when she speaks of it not only as a contestation to the existing patriarchal system but also as a challenge to the United States’ dominantly white heterosexual male culture:

Hanh’s performance of Vietnamese womanhood disrupts the orientalist fetishization of Asian women as what she calls ‘nice smiling submissive’ exotic sex objects or pitiable victims of Asian patriarchal practices. Hanh’s artwork challenges aesthetic and political

²³² Pham, quoted in Kim, 582.

²³³ Mizota, 67.

²³⁴ Hanh Thi Pham, quoted in Jerry Burchfield and Brian Doan, *Touch: Contemporary Vietnamese Photography* (Cypress, California: Cypress College, 2000), 36.

modes that privilege Americans over Vietnamese, men over women, and heterosexuals over queers.²³⁵

According to Machida, in this work Pham “began to assert that she would never again allow anyone to reduce her complex sense of self . . . to a simplistic ‘pretty picture’ whose sole purpose was to reflect some Westerner’s fantasy of compliant Asians.”²³⁶ Today, nearly twenty five years later, the image still stands as a powerful feminist work. At the time that Pham created it in 1991, it was probably considered extremely radical. Pham states, “[A] long time ago, I did not want to be associated with the term ‘radical.’ But afterwards I say, ‘Yes! I am radical!’ . . . If you don’t do anything, nothing changes the world.”²³⁷

In a sense, both, Pham’s and Nguyen’s work can be seen as being radical in terms of their purposes. Nguyen’s homoerotic ads are revolutionary for featuring the submissive seductive Asian male in order to contest American media and culture in its (lack of) representation of the Asian male body. Conversely, Pham’s work is considered extremist for its ability to emblazon the images with powerful messages against misogyny and against the expectation of submissiveness from Asian women.

Kim further touches on Pham’s feminist stance as a direct confrontation to the notion that Asians are “model minorities,” in particular the “submissive” Asian women, who would then be considered the most “modeled” of the “model minorities”:

According to Hanh, neither Americans nor Vietnamese are prepared to see Asian women as “real.” The identity and self-image Hanh chooses has nothing to do with the view of Vietnamese women as the “model minority of model minority,” or of them as obedient and devoted wives. Hanh’s expression of her own sexuality no doubt makes her a “bad

²³⁵ Kim, 582.

²³⁶ Margo Machida, “An Expatriate’s Consciousness: The Photography of Hanh Thi Pham,” in *CEPA Journal – Uncommon Traits: Re/Locating Asia Part III* (Buffalo, New York: CEPA Gallery, 1998), 4.

²³⁷ Pham, quoted in Kim, 585.

woman” in the Vietnamese community as well as in the community at large, where “model minorities” are never permitted their own sexual desires and pleasures.²³⁸

Pham speaks about the difficult and conservative circumstances of living within the boundaries of the Vietnamese diaspora, where there is little room for compromise:

You’re not supposed to address these issues [patriarchy, gender inequity, homosexuality] if you live in Orange County [in Southern California, where the largest Vietnamese refugee community in the United States is located], you are supposed to support the right wing If you’re otherwise, then you’re leftist. There’s nothing in the middle.²³⁹

Pham uses her work as a method to assert her racial, political, and sexual identities. She says, “The use of photography and written language is an attempt at developing a healthy self-concept, a non-binary gender but lesbian-defined revolutionary attitude . . . my campaign for liberation and freedom becomes active rather than reactive.”²⁴⁰

Active and radical, Pham’s *Misbegotten No More* has not been well received by the Vietnamese American community, where public discussion of sexuality, particular regarding unconventional sexual orientation, is totally unacceptable. Furthermore, the use of obscene gestures and the exhibition of oneself in the nude leave members of the diaspora with a great distaste for Pham and her work. According to Pham, the community has expressed “outrage” by her work because they want to see “positive” images that could help enhance public perception regarding the Vietnamese community. She adds, “When you make art about the naked body there will be censorship.”²⁴¹ Additionally, her leftist political stance is met with much

²³⁸ Kim, 584.

²³⁹ Pham, quoted in Kim, 585.

²⁴⁰ Hanh Thi Pham, “Artist Statement,” in *Hanh Thi Pham: A Vietnamese: Her Body in Revolt* (Fukuoka City, Japan: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997), 3.

²⁴¹ Pham, lecture at Long Beach City College, Long Beach, California (May 28, 2014).

disapproval and her life had been threatened because of it.²⁴² Nonetheless, Pham sees her work as critical in bringing forth discourse regarding the conservative stance within the community.

The images of these two Vietnamese American photographers, Pham and Nguyen, contest mainstream culture in terms of patriarchy, imperialism, gender representation, and sexual identity. Whereas Pham employs the blatantly audacious approach to bring forth her feminist message, Nguyen seduces and attempts to draw in the viewer with a more subtle and sensual slant regarding the submissive Asian male. In addition, both artists are also challenging gender and sexual norms in the Vietnamese American diasporic community, opposing the traditional gender inequities and homophobia that are deeply embedded in the conservative enclave.

Nguyen Tan Hoang: *Forever Bottom!*

Besides being a prominent photographer, Nguyen is also a noted video artist. Whichever medium he chooses to work in, Nguyen's message of sensuality and submission regarding the gay Asian male are important themes that resonate in his work, helping to bring visibility to the "queer" Asian male and to change perceptions of homophobia. His video productions tend to be independently produced short-films that deal with his Asian heritage, highlighting different aspects of the Vietnamese American community, or with his sexual identity, focusing on the Asian homosexual.

Forever Bottom!, one of his early recognized work is an appropriate example of Nguyen using the medium as a way to entice the audience into his "queer" Asian identity. In this clever and humorous 1999 short film lasting four minutes (Figure 3.10), Nguyen posits himself into a

²⁴² Pham, conversation with the author (Palm Springs, California, April 20, 2014).



Figure 3.10 Nguyen Tan Hoang, *Forever Bottom!*, 1999, film still.

“pseudo-instructional” video that has him playing the receiving end in a gay sexual romp.²⁴³ The film opens with one of Nguyen’s legs raised in the air in the foreground as a phallic-shaped cactus is seen in the background. As the film progresses both of his legs are raised as he continuously emits sounds of sexual gratification. The camera shows him in various positions but always in the submissive role and only in partial view. He moves from room to room, from indoors to outside, from a garden to the back seat of a vehicle, and finally onto a sandy beach. In all these locations he assumes various sexual positions and continues to emit sounds of rapture. Occasionally one can hear the voice of his (non-existent) dominant partner making sexual remarks. As the only visible actor in the film, Nguyen is convincing as an unquenchable

²⁴³ The term “bottom” is a gay lingo that implies the person is the “receiving” partner during sexual intercourse. Conversely, the term for the “giving” partner is “top.” Top and bottom are probably the most widely used terms in the gay population. Other similar jargons include “catcher” and “pitcher” or “submissive” and “dominant” or “slave” and “master.”

submissive gay Asian man who embraces bottomhood. The work can be seen as both, a challenge and an invitation to the dominant homosexual top. It furthers Nguyen's theory of "bottomhood" as a mode of pleasure, agency, and resistance.

The accompanying music for Nguyen's video, which starts about twenty seconds into the film and lasts for the remainder, is the borrowed title theme from a 1990s Hong Kong television soap serial called *My Dearest Love*. Although the tune is a melodic and beautiful one, it is inconsequential to the video except that it is immediately and undeniably recognizable as Asian, ensuring that the audience is aware that the submissive "bottom" in the film is Asian. Any other similarly recognizable Asian theme could have sufficed since Nguyen's work is specifically about the gay Asian male.

In her text, *Time Binds*, Professor Elizabeth Freeman speaks of Nguyen's videos as binding a temporal art form, what she calls "time art," to the human form in its sexual experimentation state. She says, "[Nguyen's videos] explicitly connects experimental video's temporal dissonance to queer sexual dissidence: it links the malleability of filmic time to the sexually experimental body."²⁴⁴ Freeman is accurate in her assessment in that the video is temporally incongruous, showing Nguyen in many locales within a four minute span. The audience never sees him move from one location to the next. He is continuously engaging in what appears to be a sexual act, one moment in indoor spaces and the next in outdoor places. The body is shown in the various locations without actually moving. The flow of time is not relevant to this experience. *Forever Bottom!*, an experimental video regarding homosexuality, is

²⁴⁴ Elizabeth Freeman. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

distributed by Frameline and could be viewed at will, with the opportunity to revisit scenes as often as the viewer wishes.

Nguyen's work, as exemplified by *Forever Bottom!*, reaffirms his stance of "bottomhood" as a position of power despite the associated submissive sexual posture. Juana María Rodríguez, Professor of Gender and Women's Studies speaks of Nguyen's video production, "Hoang Tan Nguyen reads a new wave of queer Asian documentary beginning in the 1990s that actively aims to work against dominant pornographic stereotypes of submissive Asian gay men obsessed with performing the role of sexual bottom for dominant white male tops."²⁴⁵ His embrace of the bottom position has been recognized by others. In a screening press release, Andy Ditzler from Atlanta, Georgia's Frequent Small Meals gallery describes the film: "The notorious video 'Forever Bottom!' demolishes stereotypes and p.c. [pop culture] notions of sexual representation with a bravura performance by the artist – an Asian American man's embrace of 'full, unrepentant bottomhood.'"²⁴⁶ Clearly the film is touted as a total acceptance of bottomhood.

In his text, *A View from the Bottom*, Nguyen challenges "the association of bottoming with passivity and abjection."²⁴⁷ Instead, Nguyen proposes a different interpretation of the bottomhood that provides agency for it "as a sexual position, a social alliance, an affective bond, and an aesthetic form . . . [where the] relation [is] organized not around dominance and mastery

²⁴⁵ Juana María Rodríguez, "Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (Duke University Press), Volume 17 (2011): 336. http://www.academia.edu/3994392/QUEER_SOCIALITY_AND_OTHER_SEXUAL_FANTASIES. Accessed May 20, 2014.

²⁴⁶ Andy Ditzler, "Frequent Small Meals presents *Found Fantasies: Video Works by Nguyen Tan Hoang*." <http://www.pd.org/~eyedrum/calendar/index.php?eventType=3&id=950&month=5&year=2006>. Accessed May 25, 2014.

²⁴⁷ Nguyen Tan Hoang, *A View from the Bottom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), back cover.

but around the risk of vulnerability and shame.”²⁴⁸ One of the reasons he offers for the possible empowerment of the position is a “remasculinization” of the position within the last two decades, in the post-AIDS epidemic era of the 1980s and early 1990s, “In the last twenty years, bottoming has also taken on a remasculinizing cast in both the American gay porn industry and in gay male theory.”²⁴⁹ Supported by his own theoretical framework and accentuated by his credible performance in the video, Nguyen’s *Forever Bottom!* is an affirmation and celebration of bottomhood, embracing the sexual position as one of power rather than of weakness.

Interestingly, filmmaker Hieu Tran’s short film entitled, *Squared*, was screened at the recent 2014 Vietnamese Film Festival held in Orange County, California. The fifteen minute piece humorously deals with the issues of power and male sexuality. In the skit, a young gay white man meets a young gay Asian man for a sexual encounter. The situation became hilariously awkward when it turns out that both protagonists were dominant tops and neither wanted to “bottom” for the other. It became a comedic test of will, wit, and masculinity as the men went *tête-à-tête*, first in arm wrestling, then flexing and comparing biceps, and eventually resorting to the measuring of their penises, to determine who would assume which sexual position. Ironically, the white male “loses.”

Even though it was obvious that the two were fond of each other, after their tryst, the men went their separate ways, leaving the audience with the men’s mutual sense of longing. The film ends on a partially upbeat note as the white protagonist unwittingly meets another Asian male at a bus stop. The new Asian appears to be shy and reticent, presumably bringing the viewer back to the trope of a dominant white male ending up with a submissive

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 12.

Asian male. From the film *Squared*, it is evident that submissive “bottomhood” is not a place without power, since a successful union would require both positions. Thus, each is of equal importance and wields an equal amount of power. Though the top position has generally been considered one of dominance and power, “bottomhood” has not always been viewed as such. Nguyen, in his work, challenges that fallacy and empowers the gay Asian bottom position, a place that he clearly celebrates.

Similar to his photographic work, Nguyen’s *Forever Bottom!* demonstrates his efforts to embolden the viewpoint of the submissive gay Asian male by embracing the position instead of shying away from it, viewing it as one with a positive outlook rather than a negative stance. Unabashed and unrepentant, he presents himself as a sexual being, staging bottomhood as a position of power. The production of such a work, however, would not have been possible in his conventional native Việt Nam, not only due to the Vietnamese culture’s conservative stance against and denial of the existence of homosexuality, but also because such a sexually suggestive film would not have been tolerated (even if it had been heterosexual in theme). Only through Nguyen’s migration and new life in the more tolerant United States is such a queer experimental film possible.

Queer Films: Nguyen Tan Hoang and the Celluloid Tradition

What is a “queer film?” Today there are many “queer films” that feature a gay character in a supporting or even leading role. Many motion pictures made prior to the 1960s, however, rarely acknowledged the existence of homosexuals in society. This was due to “The Hollywood Production Code (a self-censorship mechanism that regulated the content of Hollywood films

from 1934 to the mid-1960s) actively forb[iding] the representation of what is called ‘perversion.’”²⁵⁰

Even so, gays and lesbians have been represented in American films since the beginning of the industry, mostly under various pretenses. In his seminal text, *The Celluloid Closet*, the film historian Vito Russo (1946-1990) reveals a tradition of gay and lesbian representations on the silver screen since the inception of American film history. Whether hidden under the guises of a butch fem-fatal to a sissified comedic male, lesbians and gays have appeared covertly in film. Russo argues that whether the representation is a positive portrayal or more often, a negative stereotype, the depiction of homosexual characters in film provides visibility for lesbians and gays in the collective psyche of the larger culture. Only by being visible is one able to persuade and alter the mindset of the populous.

Just as the gay and lesbian movement in the United States has focused overwhelmingly on “white” homosexuals, the film industry has also maintained a “white” interpretation of gay or lesbian characters. In recent times, a token African American or Hispanic gay character may be seen, but the Asian homosexual is rarely represented. The only Hollywood produced films featuring a gay Asian male character are Ang Lee’s 1993 comedy feature, *The Wedding Banquet*, and David Cronenberg’s 1993 melodrama, *M. Butterfly*. In *The Wedding Banquet*, Winston Chao plays the main protagonist, a gay Taiwanese man living in New York City with his white American lover. Chao’s character tries to pacify his traditional Chinese parents’ continuous matchmaking with a fictional wedding. In *M. Butterfly*, which is based on a true story, John

²⁵⁰ Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 9.

Lone plays the leading role as Song Liling, an opera performer and a communist spy whose target is a French diplomat stationed in Beijing.

While Nguyen's videos are not full length features like Cronenberg's or Lee's, his work is a small attempt to alter the scarcity of representation of gay Asian men. Nguyen states that his artistic agenda is "a political one: to create a popular culture for queer Asians."²⁵¹ In his text, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema*, film and media studies professor Glen Mimura speaks of the recent growth in independent productions of Asian queer films:

One of the most exciting and important development in Asian American cinema has been the emergence of independently produced queer film and video In recent years, Asian American queer artists—lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered people, and others—have become leading actors in shaping the tenor and direction of independent media arts generally.²⁵²

As part of this insurgence by marginalized Asian American artists, Nguyen's experimental films place him in the tradition of Asian queer cinema.

²⁵¹ Nguyen, quoted in Mimi Thi Nguyen, 66.

²⁵² Glen M. Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 121.

In Europe and in every country characterized as civilized or civilizing, the family is the miniature of the nation.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1967²⁵³

Non sông gấm vóc Việt Nam do phụ nữ ta, trẻ cũng như già, ra sức dệt thêu mà thêm tốt đẹp, rực rỡ.

Hồ Chí Minh, March 8th, 1952²⁵⁴

Hanh Thi Pham: *Reframing the Family*

Similarly to Nguyen's photographs and videos which address issues of sexual identity, Pham too uses visual images to discuss homosexuality and gender identity. However, she goes beyond sexuality and discusses gender roles within the family unit. Like Nguyen, Pham's life in the United States affords her the ability to address these contentious social issues through her work. In a series of photo montages entitled, *Reframing the Family*, Pham focuses on the roles typically occupied by different members of the family, particularly women's role in the patriarchal Vietnamese society.

She remembers the submissive role her mother had to play when she was still growing up in Việt Nam and addresses it in some of the images. In the 1991 work, *Reframing the Family #7* (Figure 3.11), Pham re-photographs an old family portrait in which her mother is conspicuously absent while her grandfather, father, along with all the

²⁵³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (translated by Charles Lam Markmann) (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), 142.

²⁵⁴ Hồ Chí Minh, cited by Pham in her work. The quote translates as: "The fabric of homeland Vietnam is dependent upon the skills of our women, young and old, to sew and embroider to make fine and resplendent." The statement exemplifies Vietnamese communist revolutionary leader Hồ Chí Minh's high regard for the Vietnamese women for the role they play in shaping Vietnamese culture and history.

children in the family are present. As its head, her grandfather was very well dressed in a suit and tie and was seated front and centered, with his legs crossed, in a clear pose of

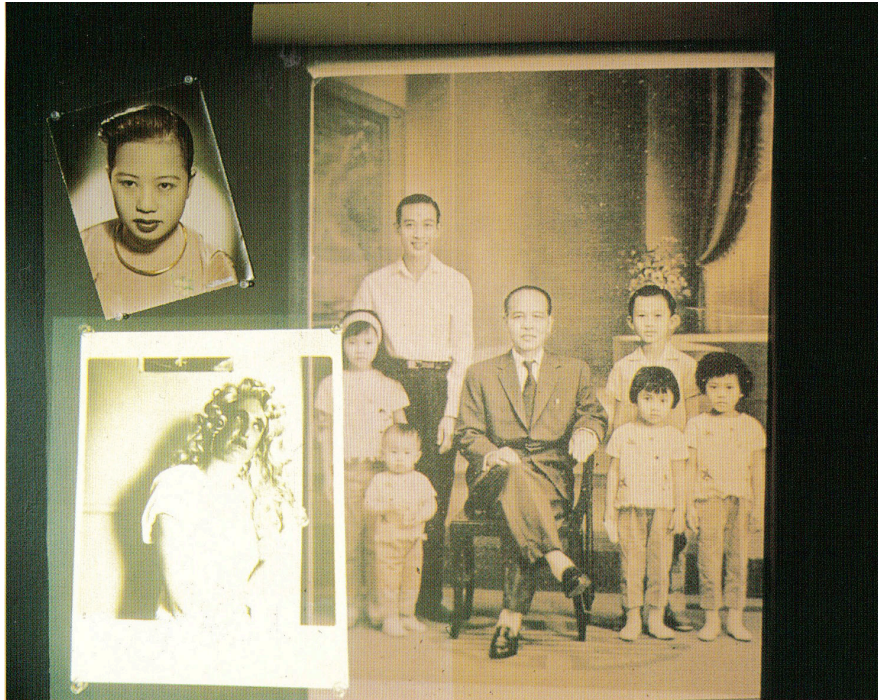


Figure 3.11 Hanh Thi Pham, *Reframing the Family* #7, 1990-1, photo montage, 20 by 24 inches.

power. Pham's father, obviously the pride of the family and representing its continuity, is standing proudly to the right of the grandfather, dressed in slacks and a nice white-collared shirt. He stands behind the children as the protector of the young and the eventual heir to the family. Pham discusses her feelings regarding the image:

It had always bothered me that my mother was not included in the official bloodline photograph that included my grandfather, father, myself, and my siblings. Not only did my mother have a job, she ran the whole family. Why, in Vietnam, are the women not in the pictures? A mother bears and raises children, yet her hard work, dignity, wisdom, and role as a provider are dismissed.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁵ Pham, quoted in Jeffrey Hantover, "Hanh Thi Pham," in *An Ocean Apart: Contemporary Vietnamese Art from the United States and Vietnam* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1995), 105.

Her missing mother speaks volumes as to the role she plays in this society. Việt Nam, under a millennium of Chinese domination, has adopted many of China's ideologies, including the philosophy of Confucianism. One of its doctrines is that women are to play subservient roles in society, where as a child she is protected by her father, as an adult by her husband, and finally in old age by her sons. Of course the implication is that she must remain obedient to these male figures in the various junctures of her life.

Pham speaks of her early adulthood, before becoming an activist artist, when she still adhered to tradition with the old patriarchal system that sought to keep women suppressed, "I was a very 'good' and dutiful female before, in wanting to be someone else's wife, and eventually a mother, this following of Vietnamese wisdom of what it is to be a woman, this sacrifice through the bloodline of the family, the serving of patriarchal and familial wishes."²⁵⁶

Since that time Pham has evolved into a militant artist. Curator Jerry Burchfield speaks of Pham and the rebellious nature of her work, "An activist artist committed to asserting her views about racial, political and sexual identities, Pham combines photography, written language and physical objects into heavily layered metaphoric pieces that question the accepted mores of Western and Asian cultures."²⁵⁷ In this particular piece, Pham places her mother back into the scene by putting her portrait in the upper left hand corner, reclaiming her status as a legitimate member of the family.

In a recent conversation, Pham recounts that after her father passed away about half a dozen years ago, her mother's health started to fail as well, and she required dialysis twice a

²⁵⁶ Pham, quoted in Erica L. H. Lee, "Breaking through the Chrysalis: Hanh Thi Pham," in Russell Leong, ed., *Amerasian Journal* (Vol. 20: No. 1, 1994): 129.

²⁵⁷ Jerry Burchfield, "Inside Out & Outside In – Vietnamese Photography in the Year 2000," in Jerry Burchfield and Brian Doan, *Touch: Contemporary Vietnamese Photography* (Cypress, California: Cypress College, 2000), 47.

week. Interestingly, Pham became the primary care provider for her mother, living with and caring for her, a traditional role for daughters in the United States. With the erosion of traditional values in this country, coupled by the hectic lifestyle that most lead, the eldest son of the family had not been able to perform his filial duties since he had his own family to care for. Pham, without a family of her own, fulfilled the role of care giver for the elderly parents usually expected of first born sons and family heirs.²⁵⁸

In the lower left corner of the photo montage Pham inserts an image of her female lover (her “wife”), assuring that her spouse is not omitted from the family portrait. Her lover is wearing a blond wig, a clear Westerner among a family of Vietnamese. By the insertion of her mother and female spouse into the image, Pham reclaims the role of women in the family, reframing it from the traditional patriarchal mode that was prevalent in Việt Nam, “I’ve reframed the family portrait to include my mother and my American lover.”²⁵⁹

Pham speaks of the technical aspects of the images and how challenging it was for her to create them in the early 1990s, when there was little digital technology, such as Adobe Photoshop, available. Pham states, “At the time, there was no technology about computer It was not really that communicative. And when you make a photograph, it was silent. But I liked that, because through silence you are more composed.”²⁶⁰

In a second example from the series, *Reframing the Family #4* (Figure 3.12), Pham again challenges traditional Vietnamese patriarchy by updating another family portrait. Using a

²⁵⁸ Pham, conversation with the author (Palm Springs, California, April 20, 2014).

²⁵⁹ Jeffrey Hantover, “Hanh Thi Pham,” in *An Ocean Apart: Contemporary Vietnamese Art from the United States and Vietnam* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1995), 105.

²⁶⁰ Pham, interview with the author (Encino, California, April 13, 2014).

photograph from her parents' wedding as a guide, Pham photographs a wedding scene between herself and her female lover. Today, in the quickly evolving and tolerant atmosphere, seeing a same-sex marriage is no longer so uncommon. At the time this image was taken in 1991, however, gay and lesbian weddings were practically unheard of since such a concept was still so



Figure 3.12 Hanh Thi Pham, *Reframing the Family #4*, 1990-1, photo montage, 20 by 24 inches.

radical for the general public in the United States. Yet, Pham's photograph has her lover and herself in wedding attire, both dressed in white tuxedos and seated on either side of the three-layered wedding cake. At the top layer of the cake are the figures of the traditional bride and groom.

In the image, Pham takes the dominant role while her lover plays the feminine one. This is evidenced by the posturing of each of the women. Like her father, Pham crosses her left leg over her right one; her right hand clutches the table as her left hand is clenched in a manly fist. Her lover sits with both feet firmly situated together on the floor as her hands are placed in a

lady-like manner on her left leg. Floating visibly in the background, above the cake, is the old wedding picture that belongs to Pham's parents. The poses of the two women mirrors the traditional positions of her parents'.

Pham assumes the masculine role in the relationship, "I was the bread winner at the time, teaching at California Institute for the Arts."²⁶¹ Pham speaks of her grandfather in Việt Nam, who had nine wives and took care of them all. She jokingly adds, "Perhaps someday I'll have nine wives!"²⁶² Here, she assumes the position of power previously held by her father and grandfather. It is noteworthy to point out that while Pham has managed to shift the gender of the male husband to a female, she has not changed the power dynamic in which one person is the breadwinner and, therefore, more powerful.

In the Vietnamese patriarchal society of the past, men often had multiple wives and families, so long as they were able to maintain those families. Polygamy was only criminalized in Việt Nam in the 1950s. In Vietnamese literature and cultural media prior to the end of the Vietnam war, the concept of polygamy and multiple families was frequently spoken of, often allowing the man, usually someone who travelled a lot, to have different families in different parts of the country. Sometimes, his wives were aware of his other families while at other times he successfully kept them in secret. The bottom line is his financial standing and his ability to maintain these various families. Even after the abolishment of polygamy in Vietnamese culture, his status as the financial provider grants the man dominion over his family.

In the diaspora there has been a noticeable shift in this particular gender role. Once they had immigrated to the United States, many Vietnamese men were forced to settle for jobs of

²⁶¹ Pham, lecture at Long Beach City College, Long Beach, California (May 28, 2014).

²⁶² Ibid.

much lower status and pay than they previously held in Việt Nam. Contrastingly, women who had previously been homemakers in Việt Nam, saw a significant increase in their earning power. Additionally, the families' financial reliance on their additional earnings raised the status of women, creating a shift in the gendered balance of power. In Nazli Kibria's text, *Family Tightrope*, one male informant states: "In Vietnam the man of the house is king. Below him the children, then the pets of the home, and then the women. Here [in the United States], the woman is the king and the man holds a position below the pets."²⁶³ Another laments: "In Vietnam, the man earns and everyone depends on him Here the man finds he can never make enough money to take care of the family. His wife has to work, his children have to work, and so they look at him in a different way. The man isn't strong anymore."²⁶⁴

Clearly, the migration process to the United States itself had challenged traditional gender roles. However, these social changes remained hidden from public view and remained under the radar. Pham's photographic series, *Reframing the Family*, pushes them to the forefront and makes them visible, highlighting identities that may not have been acknowledged in the diasporic community. Additionally, her feminist point of view challenges the traditional understandings of sexual identity within the Vietnamese American community. It contributes to making alternative lifestyles more visible, even if not yet accepted by most within the diaspora.

In the exhibition catalog, *An Ocean Apart*, Pham's photographs are discussed as coming from an ardent feminist stance, "Hanh Thi Pham examines the Vietnamese American family from a strong feminist perspective, focusing on issues of gender and power. Her interest in these

²⁶³ Nazli Kibria, *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 108.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

issues developed during her childhood in Vietnam, where women were denied social equality.”²⁶⁵ Her images tend to be recognized for their complexity and defiant tone, challenging the male-centric society.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, also a Vietnamese American woman, substantiates the challenging dilemmas that women often face in a male-dominated world, but specifically from the perspective of the female writer:

She must *learn* not only to impersonalize the voice she stole or borrowed, but also to internalize gradually the impersonal generic interpretation of masculine pronouns and nouns. She must *learn* to paint her world with colors chosen more often than not by men for men to suit their realities. *She-her* has always conveyed the idea of a personal and gender-specific voice. In order to be taken more seriously, she is therefore bound to dye this voice universal, a tint that can only be obtained through words like *man, mankind, he-him*.²⁶⁶

In the United States’ male-centric society, women such as Trinh T. Minh-ha and Hanh Thi Pham cannot help but be adversely affected by the onslaught of gender inequity. Additionally, as Asian women, they are faced with racial discrimination where American mainstream marginalizes minorities and often render them invisible.

Pham, as a member of a sexual minority group, faces a third prejudice, where the dominant heterosexual society often dismisses alternative sexual preferences as deviant and sees its homosexual members as “less than” citizens. Her artistic endeavors is to empower herself in the face of these tremendous challenges and allows her the opportunity to challenge the status quo. Media and Cultural Studies professor Lan Duong speaks of Pham’s feminist work as “target[ing] a form of heteropatriarchy entrenched in Vietnamese, Vietnamese American, and US

²⁶⁵ Jeffrey Hantover, “Hanh Thi Pham,” in *An Ocean Apart: Contemporary Vietnamese Art from the United States and Vietnam* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1995), 104.

²⁶⁶ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 27.

cultures.”²⁶⁷ In the *Reframing the Family* series, Pham employs photography as a way to further contest the outdated patriarchal system that remains prevalent in the Vietnamese American society, reclaiming the importance of women within the family. As with the larger oeuvre of her work, Pham’s photographic images are a way to oppose the enduring modes of homophobia and gender inequality that still exist in the diaspora and mainstream society.

Ngày mai em đi, biển nhớ tên em gọi về, gọi hồn liễu rũ lê thê, gọi bờ cát trắng đêm khuya. Ngày mai em đi, đồi núi nghiêng nghiêng đợi chờ, sỏi đá trông em từng giờ, nghe buồn nhịp chân bơ vơ.

Biển Nhớ, Trịnh Công Sơn²⁶⁸

PIRATED!

As with Pham’s images, Nguyen’s photographs and videos also discusses homophobia and gendered sexuality. In his video, *PIRATED!* Nguyen combines, however, his homosexual desires with other cultural aspects, including contemporary Vietnamese pop music video and scenes which suggest the longing for Việt Nam, creating a dreamlike sequence of a boat departure from the motherland. In the above lyrics, Việt Nam’s war-time composer, Trịnh Công

²⁶⁷ Lan P. Duong, *Treacherous Subjects: Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 181.

²⁶⁸ Trịnh Công Sơn, “*Biển Nhớ* (Sea of Nostalgia or The Ocean’s Longings),” in *Tuyển Tập Bốn Mươi Tình Khúc Quê Hương* (Compilation of Forty Songs from the Motherland) (Glendale, California: Nhà Xuất Bản Tinh Hoa Miền Nam, circa 1980s), 36. The above lyrics by the late composer Trịnh Công Sơn is equivalent to:

When you leave tomorrow, the ocean will miss your name and calls out, it calls to the spirit of the lengthy, droopy willows, it calls to the shores of white sand in the night. When you leave tomorrow, the hills and mountains will lean in wait, the rocks and stones will await you by the hours, saddened by the rhythm of lonely footsteps.

There is an alternate version that forsakes the actual translation in an attempt to match the English lyrics with the tune. It is sung by American-born singer Dalena in Nguyen’s video:

When tomorrow comes, and you will say goodbye, the sea and I will cry, the trees will sway and sigh. And when you go the mountains then will know

Son, describes an imminent departure and the longing for the departed from the person left behind. This yearning is projected onto the natural landscape through the use of personification, where inanimate objects such as rocks, trees, mountains, and ocean are given human qualities, allowing them to long for the person leaving. The song nostalgically and intermittently echoes throughout Nguyen's 2000 short film, *PIRATED!*. Nguyen recounts hearing this song play during his stay in a refugee camp after escaping from Việt Nam, "That song was played when I was in the refugee camps. I remember being woken up in the morning by it . . . played over the P.A. system They'd play it every day before they'd announce who was leaving. I associate the music with waiting to hear the names while hanging out at the beach with my sisters."²⁶⁹ The song ideologically functioned as a way to turn a traumatic episode into a romantic interlude with its daily use in the camp, by evoking past memories associated with the homeland.

PIRATED!, an experimental short film lasting eleven minutes, is part boat journey, part nostalgia for the homeland, and part personal homoerotic fantasy. Nguyen recalls the sojourn as a difficult one, "In 1978, my family and I escaped from Vietnam by boat. We were attacked repeatedly by Thai pirates. After a week of drifting about without an engine, we were finally rescued by a West German ship. I was seven years old and was constantly seasick."²⁷⁰ The first segment of the short film includes many appropriated shots of boat people and the open ocean. In the video, Nguyen states his intentions that the segment be seen as a partial representation of the boat experience by his inclusion of the following text, "What you are about to see is based on many true stories"

²⁶⁹ Nguyen, cited in Viet Le, "The Art of War: Vietnamese American Artists Dinh Q. Le, Ann Phong and Nguyen Tan Hoang," in Russell Leong, ed., *Amerasian Journal* (Vol. 31: No. 2, 2005): 30-1.

²⁷⁰ Nguyen, interview with the author (Irvine, California, October 15, 2012).

The next segment includes images of Việt Nam, with rice fields and water buffaloes, and Vietnamese karaoke videos of wistful songs about the motherland. Nguyen's accompanying narration turns the film into a nostalgic longing for the homeland:

After many years of uncertainty I returned to Vietnam. As I stood on the land of my ancestors I was overcome with joy and a sense of belonging. There among the sea of rice paddies, the bamboo groves, and the fields of sugar canes, I found myself. I knew this is where I belonged . . . where I belonged . . . where I belonged . . . I knew . . . I knew . . . this is where I belonged.

As his voice reverberates and echoes the statement, “where I belonged,” as if the soundtrack has hit a glitch and repeats itself, the words start to sound like a cliché. Although many refugees wish to find “home,” the reality is that the “home” one seeks usually does not live up to one's expectations. In his text, *The Art of War*, Viet Le specifically addresses this segment of the video as a fallacy, “Contrary to the voice-over in the video . . . there is no ‘home’ to which to return.”²⁷¹ Furthermore, Le adds that the vacillating images in the video demonstrate the illusive quality of memory, “Nguyen's shifting montages point to the fact that memory and identity are mediated, malleable, and not easily placed or located.”²⁷² This is demonstrated by the constant shifting of unrelated images such as homeland Việt Nam, to appropriated film clips of swashbuckling pirates, to found footage of Vietnamese boat refugees on the open sea, to Vietnamese American produced karaoke videos. Clearly, for Nguyen his identity and memory are not stable and constant, continually shifting between “real” and “imagined” memories from the past.

²⁷¹ Viet Le, “The Art of War: Vietnamese American Artists Dinh Q. Le, Ann Phong and Nguyen Tan Hoang,” in Russell Leong, ed., *Amerasian Journal* (Vol. 31: No. 2, 2005): 31.

²⁷² Ibid.

At his on-line blog, *Visualgui*, fellow Vietnamese American video artist and designer, Donny Truong, lambasts Nguyen's video for its production choices and technical qualities. Truong states that Nguyen's music selection, borrowed from Thuy Nga productions, is limited in scope, suggesting that Nguyen:

. . . reaches deeper into Vietnamese music around the world rather than just relying on Thuy Nga's production for his research on Vietnamese pop culture. His perception on Vietnamese music is the recycling of same old songs. That is what he gets when he only looks at Thuy Nga's products. The music scene has been evolving drastically and many new, original works are from independent musicians around the world and especially in Viet Nam.²⁷³

Truong adds that Nguyen's video transitions needs more technical refinement and suggests that he looks at Hillman Curtis on *Creating Short Films for the Web*:

From the visual aesthetic sense, Hoang needs tremendous improvements. His amateur productions bring down his messages, way down. I don't expect Hollywood quality from him, but decent shooting and editing will enhance his works The way he made the transitions from one image to the next were so bad (too jerky and too many cheesy effects) that I almost began to get seasick.²⁷⁴

Even though Truong is correct about the evolving Vietnamese music world, much of "the recycling of same old songs" is tied to the Vietnamese American diaspora's persistent sentiment of loss and reflects the community's feelings of anti-communism. In her text, *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free*, ethnomusicologist Adelaida Reyes speaks of "sad songs" and "love songs" as being the "true expression of how asylees [asylum seekers] felt, as confirmed by their

²⁷³ Donny Truong, "Nguyen Tan Hoang – Pirating the Popular Culture," *Visualgui* (April 5, 2006). <http://www.visualgui.com/2006/04/05/nguyen-tan-hoang-%e2%80%93-pirating-the-popular-culture/>. Accessed 8/14/2014.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

narratives and the growing body of published accounts by former refugees.”²⁷⁵ Reyes further explains the political implications of these old compositions:

The ideological grounds for preferring sad songs and love songs lay deeply embedded also in their exodus. Until the late 1980s, the Socialist government of Vietnam had prohibited love songs and songs nostalgic from pre-1975 Vietnam. To sing sad songs and love songs was therefore an act of defiance or self-differentiation from those who accepted the communist prohibition, and by extension, at least in the asylees’ view, the communist regime.²⁷⁶

Since Nguyen’s video reflects memories of an escape from communism and reminisces of a journey for asylum seekers, the use of the old songs would seem quite appropriate and fitting.

Furthermore, Truong’s suggestions that the editing of the film sequences were “jerky” and “cheesy” suggests his own misinterpretation of the video’s intent. *PIRATED!* was created as continuous dream sequences that reflect Nguyen’s personal remembrances and adulterated fantasies and not as a “Hollywood quality” film. As such, dream sequences do not transition smoothly from one scene into the next, nor do they have a linear quality. It is precisely the nonlinear aspect of Nguyen’s video that turns it into disparate dream sequences with no beginning, middle, or end. In her article, *In the arms of Pirates, Under the Bodies of Sailors*, Mimi Thi Nguyen (no relations to Nguyen) speaks of his work as such, “Through a nonlinear ‘pirated television’ editing technique used in *PIRATED!* (2000), Hoang speaks of the perilous journey of boat refugees, pirates, and his own homoerotic desire for pirates (manifest in

²⁷⁵ Adelaiya Reyes, *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 35.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

swashbuckling films), as well as insights on ‘returning to the homeland’ and its inherent contradictions.”²⁷⁷

The work, with its incongruent dream sequences, becomes televisual due to its pictorial and filmic qualities, playing on the optical senses of the viewer. It is also “pirated television” since so many of the segments are found footages “pirated” from various other sources. Nguyen himself describes the purpose of these scenes of Việt Nam, “Working against the nostalgic notion of finding oneself by going back, the restaging of my formation of identity takes place not back there in the motherland, but on the high seas, during the journey in-between, a space-time not to be found or recaptured, but only reimagined and relooped.”²⁷⁸ The identity that Nguyen finds is one of hybridity, neither based solely on reality nor fantasy. This identity is a combination of childhood memories, both real and imagined, and adulthood sexual desires.

Towards the third portion of the film, Nguyen focuses on homoerotic sexual fantasies, where scenes from American swashbuckling features such as Robert Siodmak’s 1952 film, *The Crimson Pirate*, Ken Annakin’s 1982 film, *The Pirate Movie*, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s 1982 film, *Querelle*, are included, showing Burt Lancaster swinging from a ship mast, a bare-chested grinning Christopher Atkins, and Brad Davis in a sailor costume on a steam vessel. In the video Nguyen describes his imagined sexual desires as being “in the arms of pirates and under the bodies of sailors.” He speaks of the memory and trauma from the boat trip and how it has become an imaginative source for his homoerotic sexual fantasies:

This ordeal in my personal history is the starting point for a short experimental videotape about how trauma, memory, and imagination affected the formation of sexuality. In

²⁷⁷ Mimi Thi Nguyen, “‘In the arms of Pirates, Under the bodies of Sailors’: Diaspora, Desire and Danger in Nguyen Tan Hoang’s *PIRATED!*” in *Charlie Don’t Surf: 4 Vietnamese American Artists* (Vancouver, Canada: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2005), 66.

²⁷⁸ Nguyen, interview with the author (Irvine, California, October 15, 2012).

PIRATED! I revisited those fearful and awesome encounters with pirates and sailors and re-present them in the form of a refugee boy's daydreams and sexual fantasy.²⁷⁹

PIRATED! is Nguyen's personal interpretation of the boat journey based on the perceptions and memories of a seven year old child and the reworking of those memories as an adult, since it was unlikely that Nguyen fantasized about Burt Lancaster or Brad Davis at age seven. It is probably fair to assume that these remembrances are not necessarily factual, but instead are fictional scenes spurred on by mediated childhood memories and imagined characterizations of pirates and sailors. Nguyen shares that the boat experience was a difficult one for his family, consequently, it is not a subject of discussion:

. . . My parents very seldom talk about [it] – this experience of immigration having to do with traveling, [it was] something . . . unpleasant to talk about . . . I never sat down with them and actually asked them questions So it was something that we all experienced and it was very traumatic and we never talked about it that much.²⁸⁰

The title of the video that is employed by Nguyen, *PIRATED!*, in a sense is a revisit to the difficult journey across the ocean, where Nguyen and his family faced uncertainty and trauma of the open ocean and being repeatedly attacked by Thai pirates. It also has a second possible reading, however, as a reference to Nguyen's own appropriation of videos and film clips when producing this work. Even though there are some scenes that Nguyen shot of himself and his friends interspersed throughout the film, particularly during the segments with the pirates and sailors, his own images comprise less than a quarter of the film. It is fair to say that most of the borrowed scenes, whether from American films, Vietnamese American music videos, news footage or other sources, were "pirated" for this production. He admittedly references this, "From the point of view of an adult gay man, I reconstruct the fragments of those selection

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

sequences of memory, through the use of *pirated* footage from Hollywood movies, European art film, and Vietnamese American karaoke music videos.”²⁸¹



Figure 3.13 Nguyen Tan Hoang, *PIRATED!*, 2000, film still.

With a similar undertone to *Forever Bottom!*, Nguyen uses his videos to discuss the gay Asian male’s bottomhood, by being “in the arms of pirates and under the bodies of sailors.” This is evidenced in one of the scenes Nguyen shot of himself (see Figure 3.13 for the film still), where he is seen wearing a pirate hat, and lies *under* the body of a *white* young man with a sailor cap, being kissed by the sailor. Nguyen provides a literal translation of his bottomhood in the video. While *PIRATED!* was clearly more complex, dealing with other issues such as memory, revisiting the homeland, trauma from the journey, and the appropriation of scenes from other sources, nonetheless, the overarching theme returns the audience to the subject of a subservient gay Asian male.

²⁸¹ Ibid. The author’s italicization.

I am an insurgent. I rebel against the existing situation, because I hold it to be a condition of injustice. I fight for freedom from persecution and insults. I call for the recognition of [homosexual] love. I call for it from public opinion and from the state. Just as inborn [heterosexual] love is recognized as just by public opinion and the state, so too I demand from both the recognition of inborn [homosexual] love is just.

Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, *Vindica*, 1865²⁸²

Lesbian Precepts: A Self-Portrait by Hanh Thi Pham

In some of her later images, Pham introduces religious characteristics even as she continues to discuss her sexual identity, making her photographs arguably profane and sacrilegious. One such work is a 1992 self-portrait entitled, *Lesbian Precepts* (Figure 3.14). In Buddhism *precepts* are recommended virtues to follow in conducting one's life.²⁸³ Pham, as a strong observer of Buddhism but also an avowed lesbian, borrows concepts from teachings in Buddhism, such as *precepts* and *mudras* (hand gestures that have specific religious significance in Buddhism, such as the "gesture of knowledge" or the "gesture of meditation") and transforms them into applicable tools for the representation of her sexuality.

In *Lesbian Precepts*, Pham is featured in the typical seated Buddha pose, regal and centered, with her legs crossed as her hands are performing *mudras*. Pham's image, however, is quite radical and non-conforming to any Buddhist teaching since she is seen in the nude and her *mudras* are of her own concoctions, unrelated to any known Buddhist signs. In her right hand, held upright, she makes the hand gesture commonly known in Vietnamese culture as

²⁸² Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. Quoted in Francis Mark Mondimore. *A Natural History of Homosexuality* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 231.

²⁸³ Essentially identical in both, the *Mahāyāna* (The Great Vehicle) and the *Hīnayāna* (The Lesser Vehicle) traditions of Buddhism, the five *precepts* (or the five virtues) are equivalent to ethical codes of conduct for Buddhist followers. They include: not to take the life of anything living (do not kill); not to take anything not freely given (do not steal); to abstain from sexual misconduct (do not have extra-marital relations); to refrain from untrue speech (do not lie); and to avoid intoxication (do not lose mindfulness).



Figure 3.14 Hanh Thi Pham, *Lesbian Precepts*, 1992, chromogenic print, 20 by 24 inches.

representing a vagina, where the extended index and middle fingers are joined at the tips. Her rounded left arm, placed in the direction of her navel has extended fingers, as if ready to enter a vaginal orifice. Her naked body is used as a symbol of rebellion against conventional understandings of gender role, sexual norm, and even organized religion, “Vietnamese-born lesbian photographer and installation artist Hanh Thi Pham have used images of [her] unclothed and semi-clothed bod[y] to effect political and social commentaries.”²⁸⁴

In the foreground of the photograph are two different shoes. By her right knee is a woman’s white open-back low heel shoe while by her left knee is a man’s masculine black combat boot. The shoes are symbolic representations of the different stages of Pham’s life. Pham reflects on her life before coming out:

²⁸⁴ Tee A. Corrine, “Subjects of the Visual Arts: Nude Females,” in Claude J. Summers, ed., *The Queer Encyclopedia of Visual Arts* (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc., 2004), 308.

I used to wear very feminine shoes that young women are supposed to wear, and had very long hair, and was married for twelve and a half years. So in that time I served the role of a formal wife, the genteel woman. I remember my marriage to a man, and living as a housewife, while trying to be a role model daughter in a family with three younger sisters. I tried always to blend in with the expectations of family and femaleness.²⁸⁵

Since coming out, for Pham there was a new birth: the bringing out of the male essence from within the female body. Pham now considers herself not only as a lesbian but also as a “transsexual,” seeing herself psychologically as a man inside a woman’s body, “. . . Males mistake me for a female, then females decipher the male aspect of me as not being like themselves . . . I always value females to be superior to males, and transsexuals. I still feel very sad that I cannot completely be a woman.”²⁸⁶ In a recent conversation, Pham adds an additional spiritual dimension to her self-perception, “I think I started the *Lesbian Precepts* when I meditate within myself [and] I saw that one is beyond one’s physical self. That spiritual world is very awakened, and it leans with the traditions that I was brought up, like Buddhism, and Vietnamese honoring ancestors.”²⁸⁷

Yet Pham’s inflammatory image is highly anti-traditions in that it revolts against religious conventions of Buddha (or a supreme being) as being male. Here, Pham takes on the role of Buddha, but as an avowed lesbian, unrepentantly flaunting her flesh. *Lesbian Precepts* is sacrilegious yet powerful. Elaine Kim adds, “In a world where heterosexism is a given, where men control almost all the power and resources, where the female body is generally allowed to

²⁸⁵ Pham, quoted in Erica L. H. Lee, “Breaking through the Chrysalis: Hanh Thi Pham,” in Russell Leong, ed., *Amerasian Journal* (Vol. 20: No. 1, 1994): 129-130.

²⁸⁶ Pham, quoted in Elaine H. Kim, “‘Bad Women’: Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min,” in *Feminist Studies* (Vol. 22: No. 3, Fall 1996): 584.

²⁸⁷ Pham, interview with the author (Encino, California, April 13, 2014).

function only for procreation and male sexual pleasure, she [Pham] focuses on women and celebrates female sexual desire with images of her own nude body.”²⁸⁸

Pham, as a radical and outspoken lesbian artist, follows a tradition of lesbian artists in the United States who contest gender and sexual identity. In the United States, there has been a long tradition of lesbian artists such as Kate Millet (1934 -) and Gay Block (1942 -), whose activist works strove to change the hetero-centric and male-dominant society. Others such as photographers Tee Corrine (1943-2006) and Catherine Opie (1961 -) also employed the naked female figure as a viable mode of dissent and empowerment against mainstream definitions of sexuality and gender inequity. Margo Machida speaks of Pham’s later work as moving “on to far more self-focused ruminations on her sexuality and intimate relationships, which have been mediated through race, cultural differences, and unequal power relations.”²⁸⁹ In a 2012 conversation, Machida further explains that Pham has stopped printing her own photographs in the darkroom since the mid-1990s because she has had an allergic chemical reaction that affects her skin.²⁹⁰ Consequently, her art production has also suffered.

After more than a decade of obscurity due to family obligations and self-exploration, Pham recently has decided to make a return to the art arena. She says, “So after many years of exhibitions, I was more interested in putting away the part that I can do with photography and really embark on the understanding of my own consciousness. So that’s why I drifted. I stopped doing photography and was totally interested in understanding my culture more through

²⁸⁸ Elaine H. Kim, “‘Bad Women’: Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min,” in *Feminist Studies* (Vol. 22: No. 3, Fall 1996): 578.

²⁸⁹ Margo Machida, “An Expatriate’s Consciousness: The Photography of Hanh Thi Pham,” in *Hanh Thi Pham: A Vietnamese: Her Body in Revolt* (Fukuoka City, Japan: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997), 7.

²⁹⁰ Machida, conversation with the author at a lecture during the 100th Annual CAA Conference (Los Angeles, February 25, 2012).

Buddhism.”²⁹¹ In returning to photography and the visual arts, Pham is now interested in exploring technology and possibly combining it to the spiritual dimension, what she calls “spiritual photography.” Whilst still in the early stages, Pham speaks of the direction she is heading, “I want to talk about the morphing of the spiritual within the tools of photography . . . and new technology.”²⁹² Today Pham is known by the sobriquet, “SuperNun.” The moniker is another tool of self-empowerment, one that allows Pham to navigate through the white hetero-centric male society.

A Sensual, Seductive Gay and a Brazen, Feminist Lesbian

In the same vein that Pham could not come up with a Vietnamese word for lesbianism and had to coin her own phrase to describe this form of love, there was a time in the Western world when no such word existed for homosexuality. According to psychiatrist Francis Mondimore, “The word *homosexuality* did not exist prior to 1869, when it appeared in a pamphlet that took the form of an open letter to the German minister of justice (the German word is *homosexualität*).”²⁹³ Mondimore explains that at the time, “The pamphlet’s author, Karl Maria Kertbeny (1824-82), was one of several writers and jurists who were beginning to develop the concept of sexual orientation”²⁹⁴ in order to draft up a new penal code for the North German Federation.

²⁹¹ Pham, interview with the author (Encino, California, April 13, 2014).

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Francis Mark Mondimore. *A Natural History of Homosexuality* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

In contemporary times the word homosexuality is no longer foreign, and its meaning is generally understood by most in the West as a love between two individuals of the same gender. Despite the general understanding, same sex relationships continue to face much controversy across the globe. Recent news regarding homosexuality includes Uganda's president, Yoweri Museveni, signing anti-gay laws into effect, defining certain homosexual acts to be punishable by life imprisonment. Similarly, Russian government's recent discriminatory anti-gay laws get worldwide attention, prompting opposition by athletes and delegates at the 2014 Winter Olympics, which was hosted at Sochi, Russia.

Yet there are also positive signs of acceptance. The most prominent one coming from Pope Francis, who during a visit to South America in 2013 said, "Who am I to judge a gay person of goodwill who seeks the Lord?" Perhaps, this is indicative of the Vatican's displaying a more tolerant attitude. And in Việt Nam, the year 2012 saw the first gay pride parade held in Hanoi, the country's capital. Although homosexuality is still considered taboo by many in the country, there is a loosening of government restrictions against Vietnamese gays and lesbians.

In the United States, homosexuality is heavily debated in contemporary politics. The early years of the twenty first century has seen tremendous strides for the LGBT community. There has been occasional setbacks when some states enacted bills to ban same-sex marriages. California, having passed Proposition 8 in November 2008 to halt such marriages, saw the United States Supreme Court overturning the ruling in November 2013. At the time of completion of this paper, in November 2014, a total of thirty five states, plus the District of Columbia, are issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples.²⁹⁵

²⁹⁵ Freedom to Marry. <http://www.freedomtomarry.org/states/>. Accessed November 22, 2014.

In Little Saigon and the Vietnamese American community in Westminster changes are also occurring. After several unsuccessful attempts by the LGBT group to be included in the Lunar New Year parade, it was finally allowed to participate and march as part of the *Tết* Parade in 2014: “After barring lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people from last year’s Tet parade in Orange County, Vietnamese American community members voted 51-36 on Saturday to include them in the Lunar New Year event scheduled for February 1.”²⁹⁶ Mainstream leaders expressed a sense of satisfaction that the two sides were able finally to come to terms and coexist. This is exemplified by Westminster’s Councilman Sergio Contreras’ statement, “I’m really happy to see both sides coming together To welcome everyone is a big step. I hope this is the start of stronger relationships.”²⁹⁷

While changes are happening for the LGBT community in many places, and the term “homosexual” is no longer defined as a mental illness since it has been stricken as such by the World Health Organization in 1990, homophobia is still thriving in mainstream society in the United States and is deeply entrenched in conservative communities like the Vietnamese American population. The works of activist artists such as Hanh Thi Pham and Nguyen Tan Hoang are vital and necessary to combat the negative impressions held by the traditionalist population. Whether through brazen and feminist photographs produced by Pham, or through the more sensual and seductive work created by Nguyen, these visual imageries are key to making a more tolerant society.

²⁹⁶ Anh Do, “O.C. Tet parade won’t ban gays, community decides,” *Los Angeles Times* (January 4, 2014). <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/jan/04/local/la-me-ln-lgbt-tet-parade-20140104>. Accessed July 28, 2014.

²⁹⁷ Sergio Contreras, quoted in *ibid.*

The United States, with its freedom of expression and a more indulgent climate allows for such works by Pham and Nguyen. Regarding his videos, Nguyen states, “I’ve shown my work in the past in a lot of Queer film festivals and also Asian-American festivals and they’ve been received quite well.”²⁹⁸ As for Pham, she admits that despite her outward antagonism against the male-centric society, this is a land of opportunities:

For me though, being an immigrant, a war-refugee, a person who is exiled, being a Vietnamese, being Asian-American, being all that is more complex. I’m grateful in a sense for having been displaced, for having the opportunity to leave Vietnam and [to] meet new people. It has made me a stronger warrior, a stronger constructionist. As an artist, you may be able to design the kind of community you want. You may be able to effect change, and my location in the diaspora has helped me figure out how to achieve this.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ Nguyen, interview with the author (Irvine, California, October 15, 2012).

²⁹⁹ Hanh Thi Pham, in “Promised Lands,” from the *Transnationalism and New Community Discourse* conference, held between June 25 and 26, 1995, at New York University. <http://www.nyu.edu/apa/ford/artists2.htm>. Accessed February 20, 2014.

CHAPTER 4

DISPLACEMENT AND ALIENATION

Many made no real preparations for migrating and had no idea where they would go; their only thought was to escape, often at great risk to their lives. They left everything behind: home, country, family, friends, work, material possessions, social status, and meaningful sources of identity. Most of them believed that they would never be able to return to Vietnam without risking imprisonment or death.

James M. Freeman, *Changing Identities*³⁰⁰

The mass exodus of the Vietnamese people that started at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and continued over the next two decades represents the displacement of the largest Southeast Asian population in recent history. Their dispersal to the various regions of the globe often left these migrants in a status of statelessness even as they seek refuge in foreign lands. When eventually able to resettle in a new country, they faced many difficulties including language barriers, cultural shock, discrimination, and negative stigmas, which led to a sense of alienation. Even after long periods of acculturation, many feel isolated and estranged, never quite at home in the new environment. Feelings of disaffection and alienation challenge notions of one's identity, home, allegiance, and belonging.

From within the Vietnamese American community in Southern California are two prominent artists whose visual images and installations touch on the subjects of displacement and alienation from varying approaches. Dinh Q. Lê (1968-) and Brian Doan (1968-) provide

³⁰⁰ James M. Freeman, *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans 1975-1995* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 3.

divergent examples of transmigration and their art sheds light on the challenging issues facing refugees in finding their identity and locating home after the Vietnam War. Lê, among the early refugees to arrive in America in 1978, grew up in Southern California and not feeling at home, eventually found his way back to his native Việt Nam permanently in the late 1990s. In contrast, Doan grew up in communist Việt Nam and was among the late refugees to arrive in the United States, in 1991. Yet, he also has met with difficulties during his time in this country, finding himself seriously at odds with the Vietnamese American community.

Both artists employ the self-portrait in many of their images as they search for individual identity and community allegiance. For Lê, however, there is a *religious* quality that permeates his photo-weavings, often presenting a duality as being from both, the East and the West. Doan, in contrast, utilizes *political* figures and iconic images from history to reinterpret their meanings as he establishes his personal identity in the new country. In addition, the concepts of home and location are important to both men, as they navigate between the differing cultures and come to terms with their respective senses of hybridity.

The Diaspora has lasted for over twenty-five centuries. For most of that time the political independence of the Jewish people was crushed, the central sanctuary of its faith, the Temple of Jerusalem, lay in ruins, and its homeland was a minor province of one imperial power after another. Diaspora was then called Exile (in Hebrew, *Golah* or *Galut*).

Joan Comay, *The Diaspora Story*³⁰¹

Diaspora: The Displacement of a People

The term *Diaspora* is derived from the Greek word, διασπορά (*dia-*, across, and *speirein*, to sow), and is defined as “dispersion” or “to scatter.”³⁰² Its earliest use was to identify the dispersion of the Jewish people after the Babylonian Exile, around the time of the destruction of the Hebrew kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C.E.³⁰³ The term also encompasses the resulting community settlements outside of the native land. Since that time, the terminology has been used to discuss the scattering of various peoples who share a common origin, background, culture or ideological/religious beliefs. Some such dispersions include: the African Diaspora, a direct result of the Atlantic Slave Trade between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries; the Chinese Diaspora, where tens of thousands of Chinese peasants emigrated to developing countries in need of cheap labor, particularly between the nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries; and the Indian Diaspora, one of the largest dispersion of a people, where over twenty five million comprise the overseas East Indian communities scattered to all regions of the world.

In many cases, the migration is *forced*, due to factors such as war, religious persecution, political conquest and/or domination by other powers. In other instances, the dispersal is

³⁰¹ Joan Comay, *The Diaspora Story: The Epic of the Jewish People among the Nations* (New York: Random House, 1980), 7.

³⁰² Michael Agnes & David B. Guralnik, eds., *Webster's New World College Dictionary, 4th Edition* (Foster City, California: IDG Books Worldwide, Inc., 2001), 399.

³⁰³ Comay, 7.

voluntary, due to the search for economic gains or better life opportunities. Regardless of the reason(s), the people are scattered from their roots, across invisible borders, to wander on foreign soil, and in many instances, exiled, unable to return to their homeland.

The Vietnamese Diaspora, though comparatively a new one, having only started at the end of the Vietnam War, nonetheless is a parallel to the aforementioned diasporas in terms of the displacement of a group of people from their place of origin. As a displacement, the movement of the Vietnamese people is considered to be a *forced* migration, resulting from civil war and political persecution, leaving those who were not sympathetic with the communist take-over with no options but to flee.

The unification of the two Việt Nams in 1975 saw the tightening of the communist political reigns and the upheaval of the existing free enterprise in the South by political dogmas and economic reforms. Approximate one million people, including ex-military officers and former soldiers from South Việt Nam's army, as well as past government officials, were sent to remote "reeducation camps" where an average of three to five years of exhausting physical labor and rigorous political indoctrination awaited them. In Saigon, freedom of the press ceased immediately when the North gained control as major newspapers and bookstores were closed and replaced by communist publications. Popular culture was heavily attacked, as films, music, and radio broadcasts were replaced by political propaganda, including the dissemination of new regulations, which were blasted daily over loudspeakers strategically installed throughout the city.

By early 1978, communist leaders became impatient with the sluggish pace of economic reform in the South and confiscated all remaining private enterprises, in the process, relocating many formerly middle-class merchants and their families to designated "new economic zones" in

rural parts of the country, where farming and hard labor became a way of life. These drastic changes and horrific conditions imposed by the new government on these individuals were seen by many as persecutory measures which became unbearable, forcing them to flee the country. In his text, *The Fall of Vietnam*, Philip Gavin speaks of the exodus process as one that took place over many phases:

Approximately 130,000 Vietnamese had managed last-minute escapes via planes, helicopters and boats when the North Vietnamese forces had closed in on Saigon, but once the Communist took over, the number of people leaving declined sharply, with only about 5,000 leaving the following year [in 1976]. In 1977, the number of emigrants jumped past 20,000.

This relatively small trickle of emigration became a flood in 1978 when the government began seizing small businesses and tens of thousands of merchants in the south suddenly lost both their livelihoods and their personal savings . . . [they] decided to flee Vietnam to find a better future elsewhere The sudden exodus of these merchants and their families in mid- to late 1978 caused the number of emigrants to skyrocket past 80,000.³⁰⁴

Curator and writer Viet Le, and of no relations to Lê, writes in his essay, “Sporadic Diaspora,” about the different phases of the Vietnamese diasporic migration process, citing specific final resettlement destinations:

Prior to 1975, many Vietnamese settled in neighboring countries, such as Laos, Cambodia, and China. Vietnamese who settled in France as part of the legacies of colonialism also fall into this first grouping. The second—and largest—set consists of Vietnamese who left Việt Nam after 1975 as refugees to settle in North America, Australia (159,848 as of the 2006 census), and Western Europe. Within this group, there are two waves of immigrants. The first wave relocated after the fall, or liberation, of Sài Gòn on April 30, 1975, the second wave emigrated as political refugees after 1977.³⁰⁵

Over the course of two decades, from 1975 until 1995, more than two million Vietnamese left the country and became refugees, displaced by the political persecution of the communist

³⁰⁴ Philip Gavin, *The Fall of Vietnam* (Farmington Hills, Michigan: Lucent Books, 2003), 64.

³⁰⁵ Viet Le, “Sporadic Diaspora,” in Brian Doan, *Hôme Hôme Hôme* (New York: Vilcek Foundation, 2013), 17.

regime. During the peak of the exodus, between 1978 and 1980, Vietnamese immigrants became collectively known as the “boat people” due to the numerous vessels that were used to transport these refugees away from Việt Nam.

The fortunate survivors of the perilous journeys were rescued and taken to different refugee camps set up throughout Asia, including Thailand, Malaysia, The Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Eventually many were sponsored by host countries and resettled in various nations around the globe, with the United States becoming the principal sponsor over the years. Viet Le estimates that “Currently, there are more than three million overseas Vietnamese [throughout the world]. . . .”³⁰⁶ Today, the largest concentration of Vietnamese people outside of Việt Nam proper is located in Southern California, centering in Orange County in an area better known as Little Saigon.

Dinh Q. Lê – An Early Arrival

While not among the first Vietnamese refugees to arrive in the United States, Dinh Q. Lê and his family came to this country relatively early, in 1979, at the age of ten. As a child born during the Vietnam conflict, Lê is no stranger to war or to the impact it has on successive generations. Born in Hà Tiên, near the southern tip of Việt Nam, in 1968, Lê is of Chinese-Vietnamese descent and is the middle sibling of seven children. “I was born into the war,”³⁰⁷ says Lê about his early history. He recalls his grandmother being blown up by a land mine while

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Lê, quoted in Vince Aletti, “Playing God,” *The Village Voice* (April 23, 1991): 89.

riding a motorcycle to Saigon, “My grandmother was killed when I was four or five and they brought her body home, one leg gone.”³⁰⁸

Lê speaks of both his grandfather and father as educators, “My grandfather on my father’s side was a teacher and became a principal, and then he worked for a radio station. My father also started as a teacher, became an elementary school principal, and then a high school principal.”³⁰⁹ He adds that “All of my aunts and uncles on my father’s side [also] became educators.”³¹⁰ His mother was a dealer in gold, “On my mother’s side, the merchants, the Chinese-Vietnamese . . . so that’s my mother’s family side.”³¹¹ Despite the war, as a child growing up in Việt Nam, Lê had a comfortable childhood, “I guess I grew up in sort of upper-middle-class family. It was a pretty . . . comfortable existence . . . besides the war.”³¹² With the fall of Việt Nam in 1975, however, and the replacement of the old ways by the new communist system, both his parents lost their jobs, “My father was let go of his position because he was connected to the previous regime. And then my mother was, of course, a capitalist because she was a gold and dollar dealer and a bunch of other things, so we were sort of black-listed.”³¹³

Their troubles further increased in 1977 when Lê’s father died from a stroke, “At that time the government was repressive and also there was a war between Vietnam and Cambodia.”³¹⁴ Shortly thereafter, Lê’s border village was invaded and destroyed by the

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Dinh Q. Lê, interview with the author (Ho Chi Minh City, Việt Nam, July 31, 2011).

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

Cambodian Khmer Rouge, forcing him and his family to flee, “Then on top of that, the Khmer Rouge was invading our home town. So we became refugees at the same time . . . so in ’78 we left the country.”³¹⁵ Under gunfire and grenade attack, the remaining family members eventually made it by boat to a refugee camp in Thailand, where they spent a year before being sponsored to come to the United States by an Oregonian Protestant church group in 1979. After a brief three-month stint in Banks, Oregon, the Lês relocated to Simi Valley in Southern California, “The community that sponsored us in Banks, Oregon, was really friendly and great. They tried to make us very welcome, feel at home. But it was a small town, like 500 people living there. My mom would say, ‘What are we gonna do here?’ She decided to move the family down to Southern California where my uncle lives. So we moved to Simi Valley.”³¹⁶

As a young refugee in a foreign land, Lê initially had difficulty with the English language and was a loner who spent many hours in the library looking at images in art history books. As an adult, he entered art school, and received his B.F.A. from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1989. He later received his M.F.A. in photography from the School of Visual Arts, New York in 1992. Lê describes his decision to go into the arts, “When I came to America, you’re an immigrant and so art was not an issue. You are looking at what you want to start a career in and something to make money. And art was not really something for that and there were no role models. I didn’t know anyone who could make a living as an artist, Vietnamese or American.”³¹⁷ Despite all the barriers facing him, Lê decided to pursue his passion for art.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

Lê recalls that his family initially was not supportive of his decision to pursue an artistic career, “They didn’t like it, of course. It was not something that you do. So for a long time there was a resistance. They thought I should concentrate on my studies, on computer science or engineer, something practical, and then go back and study art, but as a hobby.”³¹⁸ Lê completed his education and established a name for himself with numerous nationally and internationally exhibitions. By the late 1990s, however, he found his way back to Việt Nam to live and work on a permanent basis.

Chiều Sài Gòn, người vẫn hay mơ.
Đầu giờ đây giữa cảnh ngục tù.
Vẫn mơ về đường xưa lối cũ.
Vẫn thương về ngày tháng xa xưa.

Từ ngục tù người viết bài ca.
Khiến người đi, mắt lệ nhạt nhòa.
Cung điệu buồn, chừng như nước nở.
Ôi Sài Gòn, vĩnh biệt tình ta!

Song Ngọc, *Sài Gòn, Vĩnh Biệt Tình Ta*³¹⁹

Brian Doan – A Late Departure

In contrast to Lê, Brian Doan remained in Việt Nam, growing up under communism and was among the last wave of refugees, arriving in the United States with his family in 1991 at the age of twenty three. Like Lê, Doan was also born in 1968, but in the area of Quảng Ngãi, in Central Việt Nam. Doan recalls his early childhood, “I was born in 1968 and it was a tough year. It was a rough time in Vietnam. I still remember when I was young I lived with my father, my

³¹⁸ Ibid.

mom, and my sisters in a military compound in Central Vietnam.”³²⁰ Doan came from a good Catholic family and had many siblings, “We are a traditional Catholic and Vietnamese family. There were nine children but two had died. So [now] I have six siblings, two living in Japan and the rest of them are here [in the United States]. I’m the fifth one, I have two younger brothers. We are five brothers and two sisters.”³²¹ Despite the war, their lives were comfortable since Doan’s father was an important figure, “My father was a chief in that town.”³²² Doan recalls that life was good before the unification of the North and the South, “It was a lovely time until 1975.”³²³

When the war ended Doan’s father was placed into a reeducation camp for more than a decade while the family became displaced, roaming from town to town:

And then we moved from place to place, not anywhere to call home. And I was without my dad. He was in a reeducation camp for the whole time that I grew up Vietnam to me is a place that I was born in and I was raised. Unfortunately, I grew up at the end of the Vietnam War with the communists . . . a lot of hardship. We were Catholics. My father served [the] South Vietnam government, and his big brother too . . . so that kind of

³¹⁹Song Ngọc, *Sài Gòn, Vĩnh Biệt Tình Ta (Saigon, Goodbye Our Love)*, Tiếng Hát Thanh Tuyền, *Gởi Người Ngàn Dặm*, Làng Văn Music and Video, LV55, 1993. These lyrics from the Vietnamese song above speaks of remembrance of better times and of a song composed from within the walls of a prison. Although the translation is not literal, the lyrics are equivalent to:

Saigon afternoon, one often dreams.
Even though now from within the prison walls.
Still dream of the old roads and worn paths.
Still long for the good old days.
From prison one composes lyrics.
That causes the eyes of the departed to brim with tears.
The sad melody is heart wrenching.
Oh Saigon, goodbye our love!

³²⁰ Brian Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid.

got us into a kind of blacklist. I have very bad memories about Vietnam And the government they took away everything, the house, everything.³²⁴

Doan adds that his father, who was a colonel in the South Vietnamese army, and his uncle were both kept in the camp for unusually long terms, “He [my father] was in the reeducation camp [for] more than ten years, and my uncle a longer time. They [the Communists] kept them a long time.”³²⁵

During the time his father and uncle were detained by the Communists, Doan’s family faced tremendous economic hardship. He recalls that his family “moved from place to place, not anywhere to call home.”³²⁶ Due to those difficult years growing up, Doan became a loner and turned to Vietnamese poetry and literature as sources of release, “When I grew up my father was away, I was always hungry. No food to eat, no clothes to wear. So I spent a lot of time by the ocean. I read a lot of poetry. I think I’m lucky to be able to adapt myself to nature, poetry, literature. So pretty early on I was a withdrawn person. I shied away from people.”³²⁷ In addition, Doan remembers being affected by the bombardment of communist propaganda, “When I was growing up, I was lost in a divided society and a flood of propaganda. I became mute and mistrustful.”³²⁸

Upon his father’s release from the reeducation camp, the family was able to apply for political asylum and was allowed entry into the United States under the Humanitarian Operation

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Doan, “Artist Statement,” in *Hôme Hôme Hôme* (New York: Vilcek Foundation), 5.

program, “And then my father was released by the communists. We tried to escape a few times unsuccessfully. Because of my father’s status, we applied to come to America.”³²⁹

Arriving in the United States during the Christmas season of 1991, Doan and his family were happy to have escaped communism, but Doan also became disenchanted by the late start that his family was given in comparison to other Vietnamese immigrants:

We got here in 1991, right before Christmas You can tell because Saigon was hot and then in San Jose, San Francisco bay area it was freezing When we landed we were sponsored by my father’s brother-in-arm My father stayed behind [in Vietnam, but] his brother-in-arm, like same rank but he got here in 1975. So they have big houses. His kids were [the] same as my age . . . but they were almost finished with their doctorate programs, Ph.D. and with very stable careers. They were my friends when we were in Vietnam but they were able to get out in ’75.

And then to me I was very depressed because I’m here. I looked at them, the people that came here first. They made it! They speak English, I don’t. The people were the same as my age and my brother’s. They looked different. They looked American. Here were my friends that we grew up together in the same military compound, the same school and everything . . . and now they’re doctors and have American girlfriends. They spoke English and I didn’t understand what they said. It’s really scary. And somehow I talked with my sisters . . . we were scared and didn’t want to go out. We just came here to see all the successes.³³⁰

Not long after Doan and his family moved from San Jose, Northern California, to the Little Saigon area in Westminster, Southern California:

We couldn’t find a job in the bay area so we moved here to Little Saigon, where my cousin said, ‘Come here! At least there are more Vietnamese down here to help you.’ And of course my father had more friends in Little Saigon. So we moved here We found Little Saigon like home. My father immediately joined up with his friends . . . the community, and anti-communist groups And I felt good, I felt like my father finally found himself back to his time and his people. So he seemed pretty happy and I was happy.³³¹

³²⁹ Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid.

Doan describes his early years in the new country and the language barrier that he faced as a new arrival, not yet able to command English, “The only time that was really hard was when I started taking ESL [English as a Second Language] . . . and right away we had to find jobs.”³³² Doan also recalls his path into the arts as being an inadvertent but a passionate one, becoming ardently motivated after taking a course in photography at a community college, “I studied computer science until I met Jerry Burchfield, he was teaching at Cypress College. I took photography with him and he really changed me. He made me wake up . . . like I had to face it, that I want [to go into] the arts. Because I came here later than most Vietnamese guys, [who] studied computers, so I just followed them. But now I realized I like photography, I like [the] arts.”³³³ At the time, Doan was studying engineering and was near the program’s completion. Doan, nevertheless, switched to an arts program in order to pursue his newfound passion, “I was doing an engineering degree. I [was] almost finished . . . I had another year to finish my degree and then I took a break and I switched to art.”³³⁴

Doan met with strong objections from his parents. As was typical of most Vietnamese family, they wanted him to continue on the path of a more “practical” profession. Doan recalls, “You don’t know how my family was disappointed with that. They said, ‘The son . . . we came here [with], we brought him here, and now, look at this, he studies art . . . what is that?’”³³⁵

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid.

Yet Doan has no regrets about pursuing photography and becoming an artist, “But I believe that I made the right decision. In a way I regretted that I didn’t switch to art earlier.”³³⁶ In 2004 Doan received his B.F.A. from the University of Colorado, Denver. He furthered his art studies by pursuing an M.F.A. program, receiving the degree from Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston in 2007. Since completing his education Doan has relocated to Long Beach in Southern California and exhibit work nationally.

Nationality is a fundamental human right and a foundation of identity, dignity, justice, peace, and personal security. But statelessness (the lack of effective nationality) affects millions of people worldwide. Being stateless means having no legal protection or rights to participate in political processes, inadequate access to social services, poor employment prospects, little opportunity to own property or travel, and few protections against trafficking, harassment, and violence. Statelessness also has a disproportionate impact on women and children.

*Refugees International*³³⁷

Statelessness: *The Forgotten Ones*

One of the first portfolios of images produced by Doan, entitled *The Forgotten Ones*, focuses on the plight of a group of Vietnamese refugees who have been trapped for decades on Palawan Island, a refugee camp in the Philippines. The series of panorama documentary photographs, completed in 2004, deals with the *stateless* status of a forgotten group of people, unable to return home, yet also powerless to begin new lives elsewhere. They are caught in a state of limbo due to extreme bureaucratic and political nightmares which they face from sponsoring countries. Months of waiting have become years that in turn have developed into

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Refugees International. <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/what-we-do/statelessness>. Accessed July 29, 2014.

decades, as these immigrants languish and wither, unwanted, unclaimed, and cast away from all memory. This is a tragic example of a displaced people without any redeeming factors, alienated from their own homeland and even more alienated on foreign soil, unable to integrate into the larger Philippine society.

Doan recalls how he became interested in the project, “My older brother escaped Vietnam in 1978 or 1979, and he ended up in the Philippines, at Palawan.” Doan speaks of his family’s rejoice when news came of his brother’s arrival at Palawan:

On a rainy September afternoon in 1980 in South Vietnam, in a small village 100 kilometers northeast of Saigon, my family received a telegram from America. “Huy and Tuan arrived safely in Palawan.” It was signed by Tan, a cousin in California, telling our family that my brother and his friend were safe at the Palawan refugee camp in the Philippines. We became silent for a moment, then broke out in joyful tears. After several months [of] waiting anxiously, the telegram appeared like a miracle. Ever since then, the word “Palawan” has been recorded in my innocent mind as the land of hope, a land of legend, a paradise for Vietnamese asylum seekers. I very much regretted that I had been unable to go with my brother.³³⁸

Indeed, Doan reminisces about his brother’s fate many years later and still wishes that he had left Việt Nam with him, “When I was in Vietnam I just wanted to escape and end up like my brother. It took me twenty five years to visit Palawan, the refugee camp.”³³⁹ Doan’s brother was among the fortunate ones and was able to resettle in the United States.

Even though Doan knew of Palawan from his brother, he was not aware of its continued existence long after other refugee camps have closed. He only became aware of the refugees’ uncertain future at Palawan when he was enrolled at the University of Colorado, Denver. It was

³³⁸ Doan, “Artist Statement: The Forgotten Ones.” <http://johnib.wordpress.com/category/brian-doan/>. Accessed August 20, 2013.

³³⁹ Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

then that he gained sponsorship to visit the camp and to photograph it, “So I got some sponsors . . . and then I went there for the first trip and I took some pictures.”³⁴⁰

Doan recounts his arrival at Palawan and meeting the camp’s occupants during Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year:

When I had arrived in Palawan, the remaining Vietnamese boat people were preparing for their traditional Lunar New Year ceremony. I heard many songs expressing their life in exile and the fate of the diaspora. I had not heard those songs for a long time; they were already disappearing from popular Vietnamese-American music. But these songs, prevalent 20 years ago, are still favored by Vietnamese boat people throughout the Philippines.³⁴¹

Doan was surprised by what he saw there, not at all the enchanted sanctuary he had envisioned when his brother escaped to it, “Palawan did not look like the dream land which I imagined in my childhood. Instead, here I met many miserable people – the ‘left-over’ Vietnamese boat people and Amerasians who had arrived even before I immigrated to the United States in 1991.”³⁴² He speaks of the lost lives of these refugees as being removed from society and from the remembrances of all across the globe, “Their lives seemed to be stuck in a backwater, far away from any civilization – ignored by the free world and even by their luckier compatriots.”³⁴³

One of the emblematic photographs from the series that depicts the despair of the inhabitants of Palawan shows a man in his thirties, *Truong Tan Thanh* (Figure 4.1), and his parents. Truong is photographed in profile, with his elderly mother and stepfather, seated outside their living quarters at the camp. Born in 1968, Truong is an Amerasian who probably

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Brian Doan, quoted in Honglien Do and John E. Carey, “Book Marvelously Documents Forgotten Saga Of War Refugees and Freedom Seekers,” *Word Press* (March 26, 2007). <http://johnib.wordpress.com/category/brian-doan/>. Accessed August 20, 2013.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

faced considerable discrimination while living in Việt Nam, since abandoned children of American soldiers often were shunned in Vietnamese society. His kinky curls and dark complexion suggests Truong's birth father was African American, ensuring that the social shame Truong bears is even greater than that of the light-skinned Amerasians.



Figure 4.1 Brian Doan, *Truong Tan Thanh*, from the series *The Forgotten Ones*, 2004, chromogenic print, 10 by 20 inches.

Labeled as *bụi đời* (dust of life), many Amerasian children were given up by their mothers to orphanages when their G.I. fathers returned to the United States, due to the tremendous social stigma attached to them.³⁴⁴ Others were merely abandoned to the streets. Under the communist regime, the associated disgrace and persecution of Amerasians has only intensified, a probable reason for this family to leave Việt Nam. Even though Truong was fortunate that his mother did not abandon him and his Vietnamese stepfather accepted him, the family has been trapped in the Palawan refugee camp since arriving there in 1992. In the

³⁴⁴ See Erik Gandini's 1999 documentary, *Amerasians*, for a better understanding of the plight of Amerasian children in Việt Nam. According to Gandini, "Up to 100,000 children fathered by American soldiers were left behind in Vietnam after the war." Since 1988, the United States government has allowed them to immigrate to the US under the "Amerasian Homecoming Act." At the time the film was produced, approximately 38,000 have resettled in America.

image the family appears to have modest but adequate living quarters, with stucco walls and concrete/asphalt flooring. In the background, there are neatly stacked boxes and baskets, demonstrating a sense of structure and organization. On a piece of furniture to the left of Truong stands a small screen television, indicating a contact with the outside world. Wearing a sleeveless t-shirt, Truong displays a fit and toned physique, suggesting that he engages in manual labor. His sense of youth and purpose sets him apart from the parents, whose faces denote age and weariness. Despite the meager conditions, they appear to have a comfortable existence.

Whatever the level of comfort that is displayed in this photograph, it is not an indication of the shattered reality faced by the family. According to Doan's caption, Truong's "wife and two daughters were repatriated to Vietnam in 1996 after failing to pass the screening for resettlement in the US. Truong is currently out of work; he and his mother and sick step-father survive with the help of Vietnamese refugees in Manila."³⁴⁵ Dislocated and separated from loved ones, the portrait of Truong provides a representational view of the desperate people who reside in this camp, forgotten by most as life passes them by.



Figure 4.2 Brian Doan, *Two Little Girls Walking in Vietville*, from the series *The Forgotten Ones*, 2004, chromogenic print, 10 by 20 inches.

³⁴⁵ Brian Doan, *The Forgotten Ones: A Photographic Documentation of the Last Vietnamese Boat People in the Philippines* (Santa Ana, California: VAALA (Vietnamese American Arts & Letters Association), 2004), 60.

In a second image from the series, *Two Little Girls Walking in Vietville* (Figure 4.2), Doan captures the backs of two young girls strolling hand in hand down a small street in “Vietville,” a twenty five acre village near Puerto Princesa City on the island of Palawan. On either side of the street are a series of small homes with little front yards filled with vegetation. One of the homes, on the right side, even has a bamboo fence around the yard. Though the homes appear slightly dilapidated, the yards and the streets look clean and unspoiled by garbage or trash, suggesting a sense of pride among the inhabitants. Even though not a scene from a posh neighborhood, it represents a simple and idyllic compound in which to live, where children are able to safely walk the streets.

The unsuspecting sense of sanctuary and serenity is devastatingly shattered when contrasted by Doan’s caption that the soil in the area is laden with poisonous mercury:

Established in October 1996, it [Vietville] was supposed to be the permanent home of the Vietnamese boat people, who were allowed to stay in the Philippines based on the July 1996 Memorandum of Understanding. The Vietville community began with 700 people, who lived in 155 housing units. Later, mercury poisoning was found in the soil under the project. The mercury had already begun to harm the residents. Now less than 200 Vietnamese still live there.³⁴⁶

The two images are sufficient examples of the grim sense of anguish that this group of refugees faces daily. While the photographs themselves portray a mere snapshot of a moment in time, the accompanying captions reveal the devastating truth and long lasting scars suffered by these refugees. Displaced and in a continuous status of statelessness, these people simply exist. Stripped of their dignity and rights, these homeless ones are alienated by the current host country and have few prospects for change in their future.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 46.

Upon returning to the United States, Doan used the images as a way to help others remember these forgotten individuals. He recalled thinking to himself:

We can make a book, we can lobby congress, and we can lobby people to see “The Forgotten Ones.” We live here but we forgot there are some people [who] are stuck there for a long time . . . twenty years. So when I came back I found more sponsors, a publisher . . . VAALA [Vietnamese American Arts & Letters Association] was one of the project’s [main support, who] published the book to make people know about the situation.³⁴⁷

Gustavo Arellano from the *OC Weekly* compared the images to Dorothea Lange’s, calling them “a Dorothea Lange-esque collection of panoramic black-and-white shots.”³⁴⁸ Once *The Forgotten Ones* was published, Doan, with the help of many other individuals and organizations were able to petition the United States government to revisit the cases of these overlooked refugees, “The book helped a lot in [starting] the program to bring the people over here. I believe that now there’s less than 200 living there, married to the Philippine citizens. But most of them ended up in the U.S. or Canada.”³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

³⁴⁸ Gustavo Arellano, “Dorothean Panoramas: The Forgotten Ones remember the last boat people of the Vietnam War,” *OC Weekly* (February 24, 2005). <http://www.ocweekly.com/2005-02-24/culture/dorothean-panoramas/>. Accessed July 29, 2014.

³⁴⁹ Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

China's erratic weather hurts my health.
My heart so aches for my homeland, Vietnam.
To stay in prison and fall ill—o woe!
I should be crying but I'll madly sing

Ho Chi Minh, *Prison Diary*³⁵⁰

Doan: Big Controversy in Little Saigon

Since the completion of *The Forgotten Ones*, Doan has created some notoriety for himself among many of the Vietnamese Americans in Orange County due to a controversial image. Doan's photograph in a 2009 group exhibition near Little Saigon was seen by many in the Vietnamese American community as being pro-communist. The contentious work ignited powerful emotions within the community and incited a series of protests, becoming the site of a cultural altering experience for many within the diaspora.

One reason why Doan's image exacerbated the anti-Communist tension in the community was due to the influence of a high-profile incident, known as the Hi-Tek protest, which had occurred a decade earlier. In January 1999, Truong Van Tran, the owner of the Hi-Tek video store in Little Saigon displayed a poster of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese communist flag in the store window of his shop, igniting the emotional fire of an outraged community. Tran was physically attacked on two separate occasions and even hospitalized as a result of the second attack by enraged protesters. Tran, who arrived in the United States in 1980, claimed that he was not a communist but "wanted to use the poster to open a dialogue about what [was] happening in Vietnam."³⁵¹ The controversy and weeks of demonstration led the mall

³⁵⁰ David G. Marr, ed. *Phan Boi Chau and Ho Chi Minh: Reflections from Captivity*. Translated by Christopher Jenkins, Tran Khanh Tuyet and Huynh Sanh Thong (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1978), 93.

³⁵¹ Staff Writer, "Poster Protest in Little Saigon," *CBSNews.com* (February 11, 1999). <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/poster-protest-in-little-saigon/>. Accessed October 27, 2014.

owner to send Tran an eviction notice, closing down the store, and taking the case to court where a temporary injunction was issued for Tran to remove the poster and flag. Tran and representatives from the American Civil Liberties Union requested a second hearing, however, in which his right to freedom of speech was upheld. “Mr. Tran’s display is undisputedly offensive and engenders hatred,” said Orange County Judge Barbara Tam Nomoto Schumann. “However, these symbols are part of political speech which Mr. Tran has a right to express even if the context of that expression is offensive.”³⁵² Tran’s First Amendment right took dozens of police officers and sheriff’s deputies to protect as he triumphantly rehung the volatile symbols in his store, “Dodging eggs, oranges and curses, the police hustled the merchant, Truong Van Tran, and his wife, Kim, into the store shortly before 10 A.M., as hundreds of protesters screamed ‘Down with Communism’ and threatened to break through a thick line of officers.”³⁵³ His victory was bittersweet, however, as several months later Tran’s video store was raided by police and over 17,000 pirated video tapes were confiscated. Tran’s store was closed down and he was sentenced to ninety days in jail.³⁵⁴ His notoriety brought attention to his illegal video pirating and caused the demise of his business.

It is under the shadows of this troubled history and contentious anti-communist sentimentality that Doan’s work sparked another vehement protest from the diaspora. Part of VAALA’s *F.O.B. II: Art Speaks* exhibition in Santa Ana, California, from January 9 through 18, 2009, Doan’s photographic diptych entitled, *Avon, MA 2006 / Thu Duc, Viet Nam 2008*

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Don Terry, “Display of Ho Chi Minh Poster Spurs Protest and Arrests,” *The New York Times* (February 21, 1999). <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/21/us/display-of-ho-chi-minh-poster-spurs-protest-and-arrests.html>. Accessed October 27, 2014.

³⁵⁴ Tini Tran, “Little Saigon Merchant Gets 90 Days in Jail for Video Piracy,” *Los Angeles Times* (August 11, 1999). <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/aug/11/local/me-64741>. Accessed October 27, 2014.



Figure 4.3 Brian Doan, *Avon, MA 2006* / *Thu Duc, Viet Nam 2008*, silver gelatin prints, 30 by 42 inches.

(Figure 4.3), consists of two silver gelatin prints that are meant to be viewed together. The *Avon, MA 2006* image is hung on the left and depicts a well-dressed, bespectacled young Asian American man standing outdoors. The background behind him is that of a forest setting with a reflective pond, presumably in Avon, Massachusetts. In his right hand he holds an empty bird cage with the cage door wide open, perhaps with the implication that a bird has been freed and returned to its natural habitat. The man's eyes are closed as if in a dream state, presumably thinking of the freedom he has given to the bird.

The *Thu Duc, Viet Nam 2008* image is hung on the right and is named after a northeastern district of Ho Chi Minh City, where the shot was taken the previous year. The photograph depicts a young woman wearing a red tank top with a yellow star, the colors of Việt Nam's current official (albeit communist) flag. Next to her, on a glass tabletop was a small golden bust of the deceased communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, a vase of yellow marigolds, and a red book with a cell phone on top of it. The young woman has braided hair and is seen dreamingly looking off to her right side, into an unseen distant place. Together the two images are meant to provide contrasting views of young lives, an Asian American man in the United States in

contrast to a Vietnamese woman living in Viet Nam, perhaps each with his or her own dreams of freedom.

It was the image of the Vietnamese girl, however, that was singled out by the protesters as being provocative. Doan addressed the work, stating that it was staged and created as a commentary on the youths in contemporary Việt Nam:

It was totally staged. Almost all of my work is about the narrative. I create work in many layers, combining history and props to tell a story. I wanted to capture what it is like for the younger Vietnamese generation growing up in Vietnam now. I purchased the t-shirt, had her put her hair up in a ponytail because during communist times, this was how I remember women wearing their hair. I also put a red book on the table with a cell phone on top of it. Some may take it as making fun of how Chairman Mao in China made people carry around a red book with his quotes, but all I'm really commenting on is that the cell phone is now more important than the book. I directed the girl to look away as if she was dreaming.³⁵⁵

Yet the image was deemed as communist propaganda and incited tremendous protest from many within the Vietnamese American diaspora and became a site of cultural controversy. According to My Thuan Tran from the *Los Angeles Times*, “. . . the communist symbols in the piece enraged many Vietnamese Americans. Hundreds protested when the photograph was shown”³⁵⁶ During the demonstrations, many from Westminster’s Little Saigon demanded that VAALA shut the exhibition down early, before the show had a chance to run its brief course. Incensed by the multiple communist emblems presented in the image, Vietnamese Americans within the diaspora labelled Doan as a “communist” and, in an effort to explain why the Vietnamese American community found it so offensive, suggested that it was as if an artist

³⁵⁵ Doan, interviewed by Jason Landry, in “Exhibition by Photographer Brian Doan Sparks Protest,” *Big, Red & Shiny* (February 16, 2009). http://www.bigredandshiny.com/cgi-bin/BRS.cgi?section=news&issue=100&article=BRAIN_DOAN_EXHIBITION_1571853. Accessed August 14, 2014.

³⁵⁶ My Thuan Tran, “Vietnamese Activists to Protest Art Show,” *Los Angeles Times* (February 17, 2009). <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2009/02/vietnamese-acti.html>. Accessed August 20, 2013.

had embraced the Nazi Holocaust in his image. According to Richard Chang of the *Orange County Register*, “Some in Little Saigon and elsewhere said displaying Doan’s photo is like showing a Nazi symbol in a Jewish community. That feeling sparked two protests in mid-January, including one that shut down the exhibit ‘F.O.B. II: Art Speaks,’ and another that shut down two blocks in downtown Santa Ana.”³⁵⁷ Before the exhibit was closed, however, some members of the demonstration vandalized the work by spitting on it, scratching the glass, and spraying paint on the image.

Doan insisted that the work is “a comment on fashion, pop culture and disaffection in contemporary Vietnam.”³⁵⁸ He states that he is neither pro- nor anti-communist but is merely an artist speaking about the political confinement of his subject, “She lives in the communist country, but look at her. She’s looking away, dreaming. She wants to escape Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh is next to her, but communism is no longer in her. She wants to dream of other things.”³⁵⁹ In addition, as an image the photograph suggests that living under a communist regime does not preclude youth culture, disaffection, or modern consumer items such as cell phones.

The Vietnamese American community, however, did not agree with Doan’s assessment of the work as a fashion statement. In fact, once the protest began, the protestors began to speak out against other aspects of the show, such as the nudes by other artists that were included in the

³⁵⁷ Richard Chang, “Photographer set off Little Saigon,” *Orange County Register* (January 30, 2009). <http://www2.ocregister.com/articles/doan-vietnamese-work-2295683-communist-vietnam>. Accessed April 11, 2014.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Doan, quoted in Richard Chang.

exhibition, “Now they are protesting the nudes that are in the show, so it has become an immoral thing based on Vietnamese culture and value, not just a political thing.”³⁶⁰

Neither of the co-curators, Tram Le nor Lan P. Duong, saw Doan’s work as “communist propaganda” and publicly spoke out against the community’s narrow-mindedness and its censorship of speech with dissention regarding any different point of view than its own. In her Curatorial Statement for the exhibit, “Living Without Fear,” Le stated, “For too long, the Vietnamese community has defined ‘political’ to mean either ‘anti-communist’ or ‘pro-communist’ with the former being the only acceptable label in this ‘community.’ Moreover, if the artwork contains any symbols, colors, or images relating to this kind of politics, it is propaganda.”³⁶¹ Le dismissed the importance of the articles used in Doan’s photographs, stating that they were “actually banal objects of tourism. They can be bought, sold and exchanged.”³⁶²

Adding to the fuel was Duong’s Curatorial Statement, entitled “Vietnamese Americans and the United States of War,” which used the tagline “@ the crossroads of art + politics + community” to speak of “the impasse” at which they stood:

The intersections of “Art” (*nghệ thuật*) and “politics” (*chính trị*) are key because I know these terms to be historically vexed categories. In Vietnamese cultural history, the state’s injunctions for the creation of art have actually resulted in a need to suppress artistic expression and exert state control . . . there has often been a brutal crackdown . . . as demonstrated in the Vietnamese state’s tactics of censorship that still occur today.

Yet, it is because of this painful past that I believe that the most powerful pieces of art are the ones that speak to the political . . . we, as a community, must also address the war that burns inside our own borders. I am addressing the kinds of suppressions that occur within the Vietnamese American community, specifically the censorship of artistic expression that allows no other politics than anti-communist politics.³⁶³

³⁶⁰ Doan, quoted in Jason Landry.

³⁶¹ Tram Le, “Living Without Fear,” in *F.O.B. II: Art Speaks* (Santa Ana, California: VAALA, 2009), 7.

³⁶² Le, quoted in Richard Chang.

³⁶³ Lan P. Duong, “Vietnamese Americans and the United States of War,” in *F.O.B. II: Art Speaks* (Santa Ana, California: VAALA, 2009), 11.

While some interpreted this statement as inflammatory, the purpose of the art show was to address how anti-communist sentiments within the community have continually silenced multiple voices, created political fear, as well as inciting increasing incidents of anti-communist protests at the time. Furthermore, the curatorial statement points to the irony of anti-communists adopting the same censorship tactics as communists. Undoubtedly, the curators knew the show was going to create controversy even as they published their curatorial statements for the exhibition catalog, prior to the opening of the exhibit. In addition, the show was staged outside the backdoor of Little Saigon, in Santa Ana, minutes away from Westminster. While Duong suggested that the exhibition was created “to facilitate conversations between the community and the community of artists” or that it was “a manifestation of [her] own genuine desire to sustained dialogue and conversation,”³⁶⁴ these seemed to have been unrealistic expectations. The more probable, and actual response was an outcry from the community, one that create notoriety for the show. While it is unclear who precisely was instigating the protests, it is probably safe to assume that most of the protestors were conservatives and staunch anti-communists. Furthermore, only between one to two hundred protestors showed up from a much more sizable community. Unfortunately for Doan, however, his image became the main vehicle for the opprobrium, casting feelings of resentment against his work and leading to negative publicity for the exhibit. According to Art Pedroza from the on-line blog known as the *Orange Juice*, the *F.O.B.II* exhibit was ended several days early, “after Assemblyman Jose Solorio asked Santa

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

Ana Mayor Miguel Pulido to close its doors”³⁶⁵ and a building violation was cited as the reason to shut down the exhibit.



Figure 4.4 Brian Doan with vandalized *Thu Duc, Viet Nam* 2008.

In any case, Doan did not back down in the face of the outrage expressed by the community. In fact, after the early shut down of the exhibit at VAALA, Doan rehung the defaced *Thu Duc, Viet Nam* (Figure 4.4) the following month in another exhibition at Cypress College, about twenty minutes from Little Saigon. Again it prompted another series of protest from the community. Yet Doan stated that the freedom of expression was critical to his work and for himself as an artist, “I believe in freedom of speech I have a choice to eliminate some things in my work. But if I’m afraid and do that, the people (who don’t like the photos) will win.”³⁶⁶

³⁶⁵ Art Pedroza, “Van Tran is No Hero, but Brian Doan is!” *Orange Juice Blog* (February 1, 2009). <http://www.orangejuiceblog.com/2009/02/van-tran-is-no-hero-but-brian-doan-is/>. Accessed April 11, 2014.

³⁶⁶ Doan, quoted in Richard Chang.

Jerry Burchfield, who was Doan's first photography professor and long-time mentor, spoke positively regarding Doan's work and supported his choices despite the vocal objection by the diaspora. "His work has steadily progressed He's very much an American who is concerned about the changes in what's happening to the culture of the Vietnamese It's sad that people had to react so vehemently. All of a sudden he's become a major villain and chastised. It's surprising and unfortunate."

In response to Doan's image, many from the Vietnamese American community spoke out against him, advising that he is either pro- or anti- communist, and cannot be neutral, since being "in between" is the equivalent to being a communist sympathizer. In a letter addressed to Doan, dated February 4, 2009, elder Michael Do stated:

When the picture you shot is not able to convey the real meaning you put in it; you fail [sic] as an artist. When the picture needs some explanation to make the viewers understand, you fail [sic] as an artist. . . .

You should never forget that **you are a part of the Vietnamese Refugee Community**. . . . To you, the Vietnam War ended in 1975. To us, the war still exists, but in another form. Prior [to] 1975, there were rivals between [the] South Nationalists and [the] North Communists; today, between [the] democratic movements overseas and [the] dictatorship in Vietnam. Still between the symbols of Yellow flag with Red stripes and Red flag with yellow star. People can stay out of trouble by taking no side; but cannot stand in between. . . .

Communists never believe [in] you, they use you for their purpose and dispose you when you are not needed. The Viet Refugee Community is your family, will never reject you if you know right from wrong.³⁶⁷

The elders, in their staunch anti-communist stance, continue to adopt the same authoritarian rhetoric attributed to the communists, that if one does not conform to prescribed ideologies, one could be excommunicated from the community.

³⁶⁷ Michael Do, "To Brian Doan, Letter from An Elder." <http://www.michaelpdo.com/Brian%20Doan.htm>. Accessed August 20, 2013.

In a televised discussion on Little Saigon TV (station KXLA 44.4) on October 3, 2009, Doan was censured by an elder, the Community Chairman of Orange County, Nguyen Tan Lac, “Mr. Brian, your freedom or the freedom of anybody, a human is restricted by the freedom of others. . . . Ethics, morality, those are the things you have to see for yourself and you have to censor yourself. You should do things in restriction so you don’t hurt others. You can’t do whatever you want.”³⁶⁸ Elder Nguyen adds that as an artist, Doan should use his art to serve the community instead of hurting it, “You have the right to freedom of speech, but you should use that right to say good and right things to serve our community, humanity and society. You should not use that freedom to say anything you want to satisfy you freedom of speech and you make others sad.”³⁶⁹

Doan’s response to the censorship of his work is to compare it to the communist dogmas of Việt Nam, “I want to response to Mr. Nguyen Tan Lac. His dogmatic teachings reminded me of the time I was taught by communist politicians in school. They often sounded the same.”³⁷⁰ In addition, Doan stated that in future he will no longer exhibit his work near the Vietnamese American diaspora in Orange County, “I don’t think I want to exhibit in the community anymore because it will hurt the community. Especially after the last experience, I don’t want to exhibit in the community anymore.”³⁷¹

³⁶⁸ Nguyen Tan Lac, “Nguyen Vu interviewed Brian Doan, Nguyen Tan Lac, Nguyen Xuan Nghia, UuDam,” *Little Saigon TV – KXLA 44.4* (October 3, 2009). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvii8RWNIxI>. Accessed September 1, 2014.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Brian Doan, “Nguyen Vu interviewed Brian Doan, Nguyen Tan Lac, Nguyen Xuan Nghia, UuDam,” *Little Saigon TV – KXLA 44.4* (October 3, 2009). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvii8RWNIxI>. Accessed September 1, 2014.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

Before this October 2009 conversation between elder Nguyen and Doan, however, during the height of the anger and protest earlier in the year, there were letters and threats directed at Doan's family for their inability to control him. The result from the demonstrations was a rift between Doan and his own family members, particularly with his father, who served more than ten years in a communist reeducation camp prior to the family coming to the United States. Doan recalled being impacted greatly when he heard his father denouncing his art over both, the English and Vietnamese media broadcasts, "I felt sad I was terribly, terribly sorry. This is not [the] first time that they [my family] don't believe in me. I was thinking that I did something wrong. It was kind of sad, but, he's still my father."³⁷²

In addition to the fractured relationship between the two men, Doan also experienced a sense of alienation from his community, getting hate e-mails and threatening phone calls, "I have begun to get hate e-mails, dirty e-mails, illustrations, and phone calls that are very disturbing and threatening. It is interesting that a little image can stir up a big mess. What can you do? . . . you have to move on."³⁷³

In a 2014 interview, Doan reflected back on this experience and spoke of it as an issue of timing, "I think I was showing my work at the wrong time The Vietnamese, living anti-communist here . . . the majority was fired up I think I've been targeted for the campaign to anti-communism" ³⁷⁴ Doan suggests that the involvement of the news media kindled the situation, "The big deal here was . . . that somehow the yellow star, and the radio, the media

³⁷² Doan, quoted in Richard Chang.

³⁷³ Doan, quoted in Jason Landry.

³⁷⁴ Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

involvement was hard for my family.”³⁷⁵ He further adds that the people that paid the highest price were his parents, “I don’t have much problem but my family in Little Saigon faced big, big problems. They called my dad and my mom, that’s the sad thing [they] had to deal with [stemming] from my stubbornness.”³⁷⁶

As a political refugee arriving in the United States who started a new life away from communism, Doan had the opportunity to integrate himself into the diaspora. His displacement from his homeland and his subsequent refusal to relinquish his artistic freedom under pressure from community elders, however, have left him alienated and considered somewhat of an outcast. Furthermore, the incident demonstrates that the nuances of art are lost with a refugee community where the wounds of war are still so fresh, while political imagery and icons play a more dominant role.

Assimilation and Alienation: The Art of Doan and Lê

As mix-media visual artists, both of Doan’s and Lê’s primary medium is photography. As such, they employ the self-portrait as a viable tool to discuss their personal attempts at assimilation into American society and also to reconcile their respective senses of alienation in the new country. Yet a distinct contrast exists between the two. Lê’s self-portraits from his series, *Portraying a White God*, is filled with religious iconography, both Christian and Buddhist, while Doan’s self-portraits as iconic figures from the *Hôme, Hôme, Hôme* portfolio borrow mainly from the political realm. Interestingly, Lê’s *Portraying a White God* photo-

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

weavings are among his earliest works while Doan's political self-portraits are among his most recent.

Lê is best known for his unique style of photo-weavings or photo-tapestries, a process in which multiple large scale photographs are cut into thin strips and rewoven together to create one contrasting and fluctuating image. The process incorporates the novel approaches of grass mat weaving adopted from his homeland of Việt Nam, along with the Western inventions of photography and digital imaging in order to create complex photo-tapestries.

Originally created to protest a school policy about course requirements, Lê began *Portraying a White God*, in 1989, during his last year of undergraduate studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Even as he was trying to assimilate into American culture, Lê was protesting and questioning the university's then controversial policy that required non-Western students to complete more courses in Western art history and civilization than those of their own cultures in order to graduate. Lê, filled with a great sense of alienation, asked himself, "Where do I fit into this history?"³⁷⁷ Apparently his answer was to weave himself literally into the images.

Lê borrows the early images from the art books that he looked at in the library and combines them with his own photographs to create complex photo-weavings. His 1989 *Self-Portrait #6* (Figure 4.5) from the series is a depiction of his own assured self-portrait. Using a frontal gaze, he interweaves his countenance with a Christian painting, where his face is surrounded by a nimbus of pixilated patterns that include many religious icons. Smaller figures of saints, the Madonna, and Christ, delicately fill in the outer perimeters while Lê occupies the epicenter of the picture.

³⁷⁷ Lê, quoted in Aletti, 89.



Figure 4.5 Dinh Q. Lê, *Self-Portrait #6*, from the series *Portraying a White God*, 1989, photo-tapestry, 40 by 30 inches.

Despite the intricate composition, Lê manages to draw attention to his own image by relegating the white patterns of the weaves away from his face, suggesting, but not overtly depicting, a halo. Although the Madonna and Christ are present and occupy the periphery, Lê's central image is larger in scale and is more assertive, raising his own status to godliness as compared to the dwarfed Christian icons. He uses restrained hues of reddish orange and warm shades of flesh tones against the dark background to accentuate the ethereal deities in the foreground. Occasional blurs of white and flashes of red from the garments of the surrounding figures underscore the subtleness of color choice in the piece.

Yet what is most noticeably transgressive about Lê's photo-tapestry is the hybridity of stories being told in the weaving. It is neither merely about Christianity nor solely about the

artist himself, even though the iconic Madonna and Christ are employed along with Lê's Asian visage. In this work, Lê symbolically questions his identity as an individual who was born in the East and raised in the West, and ponders his role and path as a Vietnamese American, caught between two distinctly different cultures. The mixture of signals and stories here not only makes the viewer uncertain about the subject matter and the intent of the artist, it also causes one to feel uneasy from being confronted with a spiritual work that some may feel borders on the sacrilegious. The visual potency, however, keeps the viewer from shying away.

Lê has been intrigued with Christianity and Christian idols since childhood, "I remember the first time I went to a Catholic church in Vietnam, I was horrified by the crucifix. It was this body, just hanging there all bloody. It was a major contrast from the depiction of Buddha. He is always serene."³⁷⁸ Later, during his junior high school years in the United States, Lê made a connection with Western religious paintings as he was learning English. "I spent a lot of time in the library, but the only books I was interested in were the art books, because they had pictures. There were a lot of books on Renaissance painting so I became interested in that."³⁷⁹

Interestingly, instead of an Asian god, Lê chose to portray himself as a "white" Western Christ by specifically labeling the work as such. In *Visual Piety—A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*, art historian David Morgan states, "With relatively few exceptions, artists and their patrons throughout the history of Christianity have understood the physical likeness of Jesus to conform to their own race, nationality, and local customs In every

³⁷⁸ Lê, interviewed by Paola Prato, in "LACPS Presents Dinh Q. Lê: Headless Buddha," *LACPS-Photo Arts Calendar* (Winter 1998): 3.

³⁷⁹ Lê, interviewed by deSouza, 4.

instance, his likeness is coded to resemble the interests of those who depicted him.”³⁸⁰

According to Lê, his reasoning for portraying himself as a “white” god is that Christ was “a model Westerner. By trying to become Him, trying to act like Him, it’s essentially trying to become white.”³⁸¹ This statement by Lê seems to be disingenuous. His effort at “become white” is a superficial argument aimed to camouflage Lê’s derision of the West’s condescending attitude and of his own objection to Christianity’s preeminent disposition. This is evidenced by Lê’s confrontational gaze toward the audience, providing him with a strong frontal presence versus the smaller Christian icons whose eyes are either closed or whose gazes are directed away from the viewer. Lê’s image certainly is not an emulation of a morally superior historical religious figure from Western history.

Further substantiation of this is Lê’s steady distancing of himself from the West since his return to Việt Nam, slowly renouncing his Western acculturation. Even though it is true that Western artwork and Christian iconography have been alluring to Lê, the attraction was that of a “morbid fascination.” In one recount, he speaks specifically of a representation of Christ and his feelings towards it, “. . . [It happened] in Vietnam when I was five or six. There was a Christmas parade with an image of Christ; I was so scared, seeing this body hanging on a cross with blood dripping. So when I look at Renaissance painting it is with a morbid fascination”³⁸²

Regarding this series of photo-weavings, Lê has expressed issues of his personal identity as an Asian immigrant living in the United States, questioning his connections to the Vietnamese

³⁸⁰ David Morgan, *Visual Piety—A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 124.

³⁸¹ Lê, quoted in Aletti, 89.

³⁸² Dinh Q. Lê, interviewed by Allan deSouza, in Dinh Q. Lê, *The Headless Buddha* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, 1999), 4.

American community as well as his adopted American homeland. In the work, Lê's self-portrait, woven together images of Christianity, is not about a celebration of his duality but rather is to contrast the difference between his birth heritage to the religious symbols inherited by his Western acculturation. In the 1996 exhibition catalogue, *A Labor of Love*, Lê is quoted as saying: "I am Vietnamese. I am not Vietnamese. I am American. I am not American. I am a Vietnamese-American. I am not" ³⁸³ Unsure of his cultural identity and membership affiliation, Lê's images reflect his sense of loss and his feelings of displacement and alienation, sentiments that often resonate among members of the Vietnamese American diaspora in their acculturation process. The work weaves together various *transcultural* themes, such as identity issues for immigrants caught between cultures, negotiating between the traditional ways and the indoctrinated methods of the adopted homeland.

Lê's *Portraying a White God* transgresses beyond his individual self and encompasses a much larger history of the various diasporas living abroad, and the hybrid—often *transcultural*—identities with which each refugee has to cope. As early as 1947, Cuban critic Fernando Ortiz used the term "transcultural" in *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* to describe the phenomenon of melding two or more aspects from different cultures together. ³⁸⁴ In this text, Ortiz speaks of "transcultural" to mean more than "merely acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture which could be defined as deculturation. In addition, it carries the idea of the consequent creation of a new cultural phenomena which could be called

³⁸³ Lê, quoted in Marcia Tucker, *A Labor of Love* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 88.

³⁸⁴ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 131.

neo-culturation.”³⁸⁵ This notion of a *transcultural* identity, a new hybrid cultural distinctiveness, is prevalent within the different diasporas in the United States.

Lê’s work is transcultural due to its hybridity, forcing together an old image of Western religious references with a new portrait of an Eastern identity. This and similar stories in his tapestries can be viewed as representational for the thousands of other Vietnamese Americans who share his sense of dislocation and his feelings of estrangement, a hybridity trapped between cultures. Or they can be expanded to represent other Asians with similar feelings, living elsewhere, away from their countries of origin. Of course, the tapestry can be viewed as emblematic for most displaced immigrants, caught between their own ethnic cultures and the differing values of their adopted homes. Lê’s images are generally targeted at the general audience and not limited to the Vietnamese American community. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, and his work can be found in many private collections.

In contrast to Lê’s cut-and-woven images, Doan’s photographs are printed whole on archival paper that allows him to manually draw and paint on them, using a combination of micro pigment inks and watercolors. Unlike Lê’s *Self-Portrait #6*, which creates a conundrum due to the unusual multiplicity of woven images, Doan’s 2009-13 self-portrait, *Being Ho Chi Minh* (Figure 4.6), is unambiguous. In the forty by fifty inch self-portrait, Doan plays the part of Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969), the former leader of the Communist-ruled Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (North Việt Nam), who is now considered by most in Việt Nam as the founding father of the country. Perhaps in the same vein as the United States’ own “Uncle Sam,” who although only an iconic symbol for patriotism, is a national personification of the country’s government, Ho is often referred to as “Uncle Ho” (*Bác Hồ*) in Việt Nam and is seen as representing the

³⁸⁵ Fernando Ortiz, quoted in Mirzoeff, 131.



Figure 4.15 Brian Doan, *Being Ho Chi Minh*, 2009-12, archival ink jet print, micro pigment ink, and watercolor, 40 by 50 inches

nation. In his biography on the leader, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, historian Pierre Brocheux states of Ho as being “difficult to categorize” since his association with the Soviet Union’s Stalin and China’s Mao have relegated him “to the ranks of the murderous red tyrants of the twentieth century,” and have denied Ho “the intellectual depth of a political thinker, the creative genius of a writer, or the skills of a military strategist”³⁸⁶ Doan speaks of the man, “. . . Ho Chi Minh is regarded like a god, the father of the nation. But he was also a human. Just like any person, he had . . . rights He had everything, but the way that he worked it, it was too much, so we have to think of [him as a] person.”³⁸⁷

³⁸⁶ Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*. Translated by Claire Duiker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xiii.

³⁸⁷ Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

Doan claims that this recent series of self-portrait was created as a response to the negative publicity he received from the Vietnamese American diaspora and from his sense of alienation from the community. He states, “This project was created in response to the incident in Little Saigon And now I came back, after the picture, the portrait of the Vietnamese woman shown in Little Saigon. And I didn’t want to do that type of portrait anymore. I wanted to do my self-portrait.”³⁸⁸ Doan recalls trying to decide what type of self-portrait to create and finally settled on iconic political figures from Vietnamese history, “I wanted to pick the iconic images from Vietnam and talk about controversial issues. The persons that either [are] hated or loved, [but] different because of their [political] sides.”³⁸⁹

In Vietnamese history it would be difficult to find a figure of more political stature than Ho Chi Minh, who is definitely loved by many and equally hated by others. In the photograph, Doan sports the salt-and-pepper-colored van dyke that has become a signature facial feature of the matured Ho. His hair is combed back with a noticeable receding hairline closely resembling Ho’s own style. Additionally, Doan is dressed in a similarly light-colored *Zhongshan* suit that was often worn by Ho, consisting of matching trousers with a long-sleeve shirt, buttoned to the neck, with four front-buttoned portraying a particular individual, “So many hours of make-up to change myself into different characters that I want to perform. I want to put myself in that shoe and see the feeling.”³⁹⁰ Doan’s “dressing up” in this series seems to be an erasure of his own identity even as he assumes that of another to evoke a different impression of that individual.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Doan interviewed by the Vilcek Foundation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaJqMcicQCY>. Accessed March 31, 2014.



Figure 4.7 Ho Chi Minh on the grounds of the Presidential Palace, Hanoi.

pockets.³⁹¹ He is seated in a rattan chair with a comparable table nearby, reading a newspaper. The text in the newspaper is indistinguishable and appears to be of little relevance to the image. In his left hand is a lit cigarette. The photograph is based on similar poses of Ho Chi Minh in the outdoors at his modest Presidential Palace in Hanoi (see Figure 4.7). Doan recalls the incredible amount of work that was required to get himself into character for the photo-shoot, and the associated mixed feelings of portraying a particular individual, “So many hours of make-up to change myself into different characters that I want to perform. I want to put myself in that shoe and see the feeling.”³⁹² Doan’s “dressing up” in this series seems to be an erasure of his own identity even as he assumes that of another to evoke a different impression of that individual.

³⁹¹ The *Zhongshan* suit was originally introduced by Sun Yat-sen at the founding of the Republic of China in 1912. When the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, it was widely worn by males and government officials in China, after Mao Tse-tung adopted it as part of his regular public attire. Hence, it is also known as the “Mao suit.” Ho Chi Minh, with close ties to the Chinese communist regime adopted a similar version for himself. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mao_suit. Accessed August 29, 2014.

³⁹² Doan interviewed by the Vilcek Foundation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaJqMcicQCY>. Accessed March 31, 2014.

As a final touch, Doan draws two little pastel-colored birds into the photograph, one perching on his right shoulder as the other is on the floor by his feet. Even though the birds could be read as a male and a female, representing the duality of *yin* and *yang* that often is found in Vietnamese culture (which is influenced highly by Chinese philosophy), Doan states that he painted them specifically to represent the two Việt Nams, “The birds in [the] *Being Ho Chi Minh* photo represent the North and South Vietnamese people.”³⁹³ It could be argued also that the birds represent the intellectuals and the laborers of the nation, where the bird on Ho’s shoulder appears to be speaking to him while the bird on the ground is simply eating a worm.

He notes, “. . . the image that I use in my work, [have] been used by both sides in the Vietnam conflict [such as Ho Chi Minh] So Vietnamese are always taking sides. And I am the one that’s not taking sides. I try to find a grey area in between the red and yellow.”³⁹⁴ Thus, according to Doan, the purpose of his photograph is to merely present Ho as a human being to his audience, softening his image without necessarily supporting or denying his political ideology. Yet, by using such an iconic image of one who is so controversial could easily be misconstrued by many in the Vietnamese American community as another political agenda of Doan’s, or worse yet, as “communist propaganda.” Such a provocative image could only be attributed to Doan’s sense of not belonging and to his lack of allegiance to the diaspora.

Whether redefining a political figure as being neutral or portraying oneself as being omnipotent, Doan and Lê are using their own images to pose their respective senses of alienation and to acknowledge their lack of belonging. Regardless of the political or religious viewpoints

³⁹³ Brian Doan, email correspondence with the author, August 14, 2014.

³⁹⁴ Brian Doan interviewed by the Vilcek Foundation.

used in their photographs, both artists incorporate themselves into their images to overcome their feelings of displacement.

In a second comparison of the self-portraits by Doan and Lê, the different perspectives of politics versus religion between the two men continue. The photo-tapestry that probably best exemplifies Lê's feelings of ambivalence and reflects his fractured personae is the extraordinary *Interconfined* (Figure 4.8) from 1994. In this fifty-five by thirty-nine inch piece, Lê weaves himself in between an image of a Thai sculpture of Buddha on the left, and that of a Flemish rendering of Christ on the right. The Buddha appears to be a bronze sculpture in royal attire and from Thailand's Ayutthaya period (between the 17th and 18th centuries).³⁹⁵ The Christ image is appropriated from *Christ Bearing the Cross; The Resurrection*, an oil painting by



Figure 4.8 Dinh Q. Lê, *Interconfined*, from the series *Portraying a White God*, 1994, photo-tapestry, 55 by 39 inches.

³⁹⁵ Pratima: Fine Buddhist Art Contemporary Southeast Asia. <http://pratima13.blogspot.com/2011/05/thai-bronze-standing-crown-buddha.html>. Accessed 20 August, 2014.

Netherlander Gerard David (d. 1523), who “painted with meticulous care in an archaic style.”³⁹⁶ *Christ Bearing the Cross* was completed circa 1500 and is housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Lê’s *Interconfined* is a vertical work that is stylistically unique among his weavings. In it, Lê wove solely in the center section of the image where he himself stands. Lê’s hands appear to be interlocked at the center of the image, generating a feeling of intersection between all three figures, melding them together while creating a sense of visual ambiguity. As Lê moved outwards from the center, to either the depiction of Buddha on the left, or to the representation of Christ on the right, he gradually ceased the weaving process. As a result, neither the image of Buddha nor David’s Christ are completely fractured, and remain for the most part intact. With the highest number of weaves in the center, where Lê is pictured, which gradually dissipates as one moves away from him towards the other two icons, he is literally seen as the link between Buddhism and Christianity and, thus, between East and West.

Lê is seen hovering between the two conflicting worlds. In his book, *Going Home—Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, the renowned and venerable Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh, addresses this cultural and religious dilemma:

If you are a Christian, you feel that Jesus Christ is your home. It’s very comfortable to think of Jesus as your home. If you are a Buddhist, then it’s very nice to think of Buddha as your home. Your home is available in the here and the now. Christ is there, the Buddha is there. The practice is how to touch them, how to touch your home.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁶ Howard Hibbard, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980), 200-201, 206.

³⁹⁷ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Going Home—Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 42.

While Lê may have seen himself as the cultural bridge in *Interconfined*, it is unlikely that he has achieved the level of enlightenment of holy man Thích Nhất Hạnh, and his feelings of cultural ambivalence are communicated by the title of the piece.

Lê's great attention to detail in *Interconfined* is evidenced by his selection process. Lê is fully clothed in the work, with black trousers and a white long-sleeved shirt. For the image, he appropriated a representation of Christ from after the Resurrection, depicting a Christ that is covered from the waist down. His selection of a visually similar rendition of Buddha for the weaving reiterates Lê's diligence. Both Christ and Buddha are depicted as clothed from the waist down, each with bare torso and exposed navel. Both are in similar frontal stances, with each donning a cape and being barefooted. In recognizing all these similarities, one understands the significance of Lê's selection process of these particular representations and the cautiousness of his choices.

In addition, one cannot help but notice the close resemblances of the placement of hands in both icons: the right hands of both Buddha and Christ are extended outward, with fingers pointing upward. Specifically in the Buddha's case, the hand is making the *abhaya mudrā*, symbolizing "fearlessness."³⁹⁸ In David's Christ, the hand posture is indicative of a blessing motion, cupped with only the first two fingers extended upward. Lê's arms, in contrast, are down in front of him, and his hands appear to represent the Buddhist *dhyānamudrā*, symbolic of "concentration," visually creating a full circle that alludes to a sign of inner peace.

³⁹⁸ See E. Dale Saunders, *Mudrā: A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Sculptures* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1960), 3, 51, 80, 85. In Buddhism, *mudrās* are hand gestures that have iconographical indications. Some of the principle gestures are: *varamudrā* (where the palm of the hand is shown, but the extended fingers and thumb are pointing downward) symbolizing charity or fulfilling of the vow; *abhayamudrā* (where the palm of the hand is shown, with fingers and thumb extended upward) symbolizing absence of fear or reassurance; *bhūmispar'sa mudrā* (where the back of the hand is shown with the extended fingers and thumb pointing downward) symbolizing touching the ground or earth-touching; and *dhyānamudrā* (where the two hands are enfolded together and the thumbs touch) symbolizing concentration or meditation.

The three figures are lined up in ascending order from left to right: Buddha is the shortest, Lê in the center is of medium height, and Christ is the tallest. Lê, being from both cultures, East and West, falls in between and is seen, once again, as the link, bridging together not only religious and culture differences, but also physical differences. Catherine Maclay, art writer for San Jose's *Mercury News*, speaks of Lê's work and his weaving together of cultural gaps:

Although the United States has always been a nation of immigrants, each new wave of strangers has had to face the hostility of those who came before . . . has had the tricky task of unraveling threads of identity from old and new cultures. These threads have been rewoven, quite literally, in the images of Dinh Q. Le. . . . In 'Interconfined' (1994), Le has inserted his own photograph between representations of Jesus and Buddha by cutting each into strips that have been integrated as a single fabric with contrasting warp and woof.³⁹⁹

Yet *Interconfined* is not just a bridging of religious doctrines, cultural gaps, and genetic make-ups; it is also an amalgamation of contradictions. Not only is this work a paradox because it speaks of East and West, Buddhism and Christianity, and Asian and Caucasian; it also exemplifies several other incongruities. One such opposition is the idea of the sacred and the profane, where Lê is using sanctified images of two religious idols and interweaving himself between them, either elevating his status to godliness or demoting the deities to mere mortals. Additionally, a refutation exists between the concepts of the personal versus the universal, where Lê's individual identity is conflictingly intermingled with widespread religious belief systems.

Lê admits that the work is not just neatly woven together, but is "forced" and cogently combined: "They're not blended like double exposures—one part of me comes forth and the Renaissance recedes back. And, for me, being Asian in America is like that: part of me is Asian

³⁹⁹ Catherine Maclay, "Who We Were, What We've Become," *Mercury News* (September 15, 1995): F64.

and part of me is American—it's just going back and forth between the two.”⁴⁰⁰ This is the ambivalent and difficult position that Lê has in common with many among the Vietnamese diaspora.

Through the work, he unravels the old *outsider* identity as an *other* and negotiates a new *insider* individuality, one that starts to bridge the two worlds of East and West. Of this series Lê states:

Portraying a White God is about my effort to establish my identity in relationship to the culture I have entered What does this Western culture mean to me, as someone from the outside coming in and adopting it? By placing myself among other mythologies and cultures within my images, I dissect the meanings of these constructs and create a new mythology that serves my own needs.⁴⁰¹



Figure 4.9 Brian Doan, *Being Madame Nhu*, 2009-12, archival ink jet print, micro pigment ink, and watercolor, 40 by 50 inches.

⁴⁰⁰ Lê, quoted in *ibid.*

⁴⁰¹ Lê, quoted in Michael Read and Steven Jenkins, eds., *Tracing Cultures* (San Francisco: The Friends of Photography, 1995), 48.

In reconstructing the religious images by interjecting himself into them, Lê turns the work into a statement regarding the ambiguity of his personal identity.

In contrast, Doan's 2009-12 work, *Being Madame Nhu* (Figure 4.9) is a more political photograph than Lê's religious *Interconfined*. Doan's image is a self-portrait playing the role of the late Vietnamese First Lady, Trần Thị Lệ Xuân (1924-2011). Married to Ngô Đình Nhu (1910-1963), the younger brother and chief advisor to President Ngô Đình Diệm (1901-1963), Trần was more popularly known as "Madame Nhu." Since the president was a lifelong bachelor and Ngô Đình Nhu's family resided with him at the Presidential Palace during his time in office, Madame Nhu became the de facto First Lady of South Việt Nam throughout the administration, from 1955 to 1963.

Madame Nhu was an assertive, abrasive, and controversial figure, which earned her the moniker, the "Dragon Lady." During the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, Madame Nhu played an important and influential role and was vocally outspoken against anyone who challenged her points of view. Famous for speaking her mind and refusing to back down even to the detriment of the regime, she became a significant cause of its downfall.

Doan speaks of his decision to impersonate Madame Nhu, "She was [on] my father's side. I picked her because usually Madam Nhu was from South Vietnam but South Vietnamese people . . . didn't like her. She was a controversial image."⁴⁰² In the photograph, Doan is featured as Madame Nhu and does a convincing job of playing a pretty Asian female, dressed in a light colored traditional Vietnamese long dress, *áo dài*. Regarding the challenging experience of becoming the First Lady, he adds, "Basically about Madam Nhu . . . to walk like Madam Nhu, it was hard And then the way she was . . . [so] beautiful. I couldn't do that. So Phuoc, one

⁴⁰² Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

of my make-up artists, he helped me a lot [and told me], ‘I want you to walk like a beautiful first lady.’”⁴⁰³



Figure 4.19 Larry Burrows, *First Lady of Vietnam Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu firing a .38 pistol. Vietnam, June 1962.*

Doan’s photograph emulates Larry Burrows’ famous news photo of Madame Nhu firing a .38 pistol in June 1962 (Figure 4.10). In Doan’s image, however, with an outstretched arm she is presenting a lotus blossom towards the audience, as if giving a peace offering rather than brandishing a firearm. The lotus in her hand has a strong symbolic tie to the Buddhist religion but is ironic since it was Madame Nhu who vehemently ridiculed and derided the Buddhist demonstrations against the Diem’s administration. According to Doan, “I wish Madam Nhu didn’t hold a handgun, but [instead] she was holding a lotus, and the lotus was a representation for Buddhism. So she showed more compassion for another religion [Buddhism].”⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

In May 1963, the revered Thích Quảng Đức (1897-1963) immolated himself at a busy intersection in Saigon out of protest against Diem's Catholic regime and its persecution of Buddhism. The event was a momentous incident that shifted the trajectory of South Việt Nam's history and greatly altered the general Western perception of the war.⁴⁰⁵ At the time of Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation, Madame Nhu callously called it a "barbecue."⁴⁰⁶ According to American reporter David Halberstam, who had interviewed the First Lady after the incident, "If there was another suicide, even if there were another thirty, Madame Nhu said she would clap her hands in delight."⁴⁰⁷

In the months that followed, several other monks also followed their leader's example and martyred themselves in political pyres to continue the protest against President Diem's persecution of the Buddhists, eventually leading to the coup d'état and assassination of Diem in November 1963, ending the regime. Many, including U.S. President John F. Kennedy, blamed Madame Nhu and her outspoken antagonism for the regime's downfall, stating, "That goddamn bitch. She's responsible for the death of that kind man [Diem]. You know, it's so totally unnecessary to have that kind man die because that bitch stuck her nose in and boiled up the whole situation down there."⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁵ Trần Mai Hương, ed., "Vietnam Remembers Buddhist Monk's Self-Immolation," *Việt Nam News, Online Edition* (May 23, 2003): unpaginated. Thích Quảng Đức was born in 1897 in the central coastal province of Khánh Hòa and turned to Buddhism at the age of 15. In 1963, when the struggle for national independence and the issue of reunification were raging across the country, he became the head of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha Congregation (VBSC)'s Ritual Division.

⁴⁰⁶ Madame Nhu, quoted in Monique Brinson Demery, *Finding the Dragon Lady: The Mystery of Vietnam's Madame Nhu* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), 162.

⁴⁰⁷ David Halberstam, quoted in *ibid.*, 163.

⁴⁰⁸ John F. Kennedy, quoted in *ibid.*, 210.

Despite her well-known temperament, Doan's purpose in depicting the lady here is to soften her image for the audience. To the far left of Doan's photograph, he paints a beautiful peafowl to represent Madame Nhu, redefining the lady as a more serene and compassionate person. He describes his own personal experience while trying to fill her shoes, with initial feelings of disdain towards the woman, "I was living like her, thinking like her. I loved it. [But] I realized not liking her. I didn't like what she said . . . [regarding] Buddhism, I didn't like what she said to other people, I didn't like her attitude. She was too arrogant . . ." ⁴⁰⁹ Yet, Doan confesses that after portraying her, some of his original hostility towards the former First Lady dissipated:

From my perspective, I didn't like her until I performed that role. And I can see [why] many people in that time [did not like her]. . . . I would have acted differently. But I can more understand her. And then after that, when her family was killed, she's been very quiet and withdrawn from society and became a different person. I think she [has] paid enough for her life. ⁴¹⁰

In reclassifying Madame Nhu, Doan presents her as a more gentle individual. He speaks of having a better understanding of who Madame Nhu was, "You look at my self-portrait as Madam Nhu, and you [can] listen to [the] conversations between me and her. I talked to her and she answered in my image So the project help[ed] me to work through the person that I liked or disliked, the person I loved or hated . . ." ⁴¹¹ By working through his mixed feelings for this controversial political figure, Doan is able to present her as a more tolerable individual and in a more positive perspective.

⁴⁰⁹ Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

It seems that in dressing as other, famous, political figures, Doan tends to choose the most controversial and well-known individuals. Regardless if it is Madame Nhu or Uncle Ho, he “softens” them, picturing Ho with birds and Nhu with a lotus blossom. Conservatives from within the Vietnamese American community in Westminster may still misinterpret these controversial images as propaganda. While these photographs may be Doan’s exploration of his identity, it is undeniable that they are about the identity of the famous political figures being portrayed.

Whether the self-portraits are politically focused, like Doan’s, or religiously inclined, like Lê’s, these photographs bring forth the artists’ issues of individual identity, and subsequently about the feeling of displacement in their adopted home in the United States. Due to their feelings of estrangement and not fitting in, these photographers employ their own images in the process of reinventing themselves as they overcome their feelings of displacement and alienation in the new country.

Việt Kiều: Lê’s Homecoming

In 1992 Lê made his first return to Việt Nam since departing the country as a refugee with his family. Over the course of the next several years he began spending more time in his native homeland, due to his persistent feelings of alienation and non-belonging in the United States. By the late 1990s he was living there on a full-time basis, only returning to the United States for exhibition commitments and family visits. Yet, his sense of alienation continued in

Việt Nam when he returned, since he was considered a *việt kiều*⁴¹² (a returning national who had left the homeland to live abroad) by many in Vietnamese society.

With the normalization of relations between the United States and Việt Nam in 1995 by then President Bill Clinton, many Vietnamese Americans began to return to Việt Nam regularly. In those early years, Vietnamese Americans were greeted with mixed emotions when they returned. The *việt kiều* label used against returning Vietnamese “foreigners” carried a negative stigma that insinuated their abandonment of the home country. Yet there was also a sense of welcoming their return since many of these *việt kiều*s had the financial and technical resources that could help the local economy. Over the years, these conflicting views have dissipated. Though the term *việt kiều* is still used in Việt Nam, it no longer carries the negative connotation of the early 1990s.

When Lê first returned, in addition to the *việt kiều* stigma, he also felt worried that he was going to face persecution by the communist government due to his partial Chinese heritage, particularly since Việt Nam and China have had a long turbulent history, which only became even more precarious after the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979. Lê spoke of the Vietnamese government’s maltreatment of those of Chinese descent at the time of the Sino-Vietnamese War:

At that time China invaded the north and then all those Chinese-Vietnamese loyalties were called into question and many of them were forced to leave the country. The Chinese-Vietnamese in the south, particularly in Saigon . . . I think . . . they were trying to get rid of the merchant class, what they called the ‘capitalists’ So that was the easy way to just basically either send them to . . . the new economic zones, which were the dead end . . . it’s a way to kind of get rid of them. Or if they have the money they . . . can buy their way. And the government allowed them to buy their way and they left the country that way.

⁴¹² See Đặng Chân Liâu, Lê Khả Kế, and Phạm Duy Trọng, eds., *Từ Điển Việt-Anh (Vietnamese-English Dictionary)* (Ho Chi Minh City, Việt Nam: Nhà Xuất Bản TP. Hồ Chí Minh, 2001), 816. *Việt kiều*, the combination of the term “*việt*” (for the country) and “*kiều*” (for Nguyễn Du’s heroine) is reserved in Việt Nam to identify specifically, “Overseas Vietnamese” or “Vietnamese national (living abroad).”

By the time of his return in the 1990s, however, the Vietnamese government had relaxed its persecution of its citizens with Chinese heritage. Yet, Lê was still looked upon with distrust as one who abandoned the country to live abroad. In a 2003 conversation, Lê's response regarding his feelings after living in Việt Nam for several years was to reiterate that he was still considered a "foreigner" by the government, a *việt kiều*.⁴¹³ Living in a postcolonial Việt Nam, Lê continued to be challenged by his hybrid identity, needing to work hard at becoming "Vietnamese" enough to truly be accepted by that culture and society.

Bao nhiêu năm rồi còn mãi ra đi.
Đi đâu loanh quanh cho đời mỗi mệ
Trên hai vai ta đôi vòng nhật nguyệt
Rời suốt trăm năm một cõi đi về

Trịnh Công Sơn, *Một Cõi Đi Về*⁴¹⁴

Một Cõi Đi Về: A Lifetime Returning Home

These are the opening lyrics from the song, *Một Cõi Đi Về* (A Lifetime Returning Home), written by Trịnh Công Sơn. A favorite of Lê's, the song is a symbolic metaphor not only for himself but also for the three to five million Vietnamese now "wandering" abroad, away from

⁴¹³ Lê, conversation with the author at San Francisco Camera Work on November 4, 2003.

⁴¹⁴ These are the opening lyrics from the song, *Một Cõi Đi Về* (A Lifetime Returning Home), written by the late Vietnamese composer, Trịnh Công Sơn (1939-2001). A favorite of Lê's, the song is a symbolic metaphor not only for himself but also for the three to five million Vietnamese now "wandering" abroad, away from the Motherland (*quê Mẹ*). See Trịnh Công Sơn, *Những Bài Ca Không Năm Tháng* (Timeless Songs) (Ho Chi Minh City, Việt Nam: Nhà Xuất Bản Âm Nhạc, 1998), 134. The Vietnamese lyrics above translate as:

So many years still on the move.
To wander, a weary existence
Overhead the sun and moon ceaselessly shine
A hundred years—a lifetime returning home

the Motherland (*quê mẹ*). Lê's first return to Việt Nam was in 1992, as a first effort of "looking for home" after spending nearly a quarter century in the United States.⁴¹⁵

At the outset, Lê found it difficult to function in Việt Nam because he had been away for so long and had become Americanized to some degree. These are the initial feelings he expressed in an interview with Joanne Silver of the *Boston Herald* in 1994, after his first return, ". . . the notion of home is not what I think. I am to a certain extent Americanized. I can't function in that culture [Vietnamese] anymore. I don't know what's home anymore—or if there is a home."⁴¹⁶ Yet this feeling of isolation and cultural shock did not stop Lê as he continued to make subsequent returns. "But I will go back this summer," he stated, "I don't know what I want to find there. It's not home, but it's comforting."⁴¹⁷ Vietnamese photographer Trần Cao Lĩnh in his book, *Vietnam—Mon Pays De Toujours (Vietnam—My Country Forever)*, speaks of the idea of "nostalgia" for those who are forced away from their home: "L'exil avive la nostalgie."⁴¹⁸

Perhaps Trần is correct, that it is not so much the idea of "home," but rather the location, the "place" that helps to identify what *home* is. In this transitioning global community, many such as Lê have left their birth country to wander abroad in search of new opportunities and better lives. Consequently, one's *place* of birth and *place* of origin have slowly lost significance:

⁴¹⁵ Lê, quoted in Joanne Silver, "East and West Woven into Art," *The Boston Herald*, (16 February, 1994): 32.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Trần Cao Lĩnh, *Vietnam—Mon Pays De Toujours (Vietnam—My Country Forever)* (Gif sur Yvette, France: Aide à l'Enfance du Vietnam, 1988), 12. The French quotation translates as: "Nostalgia is almost an essential concomitant of exile."

Place has become radically contingent. The world becomes ‘de-placed,’ and each of us is displaced.

And this, I suggest, is where we find ourselves: Not knowing or having a place in nature, in the city, or in history, and finding our ‘vocation’ at least ambiguous, we are a rootless, restless, placeless people—seeking with increasing desperation a place which, however tentatively, shall be ours.⁴¹⁹

Regarding Lê’s work, critic Rachel Adams states, “Nostalgia is ever-present in the exhibition, and while Lê’s approach is perhaps a bit too sentimental, there is a critical undercurrent of how unrest, however that is defined, can be so affecting on an individual or an entire population.”⁴²⁰

For several years after 1994, Lê returned to Việt Nam annually where he rediscovered a way to exist in that culture. By 1998 he was in Việt Nam for six to nine months of the year, “coming back to the United States only for exhibition commitments and family visits.”⁴²¹ When I visited Lê in Việt Nam in June 2002, he expressed to me, “This is where my roots are. And this is where I find my inspiration [for my work].”⁴²²

Understandably, however, not all of the American-ness in Lê has left him. Although he may feel his roots and find his inspiration in Việt Nam, Lê has expressed some sentiment of isolation, especially in the art circle, while living in his birthplace. “I have few Vietnamese friends here who are artists. Most of my close friends [in Vietnam] are not artists.”⁴²³ It is true that he has built long-term relationships in cyberspace with the likes of art historian and critic

⁴¹⁹ W. H. Poteat, “Persons and Places: Paradigms in Communication,” in James Waddell and F.W. Dillistone, eds., *Art and Religion as Communication* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 194.

⁴²⁰ Rachel Adams, “Review: Dinh Q. Lê at Rice University Art Gallery,” *Modern Painters* (June 7, 2014). <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1042825/review-dinh-q-le-at-rice-university-art-gallery>. Accessed August 14, 2014.

⁴²¹ Dinh Q. Lê, *From Vietnam to Hollywood*, (Seattle: Marquand Books, 2003), 46.

⁴²² Lê, interview with author in Ho Chi Minh City, Việt Nam, June 2002.

⁴²³ Ibid.

Moira Roth, allowing for the joint creation of the manuscript *Obdurate History*. Yet the absence of his family and friends, who are in the United States, have led Lê to occasionally have feelings of anxiety and symptoms of cultural withdrawal or as he aptly expresses, “cabin fever,” after prolonged periods in Việt Nam.

In Ho Chi Minh City, Lê has been searching through numerous secondhand stores over the years in the hope of finding some of the photo albums abandoned by his family when they escaped from Việt Nam.⁴²⁴ After looking at thousands of photographs and realizing that their

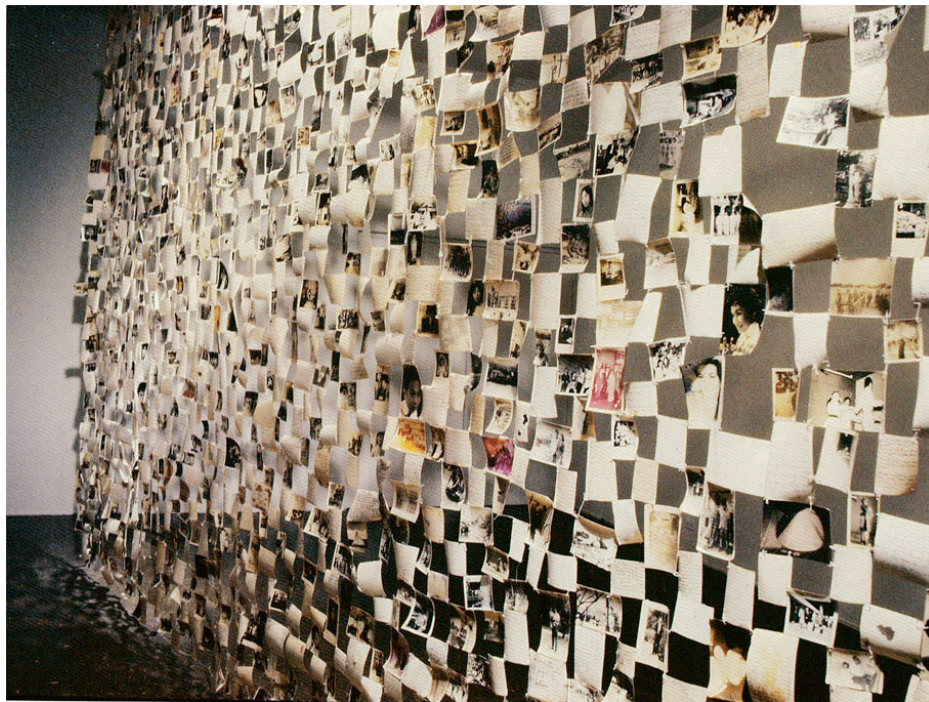


Figure 4.11 Dinh Q. Lê, *Một Đời Đi Về* (*A Lifetime Returning Home*), installation at Montgomery Gallery, Pomona College, Claremont, California, March 4-April 9, 2000. Found black-and-white and color photographs, thread, and linen tape, 10 by 20 feet.

owners also had to abandon them in their attempts to escape Việt Nam, Lê began to buy these photo albums. Soon he had amassed a huge collection of old photographs, mainly from prior to

⁴²⁴ Rebecca McGrew, *True Journey is Return* (Pomona, California: Montgomery Gallery, Pomona College, 2000), 3.

1975. “Lê bought thousands of old family photo albums,”⁴²⁵ shares Rebecca McGrew of the Montgomery Gallery at Pomona College.

In 2000, a number of these images were used in the quilt-like installation piece, *Một Cõi Di Vê* (Figure 4.11), at the Montgomery Gallery. The site-specific work was hung as a giant yet delicate wall of images in the center of the gallery, where the audience could circumnavigate the work and view both sides, getting a glimpse into some of the more intimate “lost” memories of Vietnamese citizens. Inscribed on the back of these old photographs was text from Nguyễn Du’s *The Tale of Kiều*, excerpts of interviews from James Freeman’s *Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lives*, and segments of actual letters between soldiers and their wives during the Vietnam War.⁴²⁶ The work became a rare survival of history from wartime Việt Nam, not desecrated by the new communist regime. In an email correspondence to Roth in February 2000, Lê describes the work:

I just finished a giant piece of work. It measures 3 meters high by 6 meters wide. The piece consists of about 1,500 black-and-white photographs that I bought here at secondhand stores. Initially, I was interested in finding my family’s photographs that we were forced to leave behind when we escaped from Vietnam. Sifting through these old photographs, I was hoping that one day I would find some of ours. Along the way, I realized these photographs are in a way my family’s photographs. These people also were probably forced to abandon memories of their lives, because either they did not survive the war or they had escaped from Vietnam.⁴²⁷

In a sense these “found” photographs have become a surrogate family for Lê as many of them have become a part of his repertoire and are frequently recycled into his photo-tapestries.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁴²⁷ Lê, quoted in Moira Roth, “Of Memory and History,” in Dinh Q. Lê, *From Vietnam to Hollywood*, (Seattle: Marquand Books, 2003), 9.

Since the completion of this work Lê has been spending the majority of his time in Việt Nam and feels increasingly more like a “Vietnamese.” In another email to Roth in March 2003, Lê stated, “These days, I see myself as Vietnamese, no longer as Vietnamese-American. Unfortunately, the Vietnamese government still sees me as a foreigner.”⁴²⁸ This does not impede Lê’s comfort in being in Việt Nam:

But I love being in Vietnam. I feel so much more at home there than I ever did in America. The people there are really the source of my inspiration. Their will to struggle every day to survive, to rebuild, to move forward is an amazing thing to see. I don’t think I would do the same work today if I were still living in America.⁴²⁹

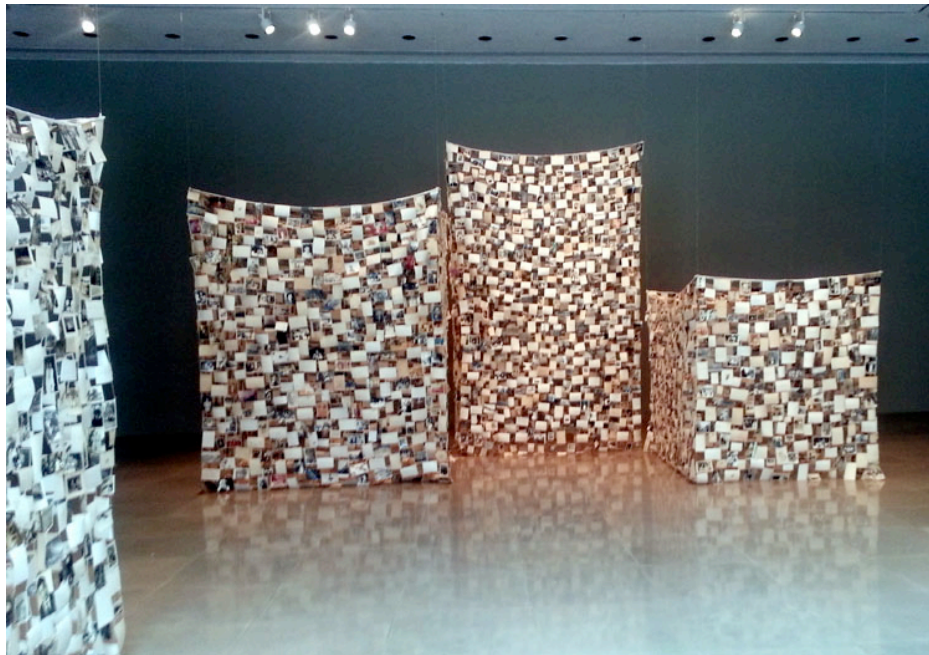


Figure 4,11 Dinh Q. Lê, *Crossing the Farther Shore*, installation at The Rice University Art Gallery, Houston, Texas, April 10-August 28, 2014. Found black-and-white and color photographs, thread, and linen tape.

Indeed, the project is a work in progress and continues to grow as Lê persists in gathering and acquiring old “family photographs” when he visits the local antique stores of Việt Nam. In a

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

recent 2014 exhibit at The Rice University Art Gallery in Houston, Texas, Lê was commissioned to create the installation, *Crossing the Farther Shore* (Figure 4.12). He used the same concept of stringing together the images he had gathered over the years to continue the work begun in 2000.

Yet, the work differs from the installation at Pomona College in that the project is now an assemblage consisting of thousands of images that comes together as seven three-dimensional squares and rectangles within the gallery space. Of the newer work Lê states, “It’s a new work, but it’s a continuation of a previous work I did around 1999-2000. I have been thinking about that piece over the years and how to expand it — make it more sculptural.”⁴³⁰ In addition, Lê has added narratives belonging to the Vietnamese diaspora onto images that do not have any writing on them, bringing the discourse in the work beyond 1975 and into current time, “Some of the photographs come with existing notes. Most of the time there are dates, locations and names of the people in the photographs. And then there are photographs that have no written notes whatsoever, and we don’t know where they come from. So, what I did for this work was [add] narratives of Vietnamese overseas. . . .”⁴³¹

Noticeably different from Lê’s 2000 installation at the Montgomery gallery, his work at The Rice University Art Gallery is no longer a mere wall of stringed images that separate the center of the room. Instead it has grown to occupy much of the gallery space, becoming multiple three-dimensional sculptures that grow out of different locations within the gallery walls. There is no one particular point that represents a beginning of the installation. The sculptural quality of the pieces allows viewer to experience the delicate combination of the thousands of found

⁴³⁰ Lê, quoted in Sophie Newman, “Rice Gallery Commission New Artist,” *The Rice Thresher* (April 9, 2014). http://www.ricethresher.org/arts_and_entertainment/article_2c43996a-c023-11e3-bc40-0017a43b2370.html. Accessed August 14, 2014.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

images and also to view them as metaphoric sculptures of history. In a review of *Crossing the Farther Shore*, Ellyn Ruddick-Sunstein describes the installation as irregular and nonlinear, thereby giving the audience the freedom to navigate through the cavities of space and the fissures in time, “By stringing together the words and images in uneven layers, the artist leaves gaps, allowing our eyes to penetrate and wander through the structures. Unbound to a linear narrative, our gaze is free to scan these forgotten moments, to make meaning from both their connections and their contradictions.”⁴³²

According to The Rice University Art Gallery website, *Crossing the Farther Shore* is inspired by and dedicated to Lê’s mother and her friends.⁴³³ Lê further adds, “The older generation, particularly my mom’s generation, migrated to America, lived in America, but their heart was still in Vietnam. Even though they are here, they are divided. They are neither here nor there. They are constantly crossing but they never arrive.”⁴³⁴ The feelings of displacement and alienation that Lê continually struggled with while living in the United States are commonly shared by his mother and many of that generation within the diaspora.

It is highly unlikely that these works have shown in Việt Nam since they have little significance for the people there, besides being stringed photographs of fellow Vietnamese. The fact that they were abandoned would further minimize the importance of the images. In contrast, Lê’s installations would have very different meanings for viewers in the United States. To the

⁴³² Ellyn Ruddick-Sunstein, “Long Lost Images from the Vietnam War Made into Powerful Installation,” *Feature Shoot* (June 10, 2014). <http://www.featureshoot.com/2014/06/long-lost-images-from-the-vietnam-war-made-into-powerful-installation/>. Accessed August 14, 2014.

⁴³³ “Dinh Q. Lê: Crossing the Farther Shore.” <http://www.ricegallery.org/new/exhibition/crossingthefarthershore.html>. Accessed August 14, 2014.

⁴³⁴ Lê, quoted in Sophie Newman, “Rice Gallery Commission New Artist,” *The Rice Thresher* (April 9, 2014). http://www.ricethresher.org/arts_and_entertainment/article_2c43996a-c023-11e3-bc40-0017a43b2370.html. Accessed August 14, 2014.

general audience and to students at Pomona College or Rice University, the photographs are likely interesting pieces of history, concrete reminder of the United States' involvement in an unpopular war at a distant location. To some they may even invoke nostalgia and melancholia.

To the Vietnamese Americans living in the United States, such as Lê's mother and her generation, the recognition of these lost mementos, which were abandoned by their owners in the rush to flee from the homeland, is a sure emotional tug at the heartstrings. The possibility of former owners seeing their lost images would result in tremendously poignant moments, bringing back mixed feelings of happiness, sorrow, and a longing for the lost homeland.

Even a return to the motherland does not ensure a cessation to those feelings or guarantee the finding of "home," as demonstrated by Lê and his return to Việt Nam. Perhaps Lê may never truly find "home," spending a lifetime searching for that elusive place that does not exist for many (except in their mind and heart), *một cõi đi về*. His complex installations become more than Lê working out his own conflicted identity; they reflect the broader search for "home" or "place" amidst the slippage of identity that characterizes the tapestry of the contemporary hybrid age.

The Appropriation of Eddie Adam's Image

The Vietnam War era was a turbulent time for the United States and was the first modern war in which television and the media played an integral role in bringing the conflict into America's homes. Among the most iconic images of the war was Eddie Adams' news photograph depicting the execution of a captured Viet Cong prisoner by police chief general Nguyen Ngoc Loan (1930-1998) during the Tet Offensive of 1968 (Figure 4.13). The potent image has been appropriated by both Lê and Doan for their



Figure 4.13 Eddie Addams, General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan executing Viet Cong prisoner, Nguyễn Văn Lém, on a Saigon street on February 1, 1968, during the Tet Offensive.

work. A comparison between the two interpretations provides an insight into the differing attitudes between the two artists: Lê revisits the conflict and comments on Hollywood's interpretation of the war whereas Doan appropriates the image to forgive and move on.

Eddie Adams (1933-2004) was awarded the 1969 Pulitzer Prize in photo-journalism for the powerful image. At the time, his photograph made significant influence on the mindset of Americans regarding the war in Southeast Asia, fueling the anti-war movement. The impact of the photograph depicting “. . . the summary execution of a Vietcong prisoner led to intense and diverse reactions. There were massive riots and peace marches. Many people refused to fight the war and others volunteered to fight all the harder. Photographs, along with the emerging medium of television, helped to change opinions and reorient perspectives.”⁴³⁵

⁴³⁵ Fred Ritchin, “The Unbearable Relevance of Photography,” *Aperture* (Number 171—Summer 2003): 64. Adams's photograph has become an iconic symbol of the Vietnam debacle and is a constant in Lê's lexicon of visual images. It was also an inspiration for Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura in his 1991 work, *Slaughter Cabinet*.

Adams later admitted that he was saddened by its power, saying that he felt remorseful of how, as a war icon, the photograph had negatively painted General Nguyen, damaging his reputation. In a 1998 eulogy for Nguyen, Adams stated:

The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world. People believe them, but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths. What the photograph didn't say was, "What would you do if you were the general at that time and place on that hot day, and you caught the so-called bad guy after he blew away one, two or three American soldiers?"⁴³⁶

Understandably the general was under difficult circumstances on that sweltering day during the Tet Offensive, when a coordinated military operation launched by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army caught the United States and the armed forces of South Việt Nam by surprise, resulting in the casualty of thousands, both military and civilian.

Nguyen's action, eternalized by Adams' camera shutter, proves to have a lasting impact even decades after the incident. Lê's appropriation of this image for several of his photo-weavings, in his 2002-3 series *From Vietnam to Hollywood*, was used to address the interpretation of the Vietnam War by Hollywood. In many of the filmic interpretations of the Vietnam War by Hollywood producers and the movie industry there was often a glorified and biased component contrasting to actual wartime documentations and news footage. Oftentimes the lens of cinematic Hollywood creates heroic but surreal/unreal interpretations of the war.

Lê's 2002 photo-tapestry, *Russian Roulette* (Figure 4.14), combines Adams' news photograph with a series of film stills from Michael Cimino's 1978 film, *The Deer Hunter*. Even though appropriation of found images has often been a standard procedure in Lê's repertoire, in this particular work he began to digitize the images before weaving them together. Lê slows

⁴³⁶ Eddie Adams, quoted in "Eulogy: General Nguyen Ngoc Loan," *Time Magazine* (July 27, 1998): 19.

down the film by freezing and showing the different frames from Cimino's motion picture and providing the audience with an apparent moment-by-moment replay. The character portrayal of American soldier, Steve, played by John Savage, has him holding a gun to his head as he is forced to play Russian roulette by his North Vietnamese captors. The result of Lê's digitization is that one sees the stages of anxiety that Steve goes through when he pulls the trigger and the

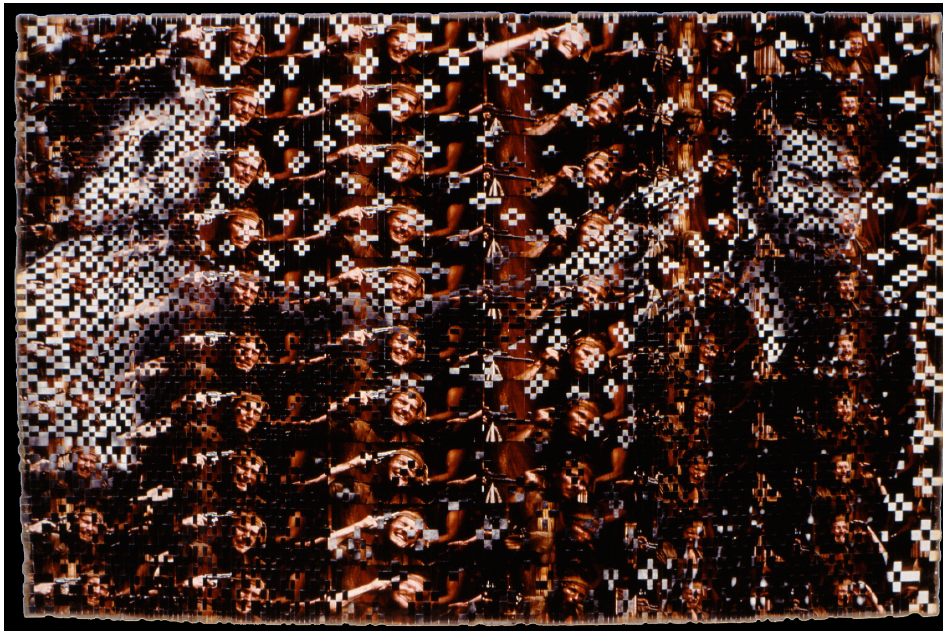


Figure 4.13 Dinh Q. Lê, *Russian Roulette*, from the series *From Vietnam to Hollywood*, 2002, photo-tapestry, 39 1/2 by 59 1/2 inches.

gun goes off. The dark colors from Cimino's formidable scene become a stark contrast to Adams' black-and-white photograph of the violent execution. Through his weaving process, Lê hides the background in Adams' image, highlighting only the figures of General Nguyen and the Viet Cong prisoner. The result is a visual fluctuation between Cimino's film stills and Adams' news photograph, each vying for the audience's attention whilst simultaneously reflecting each

other's similarity in composition. In the end, however, Cimino's film sequence, with all of its vibrant colors and clarity, appears to veil the news photo.

Visible in this work is the mechanics of reality versus Hollywood. Even when dealing with the gruesome subjects of war and death, actual events have difficulty in competing with the dramatic and fanciful special effects of the film industry. The actual war footage of a live execution of a human being is overpowered by Cimino's fictitious characterization from Hollywood. Of Lê's *From Vietnam to Hollywood* series, Gary Hesse, Associate Director of New York gallery, Light Work, states:

The images from Hollywood's interpretation of the Vietnam War are interwoven with images from the war taken from newspapers, books, and historical archives. While Hollywood film makers would use many of these same images as blueprint, their stylized representations of the war would stretch from the hyper-real to the surreal, producing a new kind of memory which Lê would suggest is 'neither fact nor fiction.'⁴³⁷

Though Hollywood's renditions of the Vietnam War are based on "neither fact nor fiction," Lê's weaving also has transgressed substantially from its original sources, Adams' news photograph and Cimino's film stills. Lê's title of the piece, *Russian Roulette*, not only describes the actual scene from *The Deer Hunter*, where actor John Savage is seen playing Russian roulette and is nearly killed in the film, but also suggests that the outcome of the unpopular Vietnam War was an uncertainty for American during its participation in the conflict. Woven with clear expertise and precision, Lê creates a dramatic composition that simultaneously highlights and distorts the original images.

Lê speaks of learning the weaving process from an aunt and of the experience he gained from her in his youth: "My aunt used to do grass-mat weaving, and when I was young I used to

⁴³⁷ Gary Hesse, "Dinh Q. Lê—Artist-in-Residence," *Contact Sheet* (Number 112), 42.

watch her and just learned how to do it over the years.”⁴³⁸ In applying the weaves to his work, however, Lê has developed a new hybrid form of weaving that is unique. No longer merely using the grass-mat weaving craft of Vietnam, he has practiced and mastered his own inimitable style, “I’ve been doing it for so long that I have a pretty accurate sense of what it will look like. There are tricks in the weaving process to bring certain aspects out and keep others hidden.”⁴³⁹ Though it is true that the tradition he is tapping into was his aunt’s grass-mat weaving, the looseness and flexibility of his craft is not that of the regimented method practiced by his aunt. Lê himself admitted to me during the visit that, “My work is actually very forgiving. If there is a flaw in the picture I can hide it easily with a weave.”⁴⁴⁰

Lê has managed to combine a traditional “low craft” from his own Vietnamese heritage with the Western art of photography to create pieces of “high art.”⁴⁴¹ His weaving decisions are made not by an inflexible protocol demanded by the craft, but rather by the artistic license based on Lê’s own intentions in his work. This is clearly demonstrated by his own admission:

When I went back to Vietnam, I asked my aunt and others to work with me on the weaving. They couldn’t do it because the weaving I do is completely different now from how they do it. They work with fairly rigid patterns whereas my patterns are based on the images, on what I want to come through. They couldn’t work that way. I gave up after a while. It would have been interesting to have that input, but it just didn’t work.⁴⁴²

⁴³⁸ Lê, interviewed by deSouza, 6.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Interview with Lê in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, June 2002.

⁴⁴¹ Lê’s work is readily accepted in the art community and his images are collected in prestigious private collections and museums across the United States, including Goldman Sachs and Company, The Ford Foundation, The Norton Family Foundation, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and The Bronx Museum.

⁴⁴² Lê, interviewed by deSouza, 7.

Though at first glance the weaving appears to be a large part of the originality and uniqueness of Lê's work, his images are content and concept driven and are more about the underlying ideas than about the craft required to execute the pieces.



Figure 4.15 Brian Doan, *Being Nguyen Ngoc Loan*, 2009-13, archival ink jet print, micro pigment ink, and watercolor, 40 by 50 inches.

In contrast to Lê's photo-weaving with its complex visual quality, Doan's 2009-13 image, *Being Nguyen Ngoc Loan* (Figure 4.15), is a close mimic of Adams' actual news image. In the forty by fifty inch photograph, Doan plays the part of General Nguyen while an unknown assistant portrays the captured Viet Cong officer. Much of Doan's photograph is a copy of Adams' original, where Doan and his assistant are in similar poses and clothing; Doan is in a single-colored uniform with his back to the camera, with the person playing the Viet Cong in a checkered plaid shirt and dark trousers, wincing at the impending moment of death. Since the Saigon cityscape in Adams' image was unidentifiable and not of relative importance, Doan merely sketches a few buildings as a background for his own impression.

The critical change that he brings to the photograph is the action of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan. Instead of brandishing a firearm and executing the prisoner, Nguyen is seen pouring water into a canteen for the man, in a gesture of goodwill and absolution. Again Doan chooses a controversial figure and softens him. He speaks of his work as a more tolerant and forgiving interpretation, where “Mr. Loan [General Nguyen], instead of shooting the prisoner, he offered him water to convince that guy, even a bad guy, ‘Here, you killed my family but here’s the water, take it!’”⁴⁴³

Doan’s image is evidently a benevolent one, showing General Nguyen as a more compassionate and forgiving individual, providing water as a mediator of peace rather than a bullet as an executioner. In his artist statement regarding the work, Doan states that he blends wit and clemency to absolve his subjects, “In much of my work, reality and the dream state exist simultaneously, I choose elements of history, appropriate and manipulate them, and recontextualize images of iconic individuals with a sense of humor and forgiveness.”⁴⁴⁴ He adds that the Vietnamese people hold onto too much of their grief and must learn to forgive, “Maybe that change, that humbleness maybe [it could] change the enemy. . . . Vietnamese . . . we’re just so upset and so trapped that we forget who we are. So it’s the time to look back.”⁴⁴⁵

Although Doan’s message has good intent, many, particularly those in the diaspora, could see his work as being created by a communist sympathizer. Misinterpreted, it could bring about protest and create further rifts between Doan and the community. In contrast to Lê’s war commentary work or his religious weavings, where the messages are visibly about displacement

⁴⁴³ Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

⁴⁴⁴ Brian Doan, “Artist Statement,” in *Hôme Hôme Hôme* (New York: Vilcek Foundation), 5.

⁴⁴⁵ Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

and disaffection, Doan's political photographs, however, tend to be more ambiguous and inflammatory. It is ironic that Doan's images, which seek to turn violent and controversial figures into benevolent ones could, nonetheless, be misconstrued and create forceful reactions. Doan's images of iconic figures, even though reflecting his own sense of alienation, they border on an antagonism which, at the least, seeks to promote discourse that often leads to controversy.

The word "home" resonates on cultural, emotional, intellectual, religious, philosophical, political and spiritual levels—as a place, a space, a myth, a source of identity, a promised land, a state of being, a war zone, an impossibility, and/or an inalienable right. This simple word is open to a wide variety of interpretations. Home can connote security, belonging, memory, and comfort, or arouse feelings of dread, alienation, and pain. Home informs and is informed by geography and history, identities and ideologies, imagined and lived experience.

Hôme, The Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association⁴⁴⁶

Hôme, Hôme, Hôme

For Doan's exhibition, *Hôme, Hôme, Hôme*, held at the Vilcek Foundation in New York, between September 14 and November 11, 2013, Doan states that the work was created as a response to the protests by the Vietnamese American community in Santa Ana in 2009, "It was my reaction to [the protests] . . . it was kind of my manifesto about who I am. . . . So my work exhibits [combined] layers of my biographical and also of the [Vietnamese] national history."⁴⁴⁷ In addition, his artist statement confirms that the work is about his feelings of displacement and his continued search for home, "When the war ended and my family was forced to leave, I began

⁴⁴⁶ The Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association (VAALA). The above description of *Hôme* came from VAALA's open call for artist submissions to its recent art exhibition, held between July 5 and 26, 2014, together with the Orange County Center for Contemporary Art (OCCCA) in their Santa Ana, California galleries.

⁴⁴⁷ Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

and anger. However, I cannot let ideology control my thoughts. My art is a space to investigate self-identity.”⁴⁵³

One of Doan’s more ambiguous works in the *Hôme, Hôme, Hôme* exhibit is a sculptural piece entitled, *Opaque Translucency and Lustrous Opacity* (2013) (Figure 4.17). The work consists of seven near life-size dark busts of Doan from the waist up, all of which are connected by a single large common triangular base. Yet, each figure is facing in different directions,



Figure 4.17 Brian Doan, *Opaque Translucency & Lustrous Opacity*, installation at Vilcek Foundation, New York, 14 September-9 October, 2013. Glass, fiberglass, acrylic paint, graphite, plywood, formica, and LED light bulb.

⁴⁵³ Brian Doan, “Artist Statement,” in *Hôme Hôme Hôme* (New York: Vilcek Foundation), 5.

sometimes inward and other times outward to the audience. At one point of the triangular base, two of the busts are facing each other, as if Doan is having a conversation with himself. At another point, two busts are placed back to back, to suggest that they cannot see each other. Toward the center of the platform two more models are in semi-conversation as they partially face each other. At the third point of the base, presumably the front of the installation, the single remaining figure of Doan faces forward, to the viewer. These busts are identical, in each case Doan is bald, dressed in the *Zhongshan* suit (Mao suit), with his arms to his sides and his eyes closed. Made of glass, fiberglass, acrylic paint, graphite plywood, and formica, the whole work appears to have a shimmering sheen to it, hence, is called *Opaque Translucency and Lustrous Opacity*. Perhaps as the title suggests, the work is about contradictions, where one might argue that Doan is about as opaque as he is translucent. Viet Le comments on the busts as representations of Doan as “meditative, alienated, and distant . . . [as if] of the Buddha in his inward gaze.”⁴⁵⁴

Furthermore, Doan’s decision to employ the communist flag of Việt Nam as the catalogue cover for the exhibition (Figure 4.18) is simultaneously a puzzle and a surprise, particularly since Doan has repeatedly denied his affiliation with the communist regime. The catalogue is a bright red color. On the front cover is a cut-out in the shape of a star, which allows one of Doan’s countenances from the *Opaque Translucency and Lustrous Opacity* work to be visible. This iconic communist symbol, previously seen as a t-shirt on his female subject in the 2008 photograph, *Thu Duc, Viet Nam*, was the reason for the protests in Little Saigon. Here it appears again in Doan’s work, employed as the full cover for the exhibition catalogue. As if to ensure the lack of ambiguity, on the back cover a small but bright yellow star is placed toward

⁴⁵⁴ Viet Le, 9 and 13.



Figure 4.18 Brian Doan, *Hôme Hôme Hôme* catalog cover at Vilcek Foundation in New York, 2013.

the center of the page, undeniably completing the communist nation state symbol. The use of the Vietnamese communist flag is clearly a provocative gesture. Rather than repressing that part of his profile, Doan's employment of the symbol acknowledges his life under the communist regime prior to his immigration to the United States.

Although Doan kept his 2009 promise to elder Nguyen from Orange County and did not exhibit the work in or near the Vietnamese American community, it appears that his work and his political stance are as opaque as they are translucent, inviting further miscommunication and increased notoriety. Regarding the exhibition, Doan writes, "My story is not about the life of a

Vietnamese person. It is about any citizen in this world who has witnessed conflict. My art is not just about the Vietnamese diaspora; it is about the journey of anyone looking for home.”⁴⁵⁵

Đứng giữa quê hương nghe mùi thơm đất mẹ.
Anh quyến luyến từng bụi cỏ bờ tre.
Kỷ niệm ấu thơ sống đầy trong trí ức,
Nói chặt thêm tình nơi cắt rốn chôn nhau.

Yên Lang, *Trở Về* (Return Home)⁴⁵⁶

Nationhood and Allegiance

The above lyrics from the Vietnamese operatic motet, *Trở Về* (Return Home), by the preeminent Vietnamese opera composer Yên Lang (1940 -)⁴⁵⁷ speaks of one’s home country and the permanent attachment one makes with it. In the last phrase, the words “*nơi cắt rốn chôn nhau*” have the literal translation as “the place of severing one’s umbilical cord and burying one’s ancestors” but is better understood as “one’s birthplace.” Dissected, the term implies the place of one’s origin, as well as where one returns to be buried, perhaps best understood in English as the place of one’s roots. Though today umbilical cords are no longer buried in Việt

⁴⁵⁵ Brian Doan, “Artist Statement,” in *Hôme Hôme Hôme* (New York: Vilcek Foundation), 5.

⁴⁵⁶ The above lyrics from Yên Lang’s aria, *Trở Về* (Return Home), translates as:

Standing in the heart of the countryside one smells the aromas of the motherland.
One feels deeply attached to each clump of grass and each river bank.
The childhood memories are embedded in one’s soul.
Bonding more tightly to one’s birthplace

⁴⁵⁷ Thanh Hiệp, “Yên Lang - soạn giả tài danh,” *Thanh Niên Online* (November 3, 2012). <http://www.thanhnien.com.vn/pages/20121103/yen-lang-soan-gia-tai-danh.aspx>. Accessed August 26, 2014. Yên Lang’s real name is Nguyễn Ngọc Thanh and he was born in Bạc Liêu, Southern Việt Nam. During the 1960s and 70s he was one of the most prolific composers, penning over thirty famous Vietnamese operas (*tuồng cải lương*), also known as “reformed theater,” and countless operatic-style motets (*bài tân cổ giao duyên*) which are the equivalent of stand-alone arias.

Nam, the symbolism of this ancient proverb demonstrates the durable connection that the Vietnamese people hold with their place of birth.

As members of the Vietnamese refugee community living in the United States, artists Doan and Lê are displaced people that were forced to leave their birthplaces and lived on foreign soil away from their motherland. Similarly, to many within the diaspora, there are often feelings of alienation and non-belonging. In many instances, the search for “home” becomes a continuous and elusive project. For Doan, who has now resettled in the United States for more than two decades, the search for “home” continues.

For Lê, his search for home has led him on a different path than Doan. Having arrived in the United States at the age of ten and growing up in this country, Lê continued to feel alienated, which led to a sense of not belonging to the culture. He stated, “I never felt at home in America. It was always temporary, somehow.”⁴⁵⁸ After the completion of his education, Lê began to make his way back to Việt Nam. His search for “home” initially left him feeling alienated there as well when he realized that the home country he left behind had changed significantly during his absence.

Today, after nearly two decades of living in Việt Nam, Lê is much closer to finding “home.” In a 2011 interview, he speaks of no longer feeling alienated. When asked if he still faces trouble re-assimilating into the Vietnamese society or its culture, Lê responded in the negative, “Not really. There aren’t those issues anymore with me. Challenges? Not really. I think there are gaps like some parts of history that I don’t know, but I’m learning all the time.”⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁸ Lê, interview with the author (Ho Chi Minh City, Việt Nam, July 31, 2011).

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

Lê adds that time is a factor that helps him as he incorporates himself back into Vietnamese society:

I just sort of work at it and it's not easy because I'm very Americanized on some level. So it takes a while to get used to the life here. It's a readjustment in some way to learn to be Vietnamese again. It took a while, but that deep sense of 'where I'm supposed to be' – that's what drew me here because deep down inside I know this is where I'm supposed to be.⁴⁶⁰

Arguably, one's success at finding "home" could be tied to a physical location, sense of nationhood, and feelings of allegiance. In his seminal text, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson speaks of the concept of the "nation" as an "imagined community," where an *invented* kinship is established between people unknown to each other, who may have shared *cultural roots* and/or similar *social experiences* that allows them to create and maintain intangible bonds of membership and strong senses of allegiance. Anderson defines the "nation" as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."⁴⁶¹ He states that the community is *imagined* because the participating citizens of the fraternity do not know each other, "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."⁴⁶² The bonds that are created in the name of nationhood are so powerful "that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings."⁴⁶³

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 7.

The *cultural roots* of one's heritage then become a critical part of one's identity and sense of belonging, helping to define one's individual identity and social make-up. For many of the Vietnamese American, particularly the elders living abroad, it then becomes a difficult and contentious subject when speaking of nationhood and one's allegiance, since the site of one's origin often is a critical part of one's identity. One's allegiance is arguably tied to one's birthplace. There are some that have spent many years in the United States and now feel a sense of hybridity in their identity. One Vietnamese American states, "We are Vietnamese but we are not Vietnamese. Living in a new country, we change and we don't even know it. Our thoughts are different and we don't even know it. Sometimes I try to deny that I am Americanized, but I have changed."⁴⁶⁴

Perhaps this reality of a hybrid identity was a contributing factor to Lê's fears. His concerns of losing his Vietnamese-ness may have contributed to his persistent feelings of non-belonging in the United States, which led to his eventual return to Việt Nam, where he now finds his sense of "home." Since returning to Việt Nam permanently, Lê artistic production has changed directions, reflecting post-bellum issues from that country's point of view:

I think when I was in America the work I was known for the most was *Portraying a White God*. At that time, living in America was also interesting because the identity politic issues were in the air. . . . That kind of perspective, when I was in America, my work was about myself in relation to America. And I think when I moved back to Vietnam I was looking at more of Vietnam histories and particularly the Vietnam War, so looking at Vietnam in relation to America but also war in relation to the world, to the history . . . the larger history, so I'm not so bound by America in a way.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶⁴ Tran Van Ngoc, quoted in Michael Omni, "Out of the Melting Pot and Into the Fire: Race Relations Policy," in Don T. Nakanishi, ed. *The State of Asian Pacific America: Policy Issues to the Year 2020* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1993), 202. (199-214).

⁴⁶⁵ Lê, interview with the author (Ho Chi Minh City, Việt Nam, July 31, 2011).

Lê's artistic repertoire since his return to Việt Nam has expanded considerably. Among his many bodies of work are: the photo-weaving series, *The Headless Buddha*, which deals with the Cambodian Killing Fields under the Khmer Rouge in the wake of the American withdrawal from the region; the sculptural series, *Damaged Genes*, which calls to attention the high rate of birth deformities in Việt Nam due to war toxin residuals, such as napalm and Agent Orange; and the photo series, *From Vietnam to Hollywood*, which questions Hollywood's filmic interpretation of the Vietnam War.

Additionally, in a 2012 curatorial project, *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Lê gathers the drawings and sketches of Vietcong soldiers from during the war, presenting an alternate perspective. Lê speaks of his interest in this series, "My interest in collecting these drawings, in part, is to understand the mind-set of these artists who participated in the war, on the Hanoi side, the Communist side. They were mainly nationalists, rather than Communists."⁴⁶⁶ It is evident that Lê's work has changed dramatically from his many years of living in Việt Nam.

Contrastingly, Doan's early life in Việt Nam and his continuous exposure to the communist propaganda prior to escaping to the United States may have allowed for the inclusion of many communist symbols in his art production. Doan, however, expresses a sense of ambivalence when speaking of allegiance, stating that he has no fidelity to either the former South Vietnamese flag or to the current communist flag. During a conversation between Doan and community elder Nguyen Tan Lac in 2009, the issue regarding the flags and their emblematic power was brought up. Doan's response was:

To me, that flag [the South Vietnam flag], perhaps the former soldiers of South Vietnam or my dad, or uncle Lac's generation consider it sacred. But I did not grow up under that

⁴⁶⁶ Lê, interviewed by Caroline Christov-Bakargiev, in *Dinh Q. Lê: dOCUMENTA (13)* (Ostfildern, Germany: Erschienen im Hatze Cantz Verlag, 2012), 4.

flag so it has little meaning to me. In addition, I think that flag represents a country that is no longer [in] existence, for a forgone power, for the fact that you cannot keep the country. When you've lost it, now it exists only in one's memory.⁴⁶⁷

Yet, Doan insists that he has no loyalty to the current communist flag of Việt Nam, despite having spent much of his teen years and early adulthood under that banner, “The communist flag does not have any meaning to me either. It does not represent me.”⁴⁶⁸ For a time, as he did interviews in Little Saigon, he was often asked, “So are you yellow or are you red?” His answer was that, “I’m gray.”⁴⁶⁹ Elder Nguyen’s respond to Doan’s point of view was one of great frustration, “I am very disappointed to see a Brian Doan who doesn’t know who he is: who doesn’t have any respect for this flag; a person who does not have any Vietnamese culture, no country, no people. I don’t know where he is from, . . .”⁴⁷⁰

Today, with his young children born and raised in the United States, Doan may yet find security and comfort in Southern California with his family, “. . . I’m just longing for home. And home is here, with my children coming home, and where I can plant a tree. But it took me a while, it took me a long time, in order to see that, I have to forgive.”⁴⁷¹ Perhaps once he has spent enough time in the United States he may find “home,” and a sense of allegiance to the flag of the United States, feeling “red, white, and blue.”

⁴⁶⁷ Brian Doan, “Nguyen Vu interviewed Brian Doan, Nguyen Tan Lac, Nguyen Xuan Nghia, UuDam,” *Little Saigon TV – KXLA 44.4* (October 3, 2009). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3u9H95bU50>. Accessed September 1, 2014.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

⁴⁷⁰ Nguyen Tan Lac, “Nguyen Vu interviewed Brian Doan, Nguyen Tan Lac, Nguyen Xuan Nghia, UuDam,” *Little Saigon TV – KXLA 44.4* (October 3, 2009). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3u9H95bU50>. Accessed September 1, 2014.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

The United States has provided sanctuary for many Vietnamese refugees displaced at the end of the Vietnam War, allowing communities of Vietnamese Americans to prosper in many areas of the country. The diaspora with its multitude of different stories and varied points of view comprises a wide spectrum of sentiments and emotions. Recently, the expression *transmigrant* has been used within academic circles to describe a person living away from their homeland, while the phrase *transnational communities* has been adopted to describe migrant populations. According to Stephen Castles and Mark Miller in their text, *The Age of Migration*, “The term diaspora often has strong emotional connotations, while the notion of a transnational community is more neutral.”⁴⁷² For the Vietnamese American community, however, with its many emotional scars, makes it difficult to speak of in terms of neutrality.

As exemplified by Lê and Doan in their artistic productions, issues of displacement, identity, alienation, and allegiance are all part of the emotional baggage that continues to haunt many of the members within the diaspora. Whereas Lê relies on religious inflections to relay his sense of loss and belonging, Doan employs political statements to discuss being displaced and his longing for “home.” Regardless of their methods, these visual artists bring forth to the audience the important issues of displacement and alienation that continue to plague many within the Vietnamese American diaspora. They share a contrasting sense of alienation from both, their birth country of Việt Nam as well as from their adopted United States, brought about primarily by their dissimilar experiences of dislocation.

⁴⁷² Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World, Fourth Edition* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2009), 31.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“Yo soy de la raza del dragón, y tú eres de la raza de los inmortales. No podemos vivir juntos para siempre. Es necesario que nos separemos. Partiré con cincuenta de nuestros hijos a las regiones marinas, y tú, con los otros cincuenta, irás a la tierra de las montañas y las selvas.

*The Legendary Origins of the Vietnamese People*⁴⁷³

Việt Nam’s ancient origins began during the Hồng Bàng Dynasty, circa 2800 BCE, and the Vietnamese people were believed to have been descendants of a dragon and a fairy. In his text, *The Birth of Vietnam*, Professor Keith Taylor describes the archeological remnants from this time period, in the form of ornamented bronze drums, as belonging to Dong-son culture, where “the designs on these drums reflect a sea-oriented culture.”⁴⁷⁴ Taylor expounds, “Vietnamese scholars associate the Hung kings with the Dong-son culture. They consider this to have been the formative period in establishing their national tradition.”⁴⁷⁵

These origins started with the mythological beginnings of the king Hùng Hiền Vương, who was also known as the dragon king, Lạc Long Quân (king of the Lạc Việt people). Married to the fairy princess, Âu Cơ, she was able to bear him one hundred sons. Because of the

⁴⁷³ Trần Đoàn Lâm, ed. *Leyendas y Cuentos de Vietnam* (Hanoi, Việt Nam: Nhà Xuất Bản Thế Giới, 2007), 24.

⁴⁷⁴ Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 4.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

differences in their races, however, the husband and wife had to separate. The above quote speaks of their departure and of the king's farewell to his wife. It is translated as: "I am from the race of the dragon, and you are from the race of the immortals. We cannot live together forever. It is necessary that we separate. I will depart with fifty of our children for the regions by the coast, and you, with the other fifty, will go to the mountainsides and the jungles."

Taylor speaks of the country's mythical origins as revealing "a sea-oriented culture coming to terms with a continental environment."⁴⁷⁶ While its history has long been linked to the mainland, over the last millennium Việt Nam has been trying to maintain its individual identity and to break itself free from foreign occupation by China. Within the last two centuries it also had to deal with the French colonizing power, Japanese wartime occupation, and American imperialist control.

When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, conflicting ideologies between the incoming Communist regime from the North and the conquered democratic capitalist way of life in the South, left many Southern Vietnamese with overwhelming fear of political persecution. Many fled the homeland and resettled in other countries throughout the world. Although some acclimated without hesitation, many transplanted Vietnamese nationals found it difficult to find "home," unable to reconcile the home of their memory and birthright with new world environment. This important concept of "home" is addressed by several of the artists in this project as they attempted to discuss what defines "home." Indeed, it has been challenging to tell stories about a lost homeland, particularly since the homeland continues to evolve and alter so dramatically from the collective memories of those who are displaced. All six artists have returned to Việt Nam since their initial departure. Their recounts of the experience have varied

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 1.

greatly, ranging from outright disappointment to a desire for and an eventual permanent resettlement.

For Long Nguyen his first return to Việt Nam came in 1991, at the end of his participation in Oliver Stone's filming of *Heaven and Earth* in Thailand. In Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), Nguyen "went to the place where his grandparents' home stood, only to find that it had been turned into a Communist government office."⁴⁷⁷ Although Nguyen was "emotional and nervous" about returning to Việt Nam due to his persistent fear of the communists, he managed to spend several months there, exploring the country.⁴⁷⁸ While he was not able to visit his coastal hometown of Nha Trang due to logistical reasons, Nguyen was able to visit the beautiful Halong Bay in Northern Việt Nam, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and was "enraptured by the landscape."⁴⁷⁹

The year 1999 was one that marked the first homecoming to the motherland for Ann Phong, Hanh Thi Pham, and Nguyen Tan Hoang. Unlike Long Nguyen's memorable visit, Ann Phong's return to Việt Nam with her husband and children was extremely discouraging, prompting her not to go back since. She recalled being disenchanted immediately by the corruption she encountered, "I went back in 1999. That's the only one time. My family's still living back there I hated it."⁴⁸⁰ Phong and her family were detained at the airport in excess of two hours because she had refused to offer bribes to the custom officials, "And they kept us at

⁴⁷⁷ Kathleen Donnelly, "Drawing on Memories," Arts & Books, San Jose Mercury News, April 18, 1993, 14.

⁴⁷⁸ Long Nguyen, interviewed by Joanne Northrup in *Tales of Yellow Skin: The Art of Long Nguyen* (San Jose, California: San Jose Museum of Art, 2003), 25.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Ann Phong, interview with the author (Santa Ana, California, September 25, 2012).

. . . the *hải quan* (customs counter) Right there! They didn't let us go through. They kept us for two hours, because I didn't slip [them some] money. I didn't bribe them And the people behind us, they could go through because they slipped money, and we didn't."⁴⁸¹ The experience came to be remembered as a profoundly negative one for Phong, "So [this] first impression, this is my country. I went back to visit my own country and I get blocked by the first step! How could I have [a] good impression?"⁴⁸² Due to her disillusioned expectations during her arrival, Phong remained close to her mother's home for the rest of her two week visit, "I went back to Vietnam, visited my mom and my whole family We didn't go anywhere, we just stayed home with my mom for two weeks and we took off. I [have not been] back"⁴⁸³

Different from Phong's poor experience with Vietnamese government officials, Hanh Thi Pham's return to Việt Nam was an emotional journey since she finally was able to see some of the remnants of the war ravaged land, "There was not enough time for me to resolve my sadness. I remember crying every day because I finally visited the North and Central parts of Vietnam. I saw bomb craters. I never saw them when I was in the South. And I saw how beautiful my country was but [also] how damaged it was."⁴⁸⁴ For Pham there is a sense of loss of identity regarding her birthplace, resulting in a divided allegiance between her homeland and her adopted country, "And then now that I'm [living] in the United States, how do I take that all together? I

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Hanh Thi Pham, interview with the author (Encino, California, April 13, 2014).

don't have a home, not a base to work from”⁴⁸⁵ Pham's divided allegiance between her birthplace and her adopted home made the return trip to Việt Nam an emotional and challenging one.

Contrasting to Phong's or Pham's perspectives, Nguyen Tan Hoang accompanied his parents back to Việt Nam and experienced the trip from the eyes of a vacationer, “We were . . . just being tourists. There was no special reason for us to [go] back. It was very difficult for me. I think because it was the first time [since] I left [that] I visited Asia, and also Vietnam. That was very . . . well, they were not ready for tourists. And [the country was] very poor. That was a big shock to me.”⁴⁸⁶ He added that a language barrier made the trip a challenge for him, “And my Vietnamese was not very good It was a very difficult trip. I think I had a lot of [emotional] investment in this trip, returning to the motherland. Feeling that finally I had a place where I can call home, or fit in. It did not quite happen the way I had imagined.”⁴⁸⁷ Nguyen recalled being treated as an outsider:

Yeah, so there was a lot of resentment toward *việt kiều* (nationals living abroad). I think now maybe people are more accepting as more *việt kiều*s are coming back and staying there . . . building businesses, settling down, whereas before I think there was much . . . I think it was too soon. There was a lot of . . . I saw [that] the class differences were so strong. I think now a lot of local Vietnamese are doing much better in terms of business, and the economy's stabilized. So I think right now it's not as . . . well, there's more of a fascination with *việt kiều* rather than resentment.⁴⁸⁸

Nguyen made subsequent returns in 2001 and 2010, discovering that he did not feel at home in Việt Nam despite more visits, “[Back in Vietnam] I didn't feel at home at all. I still

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Nguyen Tan Hoang, interview with the author (Irvine, California, October 15, 2012).

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

don't. I went back again two years later. And in 2010, I was back for a conference, but it still didn't feel like home, because a big part of it is my immediate family [members] are in the United States."⁴⁸⁹

For Brian Doan, his first return to Việt Nam came in 1998, one year earlier than to Phong's, Pham's, and Nguyen's. Doan's trip, however, was due to an old friendship, "The first time I went back was in 1998. One of my friends was in an accident. I went back to be with him."⁴⁹⁰ Despite the dramatic changes that occurred in the country Doan was happy to be united with his friends again, "At that time Vietnam had changed a lot. But also [it was] pretty to me. I felt happy to meet friends, eat the food, and speak your language, your country."⁴⁹¹ Even so, Doan recalled a feeling of alienation and remembered experiencing a sense of cultural shock:

It was a little scary, to see the color red. But also, you feel alienated, estranged to the culture. Here [in the United States], I have my own privacy and space. Here, it's more like living by myself and work[ing] on my greenery [garden] But in Vietnam it seems like all the relationships . . . you don't have that private time. My friends would come to my room at any time, without knocking on the door. It was so noisy, and the weather was kind of different, the culture was kind of different. I couldn't find information [on the internet]. And actually the Vietnamese society was too conservative [for] me. That was the first reaction.⁴⁹²

Doan spoke of being happy to return "home," to the United States, yet still had longings for his native homeland, "And then, on the way back to the United States, I kind of missed it. I was going to cry, I missed Vietnam. But then I got back here, to San Francisco, and I felt at

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Brian Doan, interview with the author (Long Beach, California, June 18, 2014).

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

home: the weather, the quietness, clean food, information across the internet, in my own room, and listen[ing] to my own music, and my freedom. But I still missed Vietnam.”⁴⁹³

Au contraire to the other five, Dinh Q. Lê moved back to Việt Nam permanently after a few initial visits in the early 1990s. He recalled his first return in 1994, “The first trip was in ’94 and then [between] ’94 to ’96 I kept going back and forth, every three or six months.”⁴⁹⁴ He recalled witnessing the difficult economic circumstances in Việt Nam during those early visits, “At that time, in ’94, everybody was poor. Not a lot of people have a lot of money, so early on the overseas Vietnamese were the rich ones, when they came back. So I was treated very well. Then they started to realize I was a starving artist, a poor artist, and that was kind of interesting.”⁴⁹⁵ Nonetheless, Lê has reclaimed his birth country and made Việt Nam his “home” for nearly two decades now. Despite living under communist control, Lê witnessed the open market economy that thrived in Việt Nam over the last twenty years, spurring the country’s economic growth.

In the United States, the Vietnamese American diaspora is indifferent to Việt Nam’s economic success and still maintains great resentment toward communist ideals. Much of the anti-communist rhetoric continue to be enforced by the community elders, understandably due to the unrelenting scars from loss of home, nationhood, economic positions, family and friends. Resentments that will not dissipate on their own will dilute in intensity only with the passing of those elders. This has led, as is seen, to outright criticism and persecution of younger artists who do not share the same political opinions as an older generation.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Dinh Q. Lê, interview with the author (Ho Chi Minh City, Việt Nam, July 31, 2011).

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

The six artists examined in this dissertation all left Việt Nam to make their homes in California, and most have developed a hybrid identity that is often reflected in the Vietnamese American diaspora. Vietnamese American author Le Ly Hayslip, whose autobiography, *Heaven and Earth*, was turned into the 1993 blockbuster of the same name by film maker Oliver Stone, describes her own sense of mixed identity upon returning to her birthplace, “I have come home, yes, but home has changed and I will always be in-between . . . South-North, East-West, peace-war, Vietnam-America”⁴⁹⁶

As members of the Southern California diaspora, most of these artists did not start their acculturation process into American society with the intent of becoming artists. In fact, the majority faced displeasure and criticism from family members when they first started down the path of an artistic career. Yet, their passion prevailed, allowing them to be educated in the visual arts and consequently to develop critical voices regarding some of the important issues pertaining to their lives abroad. With those voices, these artists exposed representational and contrasting views to the Vietnamese American community.

Interestingly, those living outside Việt Nam represent just a little more than three percent of the country’s population. This is based on Viet Le’s estimate that there are approximately three million Vietnamese living outside the homeland.⁴⁹⁷ When the diaspora is addressed as a singular entity, however, the only commonality between all the members is their universal identity as a displaced people. Beyond that, there are as many unique stories as there are individuals within the diaspora, as exemplified so succinctly by the six artists explored in this

⁴⁹⁶ Le Ly Hayslip as quoted in Michael Singer, *The Making of Oliver Stone’s Heaven and Earth* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1993), 102.

⁴⁹⁷ Viet Le, “The Color of Memory,” in Brian Doan, *Hôme Hôme Hôme* (New York: Vilcek Foundation, 2013), 17.

project. Even when speaking of the trauma and associated memory of the boat journey, Long Nguyen and Ann Phong had different approaches and perspectives. Or when discussing sexuality and gender issues, Hanh Thi Pham and Nguyen Tan Hoang could not be further apart in styles and attitudes. And when broaching the subjects of displacement, alienation, and the search for home, Brian Doan and Dinh Q. Lê are contrasting examples of outlooks and methodologies. The common denominator for these visual artists is their shared cultural heritage.

Today, as the thirteenth most populous country in the world, with nearly ninety three and one half million people,⁴⁹⁸ Việt Nam has made impressive strides in positioning itself competitively in the world economy despite its communist political rule. Conversely, there exists a dearth of awareness and comprehension apropos Vietnamese art. In her text, *Painters in Hanoi*, the art historian Nora Taylor notes of Việt Nam's "marginal status" in the annals of art history and corroborates a lack of knowledge about the country's artistic production by the West, "Vietnam's marginal status in Asian art history from the West—where it is a challenge to find reference to Vietnamese art in any Asian art history textbook—is part of a greater problem facing Western scholars of art history."⁴⁹⁹ While the Vietnamese artists living in California have received some recognition, there is much work to be done to bring to light the contemporary cultural scene in Việt Nam.

This dissertation is an attempt to shed some insight into a few contemporary voices of the Vietnamese art world, specifically from within the Vietnamese American diaspora. Its intention

⁴⁹⁸ World Population Statistics, "Population of Vietnam 2014." <http://www.worldpopulationstatistics.com/population-of-vietnam-2014/>. Accessed September 18, 2014.

⁴⁹⁹ Nora Annesley Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 6.

is not merely to describe the lives of six astute, talented, and above all, brave Vietnamese refugees, but to provide their representational perspectives for many others in the displaced Vietnamese American population. Regardless of when and how they departed the country, they have not truly left their culture or roots. Although the Việt Nam of their past is gone, these artists have not forsaken their beloved birthplace, which undisputedly remains deeply ingrained in their hearts, minds, and souls.

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