

Seen and heard

Nguyen's exhibits speak to us, questioning our perceptions

By Robert L. Pincus

ART CRITIC

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Many years ago, Han Nguyen thought he wanted to be a street photographer in the tradition of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Garry Winogrand. But in a 1999 interview he confided that he didn't have the gregarious temperament for that sort of work.

There has to be a bit of poetic irony in the fact that one of his new series finds him photographing rows of buildings. There's no street in front of them, but the suggestion of one is obvious.

Actually, the buildings are of the artist's making – little ceramic houses and apartment towers. And they appear in "Model Home," one of two new series of pictures by Nguyen in his exhibition at the Joseph Bellows Gallery.

True to form, Nguyen makes these structures the subject of impeccably lit and printed images. He's a photographic artist with a philosophical temperament who knows how to make his ideas visual – a gift he's demonstrated for two decades in a memorable string of exhibitions, including a 1999 mid-career survey at the Museum of Photographic Arts, "In Studio."

"Model Home" is vintage Nguyen, simple in style but sophisticated and complex in effect and concept. This series makes elegant use of black and white. The tiny structures gleam like ivory, and the space around them is uniformly black.

The structures themselves are childlike, with their tiny indentations as windows and doors punctuating elemental shapes: rectangular, tall and squat; some with flat roofs and others with peaked ones. "House #2," for example, is a vertical box, with only two indentations to hint at windows and another to imply a door. "House #11" offers three quasi-rectangles, one smaller than the next and all misshapen on one side or another. "House #10" contains a highrise, which hovers over two little structures that hug its right side.

Nguyen turns these creations into platonic forms of home, and he underscores this idea by placing them in stark light. Only windows are in shadow. These edifices don't resemble buildings but ghost versions of them.

This is hardly the first time Nguyen has constructed things to photograph. Back in 1985, he arranged stones to resemble an uncanny detail of Stonehenge. In the early 1990s, he made haunting architectural interiors in which some of the objects suggested human fragments and others looked like sculptures. As with these interiors, the new "houses" blur our sense of scale. We intuit that they are miniatures. But in a picture, a real building can look similar in size.

"Model Home" encourages us to register the pleasurable mysteries of perception that photography can produce. Of course, it only does this because Nguyen has the eye and mind to make pictures that evoke such large themes.

"Flow," Nguyen's second series on view, reveals similar concerns, even though its images are

radically different.

Stark black and white is replaced by lush color. For solid forms, he substitutes water.

This series doesn't so much blur scale as exploit the difference between flux and frozen form. A picture is a moment in time, of course, while water doesn't stand still. But in photographs, motion is arrested; ripples and eddies are arrested.

The traces of those ripples and eddies become pronounced because Nguyen has added a concentrated version of watercolor to the water for each image. It's a simple idea that yields lovely results, with the tinted water filling the entire surface of the photograph. "Flow #7" is a sea of lime green, "Flow #15" a dazzling purple, and "Flow #34" an aqua blue. There are brilliant yellows and additional shades of green in other examples.

From one vantage point, these pictures are akin to abstract paintings, with the lines in water suggesting brush strokes. It's as though Nguyen's using water as his canvas and watercolor as his medium.

In one sense, these photographs hardly seem like pictures at all. They are rectangles of pure color with accidental differences in their design. But in actuality, they are products of a carefully devised concept. And like Nguyen's "Model Home" series, they join an elemental kind of image to a fresh, sophisticated concept.

ART REVIEWS

Los Angeles Times, Aug 20, 1999

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT, Los Angeles Times Art Critic

Body "**Gesture**": The richly sepia toned, soft focus images of hands, feet and limbs made by largely self-taught photographer Han Nguyen merge the delicacy of pastel drawings with the sturdy impenetrability of bronze reliefs. That the San Diego-based artist has turned the camera on his own body infuses their dual sense of transient fragility and ancient mystery with an introspective aura.

Nguyen calls his show of 26 pictures at Stephen Cohen Gallery "Gestures." Dated 1997 to 1999, they display fragmentary limbs isolated against blank backgrounds in a wide variety of poses. Hands hang limply, clasp one another, grasp air. Feet point, rest corpse-like on heels, stand formally in profile.

In a few pictures a hand grasps an ankle, joining two extremities that bring the absent, unseen body between them squarely into the mind's eye. One especially lyrical work shows the soft inner length of an arm, cascading like a stream from the upper right to the lower left in a gentle display of vulnerability and exposure.

These physical gestures are poignantly mute, though, eschewing the legibility of sign language. Instead, it's Nguyen's camera that gestures, situating photography alongside older forms of art. The former resemblance to drawing and bronze relief is compounded with quiet allusions to everything from the gesticulating hands in Grunewald's Isenheim altarpiece and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling to Stieglitz's photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe and Asian carvings of Buddha.

Nguyen, whose work is also currently the subject of a survey at San Diego's Museum of Contemporary Art, organized by the Museum of Photographic Arts there, employs a format that's highly reflective: Behind glass, the rich bronze tones create a mirror-like finish in which the inescapable reflection of your own inquiring face and body intermingles with the gestures.

The two most recent photographs show a slight shift. These pictures color, cyan instead of bronze, recalls architectural blueprints. It's too soon to tell where Nguyen is headed with this change, but on the evidence of the earlier photographs it will be worth watching.

ZOOM MAGAZINE

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By **LEAH OLLMAN**, Art Critic

The myth of progress that plagues our understanding of history also confounds our attempts at comprehending artist's lives and motivations. Time moves, persistently, in one direction, but human events follow a meandering course marked by deviations and internal contradictions that defy the logic of the conventional, chronological narratives.

Han Nguyen has produced several discrete bodies of work over the past decade. An account could be written that begins at the beginning and abides by the continuity of time, tracing the evolution of each series in its turn. But the richness and poignancy of Nguyen's work owes nothing to the predictability of the straight line. His images draw from the deep pool of sources and concerns. They dart between (and occasionally unite) opposing conditions - raw sensuality and calculated artifice; the home and body are primary, private sites of emotion; and the staged display of collective dreams, myths and histories.

"Gestures" Nguyen's most recent series of work, is his most stripped down and sensuous. A cumulative self-portrait made with a pinhole camera, the images show only the artist's arms and hands in a quiet ballet against sepia-toned darkness. The gestures are simple, eloquent, distilled to pure pattern in space, yet resonant with the whole body, whole mind dance of emotions. In the center of one photograph, Nguyen's hands clench in a knot; in another his palms press together as in prayer. In one image, Nguyen combines two negatives so he can show both of his arms entering the frame from opposite sides. Like the twin masks of comedy and tragedy, one cupped hand opens upward, with confidence, while the other droops downward, languidly. Strength fuses with grace, and power with yearning in this lush suite of images.

The nakedness of the "Gestures" work is countered by stagey self-consciousness in Nguyen's "B-Movie" series. Negatives stacked like film frames yield a disorienting scenario in the image, "Dream": on top, small dark beetles crawl up a glass pane; in the middle lies a fake dinosaur carcass from a natural history display, and on the bottom, as if the sum total of the ingredients, is a tight close-up of a screaming mouth. Other photographs from the series are similarly nightmarish, combining intense portraits by Van Gogh and Francis Bacon with images of animal and human skeletons. Like concentrated, condensed B-movies, they evoke a sense of horror through obviously artificial means (rather than depicting actual trauma), yet the impact on the senses is formidable and real.

Pictures from the "B-Movie" series overlap with earlier work Nguyen made using photographs of displays in anthropological and natural history museums in San Diego,

where he moved in the mid 70s from his native Viet Nam. His “Hominid” photographs, as well as related work that layers lush landscapes with images of artifacts and skeletons, delve into the memory of the species. Nguyen shows us our ancestors as a reminder, inflected through his Buddhist faith, that the past co-exists with the present. Reincarnation keeps the spirit or soul alive, while its external form changes over time. Cutting and taping together negatives, Nguyen mimics the challenge of reclaiming memory and reconstructing history through its fragmented remains.

Nguyen’s stunning little photographs of constructed interiors shift the focus of our musings to the notion of place rather than time, though they evoke a primal simplicity that is tinged with nostalgia. In these tiny prints - just a few inches per side - Nguyen fuses the artifice of his photographed museum tableaux with the emotional authenticity of his “Gestures.” Like the work of James Casebere, these are staged, miniature, unpeopled environments steeped in human presence.

Enclosed by clay-washed cardboard walls, Nguyen’s “Interiors” are furnished with objects that identify the setting as either a home or an artist’s studio - in either case, a site of personal nourishment. The small clay objects within, whether tools, implements or sculptures, appear to be bare basics of survival, the answers to essential needs. They are barely one remove from the artist’s hand: tapered, twisted sculptural forms reminiscent of Brancusi look like they have been rolled between the palms; the three legs of a stool seem to have twisted between the fingers; and a set of bowls appear to be the result of depressing a thumb into dabs of clay. A disproportionately large fork leaned against the wall in one of the photographs even take on the qualities of the hand itself, its tines like thick, irregular fingers.

These are primitive interiors but also primitivist, self-consciously minimal. Domestic, but far from banal, they have a quiet sacredness to them, their humble forms casting rich, rhythmic shadows. Like all of Nguyen’s work, the “Interiors” are exquisitely printed and marked by concentrated beauty - a pensive beauty that embraces contradictions, disjunctions and deviations from the straight and obvious path.

PHOTOGRAPHER GOES “IN STUDIO” TO EXPLORE LIFE

The San Diego Union-Tribune, August 8, 1999

By ROBERT L. PINCUS, Art Critic

A stone, wood, a plant: Those things possess one life in nature and another equally vital one in Han Nguyen’s photographs. He doesn’t simply make pictures of them; he communes with them.

It’s hard to reach any conclusion after seeing his inspired museum exhibition, “Han Nguyen: In Studio,” at the temporary quarters of the Museum of Photographic Arts in downtown San Diego. He reveals shape and surface with gorgeous clarity. You could swear that the rock in one of his “Rock Portraits” is about to push outward from the picture surface. The rational mind tells you the image is flat, but the roundness of the photographed specimen appears so real.

Portrait is a perfect word choice to capture the spirit of this series. Usually, of course, the term is applied to the likeness of a person - to a picture that reveals something distinctive about that

individual. Yet that is precisely how Nguyen approaches the photographing of an object: to reveal its character.

This premise gets even wider play in his “Wood Portraits” from 1987, for which the subject is individual pieces of firewood. The idea of photographing them may sound a touch absurd, but a skilled artist has a way of turning conventions on their head. Nguyen does exactly that. He makes us believe these inanimate things a worthy of a portrait.

Look at one way, “wood #7” resembles a torso. Viewed with a different frame of mind, though, it seems a handsome abstract sculpture. But shape isn’t the only thing on which he fixes our attention. He captures the many details of the wood’s skin, with its prominent knot and areas alternately bathed in light and shadow. By contrast, “Wood #10” is flat, almost rectangular, as if it were not a three-dimensional piece of wood but a wood-grain pattern, precisely lighted to reveal every crevice and line.

The objects in these early pictures are organic, but the setting isn’t. He places the wood on a draped pedestal and sets it against a uniformly dark background.

These pictures aren’t the meditation on nature so much as a tale of the eye and the transformative power of the camera. Nguyen’s stage is the studio, as the title of his exhibition suggests.

These breakthrough series are stylish. The celebrated fashion and portrait photographer Irving Penn is an influence that both exhibition curator Diana Gaston cites and the artist names. The elegant lighting and neutral setting are qualities that Nguyen clearly saw in Penn’s art.

From the start, Nguyen avoided that pitfall of all pitfalls: He didn’t become an imitator of Penn’s (or of any photographer) he admired. Instead, he perceived how subjects different from Penn’s could gain a new life in the studio. It was the myriad possibilities of the studio that became his overriding preoccupation, which is why there is no identifiable style in Nguyen’s photographs, but styles to fit each successive idea.

Even Nguyen photographed plants, for his “Garden at Night” series in 1991, the setting wasn’t a garden. He brought flora, fauna and dirt indoors, constructing temporary dioramas.

In one, you can scrutinize “Twin Gladioli”. They are side by side, like slender sentinels of their domain and gradually it becomes evident that subtle differences between them are as much the subject as their mirroring of each other. In “Sago Palm,” the pictured plant leans to the right like a dancer, frozen in mid-gesture. In “Iris,” the leaves are like slender, ghostly fingers, posed against a blurred studio backdrop of clouds.

His 1992 “Interiors” series might seem a dramatic departure from earlier group of pictures, unless we see Nguyen as a photographer who was - and is - willing to take risks, to explore an idea rather than aspire to have a signature style.

They are hypnotic little compositions, the first in which he uses a sepia tone rather than a crisp black and white. And the things in these images are made from clay rather than found objects: tiny furnishings, utensils, bowls and sculptures. So are the rooms that house them.

The space in some “Interiors” is tight. He focuses closely on a “Three Legged Stool”. which looks as if it’s about to go for a stroll. The scope is wider in the arresting “Brancusi’s Bird,” for Nguyen crafted

tiny sculptures in the manner of Brancusi. He focuses tightly on one, which stands in the middle of the tiny room, while the others, set against the walls, are slightly blurred.

This series divides into domestic interiors and gallery or museum like spaces, adorned with sculptures. But that doesn't mean the furnishings are any less fantastical than the mock art. Perhaps the most haunting selection is "Fork on Table," in which the fork looks more like a fragment of an arm with three-fingered hand.

The sepia tone of the "Interior" series meshes perfectly with its content. The imagery is dreamlike, the product of fantasy. The antiquarian look of the pictures makes them seem as if they exist in another time, which is apt, since they create a place that exists for us only in photographic form.

PRIVATE VISIONS

Just as abruptly as he adopted this approach, Nguyen abandoned it. By 1993, he had rejected the constructed rooms and the sepia prints for everyday sights in more conventionally printed black-and-white images. Nguyen even ventured outside the studio, in his "B-Movie" series (1993-1998), photographing a jellyfish in an aquarium tank and a tiny skeleton at the Museum of Man.

Yet the vision remains just as private. We could say he brings the world into his studio, jokingly altering our view of the jellyfish by turning it into a visual double entendre, by dubbing three views of it "Spaceship Descending" (1998). An eerie photograph of skeleton, flanked by images of bird wings, becomes "Dead Angel" (1996).

By the time his "Gestures" series appears, it's not surprising to find Nguyen shifting again. Hands and arms, softly focused, are frozen in pictorial space. At times, there is one; at others, two. Legs and feet appear, too. The poses are suggestive more explicit, implying a tense relationship between subject and world.

The subject, this time, is Nguyen himself. "Gestures" is a drama of tension, pitting communication against concealment. In style, they are seductive: large sepia images made with a pinhole camera. They also assert that the studio remains a place of fertile ideas for the 43-year-old photographer. The variety of the exhibition is rich and provocative, even as it hints that we should have high expectations for his future as an artist.