

Northern California

Binh Danh at Haines Gallery

Cambodia: Back on the Travel Wish List” trumpets the Lonely Planet home page as Binh Danh’s new show of Daguerreotypes opens at Haines Gallery. With 2 million tourists “and counting” now flooding into this nation of 15 million annually—including two generations of Cambodians born after the devastating Khmer Rouge rule of Democratic Kampuchea—Danh’s Daguerreotypes illuminate the ghost-elephant in the airport waiting room, juxtaposing silvery images of Cambodia’s most cherished monuments with ectoplasmic portraits of executed men, women and children taken at their darkest hours in the Killing Fields.

Since his Daguerreotypes are polished to a high gloss, Danh’s luminous images of stone reliefs and elegant vases hold up a mirror to gallery-goers as we may like to picture ourselves: enlightened global citizens at our leisure amid the intricate stonework of Khmer temples, or floating down a tranquil river as the mists rise above Angkor Wat. But alongside these alluring reflections are images that send us through the mirror darkly. In *Ghost of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum #1* (all works 2008), we glimpse ourselves and a prisoner from the vantage point of a guard at Tuol Sleng Prison tasked with photographing men, women and children before their extermination for suspected or anticipated crimes against the regime. Seen together, these images are both devotional and



Binh Danh, *Ghost of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum #2*, 2008, Daguerreotype, 8-1/2" x 6-1/2", at Haines Gallery, San Francisco.

provocative, appealing to our aspirations even as they mirror our contradictory actions in Cambodia and beyond: to shelter and carpet-bomb, to condemn and exculpate, to worship and ignore.

Amid these moving, meditative works, a stand-alone Daguerreotype of an abstract temple relief pattern comes as a kind of punctuation, a helpful reminder to breathe or pause between sutras. It demands to be seen in the context of the whole show, as does a Daguerreotype that reads with the emphasis of boldface prayer text: *Killing tree against which executioners beat children* (2008). The title is taken from text on a sign planted under a shaggy tree in Cambodia’s Killing Fields, where concrete blocks and human bones have been

collected at its roots. There is nothing incidental in this image. It’s shot at an angle so that we can read the sign clearly, while noting that in the background, a bench has been thoughtfully provided for visitors too tired or paralyzed by grief to continue their tour. Danh’s image serves the same purpose as the sign and the bench: it tells the truth plainly and unequivocally, while recognizing that this particular truth may be too much to take in all at once.

Daguerreotypes are both a departure from and logical extension of Danh’s ongoing innovations in chlorophyll printing. In Danh’s method, photographic images are exposed, not on paper in a darkroom, but onto leaves over the course of a few months outdoors. The dark areas of the photographic image, shielded from sunlight, remain evergreen, while the rest of the leaf turns a pale, lifeless gold. This is the fragile moment Danh preserves in resin for viewers to experience in perpetuity, transforming a private meditation on life and death into a matter of public record—and reckoning.

A few chlorophyll-printed images included in this exhibition are photographs of children taken moments before their executions. The leaves for these works were grown in Danh’s backyard in San Jose, and he has coupled the completed prints with butterflies sourced from collectors on eBay—yet these practical considerations make his creative gesture more profound, not less. His broad search for raw materials reveals a fundamental truth: humankind is still ill-equipped to picture what happened in Cambodia three decades ago. A boy glances up reluctantly from under a brow far too heavy for his six or seven years; a girl boldly stares into the camera, chin up, hair neatly held back with a clip so that she may see and be seen clearly.

Danh has hung the small leaves bearing their likenesses in a shadow box above strikingly individual butterflies captured in iridescent youth, the mind instinctively seeks to fill in the gap between the two, as with a haiku missing its third line. In this pause, Danh's work reaches beyond heartbreak: It becomes a critical gesture toward reconciliation and due veneration, reclaiming souls otherwise lost in the incomprehensible catalog of death that covers the walls at Tuol Sleng Prison.

The photographs of the executed that might once have been filed away by Khmer Rouge functionaries now wallpaper the prison in remembrance. Danh captured one wall of photos at a moment when the sun was shining weakly through the prison window opposite it, so that the window bars are eerily reflected on the glossy surface of the images. He developed this not as a chlorophyll print, but as a Daguerreotype—and here again, Danh's choice of medium is uncanny. Since their invention in 1839, Daguerreotypes have been a challenging and expensive medium, generally reserved for persons and occasions of historic import. In turning this wall of death portraits into a singular Daguerreotype, Danh recognizes each and every individual as worthy of com-

memoration, and the shared act of remembrance they cumulatively represent as historic. Danh's intervention here may seem straightforward, but it is epic.

In his methods and materials as in his subject matter, Danh's challenge is to reconcile here and there, now and then, private lives and political acts. This is a legacy most viewers are only now confronting, prompted by the change of political administration, but Danh began this work years ago, when many otherwise visionary contemporary artists were over- by the prospect of unlimited warfare and civil liberties encroachments. Danh's work is exceptional and precocious not merely when measured by his own three decades of life or against the efforts of his contemporaries; his work has far exceeded its era. Yet if we can adjust our vision to match the truthful devotion and devoted truthfulness Danh has exhibited through these works, we may yet meet him on the far horizon.

—Alison Bing

Binh Danh: In the Eclipse of Angkor: Tuol Sleng, Choeung EK, and Khmer Temples closed February 28 at Haines Gallery, San Francisco.

Alison Bing is contributing editor to *Artweek*.