

BINH DANH

YOSEMITE

HAINES GALLERY

“The camera has given me the desire to never stop learning. Photography is the tool with which I examine the world in all of its complexity, and it all started with a trip into the forest.”

— Binh Danh

## Introduction: ‘Binh Danh: Yosemite’

by Boreth Ly

Binh Danh was born in Vietnam in 1977. In 1979, when he was two years old, his family fled Vietnam as boat refugees. They went to Pulau Bidong, an island located off the coast of Malaysia, where they stayed briefly before journeying to the United States. They finally settled in Northern California. He was 22 years old before he returned to visit Vietnam.

In 2002 Danh had his first solo exhibition at the Sesnon Gallery at the University of California, Santa Cruz, followed by him receiving his MFA at Stanford University in 2004. The exhibition at Santa Cruz was titled, “Immortality: The Remnants of the Vietnam and American War.” The experience and perspectives gathered from his journey back to his native land shaped the content of the artworks included in that show.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that this year marks the tenth anniversary of Danh’s first solo exhibition.

Danh is known for his trademark chlorophyll prints on leaves, a photographic process he invented by superimposing a photographic negative onto the surface of a leaf and exposing it to sunlight for a few days. As a result, the negative literally grows into the leaf through the process of photosynthesis. Danh then seals the

image with resin. The subject matter of his chlorophyll print series was mostly drawn from black-and-white photographs from the Vietnam-American War.<sup>2</sup>

Since his debut as a professional artist over ten years ago, Danh has been celebrated for his experimental photography; it involves meticulous research into scientific and historical photographic processes and methods, as well as his own inventions. He makes use of and integrates these historic photographic techniques into his own creative processes and art. Danh’s art engages with themes of memory, genocide, trauma, and landscape in Southeast Asia and its diasporas in the post Vietnam-American War period. In 2011, he created an art project based on his interaction with the Vietnamese-American community in Nebraska, United States. Two of Danh’s color photographs from his “Viet Nam, Nebraska” series demonstrate the artist’s commitment to documenting the Vietnamese American community in the United States and abroad.<sup>3</sup>

Danh’s works have been collected by established art institutions such as the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the de Young Museum in San Francisco, the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, and the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. As of this year, Danh has accepted a tenure-track position as Assistant Professor of Art at the Arizona State University, Tempe. Danh is a recognized international artist, as well as an accom-



Binh Danh, Mother and Child, 2001, chlorophyll print cast in resin, 30 x 14 inches.

plished Vietnamese-American artist in the United States. He recently participated in the 18th Biennale of Sydney in 2012 and has held many residencies. “Binh Danh: Yosemite” is his fourth solo exhibition at Haines Gallery. Danh shares his thoughts with me about his new body of works in the following interview.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Roth, Moira, Gleanings #6: Binh Danh blog, November 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Spalding, David. Revolutionary Message, Evolutionary Medium, Rapportage, Fall 2004 , Vol. 5, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy, Sharon, Curator of Cultural and Civic Engagement, The Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, NE, Viet Nam, Nebraska: Photographs by Binh Danh, opened September 23, 2011.

**Conversation between Binh Danh and Boreth Ly, August 2012 on the subject of ‘Binh Danh: Yosemite’**

BORETH LY: I would like to begin with your latest body of work, on Yosemite. Why did you choose Yosemite as the site/sight?

BINH DANH: For my latest series, I turned my camera to the landscape at home. In 2009 I had the chance to live and work in Virginia, and being from California, I was taken by the landscape there. I started to read up on the American Civil War and Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. These insights gave me a new filter to view the landscape in that region of the United States. When I returned to California, the landscape here also became “new” to me, and I started a landscape/research project. Yosemite was a great place to start. As a kid, I had always wanted to visit Yosemite; I discovered it by viewing the photographs of Ansel Adams, but I never had the chance to visit the Park until I started this project. And so Yosemite, like the Vietnam War, only existed in my imagination because I only saw the landscape in photographs. I visited Yosemite with my camera and daguerreotype van, which I called Louis (after Louis Daguerre, one of the fathers of photography). Photographing the Park made it “real” for me, so that it not only existed in my imagination, but physically on a sheet of silver.

LY: What does Yosemite mean to you?



Binh Danh, Photographs from Binh Danh’s Redwood Glen album, 1987, color prints (fig. 2)

DANH: Looking at photographs of the National Parks as a kid was a way for me to escape the boredom of working at my father’s television repair shop every day after school. It was not until the fifth grade, during a class camping trip, that I ventured into the “wilderness,” and this had a profound affect on me. It was the first time I was away from home, so naturally I was nervous and excited. My father bought me a camera for this very special occasion. When we arrived at the campground, the first thing I did, even before exiting the bus, was to pull out my camera and snap a photograph through the foggy bus window. I did not know that this was the start of my life as a photographer. I still have these pictures today and every time I look at them, I am transported back to my childhood, trying to make sense of my life through

the lens of a camera (fig. 2). The camera has given me the desire to never stop learning. Photography is the tool in which I examine the world in all of its complexity, and it all started with a trip into the forest.

LY: In photographic representations, Yosemite evokes for me those sublime iconic black-and-white photographs by Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams. I noticed many of the daguerreotypes included in the exhibit captured the well-known sight of Bridalveil Falls at Yosemite, a place that was also made visible in many of the photographs taken by Watkins and Adams (fig. 3). What drew you to focus on this site/sight?

DANH: Bridalveil Falls is my favorite scenery to photograph in Yosemite Valley. I

wanted to photograph the waterfall from many different angles to show how it’s the same fall, but it never looks the same. Overall, I wanted to show the greatest hits of Yosemite Valley, in much the same ways as Watkins and Adams, and thousands of photographers before me had done. I approached Yosemite Valley with classical eyes as I based my compositions off my memory of Yosemite as I had seen it in those early photographs.

LY: In what ways are your framings of Yosemite different from those of Carleton and Adams, who are both white American artists? Do their works influence your ways of seeing and photographing Yosemite?

DANH: Yes, absolutely, one cannot photograph Yosemite Valley without Watkins and Adams peeking over his shoulder.

These are photo gods and I often found myself praying to them to give me a stunning shot. In reality, it’s really hard to make a bad picture of Yosemite Valley. Good pictures are everywhere you turn. It’s quite overwhelming. I am influenced more by Carleton E. Watkins than Ansel Adams because Watkins was one of the first photographers to make really large photographs of Yosemite Valley. He had to carry his darkroom tent into the landscape and coated his 18x22 glass plate under difficult conditions. I imagine in his time just finding a way into Yosemite Valley was hard enough. Today we have good roads and maps, friendly park rangers; we could even go online and look at web cams, or check the weather before we jump into the car. Watkins, Muybridge, Adams, and many other white photographers who came before me defined Yosemite for us. They were the white forefathers

of American landscape photography who shaped and defined the visual culture of Yosemite. Photographs of Yosemite began to circulate right after the Civil War and brought the nation together.

So those early photographs of Yosemite are very important to my research. I like to see what types of photographs have already been made of Yosemite. These pictures influenced my own framing. First, I didn’t want to make photographs that look like Adams; I would be wasting my time, but at the same time I didn’t want to be too experimental. I want the public to be able to relate to the work, too. I want them to think about Watkins, Muybridge, Adams, and even their own photographs of Yosemite. I gravitated towards the daguerreotype because the images on my plates are reflections of the Park, mirror images. Daguerreotypes were known as a mirror with a memory. I wanted the viewers to reflect into the work and they could also see themselves, seeing their own faces on El Capitan.

LY: What does Yosemite mean to an Asian-American artist? Specifically to a Vietnamese-American artist?

DANH: I can only speak from my own perspective and feelings about Yosemite as a refugee. Growing up in a Vietnamese-American family, the outdoors to me was a “white” space. Because money was tight, as a family we did not venture into the wilderness. Camping for me was what white people did; it was not for people who ran through the jungles at night to get onto a fishing boat and head into the



Carleton E. Watkins, “Pohono, or the Bridal Veil [sic], 900 feet, from the Coulterville Trail, Yosemite Valley, Mariposa County, CA”, circa 1865-1866, stereograph. (fig. 3)

South China Sea. As a family, we already camped in a refugee camp before coming to the United States. So it never made sense to my parents to take the family out into the woods and expose us to the elements. But like most Asian-American kids we wanted to fit into the mainstream culture. I remember visiting my best friend's home and seeing his vacation pictures in the woods, and I wished that I was in those pictures.

A couple of years ago, I was visiting an antique photo trade show and found a wonderful tintype capturing three Chinese, perhaps in California, posing in front of a studio backdrop depicting a forest scene (fig. 4). This image made me wonder about how the Asian body fits into the natural landscape of North America. During the California gold rush, Chinese laborers built the railroads, and dug the mines, but a lot of those depictions are written out of history. Being Asian-American, I am able to negotiate my connection to the land and the history of the United States through my work.

LY: You have been creating art that deals with different aspects of landscape of Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) and now Yosemite. Why are you so interested in exploring the body and materiality of nature and landscape in your artwork?

DANH: For me landscape is what defines me. When I am somewhere new or unfamiliar, I am constantly in dialogue with the past, present, and my future self. When I am thinking about landscape, I am



Unknown photographer, "Three Chinese Men", ca. 1860's, tintype. (fig. 4)

thinking about those who have stood on this land before me. Whoever they are, hopefully history recorded their makings on the land for me to study and contemplate. In my work about the Vietnam-American War, I was exploring the body in a war and how the land remembers the trauma that the body encountered. Now living in Arizona with its anti-immigration stands and suspicion of foreigners, I am more cautious of my surroundings. Here, the foreign body becomes more politicized. It's like that song by the Mexican band, Los Tigres del Norte: "I didn't cross the border, the border crossed me." And just this week in Wisconsin, a white supremacist walked into a Sikh Temple, opened fire, and killed six people. I was sickened and saddened to learn of the news. There are those who will always believe that the non-white body doesn't belong here in this landscape and will go

to any means to get rid of us.

LY: Why do you use daguerreotypes and not print photography to capture the landscape of Yosemite?

DANH: I am interested in how we as a nation of immigrants and refugees could "reflect" on these daguerreotypes and see our faces in this landscape. This quote by Carl Pope from the PBS series, the National Parks: America's Best Idea sums up my feeling of "picturing" Yosemite:

"My sense is that our special connection with the National Parks comes from the fact that we're a nation of immigrants. We're a nation of people for whom this is not home, and the National Parks are what anchor and root us on this continent. They are the meaning of home for many of us. They're what it means to be an American, to inhabit this continent. It's at the end of the immigrant experience, and they're what take you and say, 'Now I am an American.'"

LY: By contrast to 19th-century daguerreotype, which is small, yours are large. What are their measurements? Are you trying to transform this 19th-century medium into a more contemporary one by making them larger?

DANH: Well, the size I mostly use, full plate (6.5 x 8.5 inch), was a 19th century size. Pretty much, if you want to make a photograph that is 6.5 x 8.5 inch, you would need a camera that takes that size plate, too. Although the full plate size was

around, it wasn't too popular in the portrait studio. One could guess that it would cost much more to commission a full-plate portrait. In my case, I am interested in making landscape photography so that size was perfect. I do find it interesting that the full size plate is perfect to view one's own face, like in a mirror. I think that's where the 8 x 10 inch size came from. Its measurement can fit a human head with 1:1 ratio. At any rate, most of the cased images we encounter are small, even half-plate (4.25 x 5.5 inch) are rare. So seeing a daguerreotype that large would be new a experience for most people.

LY: As you know, small and intimate daguerreotypes were used as "memento mori" to remember loved ones who died young in the 19th century. Moreover, they were not created to be display on the walls of a gallery at all. Is it a challenge to find the right lighting for your large-scale daguerreotypes when they are displayed in a gallery space? What is lost and what is gained in viewing daguerreotype in this type of setting?

DANH: Well, for me, viewing art in a gallery is about community. When we visit a gallery and we look at a work of art, most of the time we are sharing that space with someone else and we experience the work together. Jeff Koons' "Michael Jackson and Bubbles" sculpture at SFMOMA is a great example of how visitors to a museum interact with art and with others. People want to be photographed with it, and they're waiting for their turn. Strangers would talk to each other. Some would even hand a stranger their camera to ask

for a picture with them in it. It's quite fascinating to watch. That's why I like to see my daguerreotypes exhibited in a gallery. I want people to interact with them. See themselves and strangers in the reflection of the silver surface. Of course what is lost is the intimacy of viewing a daguerreotype. Depending on where these works end up -- in private or public collection -- some of them won't see the reflection of the public after this exhibit.

LY: What kind of camera do you use to capture images reproduced in these daguerreotypes?

DANH: I use old box cameras from India made by the Vageeswari Camera Works Company, which I found on eBay. I have several kits that take plate holders rather than film holders for modern box cameras. These cameras were made to take dry glass plates. I have several formats: a full-plate size camera (6.5 x 8.5 inch), a half-plate camera (4.5 x 6.5 inch), a 8.5 x 15 inch plate camera, and a 12 x 10 inch plate camera.

LY: I know that you are developing these daguerreotypes using the old-fashioned process. Can you explain to me systematically how you go about creating and developing these daguerreotypes? Do you have a darkroom at home? How long does it take to create one? Are the materials expensive?

DANH: This question took me five years to figure out: how can one make daguerreotypes in contemporary times? I could start with your last question, YES

IT'S VERY EXPENSIVE. And it's not really the cost of the silver plate, iodine, bromine, and mercury, etc. It is the time I pour into my studio that I can never get back. I love the daguerreotype process, but at the same time I hate it too. At first when I was starting out, the process was so unpredictable. I learned to make "Bequerel" daguerreotypes on my own when I was an art student at San Jose



Unknown Photographer, Glacier Point, Yosemite Valley, date unknown.

State University in 1999. The “Becquerel” process was quite easy to master because it didn’t require mercury and bromine. At that time, I was working on a series of daguerreotypes about mortality. I recalled visiting an exhibition at the San Jose Museum of Art by the Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide. And on the wall was a quote by Jean Cocteau, “Photography is the only way to kill death,” which Iturbide often mentions when she talks about her way of taking pictures. This quote had stayed with me through the years in my own art practice. Photography brings people back to life, and the daguerreotype is the perfect medium to address our notions of death and memory. I was happy with my results working with the “Becquerel” process in some of my early college work, but after comparing my work to those daguerreotypes of the 19th century, my “Becquerel” plates lack something. So I put the work away and not until about 2006 did I decide to give the daguerreotype process another try. I got help from several contemporary daguerreotypists, but mostly I learned on my own from reading 19th-century accounts of the process, making thousands of mistakes, and learning along the way. It was a long journey; I didn’t arrive here overnight. It took me hours and hours of polishing copper plates, and then plating them with silver, and then polishing them again until I got a plate that would work for me. And on top of that I was trying to understand the steps of fuming the plate with iodine and bromine vapors, and the colors the plate cycles through. Each color gives different results in different lighting conditions. And knowing how to use the colors of the plates to suit the types of lighting

condition is one of the many factors in getting a good image. So at first I made daguerreotypes in the darkroom by exposing the image onto the plate under an enlarger. This was great for making multiples, but the trade off was that the image quality didn’t come near to those of the one-of-a-kind 19th-century daguerreotype. On the other hand, mistakes are more forgiving because you are not working in the landscape. When I am sensitizing, exposing, and developing in the landscape, which I have done with the Yosemite work, there are so many more factors that came into play towards ruining your image. It’s the “plein air” way of making photography. Because the exposure is quite long, about a minute or two at f16, I tried to avoid windy days. But the temperature in my van could throw me off, too. Anyway, I’ll skip the technical part in answering your question. Most if it wouldn’t make sense to the public. To sum up my response to your question, I just became better at my craft as I learned more about the process. I am trying to get as close to those daguerreotypes of the 19th century as possible. I know I have a long way to go, but I have come to a point where I am happy to share these with viewers and collectors. Ansel Adams once said that he often compares his prints to daguerreotypes to see if he made successful prints. You could see why it has taken me so long to arrive where I am at today, and I am not anyway near Adams’ prints.

LY: How many trips did you make to Yosemite? How long do you stay each time? Was there a specific season that you preferred to visit Yosemite? Did you camp out to be

able to observe the effects of the changing temperature and lighting of specific places and sites that you like to photograph?

DANH: I did all of that. I visited Yosemite all year long on day trips and sometimes stayed overnight in a motel. I started the project three years ago. Even when I was traveling on the art circuit, my mind was on Yosemite. I was eager to come home so I can gear up Louis, my daguerreotype van, and head out to Yosemite. I wanted to photograph more during the winter; I wanted snow in my photographs, but the weather was unpredictable. Sometime the snow melted before I had a chance to enter the park. I observed the changing of the light during the different seasons. There are four similar photographs of Yosemite Falls that depict the capacity of the falls during different seasons. You can also see snow in some and almost no water in another. This is why photographing Yosemite is so interesting and why the daguerreotype process is such a challenge. If you miss the opportunity to photograph, then it’s gone, and you can only pray to Adams or Watkins to give you another chance.

LY: I know that you are an avid collector of artifacts that are related to your research and to your creative process. When did you start collecting, and why?

DANH: I started collecting when I was a young art student. I thought that collecting and going through the work was a way for me to prove it to myself and others that I just didn’t get my facts in a history book and repeat what other had written. I wanted to develop my own resources. Having said

that, I also collect books relating to my research interests. They are piling up here, and there is so little time in a day to get through them.

LY: We met for the first time at your first solo exhibit at the Sesnon Gallery at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 2002. We have known each other for ten years now. How do you think you have evolved as an artist, from your first solo show to an accomplished international artist? How does your maturity as an artist reflect in your art?

DANH: I can’t believe that was ten years ago. One thing for sure is that I am not as nervous as when I was then as a young art student. Since 2002, I have had about 25 solo shows, most at museums and colleges. Much has happened in those ten years. I have traveled all over the United

States; lived in Paris, France; visited Vietnam and Sydney, Australia. My work has been collected by many prestigious and established institutions, such as the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Now I am an Assistant Professor of Art at the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University, Tempe. Having said all that, I feel that I am barely scratching the surface of the national and international art world. All I can do is keep moving forward. Through the years, I have become better with my craft, that’s a given. The more artists work with their tools, the better they become at their craft. It’s muscle memory. Also, I edit a lot more and throw away more artwork. I do



Unknown Photographer, Mirror Lake, Yosemite Valley, August 8, 1932.

believe my work is getting stronger, both with the image and idea. I hope this new series on Yosemite is equally surprising as my last series, “Vietnam-Nebraska.” In art making, you have to keep doing something new to stay the same.

LY: What kind of advice would you give to artists who are starting out?

DANH: That is the most exciting time to be an artist, just starting out. There’s so much you want to try, and the future is within reach, but also it can seem so far away. I would have to say never stop playing and as you play, you learn. Also find an art program that works for you, build an art com-

munity, and never stop creating art.

LY: What are some of the art projects you have coming up in the near future?

DANH: I would like to travel with and work out of my van, Louis. I plan to visit other National Parks in the Southwest of the United States, Joshua Tree, and the Grand Canyon. I plan to take a road trip with Louis throughout the South, up to Virginia, and stopping by some Civil War sites. I am continuing my collaboration with Robert Schultz at Roanoke College. We are exploring the landscapes of war, monuments, memorials, photography, and literature by Whitman. This project is tentatively titled Specimen Days: Civil War, Walt Whitman, and Renewal. Please look out for some of my new work; the journey continues.

Boreth Ly is Assistant Professor of Southeast Asian Art History and Visual Culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He was born in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and educated in France and the United States. Ly has conducted field research and traveled extensively in Southeast Asia. At the University of California, Santa Cruz, he teaches courses on ancient and Contemporary Art of Southeast Asia and its diaspora. He has published numerous articles on the visual culture of Southeast Asia and its diaspora; in addition, he has co-edited a book, with Nora Taylor, *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*. Ithaca, New York: SEAP, 2012.