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

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. 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.

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.

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 Arizona State University, Tempe. Danh is a recognized international artist, as well as an accomplished 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
1 Roth, Moira, Gleanings #6: Binh Danh blog, November 2011.
ON THE SUBJECT OF Binh Danh: Yosemite

BIRTHLY: 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. 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 family when I was in the fifth grade, during a class camping trip, that I entered 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 notice 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); a place that I wanted to photograph the waterfall from many different angles to show how it’s the same fall, but it looks the same overall. I wanted to show the greatest hits of Yosemite Valley in much the same way as Watkins and Adams, and thousands of photographers before me had done. I approached Yosemite Valley with classical eyes as I visualized my compositions off my memory of Yosemite as I had seen in in those early photographs. LY: In what ways are your framings of Yosemite different from those of Carleton Adams and Ansel Adams, who are both white American artists? Do their works influence your ways of seeing and photographing Yosemite?

DANH: Yes, absolutely, I cannot photograph Yosemite Valley without Watkins and Adams posing over my shoulder. These are photos god 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. Good pictures are everywhere you turn. It’s quite overwhelming. I am influenced more by Carleton L. Watkins than Ansel Adams because Watkins was one of the first photographers to make large photographs of Yosemite Valley. He had to carry his darkroom tent into the landscape and coat 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 very 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, Maybridge, Adams, and many other white photographers who came before me defined Yosemite. They were the white forefathers of American landscape photographers who shaped and defined the visual culture of Yosemite. Photographs of Yosemite were “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 of color. Growing up as a refugee. I wanted the viewers to reflect into the mirror images. Daguerreotypes were known as a mirror with a memory. I want them to think about Watkins, Maybridge, Adams and many other white photographers who came before me defined Yosemite. They were the white forefathers of American landscape photographs who shaped and defined the visual culture of Yosemite. Photographs of Yosemite were “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 of color. I ran through the jungles at night to get onto a fishing boat and head into the open sea. BORETH 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 of color. Growing up as a refugee. When I visited Yosemite, I wanted to show the greatest hits of Yosemite Valley, in much the same way as Watkins and Adams, and thousands of photographers before me had done. 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 family when I was in the fifth grade, during a class camping trip, that I entered 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 notice 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); a place that I wanted to photograph the waterfall from many different angles to show how it’s the same fall, but it looks the same overall. I wanted to show the greatest hits of Yosemite Valley in much the same way as Watkins and Adams, and thousands of photographers before me had done. I approached Yosemite Valley with classical eyes as I visualized my compositions off my memory of Yosemite as I had seen in in those early photographs. LY: What does Yosemite mean to you?
South China Sea. As a family, we already camped in a refugee camp before coming to the United States. I learned to respond to my sense to my parents to take the family out camping and to adapt to the elements. But like most Asian-American kids we wanted to fit into the mainstream culture. I remember visiting my friend’s home and seeing his vacation pictures in the woods, and I wished that I was there playing in the woods. 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 think about the Asian body fitting into the natural landscape of North America. As a child, I would go to friends’ homes and see huge Chinese lanterns built the railroads, and dug the mines, but a lot of those depictions are written out of history by being Asian-American, I am able to negotiate my connection to the land and the history of the United States through my work.

You have been creating art that deals with different aspects of landscape of Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos), landscape of Yosemite Valley, landscape of the South China Sea. As a family, we already started with the Vietnam War, I was exploring the body in a war and how the body remembers the trauma that the body encountered: how living in Asia with its anti-immigration stance and suspension of foreigners, I am more cautious of my surroundings here, the foreign body becomes more political. It’s like that song by the Mexican band, Los Tigres del Norte: “I didn’t cross the border, the border crossed me.”

When I am somewhere new or unfamiliar, I am constantly in dialogue with my environment and I am acutely aware of my surroundings. Here I think that where the 8 x 10 inch size came from. Its characteristic ratio is 1:1. At any rate, most of the cased images we encounter are small, even half-plates (4 5/8 x 5 1/2 inch) are rare. So seeing a daguerreotype that large would be new for most people.

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, see our faces in this landscape. This nation of immigrants and refugees 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, the money 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 “less-queried” daguerreotypes on my own when I was an art student at San Jose State University. I was learning about the process to make daguerreotypes in contemporary times? I guess I've become interested in exploring the body and materiality of nature and landscape in your artwork.

The landscape of Yosemite?

DANH: Well, for me, viewing art in a gallery is about community. When we go to 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 each other. People want to be photographed with it, and they’re waiting for their turn. Strangers would talk to each other. Someone 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 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.

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 Vayugewali Camera Works company, which I found on eBay. I have several kits that take plate holders rather than film holders. I have a full-plate camera, a half-plate camera, a 4 5/8 x 5 1/2 inch, a 5 x 7 inch plate camera, and a 12 x 10 inch plate camera.

I know that you are developing these daguerreotypes using the old-fashioned process. Can you explain to me systematically? How do 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 do with these tools? In the studio that I have I could start with your last question, YES I KNOW. How do you go about creating and developing these daguerreotypes using the old-fashioned process? Can you explain to me systematically? How do you make do with these tools? In the studio that I have I could start with your last question, YES I KNOW. How do you make do with these tools? In the studio that I have I could start with your last question, YES I KNOW. How do you make do with these tools? In the studio that I have I could start with your last question, YES I KNOW.
The "Becquerel" of the plates to suit the types of lighting the plate cycles through. Each color gives you a understanding the steps of fuming the plate with again until I got a plate that would work for overnight. It took me hours and hours of mistakes, and learning along the way. Photography brings people back in life, and the daguerreotype is the perfect medium to address our notions of death and memory. I was happy with my results and 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 and practice. I was happy with my results and practice. I was happy with my results and practice. I was happy with my results and practice.

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