



BRIAN

DOAN

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VILCEK FOUNDATION



BRIAN
DOAN
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09/14 – 11/09/2013

OPAQUE
TRANSLUCENCY &
LUSTROUS OPACITY
[DETAIL]
2013
GLASS, FIBERGLASS,
ACRYLIC PAINT,
GRAPHITE, PLYWOOD,
FORMICA AND
LED LIGHT BULB



BRIAN DOAN: MEMORY AND IDENTITY

FOREWORD BY
RICK KINSEL
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

While the Vilcek Foundation's mission has always been to support immigrant artists, we are particularly pleased to give Vietnamese-born Brian Doan his first solo exhibition in New York, for he is not only an immigrant but also an artist whose work specifically focuses on the traumas and psychological complexities of the immigrant experience.

Doan's own experience in coming to America was particularly complicated; the war that precipitated his immigration was in fact waged upon his country by the United States itself. While his work is based upon the essential question of individual identity, it also questions the nature of the struggle between North Vietnam and the United States and the vast differences between the two cultures. Perhaps more importantly, it demonstrates the emotional cost of violent foreign intervention to civilian populations. In an era of history in which the civilian populations in both Iraq and Afghanistan have experienced similar devastation and loss, Doan's work is timely indeed.

Much of the irony in Doan's work is directed not at America but rather at the Communists of North Vietnam, as the conquerors of Saigon captured Doan's army-officer father and ultimately kept him incarcerated for nearly a decade. During those sad and difficult years, Doan and his remaining family were relentlessly bombarded with North Vietnamese political propaganda, much of which echoes through the works in this gallery. Like many South Vietnamese whose existence was shattered by the war, the Doan family (along with 1.4 million other Vietnamese) eventually chose to leave their Communist-dominated homeland and immigrate to the United States.

Doan's works, almost all of which were specifically commissioned for this exhibition, evoke the fragility and irony of his adult existence between these two very different cultures, even as he struggles with the memory of his own broken home and war-traumatized childhood.

The works that the artist has installed in the gallery have been highly experimental, and in fact, he has omitted a number of sculptural works (some in ice and some in glass). In that sense, Doan strikes me as a restless, process-oriented artist whose ongoing work is closely related to the act of remembering: in his work, as in his life, he seems to be constantly finding new ways to put trauma into perspective. In discarding some constructions while cherishing and holding closely to others, he seems to speak to the experience of all immigrants and, by extension, the experience of all Americans. For in the end, we are all immigrants, and we are all constantly working to put the past into order and to get on with the business of living. We are therefore particularly proud to present Brian Doan's work at the Vilcek Foundation Gallery. ★

HÔMEHÔMEHÔME
2013
NEON TUBE,
ARGON GAS
AND WIRE



ARTIST STATEMENT

During the end of the Vietnam War, when I was growing up, I was lost in a divided society and a flood of propaganda. I became mute and mistrustful.

When the war ended and my family was forced to leave, I began the endless search for a place to call home. Now, years later, memories are triggered by similar conflicts. I am still trapped in the dogma of my youth.

Occasionally, my art is condemned because of its ambiguity, but I share the same history as my people, and I understand their pain and anger. However, I cannot let ideology control my thoughts. My art is a space to investigate self-identity.

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.

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.

I have visited the past with a gentle heart, still searching for home. ★

BRIAN DOAN

SEPTEMBER 2013

OPAQUE
TRANSLUCENCY &
LUSTROUS OPACITY
2013
GLASS, FIBERGLASS,
ACRYLIC PAINT,
GRAPHITE, PLYWOOD,
FORMICA AND
LED LIGHT BULB

THE COLOR OF MEMORY

ESSAY BY
VIỆT LÊ
PHD





PAGE 10, TOP LEFT
BHCM

2009–2012
ARCHIVAL INKJET PRINT,
MICRO PIGMENT INK
AND WATERCOLOR

PAGE 10, BOTTOM LEFT
BTQD

2009–2013
ARCHIVAL INKJET PRINT,
MICRO PIGMENT INK
AND WATERCOLOR

PAGE 11, TOP RIGHT
BMN

2009–2012
ARCHIVAL INKJET PRINT,
MICRO PIGMENT INK
AND WATERCOLOR

PAGE 11, BOTTOM RIGHT
BNNL

2009–2013
ARCHIVAL INKJET PRINT,
MICRO PIGMENT INK
AND WATERCOLOR

^

BJL

2009–2013
ARCHIVAL INKJET PRINT,
MICRO PIGMENT INK
AND WATERCOLOR



the Buddha in his inward gaze. Rendered in glass and graphite, these busts point at the changing, malleable nature of ideas. The main glass figure looms on a trapezoidal structure; below, the seven identical graphite busts face helter-skelter on an abstracted boat-shaped platform. In a March 2013 interview in his Long Beach studio, Doan stated that “ideology is so clear and beautiful; the original idea is clear” but becomes “distorted” through interpretation and adaptation by government and the masses.

A series of black-and-white staged photographs with drawings referencing iconic Việt Nam-era images also highlight the constructed nature of mass media, memory, and identity. Donning various guises, Doan assumes the role of historical actors: Hồ Chí Minh in **BHCM** (2009–2012); John Lennon with Yoko Ono in their Bed-In for Peace in **BJL** (2009–2013); Thích Quảng Đức, the Buddhist monk who self-immolated in protest of the South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm's anti-Buddhist regime in **BTQD** (2009–2013); and so on. A painted car door—**You put a gun in my hand** (2013)—references an infamous South Vietnamese soldier's hand shooting a gun. Discussing these provocative images, Doan states, “One person, one Vietnamese guy plays different roles, different sides—he is still like you, he is your brother.” No matter what side of history we may fall on, we are all interconnected; we are all family. The artist writes, “There is still a gap between each Vietnamese from both sides, and also within. Know who the real enemy is—the most dangerous enemy is the Self.”⁵ Doan's work attempts to bridge divides.

⁵ E-mail exchange with the artist, June 7, 2013.

^ **YOU PUT A GUN IN MY HAND**
2013
CAR DOOR,
ACRYLIC PAINT
AND
PHOTOGRAPHIC
TRANSFER

WHITE CHRISTMAS
[DETAIL]
2012-2013
VIDEO, PLASTIC MODELS,
ACRYLIC PAINT,
ENAMEL PAINT,
VINTAGE TELEVISION,
PLYWOOD, FORMICA
AND MEDIA PLAYER





▲ **WHITE CHRISTMAS**
2012–2013
VIDEO,
PLASTIC MODELS,
ACRYLIC PAINT,
ENAMEL PAINT,
VINTAGE TELEVISION,
PLYWOOD, FORMICA
AND MEDIA PLAYER

SPORADIC DIASPORA

For diasporic subjects, the gaps between official history and individual memory are immense. Anthropologist Ashley Carruthers argues that the distinction between diaspora and homeland is collapsed for overseas Vietnamese through the real and symbolic movement of goods and bodies. Currently, there are more than three million overseas Vietnamese, a number which encompasses several waves of immigrants. 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. Brian Doan's family left as H.O. (Humanitarian Operation) refugees in 1991, the last wave to leave Việt Nam.⁶ The H.O. program was agreed upon between the U.S. and Việt Nam. It allowed high-ranking South Vietnamese officers, soldiers, and government officials—many who spent several years in reeducation prison camps—and their families to leave Việt Nam.

Several works in the exhibit deal with this legacy as well as with the ties between fathers and sons, history and memory. A small, simple, all-white video installation entitled *White Christmas* (2012–2013) is composed of a television monitor and small figures atop the monitor. Among the figures, a helicopter hovers in midair. Below, a small group of civilians with suitcases await their departure. A lone military officer, his arms crossed on his chest, stands in front of a Jeep. This is Doan's last childhood memory of his father, a colonel in the South Vietnamese army. Doan recalls the scene in which his family left the country by helicopter:

I was in first grade, and I had packed a toy airplane in my suitcase. I refused to go with my family, refused to put on my seatbelt in the helicopter. Grandma carried a bunch of bananas onto the helicopter. It was so wise of her; we had no food for the next three days.... That day was the first time I saw my dad in uniform. He said he would leave soon; the rest of my family and I left first. I didn't see him until ten years later, after he came back from reeducation camp.⁷

The white figures are frozen in time. On the television screen, an abstracted flurry of white drifts in front of a black background as the song "White Christmas" plays. On the morning of April 29, 1975, when the South Vietnamese regime fell to the North Vietnamese Communists, Operation Frequent Wind took effect. It was a large-scale helicopter evacuation by the U.S. government of South Vietnamese and American civilians and military personnel. Irving Berlin's song "White Christmas" was the code that launched

⁶ Seth Mydans, "Old Soldiers: The Last Refugees Free to Leave Vietnam," *The New York Times*, September 4, 1992. Accessed May 1, 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/14/us/old-soldiers-the-last-refugees-free-to-leave-vietnam.html>>

⁷ Author interview with Brian Doan, Long Beach, California, March 11, 2013.

this massive escape operation: “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas.” Doan’s family missed the fleeing helicopters in 1975 and left much later. They were among the last of a seventeen-year exodus of Vietnamese refugees that ended up across the globe.

Doan was born in Quảng Ngãi, in central Việt Nam. After the war, Doan’s family evacuated to Sài Gòn then subsequently moved to the south-central coast—Đà Nẵng, Nha Trang, and Long Khánh—in order to survive. After relocating to the United States, Doan’s immediate family moved from San Francisco to San Jose to Little Sài Gòn, California. Doan’s brother and sister have since relocated to Denver, Colorado. Doan recalls, “In Denver, it was the first white Christmas I ever had.” The installation’s song and the white noise on-screen echo the gaps then and now—escape and arrival. Speaking about this contemplative piece, the artist states that it is about “the moment of separation between a son and father, about losing my childhood place forever, about moving from city to city that we couldn’t stay in for more than two years...” Doan’s artwork captures this liminal position, forever suspended in between in time and space.

Suspension is a recurring motif. In a larger piece titled *Reminiscence* (2013), a projected video of floating jellyfish is shown with hovering helicopters. Upon closer inspection, these helicopters are paper lanterns, evoking the paper lanterns lit and carried by children during the popular Tết Trung Thu (Mid-Autumn Moon Festival). Again, the line between the personal and political is blurred—military might and childhood memories are intertwined.

When Doan visited an aquarium in Long Beach with his six-year-old son, they were both fascinated by the ethereal jellyfish. For Doan, the jellyfish remind him of war and opening parachutes. But their opaque forms are also beautiful, transcendent. As the jellyfish open and close against a dark background, text in Vietnamese and English fades in and out: *father, country*, and so on. This work is about generations of fathers and sons and the afterlife of war and wounds. This work is an homage to his father, who passed away in August 2012. It is a musing on loss and longing. Poet Robert Hass writes, “All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking.” In recontextualizing and reappropriating historical archives and iconic forms, Doan shifts the way we perceive legacies of loss.

We use the word *longing*, Hass observes, “because desire is full / of endless distances.”⁸

In this suite of works, Brian Doan is still grappling with loss: the loss of his father, the loss of his childhood home. He desires to bridge the interminable distances. Việt Nam and the United States are countries of memory. We’re longing for home. We’re haunted, we’re homesick. The gaps are intimate, immense. Home is everywhere and nowhere. Home is both leaving and returning. Gently holding his helicopter paper lanterns—symbols of departure and arrival—the artist says, “**This is the color of memory.**”



▲ **CHOPPER II**
2013
BAMBOO, WIRE
AND VIETNAMESE
HANDMADE PAPER
(DÓ)

▼ **REMINISCENCE**
[VIDEO STILL/DETAIL]
2013
VIDEO, BAMBOO, WIRE
AND VIETNAMESE
HANDMADE PAPER
(DÓ)





REMINISCENCE
[DETAIL]
2013
VIDEO, BAMBOO,
WIRE AND
VIETNAMESE
HANDMADE PAPER
(DÓ)

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