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BINH DANH'S IMAGES

Literary critics emphasize that stories and poems are intertextual. When one reads, one hears what Roland Barthes called "off-stage voices," references to prior texts. Visual "texts" are also intertextual, of course. Binh Danh's images are striking in part because they are so vividly and concretely intertextual. Within each leafy image is a photo that we have seen already—maybe not the exact photo we know but one like it. How we react to his images depends on our experience with the earlier photos and on how we see the text of the photo interacting with the text of the leaf.

I lived in Vietnam for four years during the war—from 1968 to 1970 and from 1971 to 1973. I taught English and did refugee relief work first with International Voluntary Services and then with the Fulbright Program. My experience of Vietnam was direct, not mediated solely by images, but nevertheless some photographs of the Vietnam War have penetrated my mind probably as deeply as they have penetrated the minds of those who never set foot on Vietnamese soil. This could be because many wartime photos are about the horrors of combat, something I did not experience, but I think it has more to do with the power of photographs to influence, channel, and organize our memories. It seems not to matter whether these memories be of things we have only heard of or of events in which we participated.

I experienced most of the so-called iconic Vietnam war photos some years after they first appeared in newspapers and magazines. When the war began to escalate in the mid-60s I was in the Peace Corps in Africa. In Vietnam where I worked (Danang and Hue) I didn't have access to American newspapers and magazines. On trips to Saigon I'd pick up a copy of *Time* or *Newsweek*, both readily available around the old

Opera House near the hotels Continental and Caravelle. I believe it was on one of these trips that I first saw the pictures of Kent State, including the one of Mary Ann Vecchio, fourteen years old at the time, screaming as she knelt over the body of Jeffrey Miller, shot by National Guardsmen. That photograph has always haunted my memory. Other photos I encountered later, many of them as I leafed through old magazines and newly written histories of the war searching for ways to present the conflict to my students in a class I have taught called Literature about the Vietnam War—photos like Malcolm W. Browne's photograph of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation; Larry Burrows's "Reaching Out" of an African American soldier, himself wounded, reaching out to a dying white comrade; Nick Ut's photo of the nine-year-old girl Kim Phuc fleeing from napalm, etc.

Of all these famous photographs, an important part of our collective memory of the war, the one that haunts me the most is Ronald Haeberle's photo of Vietnamese, including women and children, massacred at My Lai. This photo became an antiwar poster that I remember seeing in places where members of the antiwar movement gathered—college dorms, church basements, coffee houses in college towns. Included was this exchange from the questioning by the Army's Criminal Investigation Division of a participant in the massacre: Questioner: "And babies?" Participant: "Yes, and babies." That poster represents a kind of moral ground zero for me, a nightmare vision of evil.

To counter this vision I have a host of wonderful Vietnam-related experiences and images of a peaceful Vietnam that I've collected on trips back to Vietnam since the war ended. And now I have the intriguing art work of Binh Danh in which pictures of suffering, violence, and death are enshrouded by the greenness of life and hope. The fact that nature not only permeates the photos but creates the total image, as sunlight imprints the leaf and photo on a negative, reminds us of nature's power to create and recuperate. At the same time the fragility of Binh Danh's images—the fact that they are printed on thin, tiny leaves—reminds us that humans, armed with modern science and technology, can disrupt the delicate balance between the natural and the human. Binh Danh's works, like the plants they are printed on, are

produced by photosynthesis, the same process that the U.S.'s defoliation program was designed to inhibit. Evidence suggests that Agent Orange, one of the agents used to defoliate, has caused illness, birth defects, and chromosome alterations. In peacetime too, humans out of greed or ignorance often destroy nature and render it unable to hold us in its protective grasp. In Binh Danh's works, however, images of human suffering are cradled in the hand of nature.

One way nature comforts us is by erasing the physical evidence of war, making it easier to forget. Grass grows quickly, obscuring old battlegrounds. Although Binh Danh wraps images of suffering in green leaves, I do not think he wants us to forget the past. The careful inclusion of the old photographs suggests a need to resist nature's power to encourage forgetfulness. His works reflect a desire to remember and record. In an NPR interview Binh Danh wished his father and his friends would stop blaming themselves or the Americans for their defeat, but he didn't suggest it would be possible or desirable to forget the war completely. He told NPR that the first image he made was a portrait of his family. Though he grew up in America, the artist is very Vietnamese in his reverence for his family and for the past, including one's ancestors.

In 2001, I visited My Lai and saw the ditch where the massacre represented in that antiwar poster took place. Beating back the vegetation, establishing an exhibition there, seems right to me. We need to remember some things so that they will never happen again. But we also need a vision of rebirth and hope. The beauty of Binh Danh's creations is that in them remembrance of the past and hope for the future are so carefully intertwined.