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The Wonderful Mind and Eye of Mr Vo

Danh Vo's Potent Show



Danh Vo, *She was more like a beauty queen from a movie scene* (2009). Collection Chantal Crousel. Photo credit: Jean-Daniel Pellen, Paris © Danh Vo

By Allan Schwartzman

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Not since Félix Gonzáles-Torres or Matthew Barney has there been an artist who has worked with the breadth and precision of Danh Vo. This is made exquisitely apparent in the full, yet sparsely installed, mid-career survey that has just opened at the Guggenheim Museum ("[Danh Vo: Take My Breath Away](#)", until 9 May).

Vo commonly sources his materials from the remnants of history, spanning, in this exhibition alone, antiquity, Catholicism and the Kennedy administration—to name just three. His work is a potent and poetic fusion of the cultural, the political and the personal. It is conceptually and intellectually resolute, while humanistically abundant.

His oeuvre is borne from Conceptual art but feels vital, engaged in narrative and our times, as they unfold and transform the past. In a period when there is a lot of professional art being made, there is something exhilarating about an artist whose work is shrewd and complex, while visually still so accessible.

Some reviewers have criticized the work on show as being “complicit” with the market. My view is that, if you look closely, the opposite is the case: this is indeed an exquisitely curated exhibition. It puts everything Vo makes into perspective, where content is king and materials are the compelling vehicle of expression.



Installation view of Danh Vo وادي الحجارة at Museo Jumex, Mexico City (2014-15).
Courtesy Museo Jumex, Mexico City. Photo credit: Abigail Enzaldo and Emilio Bernabé García

The work often deals with the brutality of power, the troubling and occasionally surreal consequences of colonialism and the meanings and symbols of freedom. Vo is truly the embodiment of the global artist. Born in 1975 in South Vietnam, his parents fled the Communist regime when he was four years old in a homemade boat. Rescued at sea by a Danish freighter, the family settled in Denmark, where Vo grew up as a European greatly impacted by Western youth culture.

The work brings Vo's personal history together with many more sweeping political and cultural histories. Faith, belief, deceit, duality and irony are pondered with insight, poignancy and a quick-witted gallows humor, reanimating the fragments and ruins of history into works of art that reimagine sculpture.

“Vo is a master at presenting slices of horror, casually and without comment,” said the exhibition's curator Katherine Brinson as she walked us through the installation, referring to a series of obsequious, mundane, and even a little seductive letters from Henry Kissinger to the New York Post's then theater critic Leonard Lyons. In one, Kissinger apologizes for being unable

to attend a ballet performance because of the “contemplation of Cambodia”.

If you are new to the work, undoubtedly you will benefit from reading the wall labels so as to fully appreciate what is here. Yet Vo’s work is so satisfying that, while challenging various preconceptions about history and culture, he is also making some of the most affirmative and profound art of his generation.