



Stanford University

Conor Lauesen  
Stanford University  
Art & Art History Department  
Ph.D. 2019  
[Cmlauesen84@alumni.stanford.edu](mailto:Cmlauesen84@alumni.stanford.edu),  
[cmlauesen@gmail.com](mailto:cmlauesen@gmail.com)  
773.490.2581

Creaturely Life, Queer Ecology and Empires of Dispossession:  
Two Artists, Ly Tran Quynh Giang and Danh Vo



Figure 1. Ly Tran Quynh Giang, *Ho di dau 1*, 2013.



Figure 2. Danh Vo. A Detail from 'Take My Breadth Away.' Guggenheim Retrospective 2018.

This project explores the work of two contemporary artists Ly Tran Quynh Giang and Danh Vo through a lens of art ecocriticism, alternative queer histories and the necromancy of grief. In order to place these two artists in discourse, I contextualize questions of personal identity, historical trauma and national mythmaking in Vietnam. While both artists are ethnically Vietnamese (Quynh Giang lives mostly in Hanoi; Danh Vo is Danish-Vietnamese), embodied queerness and transgressive politics, aesthetically formal dissimilarities and anti-narratological views are what interest me most in their collective projects.

To be more specific, I uncover the pathos of Giang's pictures—their often thinly veiled mythical content and psychosomatic vernacular—through an art historical method of intertextuality, ecological critique and careful close-looking. What do we encounter in Giang's poetic visual world? How do the stakes of representation, creaturely possession and bodily fracture operate? Why is her aesthetic vocabulary—often explicitly erotic, actively inflected—a radical interface to current images of fetishized capital, mass-media culture and western commodification bombarding contemporary Vietnam?

In order to reveal the full stakes of Giang's project I perform a kind of feminist queering, and in turns suggest that her visual constellation of post-human motifs—a world of bleak creaturely life, fractured human social identification, and scattered remnants of environmental decay—ought to be read as a necromantically animate and subversive set of cultural icons. Giang's best paintings have a lifeforce; their charged refugee spirits create an atmospheric world of their own.

As a quick example, consider the uncanny picture *Ho di dau 1* [Where did they go 1?] (Fig. 1) 2013. The small painting shows a languidly posed, phantasmatic creature—a quixotic amalgam of human and animal—standing in the frontmost register of a forest landscape. In this transhuman portrait of otherness, a rabbit's face, owl's eyes and woman's body converge to form some otherworldly beast.

Whereas Giang's pictures require attention to sensuous pigment and a kind of microscopic archaeology, the oeuvre of Danh Vo appears, at first, to be imbued with a plurality of antithetical sentiments. I unveil these surface orientations, however, to be just that: a first material layer (at times figured as even obstinate, vulgar and affront), to the wider emotive cosmos of his project. With a dynamically robust sense of the past Danh Vo's work is part history and auto-biography; at once, critical assemblage and performative installation, reappropriated talismans and apprehended anti-capitalist documents. This detail view from 'Take My Breadth Away' is a sculptural fragment from western antiquity (Fig. 2).

For example, consider the chandelier fragment from ‘Take My Breadth Away’ (Fig. 3). Acquired by the artist through auction, the light fixture once hung as center piece at the Paris Peace Accords (1973). Through a creative process of aesthetic reappropriation and redemptive praxis, Danh Vo evokes questions of historical memory. What is collective recovery or trauma in the world of objects, bodies and life? How does inscription fill gaps? Where in his work do the spheres of materialism and phenomenology collide in a kind of post-monumentation? For Ly Giang and Danh Vo alike, a panoply of analogous terms and eddying dialectics triangulate—materiality and scale, possession and identity, territories and maps, history and fiction, duration and stasis. Danh Vo’s *Oma Totem* 2009 is another point of entry.

A recent article from Michael G. Vann entitled *Refugee Gothic* (summer 2019, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*) implicitly posits an askance ontological category of empowerment in exile. ‘Refugee gothic’ is a kind of helpful, preliminary theoretical language for our intervention. Moreover, Jinah Kim’s analysis of postcolonial grief and memory-building as a structure in *Postcolonial Grief: The Afterlives of the Pacific Wars in the Americas* (2019) is insightful. Kim writes transpacific noir is “a genre full of broken and degraded bodies, which makes visible the necropolitical that structures U.S. military dominance in the Pacific arena during and after the World War II era” (68-69). In my reading, Kim’s necropolitical domain of haunting and ruin, territories and power begins with sociological concepts from Avery Gordon. Gordon’s sublime idea of haunting “as an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely,” most evocatively helps guide us into the work of these two artists.

As a final example from Giang, consider the recently completed 2018 series of paintings *I see in the Garden* (Fig. 6). In this picture, two *trans-actors* reside in some uncanny interior space; twinning human-like spines are topped off by kaleidoscopic owls’ turning-heads. Freud’s *Sandman* and Apichatpong Weerasethakul *Cemetery of Splendor* are the kinds of interpolating forces at work. Here, at last, Giang’s melancholic personal visions and complex anthropomorphic subject matter meet; horizonless post-human landscapes reexamine both the foundational ground of narrative teleology, as well as human-animal-spirit relations to the natural world.

Monstrous apparitions of material, I suggest it is Giang’s strange *others* that best populate (unknowingly) the empty installation landscapes of Danh Vo. For example, think of the empty spaces and large-scale objects in ‘We the People.’ Figure six shows a replicated hand from the Statue of Liberty. Wooden scaffolding creates a barricade of sorts. Identifying the hand’s horizontality and familiar token gesture, viewers are kept at a distance. The body is centered. Fragmentation, ruins and

the gravitas of history compose the fabric of the show; an uncanny domain of spectral motion and material decay that is the root.

Ly Giang's anthropomorphic otherness gaze into these evacuated hollows: creatures and characters flip sides, objects and things see each other reverse and fresh; perhaps through Giang's painterly eyes and Danh Vo's cartographic webs, human actors and ghostly simulacrum learn to occupy new windows of time and place (Fig. 7).



Figure 3. Danh Vo. A Detail from 'Take My Breadth Away.' Guggenheim Retrospective 2018.



Figure 4. Danh Vo. *Oma Totem*. 2009. Made from Television, washing machine, refrigerator and a wood crucifix.

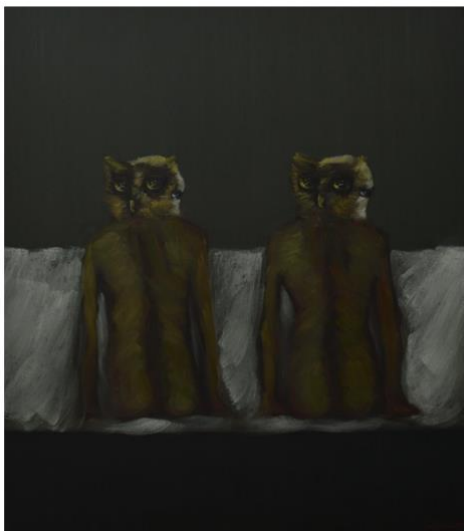


Figure 5. Ly Tran Quynh Giang. *I See in the Garden*. 2018



Figure 6. Detail from Danh Vo's "We the People," a model hand from his replica of the Statue of Liberty, Guggenheim Museum Retrospective 2018.



Figure 7. Ly Tran Quynh Giang. *Portrait*. 2010.