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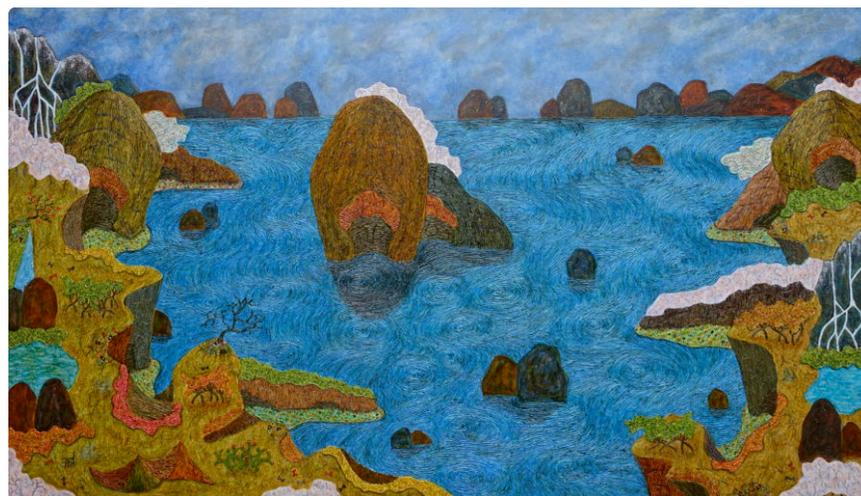
Hung Viet Nguyen: Searching for balance, practicing respect

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"Sacred Landscape II #21," by Hung Viet Nguyen

WITH DUE RESPECT TO MOTHER NATURE

Hung Viet Nguyen is among the talented artists in "South Bay Focus 2016"

by Bondo Wyszpolski

War upends everyone's life, doesn't it? In the 1960s and '70s, very few young men from this country wanted to go to Vietnam. From the latter 1970s and up into the 1990s, many people in Vietnam wanted to leave. Those who fled by sea, and we know them as "the boat people," ended up in surrounding Southeast Asian countries, some receptive to their plight and some not so much. Eventually many of these people were

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resettled elsewhere, with about half coming to the United States.

Hung Viet Nguyen was among the latter. He landed first in the Philippines, and after ten months came to California, sponsored by a brother who already lived here. That was in 1982. After a few months in Silicon Valley, Nguyen moved to the South Bay, to Torrance, and he's been here ever since, for well over 30 years.

It may not be quite as life-changing, but we're going to concentrate on his journey as an artist. His journey as a migrant has been over for more than three decades, but the journey of an artist can continue indefinitely.



Hung Viet Nguyen, with his art-in-progress. Photo by Bondo Wyszpolski

FINDING HIS MEDIUM

"In Vietnam, I loved art as a kid," Nguyen says. "I guess any child loves to draw, but I think I loved it more than other children." However, coming from a large family and an environment that didn't favor the pursuit of art, Nguyen went to Science University in Saigon where he studied biology.

He chose biology, he says, because at the time it required some drawing. The internet and the personal computer hadn't yet made their grand if perhaps intrusive appearances, and "Everything you saw you learned from observation. You'd look through the microscope and be surprised by what you saw." For these same reasons, he continued with biology after he came to the United States.

Although working full time as a fine artist was out of the question, Nguyen eventually harnessed his drawing skills and found work as a technical illustrator, or technical graphic artist. "I used whatever time I had left during the day, and at night, to do my artwork." Eventually he'd land a job at Boeing, from which he's now retired after working for the company for 25 years.

When Nguyen was growing up, the two secondary languages being taught in Vietnam were English and French. "I picked English because I heard people say that French is very difficult," he explains with a laugh. Interestingly, his wife, who was born in Vietnam, was raised in France and attended school there from kindergarten through college. So, speaking of French, "I would say that's her first language."



"Ancient Pine #20," by Hung Viet Nguyen

Nguyen may have begun with just a pen or a pencil and a sheet of paper, but gradually he swapped his pencil for a paintbrush.

"I drew a lot of pictures and I became curious about (other) materials, so from there I (advanced) to watercolor. After watercolor I did a couple of acrylics, but for me oil painting is still a mystery," though it's also the medium in which he's most at home.

"I don't know if I chose oil painting or if oil painting chose me," he says. While he's quite aware that many artists experiment with alternative materials, "I'm still loyal to my oil painting

because I haven't gotten to the top yet. I'm still learning."

That's what I mean by saying that the journey of an artist can continue indefinitely.

LANDSCAPES AND TEXTURE

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With the exception of some portraits, including some recent and ongoing studies of his elderly mother, Hung Viet Nguyen tends to favor landscape ("Nature gives me inspiration first of all."). These are not necessarily recognizable places like the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls, but rather haunts that tend to exist in the imagination or are composites of different sites composed in Nguyen's individual style. Two of the influences would be Chinese scroll painting and the work of David Hockney, such as the latter's "A Visit with Christopher and Don, Santa Monica Canyon," from 1984. In these works, several sequences in time can be viewed simultaneously.



"Sacred Landscape II #9," by Hung Viet Nguyen

Most of Nguyen's landscapes include an ocean, a river, or scenery with a waterfall. But the key, he says, is in the harmony, in the visual balance of the work.

Equally as important, and it's perhaps what lends Nguyen's pictures an edge, is the texture. It's like a weave, or a fabric.

Or like threads, he replies. "I build up the oil painting and I use a palette knife to sculpt, to remove or to put into it whatever shape I like." The result is a stationary work that seems to swirl at the same time.

It's hard not to think of Van Gogh and such pictures as his "Starry Night," and although Van Gogh is one of Nguyen's other influences, along with Gustav Klimt, Joan Miró, and Pablo Picasso, an influence just as powerful are the beautiful and calming Zen rock gardens. When carefully raked, they resemble moving water.

I mention that I once placed a toy tractor in the one at the Huntington Library. Nguyen laughs. "That's another form of art," he says. Or playful mischief, perhaps.

Yet another influence is Lucian Freud, whose work was recently on view in "London Calling" at the Getty Center. But that's not where Nguyen first saw his pictures. Rather, it was some years back at MoCA in downtown L.A. "I went to that exhibition three times to look at his paintings," he says. While Freud's style doesn't really compare with his, Nguyen explains that what attracts him is Freud's unwavering devotion to his craft, to his painting in oil, without being unduly bothered by the often whimsical shifts of contemporary art. It's that sense of dedication and purpose that Nguyen admires.



"Personage #3," by Hung Viet Nguyen

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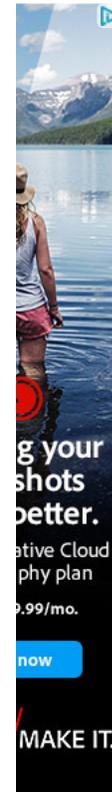
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"Ancient Pine #13," by Hung Viet Nguyen

A MATTER OF RESPECT

It may sound like an Eastern viewpoint, but Nguyen suggests there's a deeper connection between the artist and the artwork. And so, he says, "when I look at the material I treat it not like material; I treat it like another person.

"It's hard to explain. When you're humble or when you respect everything, you may have that kind of feeling. For me it's very spiritual." He uses the example of a hiker on a mountain trail who wantonly kicks at a rock.

"I see that as disrespectful. I don't know the rock, maybe it doesn't feel pain at all, but for me you're always gentle. That's the way I feel with material. The material helps me to build something nice, something for people to enjoy, so that's why I have to relate to the material."

This sense of respect extends and encompasses everything in nature.

"That's the whole idea. We need to respect, that's all." Nguyen notes that people respect animals, or things that move, whereas "I go a little bit further: I respect something that doesn't move."

Nguyen has been in numerous shows, but lately he's been the star of the San Diego Art Institute, which hosts an international competition biannually. He received the Juror's Choice Award in 2013, and then last year he won it again.

"The award is good because it comes with cash," he says, laughing. "It's not small cash, it's good cash. I'm pretty happy, and also I'm very lucky," he continues, because there were many other talented artists.

Asked why he believes he was chosen, Nguyen guesses it may have had to do with his technique. "I think if they saw something similar they (wouldn't have) picked me." This writer surmises that it may have had to do with a style that is somehow distinctive and recognizable. When I've walked into a group show I've always known at a glance whether Nguyen's work is on view.



Hung Viet Nguyen, in his Torrance studio. Photo by Bondo Wyszpolski



"Personage #1," by Hung Viet Nguyen. This large four-panel work is currently on view at the Torrance Art Museum

Having retired just last year, Nguyen remains as passionate as ever about his painting. "It doesn't mean I'm going to produce more," he says, "but I will spend more time on the artwork."

And so his journey continues, with no end in sight.

HUNG VIET NGUYEN currently has one four-panel painting ("Personage #1") on view in **South Bay Focus 2016**, which is curated by **Peter Frank**. The show is up through Dec. 16 at the **Torrance Art Museum**, 3320 Civic Center Drive, Torrance. Nguyen also has paintings going on display Dec. 1 in the second floor lobby of the Laemmle Theater in Santa Monica (reception from 7 to 9 p.m.). To learn more about **South Bay Focus**, call (310) 618-6388, or go to TorranceArtMuseum.com (<http://TorranceArtMuseum.com>). To directly access Nguyen's work, visit his website at hung4art.com (<http://hung4art.com>). **ER**

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