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Hung Viet Nguyen’s Artistic and Spiritual Alchemy

JUNE 11, 2018 BY [GENIE DAVIS](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

by **Genie Davis**

Artist Hung Viet Nguyen is a magician and an alchemist. His paintings evoke the beauty of nature, its wonder and its spiritual quality. He takes the real and reconfigures it, shapes it into a mysterious, reverent space. With images that are both landscapes and stunning mosaic-like patterns, the Vietnamese-born, Los Angeles-based artist transports viewers into paintings that resemble an enchanted realm.

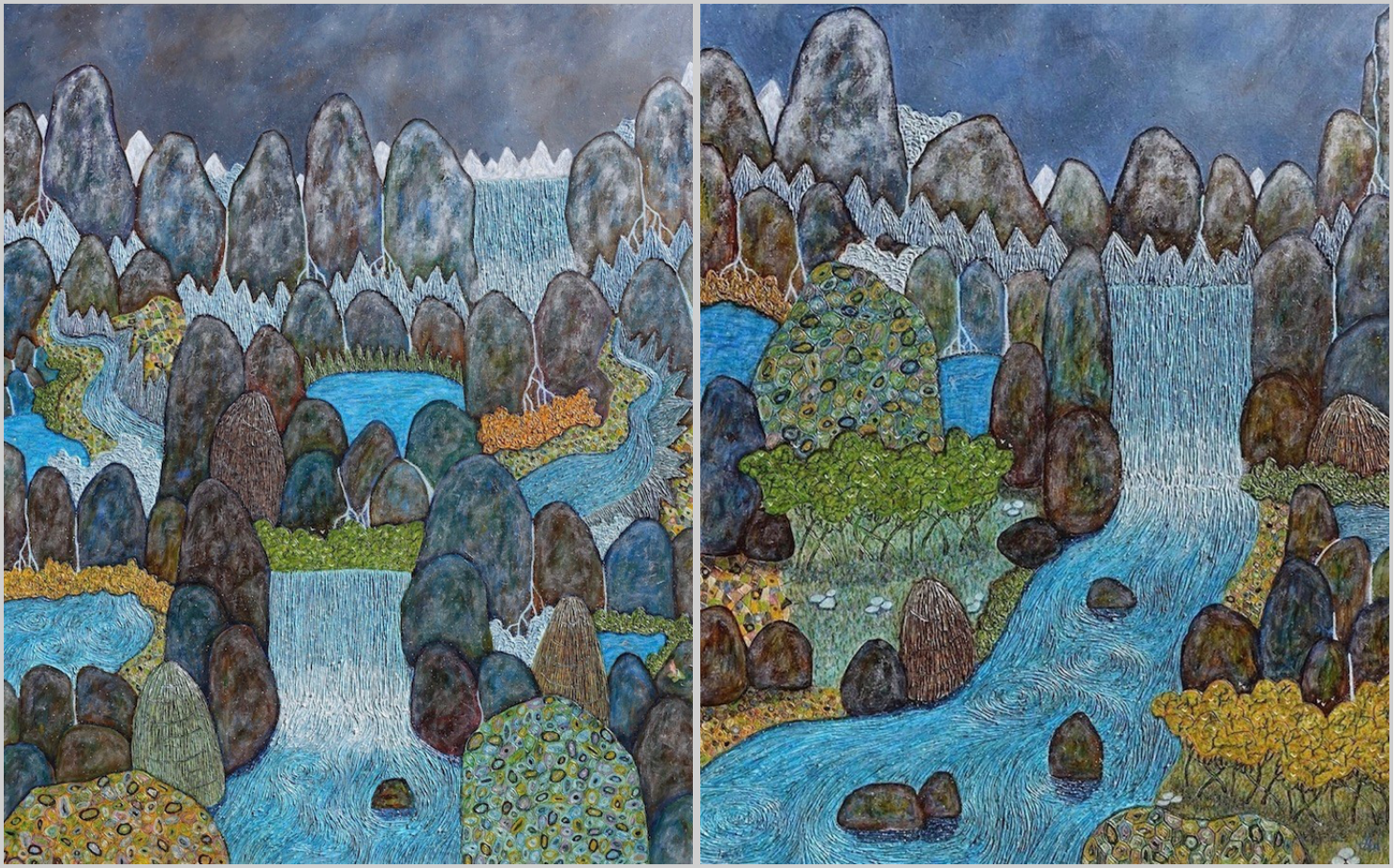
Nguyen works with deep, rich, and perfectly formed layers of oil paint, sculpting his work as much as painting it. He gives us ancient trees, flowing waterfalls, lush mounds of hills, glowing streams. His color palette has moved over the years from lighter pastels to something darker, deeper, and more mythic, yet each work is still infused with light and an opalescence. Nguyen is building this illuminated quality in part with translucent glazes and a vibrant, stirring use of color; in part through a sense of serenity and purpose that feels innate in his painting. There is the quality of a dream, of an illusion, and of an alternate universe in his works which always, regardless of specific landscape, capture both an inner and outer world.



Sacred Landscapes III #12

Opening June 30th at Launch Gallery in mid-city, Nguyen will be showing his *Sacred Landscapes III* series, which leads viewers deeper into his mystical, magical world with highly textured oil works that are dream-like and contemplative.

Nguyen has created art since he was a small child, formally creating in his high school and college years, when he created art posters for his classes. Although his passion for art carried strongly into adulthood, there were times when he did not exercise his gift. “I came to the U.S. in 1982, and for the first years I was working at minimum wage, and had no time and energy to make art after long hours working,” he relates. He worked as an illustrator, designer, and graphic artist. But after a lay-off in 1984 and a visit to France, his inspiration returned. “I visited the Louvre Museum and spent time walking around Paris. I was back to art and started painting in oil. I painted very little here and there in the style of Impressionism,” he says. But once again, he stopped painting to take on other challenges, physical ones, like “Running marathons, hiking mountains and competing in triathlons. After a while I could see I had reached my limit in sport, I could not do any better than what I had already achieved. So, in 2000, I was back to art,” he laughs “because I know I will never get to the top and the challenge is always there.”



Sacred Landscapes III #48 & #38

But it was just that break from art making, and his experience in physical activity and exploration of nature that led Nguyen to his subject matter. “During my time away from creating art, I got very close to nature through camping, hiking, and other outdoor activities. I felt I was closer to God than going to churches or pagodas,” he explains. “And when I was back to painting, I combined all the nature images from many places which I had visited into what I painted.” And he also added the spiritual experiences he’d had into the mix.

Nguyen notes that his style of painting is similar to classic Oriental scroll painting. “The painter paints the places he or she has been traveling through, not one fixed location. I came up with the name “Sacred Landscape” for each of my series because I think nature is sacred, and the act of painting is sacred, too.”

Along with a beautiful, enigmatic fusion of specific locations, Nguyen also blends a variety of styles. Besides his link to Oriental scroll painting, viewers can see images that also seem to reference other types of artwork and artists. Some of Nguyen’s work evokes luminous mosaics and Japanese woodblock design; some pieces remind viewers of Van Gogh – in both texture and a free, pure joy in nature, as well as in color palette; and moving to modern times, there are vistas that remind one of David Hockney in sweep and intricacy. But regardless of these references, Nguyen’s art is uniquely his own, from composition to landscape.



Artist Hung Viet Nguyen amongst the Ancient Bristlecone Pines

One of the real-life landscapes which Nguyen is fascinated by and has included significantly in his art is that of the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest east of Yosemite. The region drew him, at least in part, from his university studies in biology. “I chose Botany as my final major,” he states, and in part for that reason “Special trees always draw me in. I have visited the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest in Big Pine many times through many summers,” he says. The Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest is home to the oldest trees in the world, with some living trees more than 4000 years of age. Trees are twisted and take on wonderful shapes, exhibiting beautiful and varicolored wood. The remoteness of the trees’ location in the Eastern Sierras makes it possible for visitors to observe them and hike in the location often in near solitude. The contemplative nature of the region also appealed to Nguyen, allowing him, in a sense, to commune with the trees themselves.

“The trees have survived for many centuries in that harsh environment, and they are so beautiful,” he says. “Each tree has his or her own character. I think if one [of the trees] can endure the hardship, then it will survive and succeed.” Nguyen felt with that strength, determination, and beauty such an intrinsic part of the trees, as a subject, their images were “right for the art and artist.”



Ancient Pine #6 & #14

Despite his vibrant subjects and beautifully honed techniques, Nguyen is nothing but unassuming when it comes to what he wants viewers to take from his work. “It’s great if people can have feelings for my artwork. Everything else will come later.”

Unassuming or not, Nguyen’s technique has taken a long time to master. “I use a palette knife to build up and manipulate oil paint into the textures, patterns. And they only look good if I can perform spontaneously; which is something one has to practice through many years to achieve.” He says that while he does plan his

work to some extent to control the process, while painting, much happens that he cannot control, creating what he terms “a certain edge of mystery” in his creation, even for himself. “My art work has its own life,” her remarks.



Sacred Landscapes III #5

In *Sacred Landscapes III #32*, a vivid bright blue streams run into other streams, tumbling downward. In the background, a calm lake, ringed with boulders; other small lakes appear further downstream on each side of the painting. Behind that central lake, tall, white mountain peaks are sluicing slender waterfalls. The boulders in the foreground are varied, and deeply tactile, their surfaces dark but infused with blues and greens, as if mossy and damp. Land masses are comprised of beautiful dots of color, like stained glass or mosaic compositions. Some tall formations among the rocks are not quite boulders, their brush strokes make viewers think of small hills covered with grasses. The overall look of the piece is dynamic, as if the water could rush past at any moment. It is so compelling that one can almost sense the hush of the place, hear distant streams and splashing river, feel a wind rifling the hair.

With Nguyen’s *Ancient Pine #13*, the palette is primarily brown and gold. There is a brilliant blue sky as backdrop, but the piece is dominated by a dusty gold landscape is broken into two, sinuous, wave-like shapes and the central “character” of a bristlecone tree. In the back of the painting, smooth, grassy dry hills seem crisscrossed by paths. In front, the land is pocked with stones, from which, on a dark, earthy bed, the twisted, lush branches of a leafless Bristlecone Pine rise in supplication. These are not so much branches as arms. The tree itself has a strong gravitational pull, both visually and emotionally, as if it embodied a human or even an angelic spirit. The perfect final touch: one shard of bright green, an emerald, feather-like pine needle cluster lies on the ground, a tribute to what once was and a primordial hope of what yet could be.

In each of Nguyen’s works, whether of tree or mountain, river or waterfall, the artist’s works feel very alive, soaring with color and shimmering motion.

Over the years, Nguyen feels that his art has slowly changed. “The subject matter might stay the same, but colors and compositions change. My colors have moved from bright to pastel light, and now are more gray and saturated. The composition is getting more complicated, as I would like to create more space and movement.”

He adds “I never force myself to change my art. I let it evolve naturally, and I think it should be that way.”

For the viewer, that evolution carries one on a journey to a place that is beyond the ordinary, beyond the defined, into a world that is truly magical.



Launch Gallery is located at 170 South La Brea Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90036; Sacred Landscapes III opens Saturday June 30, 6-9 p.m.

Nguyen will also be showing his work at a July 14thpop up event at VASCAM (Vietnamese American Society for Creative Arts and Music)14841 Moran St. in Westminster, CA 92683

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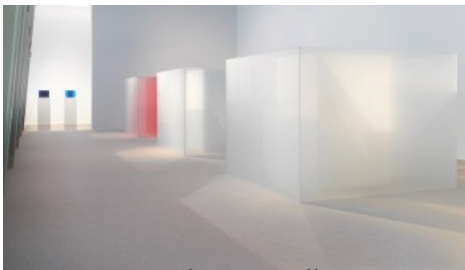
Ancient Pine #10



Genie Davis is a multi-published novelist, journalist, and produced screen and television writer based in Los Angeles. Publisher and writer of www.diversionsLA.com, she also writes for a wide range of magazines and newspapers.



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