

## VISUAL ARTS

# The Mystical Mindscapes of Hung Viet Nguyen

Meher McArthur | December 23, 2013



Cruelly-Go-Round # 25 by Hung Viet Nguyen, 2013, | Courtesy of the artist.

**Asian Accents:** *This article is part of an ongoing series that explores the diverse range of artistic influences from Asia in the arts and culture of Southern California.*

A large blue shark breaks through turquoise waves to snatch a bird in its razor-sharp teeth. The unfortunate bird has just caught a fish in its beak, so it is at once devouring and being devoured. And so, in fact, is the shark. Tentacles of an octopus are wrapping around its body and pulling it back into the sea. The dramatic scene is depicted with such dazzlingly rich colors, intricate detailing and lavish texturing that we know we are not simply viewing violence here. In the rich, purple tinge of the shark's skin, the mosaic-like waves, and the artfully sculpted waves, we are being presented with a more complex and honest view of the natural world, as simultaneously horrific and beautiful.

The painting "Cruelly-Go-Round #25" is a recent work by Vietnamese American Hung Viet Nguyen, an artist whose appreciation of nature is not just aesthetic but also scientific. Nguyen was born in Vietnam and studied biology at Science University in Ho Chi Minh City. It was only after moving to the United States in 1982 that he began working as an illustrator, graphic artist and designer. Although he transitioned from a career as a biologist to one as an artist, he has maintained a keen interest in the way living creatures live, procreate, interact and die. In a number of his recent paintings, on view at [LA Artcore Brewery Annex](#) until December 29, 2013, he examines both the physical and the philosophical aspects of our existence. In the shark image, for instance, by depicting the grisly reality of how life feeds upon life, he is exploring the idea that power is ephemeral. Just like the seabird that has cleverly snagged a fish, no matter how powerful we may feel, we can always be overthrown by a larger, more powerful force. The painting is a reminder to be humble about one's own power and to show compassion towards those who are weaker.





Cruelly-Go-Round #1 ABCD by Hung Viet Nguyen, 2013, | Courtesy of the artist., by [klxadm](#)

The large 4-panel work "Cruelly-Go-Round #1" is a whimsical celebration of life in all its manifestations, some of which are more cruel than merry, hence the title of this series. In habitats ranging from seas and rivers to grasslands, forests and deserts, Nguyen depicts hawks swooping down and seizing rabbits and fish, snakes swallowing rodents, deer mating energetically among the trees and whales frolicking in the bay. All of this sex and death amidst an abundance of greenery and life-giving waters reminds us of all that is required - good and bad - for life to thrive. Individuality also has its place, according to Nguyen. In the upper right corner of the work near the diving whale is a school of fish. "There is one fish swimming in the opposite direction," he explains. "This is to acknowledge that an artist is usually lonely because he or she is doing things differently, and not following anyone else."





Mindscape #47 by Hung Viet Nguyen, 2013, oil on wood; 24 x 30 inches. | Courtesy of the artist.

Nguyen's background in biology also taught him to perceive nature and life at a cellular level, a tendency he has also brought to his paintings. Although his landscapes are far from realistic, with their candy-colored palette and sometimes Seussian compositions, they abound with intricate details born of a keen attention to nature's exquisite patterns and textures. In his series of "Mindscape" paintings, also on view at LA Artcore, we see beds of flowers built up like tiny mosaics of jewels and thick rivers of turquoise oil paint carved deftly to suggest the rapid water current. The trunks of trees are never straight, instead curving rhythmically into dark silhouettes on which crows perch, or interlaced with neighboring trees. In "Mindscape #47," the entrance to a cave is textured with hundreds of green and brown ovals layered like snake scales to evoke the eerie dampness of the interior of a cave.





Mindscape # 35 by Hung Viet Nguyen, 2013, oil on wood; 22 x 28 inches. | Courtesy of the artist.

As an artist, Nguyen is largely self-taught, and over the years he has sought inspiration from the works of many masters. In his *Mindscales*, in particular, we can see the influence of modern Western artists such as Klimt and even Chuck Close in his mosaic-like floral patterning, Van Gogh in his generous applications and sculpting of oil paint, and Hockney in his meandering landscape compositions and upbeat, sunny palette. "Some of the influences I only realized and found out after the artwork had been completed for awhile," he explains. "They were happening unconsciously." He has also looked to his Asian roots for inspiration, studying traditions as diverse as Chinese scroll paintings, Japanese woodblock prints and ceramic decoration.



Sacred Cove/Mindscape by Hung Viet Nguyen, 2013, oil on wood; total size 72 x 120 inches. | Courtesy of the artist.

In his triptych "Sacred Cove/Mindscape," all of these influences - Eastern and Western, ancient and modern, scientific and aesthetic - unite to transform a cove on the Palos Verdes beach into a magical, lusciously detailed universe. In the three panels of this triptych, craggy cliffs wind upwards towards the sky with the bold verticality of Chinese mountain landscapes but here framing the turquoise waters of the Pacific. A waterfall sends fingers of water downwards to feed gem-like flowers and criss-crossing trees, while a hungry crow pecks at seeds on the branches of a precariously positioned tree. A curved peak in the central panel is crowned by a grove of trees and embraced by bushes rendered in pink - a color feared by many artists, but one which here softens, lightens and sensualizes the image, bold contrasting the dark depths of the panel to the right. In the final panel ascending into the night sky is a lone white crane, traditionally an Asian symbol of longevity, but perhaps here standing for the artist who braves the darkness in order to find new mindscapes to explore.





Detail of Cruelly-Go-Round #1 by Hung Viet Nguyen, 2013, oil on wood. | Courtesy of the artist



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*Hung Viet Nguyen's work will be on view in the 3-artist exhibition Sensescape at LA Artcore Brewery Annex until December 29, 2013 and can be found on his website. His work will also be included in "Auction 2014: The Art of the Heist" at Laguna Art Museum from February 3rd - 9th, 2014.*

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR MEHER MCARTHUR

Originally from the UK, Meher McArthur is an independent Asian art historian, author and educator based in Los Angeles. She has two exhibitions currently touring the U.S.: "Folding Paper: The Infinite Possibilities of Origami" (through 2015) and "Above the Fold: New Expressions in Origami" (through 2017). She worked for many years as Curator of East Asian Art at Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, has collaborated with several Southern California museums, and advised for the V&A Museum in London.

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