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Portraits of the Forgotten

Anti-Vietnamese sentiments in Cambodia have dated back since the early seventeenth century when Vietnamese settlers began migrating into Cambodian territory and annexing the region. This negative attitude towards their neighboring country continued when France, who established colonial ruling over Cambodia during that time, encouraged Vietnamese migration into Cambodia; in addition to the French preference for the Vietnamese, the Vietnamese immigrants were also taking up agricultural production and colonial administration in Cambodia. Over the course of several decades, the combination of these factors solidified Cambodia's anti-Vietnamese sentiments, which was clearly evident in Cambodian newspapers and naturalization laws. As the Khmer Republic began to crumble after 1975, a new form a government rose to power; the Democratic Kampuchea, ruled by the Khmer Rouge, used the native's fear and paranoia of non-natives as a key component to take control the country. Between 1975-1979, approximately 2 million lives were lost as the Pol Pot regime conducted rampant murders and cruel mistreatment of civilians in order to reform the country into an ideal agrarian society. Through iconic images of the killing fields and the victims' skulls, the Cambodian genocide is represented as a tremendous tragedy for the people of Cambodia; however, within the 2 million victims of the Khmer Rouge included a great deal of ethnic and religious minorities, whose deaths went largely undocumented. In Binh Danh's "Ancestral Altars," the local artist poignantly recreates the portraits of ethnic "foreigners" in Cambodian soil during the Cambodian

genocide in an attempt to bring to light the deaths of these overlooked victims. Taking documentation from S-21, a security prison where 14,000 individuals of all ages deemed as "foreign enemies" were tortured and executed by the Khmer Rouge, Danh uses chlorophyll pigment to etch the portraits of these victims onto organic materials such as leaves and grass. By incorporating organic material into his art, Danh emphasizes the fragility of the human body in his work and sheds light on these underrepresented victims of the Cambodian genocide; furthermore, because of his blank recollection of his family's history with war, his use of negative space, color, contrast, and subject matter suggests that Danh uses his art as a medium to condemn war as a destructive force that destroys any recollection of the past.

Binh Danh's entire artistic process relies solely on natural resources as he employs organic matter and sunlight to create his portraits; because of the fragility of the templates that the portraits are printed on, the images themselves are susceptible to withering and dying, which represents the lives of the deceased, as well as our memory of them as time wears on. Danh's innovative chlorophyll printing technique comments on the dynamics of human life as Aaron Kerner, an art curator from the University of Hawaii states, "just as with the process of photosynthesis where a leaf absorbs ambient energy, the human spirit too is marked by historical events" (Kerner). By taking the portraits of the deceased Vietnamese victims and engraving them on leaves using photosynthesis, Danh grants the victims one last sign of respect to commemorate their lives. Furthermore, when the leaves and grass die, the body of work returns back to the earth, just as the human body does when it dies. Danh himself says, "to honor these lives, I made altars of the dead—a place where we can meditate on history, the present moment, and our own mortality" (Danh). Danh uses the portraits of deceased ethnic minority prisoners of the Cambodian genocide to illustrate a new perspective of those who were affected by the

genocide; his use of organic material and chlorophyll printing creates an emotionally-charged image that holds us accountable for their deaths as well as reflects upon our own mortality. By analyzing Danh's work, we come to an understanding of how ethnic minorities were treated in Cambodia during that time and how the new generation has come to commemorate the dead who have lost their voices long ago.

A common theme within Danh's portraits is a wash of muted, subdued color and a prevalence of low contrast found in his body of work; the absence of vibrancy in these portraits signifies their fading from our memories. Danh deliberately chose to print the portraits on browning leaves, fully utilizing the earthy tones to represent the natural state of death. In conjunction with the muted colors, the soft, low contrast gives off a ghostly appearance to the individuals seen in the portraits; these two elements of art work together to present a direct correlation to the decay of the memories of these individuals. Kerner argues that Danh's photosynthetic prints are an analogy to the cycle of nature; mirroring the cycle of nature, "the residue of [the victim's] existence, fragments of their collected memories, eventually nourish the history and the memories of the living" (Kerner). The ghastly appearance of the individuals in Danh's work serves as a reminder that these victims of war were not given a proper death; because there is a severe lack of Vietnamese memorialization on the Cambodian genocide, the death of these individuals seemed to have faded into history. In agreement, Kerner says, "[Danh's] work fossilizes this delicate hold on historical memory, not fossilizing memory at its strongest or most acute, but rather it captures memories as they begin to fade" (Kerner). Danh asserts that the ethnic minority victims have been washed out of our memories and challenges his audience to provide accountability for their deaths. With the employment of subdued, earth-toned colors and a ghastly, low contrast print of the victims, Danh captures the deaths of these

victims in a haunting manner. He forces his audience to recognize the deaths of the Vietnamese minority while simultaneously capturing the struggle to memorialize the lost souls of the victims.

Taking a further look into the iconography of Danh's work, the artist incorporates butterflies into his artwork, which represents the life and death of the human soul. Other than leaves and grass, Danh also includes butterflies in his portraits not only to heighten the visual aesthetics of his art, but to also make a comment on the life and deaths of these individuals. According to Gloria Schlaepfer, butterflies have been "symbols of life and death of the human soul" since ancient times (Schlaepfer 17). In addition, Southeast Asian culture has considered butterflies to "represent a fleeting moment," as the caterpillar "undergoes a complete transformation into a symbol of beauty and fragility" (Schlaepfer 16). By incorporating butterflies into "Ancestral Altars," Danh again acknowledges the deaths of these individuals and shows the innocence of their souls through the resin of the delicate butterflies; like the souls of the deceased, the butterflies are encased and immortalized, ready to be captured by the gaze of the viewer. The direct correlation between the butterflies and the victims show the lost souls of the individuals who have had their voices stripped away from them through the harsh reality of war. Moreover, the symbolism of the butterflies seen in the portraits comments on the lack of memorialization of the victims of S-21 security prison as Danh attempts to embody the souls of the deceased as make them visible to the viewers; by visually reconstructing the souls of the deceased through butterflies, Danh gives each individual a new chance to thrive in the memories of the viewers - a chance at life beyond death.

Additionally, the balance and size of each image draws contrast to represent the relationship between the individuals seen on the portrait. Binh Danh executes the principles of design in the form of size and balance in his portraits to connect and unify his artwork,

transforming it into one cohesive piece. Some images contain one central focus in isolation, while others contain a balance of multiple portraits that separates the space and divides the attention of the viewers. In an interview, Danh says, "the purpose of my art is to give a face to the human cost of war… the portraits of these victims are represented through the interconnecting branches and stems, a thin connection that can be easily broken through the damage of war" (Danh). In "Ancestral Altars," many of the portraits are printed on fragile leaves, with transparent veins that seem like the human body itself. In some images, each portrait is tied together to another portrait through thin, wiry stems to represent a family tree or something of the like; however, because each portrait is linked to each other through an intricate system of stems and branches, Danh depicts a metaphor for the destructive nature of war. Through the fragility of the connections between individuals, Danh is able to emphasize the destructive nature of war and it's ability to tear families apart, obliterating the connections between people.

In addition to the raw material that Danh uses, the blank, negative space that he employs highlights the struggle of identity that the victims faced being a minority in a hostile war environment and the absence of memorialization for the victims of the ordeal. Due to Vietnamese immigration into Cambodia during its pre-colonial years and its years under French control, anti-Vietnamese sentiment was nurtured as the immigrants began displacing Cambodians working in rubber plantations, civil servants, and agricultural production farms. Many Cambodians "gradually adopted an anti-Vietnamese stand and objected Vietnamese dominance in civil service" (Amer). In order to restrict Vietnamese influence in the country, the Khmer Rouge began to pass strict naturalization and immigration laws; in addition, as time went on, the regime "slaughtered thousands of ethnic Vietnamese as 'spies' during their three-year

reign of terror" (Abuza). The tension between the two neighboring countries generated a form of friction between the two opposing sides that transcended through the generations. Many scholars try to explore the relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam, with David Ablin sharing his insight, "the relationship between native Cambodians and their Vietnamese counterparts are heavily strained… to fully understand the two, we must delve into the roots of their respective cultures" (Ablin 315). Therefore, by analyzing Danh's work, we come to a new understanding of the Cambodian genocide through a platform that has been influenced by Vietnamese culture. The hostility and alienation the ethnic Vietnamese felt during the genocide can be seen in Danh's work as the negative space engulfs each portrait. Each portrait is seen with a blank black background behind the leaf, symbolizing the shroud of darkness that each individual faced while living in a hostile environment. As a target of racial discrimination at the time, Danh portrays a sense of identity struggle within each of the portraits with the negative space between the subject and the frame; the Cambodian government denies citizenship to these ethnic Vietnamese yet they still live on Cambodian soil and are expected to have Cambodian culture embedded in them. Because the victims of S-21 prison camp struggled with their identity as the genocide tore their lives apart, Danh tries to illustrate the hardships of being a minority in a hostile Cambodia while exemplifying the absence of memorialization of these victims.

As "Ancestral Altars" shows, Danh is fixated on grabbing attention to the underrepresented victims of the Cambodian genocide; however, this subconscious preoccupation for memorialization comes from Danh's own blank recollections of war, which is why he criticizes the destructive nature of war in his photographs. Through the navigation of personal and collective memories, Danh says, "I'm coming up with my own concept about what is life, what is death, what is consciousness, what is history" (Danh). Kerner, on the other hand,

believes that Danh uses his art as a medium to reconcile what he feels he has lost in his family history. Kerner argues, "it came down to Danh to formulate his own memories, to reconstruct memories from the fragments that are available… through his work, and by drawing on images from that era, he can reconfigure a memory" (Kerner). By unearthing victims of war and having their memories preserved in his art, Danh attempts to relate to those whose lives have been scarred by the consequences of war. Because of his own blank recollection of war, Danh feels as though something has been taken away from his; to bridge this gaping hole, Danh finds therapy in formulating new memories with the victims of S-21. Danh himself recognizes this and that "photographs bring up memories and for me they start to fabricate these memories of my life in Vietnam" (Danh). Danh's fascination towards war and memories involving war stems from his own personal family history with war; as he has no recollections from a time where war has touched the lives of his family, he criticizes war for stealing a part of his family history and, at the same time, uses the portraits of the fallen Vietnamese victims in the Cambodian genocide to reconcile his past.

By recreating the portraits of the deceased victims, Danh presents a platform for Vietnamese memorialization in the Cambodian genocide, a perspective that is rarely brought to light. In Helen Jarvis and Nereida Cross' paper, *Documenting the Cambodian Genocide on Multimedia,* the two authors explore the misrepresentation of the Cambodian genocide. The paper begins, "the terrors of the genocide is generally represented in the emotive and dramatic images of skulls and black-clothed ant-like slaves building dykes," a typical image of what we know as the Cambodian genocide; however, they continue, "our challenge is to move beyond those authentic yet essentially reductionist images to arrive at a deeper understanding of what took place in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979" (Jarvis). By spreading the images of these

unknown victims of war, Danh does exactly this; Danh gives a new perspective to the Cambodian genocide, challenging his audience to "rehistoricize" a well-known tragedy. Danh, being one of the very few contributors to the memorialization of Vietnamese in Cambodia, is different from other Vietnamese photojournalists who captured the Cambodian genocide in that he takes the war and makes a statement on it, giving it his own meaning to the war rather than just objectively photographing the events that unfolded. Christina Schwenkel analyzes Vietnamese war photography and says, "photographs of the Vietnamese (from all sides) provide only fragmented knowledge of wartime violence and select glimpses into its complexities. Moreover, the meanings and significance of such images are never fixed but shift according to various contexts of viewing and new interpretations of the past" (Schwenkel 37). Even though Danh's work gives the freedom to interpret the implications of war, we still find unifying themes of death and memory in his work; this implies that Danh targets war as the hostile force that causes broken memories. Schwenkel reinforces this idea by asserting, "Vietnamese photographs reveal to the viewer a broad array of combat experiences that include but are not limited to the trauma and destruction of war" (Schwenkel 37-8). "Ancestral Altars" presents itself as a platform for people to mediate on the deaths of an unnoticed minority group, giving a new perspective to the Cambodian genocide and a chance for the victims to be properly commemorated. While Danh's photographs exhibit the consequences of war, it reaches a much deeper understanding than that; Danh follows traditional Vietnamese war photography in that he gives meaning to his portraits and makes a statement that war is a catastrophe that severs lives and memories of the individuals involved.

Through his series "Ancestral Altars," Binh Danh takes documentation of previously unknown prisoners of S-21 security prison during the Cambodian genocide and exhibits them for

his audience to see, giving their deaths the proper respect that they did not receive. Moreover, by cleverly choosing organic materials to print the portraits on, Danh recreates the deaths of these prisoners by symbolically giving them a second death – when the leaves return back to the earth. With the mirroring of natural states, Danh comments on the death of these individuals; the Vietnamese prisoners of S-21 died without any hint of commemoration, thereby taking the memories of them to the grave. To immortalize the memories of these individuals and the commemorate their deaths, Danh brings the portraits to light, placing them at the center of his viewer's attention. Furthermore, through his utilization of muted colors and low contrast, Danh paints a haunting image of the portraits, signaling their ghost-like status. As if they are fading from history itself, Danh presents the portraits as being lost in time, the memories of the victims lost; by doing so, Danh effectively remarks on the lack of Vietnamese memorialization in the Cambodian genocide. Taking into account the iconography of his photographs, Danh incorporates butterflies, which symbolize the life and death of the soul, into his portraits. The direct correlation between butterflies and the portraits themselves further solidifies Danh's attempt to commemorate the fallen Vietnamese prisoners; Danh gives the victims another chance to be remembered. Analyzing other aspects of Danh's work, however, we see that Danh perceives war as a destructive force that severs human life and memories. Using balance of the frame and negative space, Danh presents the struggles of these unheard victims of war; the thin, fragile stems of each leaf represents familial ties that can easily be broken apart due to the catastrophic events of war and the hollowing, empty blackness that surrounds each portrait represents the lost of identity each victim faced while living in a hostile environment. Furthermore, the negative space also provides the viewer an understanding of the absence of these victims in history – how they have gone unnoticed and unheard. Danh's work is the

culmination of many aspects of art and photographic metaphors; he follows many Vietnamese war examples by portraying the destructive force of war and the consequences that we face in the aftermath; however, his curiosity for the loss of memory for these Cambodian genocide victims come from his own personal loss of family history. Scholars have argued that while Danh's utmost priority is to raise awareness to these individuals who have gone unrecognized for so many decades, he himself uses his artwork as a way to reconcile is own war-torn past; by having the audience create new memories of the genocide, Danh fabricates his own memories of the past and uses it to fill in the holes of his life. No matter what his intentions were on creating "Ancestral Altars," Danh proves to be successful as he illustrates the underrepresentation of Vietnamese victims in the Cambodian genocide and breathes life into their souls once again.

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