

Danh Vo, Take My Breath Away, Guggenheim Museum, New York

Tak Pham

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Danh Vo

Installation views, *Take My Breath Away*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2018.

Photos : David Heald, © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2017

Danh Vo *Take My Breath Away*

Danish artist Danh Vo welcomes visitors to his survey exhibition, titled *Take My Breath Away*, at the Guggenheim Museum with three disparate works in the High Gallery. Acting as a prologue, the works show not only a historical milestone in the artist's personal history, but also the history of Vietnam, from where he fled at the age of four. Through the display of ephemera and physical remnants from history, Vo creates an experience that is not historically factual, but rather a fragmented journey through religion, colonialism, diaspora, and confrontation. *Take My Breath Away* is unapologetic, satirical, but nuanced in the struggles that many diasporic Vietnamese and artists can relate to.

In the centre of the gallery, against the back wall, Vo places one of the two armchairs from *Lot 20. Two Kennedy Administration Cabinet Room Chairs* (2013), while the other one is located further up along the ramp. Once used by President John F. Kennedy, the two armchairs were acquired from an estate auction of the former U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, along with correspondences from the White House. Vo stripped the chairs down to their wooden frames, then scattered their parts across the museum. *Christmas (Rome), 2012* (2013), hovering in the upper right corner over the mahogany skeleton of the first chair, shows tableaux of silhouettes resembling recognizable religious icons such as crucifixes, chalices, and religious boxes. Their shadows permanently imprint upon layers of brown velvet wallpaper that once hung in the Vatican's museum. On the floor is *Take My Breath Away* (2017), a second-century marble statue with half of a leg and a foot still attached to its base.

What Vo presents in the High Gallery, and eventually throughout the exhibition, reveals his perception of history. Vo views history in fragments of events and encounters. He collages deconstructed items in ingenious, provocative, and

sometimes even disrespectful compositions. As viewers walk up the spiral ramp of the Guggenheim, they casually encounter Vo's series of Medieval religious wood sculptures which have been severed and reattached to Roman marble statues. Each sculpture is accompanied with vulgar titles such as: *Your mother sucks cocks in Hell* (2015), *Lick me, lick me* (2015), or *Shove it up your ass, you faggot!* (2013). The aggressiveness in Vo's titles is juxtaposed with a series of collected ephemera displayed along the museum walls and the railing of the ramp. The series includes personal letters and correspondence from McNamara's office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense, photographs of young Vietnamese men taken by an American Research Analyst during his assignment in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, and a long vitrine showing the ongoing project *2.2.1861*.

2.2.1861 began in 2009, when Vo's father started to make copies of a letter written by Jean-Théophane Vénard, a young French missionary who was sent to Tonkin (now North Vietnam) in 1852. On February 2nd, 1861 Vénard wrote a last letter to his father in France from his imprisonment in a bamboo cage while waiting for his impending execution for proselytizing. For this piece Vo's father copied Vénard's letter in beautiful penmanship despite having no knowledge of the French language. Every time an edition of *2.2.1861* is acquired, Vo's father will make a copy of the letter and airmail it in a sealed envelope directly to the buyer. Vo remunerates his father for every copy made. By "employing" his father, the work is distorted into an Oedipus complex where Vo continues to rebel against authority; be it his father, the Catholic church, the colonizers, or the white man. This intention becomes nuanced as the vitrine containing numerous copies of the letter extends along the balcony up one full level of the ramp. The monumentality of the installation pulls the visitors upwards by



passing another series of sculptures comprised of recycled symbols of Americana, and personal artifacts. Vo's maintenance of two parallel narratives enforces a juxtaposition that is necessary in order for viewers to understand the artist's position, as they compare the motives underlying his practice against the content that is on display.

Throughout the exhibition Vo uses historical artifacts and ephemera as subtexts to present viewers with sources of his traumas, his nightmares, and his relentless experience as a refugee artist navigating in the Western art world. For instance, the accompanying exhibition catalogue shares the story of how Vo came to discover the collection of photographs by American researcher Joseph M. Carrier:

... Carrier recounts how he felt an immediate attraction to Vo after seeking him out at a reception for artists in a residency program at the Villa Aurora in Los Angeles. Vo visited his house the following day, where he saw Carrier's large collection of Mexican and Asian folk art... [Carrier's] photos predominantly feature young Vietnamese men engaged in gestures of physical intimacy, such as holding hands or laying beside one another as they slept... (Danh Vo, *Take My Breath Away*, 267)

Despite their academic purposes—Carrier first visited Vietnam as a Research Analyst, and later as a PhD candidate in Anthropology—the photos are laden with an erotic gaze. Through Carrier's lens, the bodies of these men are glorified. In one of the photos, a young man leans over a balcony having a smoke. His topless torso is dramatically stretched, flexing his back muscles towards the camera. The composition is reminiscent of Classical sculptures of athletic youth in action. The absence of the man's feet in the photo evokes a phantom collage that places his torso on top of the marble feet from the namesake piece *Take My Breath Away* (2017) in the High Gallery. Vo reverses the colonial gaze of Carrier's camera to impose himself onto

the classical marble. On his own terms and using the unidentified Vietnamese model in the photo as a stand-in, Vo declares himself as an object of desire.

While he often draws on his Catholic faith in his practice, Vo's reference to his Vietnamese heritage is implicit; it is only revealed through items and ephemera of world history that he collects and incorporates into the works. In his artist statement, Vo only identifies as a Dane, despite being born in Vietnam. His omission of this information proves to be an attempt to move beyond the stereotypes that are often imposed on the works of many diasporic Asian artists. Vo's works suggest that being Vietnamese is inconsequentially genetic—as is being human—while drawing attention to how systems of belief such as faith can be, and have been used to unite, oppress, or dislocate people who are different. Vo challenges racial assumptions by appropriating the visual language from authors of power and uses it as a tool to animate his experience of displacement as a consequence of the other's infiltration of his homeland. With the chairs once sat in by JFK and McNamara (whose involvements in the Vietnam War were brutal), Vénard's letter describing the savageness of his Tonkinese captors, and Carrier's sensual photos that are borderline fetishistic, *Take My Breath Away* literally conveys a sense of exasperation with systems of authority that Vo must reconcile in order to find his place in contemporary art world.

Tak Pham

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