

VERDICT(S) OF HISTORY? COLLECTIVE MEMORIES OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Faces in the Leaves: Killing Fields, Memory and Art

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“They all have stories to tell and are asking the same question as they peer out to the viewer: How could this happen? I wanted to give these portraits voices, so they can teach us I hope they will be alive in us as we remember them, and in return we give them life.”

--Binh Danh, on his portraits of Cambodian
genocide victims

As we look back now at the twentieth century whole, one plausible way to remember it is as a century of genocide. The term “genocide” is a twentieth-century coinage, introduced when it was needed—in 1944—by the Polish jurist Raphael Lemkin, who combined the Greek *genos*, for “race,” with the Latin suffix for “killing.” And since 1948 the United Nations has defined genocide as acts undertaken with the intention to

destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. By this definition the century just past saw at least seven genocides that killed roughly five million people. Running from the massacres of Armenians in Turkey at the century's beginning to "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the '90s, genocide occurred in five distinct decades and in Europe, Eurasia, Southeast Asia, China, and Africa.

Anything in our human past that we wish to prevent in the future must be studied and understood. First, however, it must be remembered. But how? What does it mean to remember such things? How can a mind hold them? And what will it mean for the mind to do so? What kind of remembering is enabling, and what kind may be disabling, paralyzing? This is a dark subject, and I'm surprised to be speaking on it. I'll try to explain how I came to it, and in doing so I hope to shed some light on the role of art in remembering such things.

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Two years ago an exhibition of contemporary photography at the Art Museum of Western Virginia—now the Taubman—included nine works by the Vietnamese-American artist Binh Danh, who prints photographs in the flesh of living leaves by means of photosynthesis. Danh, who fled Vietnam with his parents in the 1979 exodus of "boat people," emigrated to the U.S., but has returned to Southeast Asia many times to collect images for his work, a significant portion of which is centered on the Cambodian genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge.

From 1975 to 1979 Pol Pot's regime executed an estimated 1.7 "national enemies"—foreigners, professionals, artists, teachers, Christians, Muslims, Buddhist monks, homosexuals. They were worked to death in labor camps, tortured in prisons like

the notorious Tuol Sleng, or sent to “killing fields” such as Choeng Ek, which has since been made into a memorial for the dead.

At Tuol Sleng prison, originally a school and now a museum, Binh Danh was confronted by photographs taken by the Khmer Rouge to document their victims. Lining the Museum of Genocide walls are hundreds of these portraits arranged in stark rows. In response, Binh Danh made negatives of selected portraits, attached them to leaves plucked from his mother’s garden, and exposed them in the sun to make what he calls “chlorophyll prints.” The leaf prints are then preserved with a resin process, mounted, and framed. Commenting on his choice to remember the dead in this way, Danh says:

I have tried to show how like plants humans are; we participate in the kinetics of events and the process of creating memories by absorbing the history around us—and, like leaves, we wither and eventually die. The residue of our existence nourishes the memories of the living like a decaying leaf nourishes the soil.

Many of Binh Danh’s portraits also include images of butterflies, and some are matted next to actual butterfly specimens. Danh comments: "For me butterflies are symbols of transmigration or metamorphism, a process that we are all a part of, and from a Buddhist perspective the Khmer Rouge victims are part of this cyclical process After their violent death they return to the cosmos where there is no end or beginning of life but just a cycle."

Growing up in a traditional Buddhist household, rituals of remembrance were an important part of the artist’s experience. “The themes of mortality, memory, and spirituality,” he remembers, “became a lifelong inspiration for me.” No wonder, then,

that Danh turned to photography, a medium of remembrance, and that an important series of his Khmer Rouge portraits is entitled “Ancestral Altars.” “History is alive and is not a past event,” he urges. “It is happening right now. Everyone's history is our history.” This is true for Binh Danh not only culturally and spiritually, but materially. We are made of the same elements that make up the leaves, and all things cycle through seasons and through epochs. Binh Danh is speaking literally when he says that “history is in our blood stream and in the veins of plants.” And so the victims of genocide went into the ground—thousands upon thousands—to rise in the leaves, and, by means of Binh Danh’s art, in us.

When I saw this art at our museum downtown, I was struck, of course, by its poignancy and by the novel means it uses to register its emotions and its thought. But I was also struck by the way it echoed unintentionally one of the founding metaphors of American poetry. Part six of Whitman’s great poem “Song of Myself” begins, “A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands.” At first the speaker is baffled by the question and can only reply with fanciful jokes and labored figures. But in the play of imagination, he tumbles into vision. Suddenly, in one of American poetry’s most haunting passages, he perceives the common grass as hieroglyphic:

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,

It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,

It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,

It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of

their mothers' laps . . .

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues . . .

Like Whitman's poem, Binh Danh's ancestral altars and found portraits appeal to organic cycles in a vision of things that includes metamorphosis, collective memory, and even a kind of resurrection. His artworks, therefore, do more than confront us with grim realities. Remembrance is inflected with a wider, transformative view. In Binh Danh's art, the dead and the circumstances of their deaths are resurrected in memory, newly fleshed in us, as in the leaves that hold their images. And the butterflies attest to this metamorphosis from one self to another.

Certainly the individual self does not survive; the art does not ask us to utterly blot out the horrors of genocide, or even the hard fact of mortality. It does not seek false consolations in sentimentality or cliché. Yet the move from the individual to the natural and communal worlds enlarges the frame and lets a certain sublimity in. And within such a frame Walt Whitman, eschewing a tragic for a comic view of life, can maintain: "The smallest sprout shows there is really no death, / And if there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it . . ."

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As with all art, Binh Danh's work is completed in those who see it. And as always with powerful art, the question becomes, "How will we respond?"

It is not a question to be answered singly for all persons, or with a simple moral "ought." Among my own many reactions to Binh Danh's work, one has been the desire to answer art with art, in my own medium—to render Danh's pictures back into words. But how? Merely to describe them would add nothing, would only move them out of their native medium and repeat them with a blunted impact.

Then, a year ago, in the first days of calm after a busy semester, I awoke one night with the recognition that I must respond to Binh Danh's works of remembrance and return in the formal recurrences of rhythm and rhyme—in pantoums, villanelles, triolets, "In Memoriam" stanzas . . . I could finally begin when I understood that my leaves would be the poetic forms with their own cyclings and repetitions. The subject matter of war and genocide demanded restraint, the slight distancing of given forms, and the forms themselves had to enact the organic cycles that Binh Danh's chlorophyll prints insisted upon in his medium of living leaves. The poetic forms would be my leaves inscribed in the leaves of a book, revisiting Whitman's founding trope, *Leaves of Grass*.

The following poem, a pantoum, responds to "Ancestral Altar #7." In this form, the second and fourth lines rotate up to become the first and third lines of the following stanza, with the pattern continuing in subsequent stanzas. The form recycles its lines in repetitions until, when the end repeats the beginning, the whole snaps into a ring.

ANCESTRAL ALTAR #7

The soon-to-be-dead
were photographed, filed—
two boys, a girl, with tags
on their shirts, numbers

of the photographed filed
in metal drawers,
numbered by the tags on shirts
to be kept in order,

kept in drawers
by men who killed
for a kind of order,
for purity and clear ideas.

The men who killed—
two million gone
for purity and clear ideas—
trenched mass graves

where two million
sank into earth,
into shallow trenches, graves

of mingled bones.

They sank into earth
and the dirt took them,
mingled their bones
and sent them back.

The dirt took them
into its dark
and sent them back
in caladium leaves

that rose from dark
and reached for sunlight,
caladium leaves
whose bitten faces

reached for sunlight,
and here they are—
the bitten faces
fleshed in green.

And here they are,

two boys, a girl, with tags,
newly fleshed in green,
the soon-to-be-dead.

One concern I've had as I've written these poems has been to achieve a balance between witness and transformation similar to the one that I admire in Binh Danh's art. Only to confront readers with painful historical facts seems gratuitous, and my anxiety on this count is intense in the case of a villanelle, "The Chankiri Tree." The poem is set at the killing field Choeng Ek, where thousands were executed and buried in shallow trenches. The place is now a memorial site famous for its partly excavated graves and the spired stupa containing bones and skulls.

THE CHANKIRI TREE

At the killing field, Choeung Ek, no bells are rung.
In a tall stupa, piled skulls cannot blame or resent
This staring crowd—emptied bones without tongues.

Pathways lead between excavations begun
And abandoned. The plain is scarred with shallow dents
Bordered by trees where children climb the rungs.

In a low building, victims' photos, hung

In rows of black and white, draw the murdered present.

I scan across the peering eyes, struck dumb.

Back outside in the glaring sun, leaves are stung

With images—faces risen, called up and sent

To green the tree of knowledge rung by rung.

See, they return: In the wide ditch new grass has sprung

Where bones still lie, shaded by the tree's broad tent.

When a breeze moves, leaves whisper what they've become.

The bark is torn. Against this trunk executioners flung

The bodies of children. Bullets, costly, were rarely spent.

We climb the tree of knowledge rung by rung.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues.

The events remembered here are shocking. *Must* we remember? Does recalling them serve any purpose? Does the art of witness sometimes risk merely morbid fascination, the pornography of violence, or paralysis in grief? One asks such questions and hopes not only for nerve, but also for tact and taste. And one navigates from poem to poem through varying responses, aiming for balance and completeness in the series as a whole. In “Found Portrait #5” the emphasis is on the transformative emotions the artist brings to his material, and on the function of art.

FOUND PORTRAIT #5

The portrait is changed
By art and belief
To something strange—
A man and butterfly in a leaf.

In this dire moment
Is he terrified or serene,
Standing, arrested, in his green
Flame, shroud of living fire?

The leaf's central vein
Rises like a seam
He could open at the stem
To escape from pain

Or to free the butterfly
Clinging to his shirt.
There it sits, chest-sized, inverted,
Lung-shaped, spotted,

Ephemeral as the sigh
That escapes his lips
As the shutter clicks
And will not die.

As the end of this poem suggests, one difference between experience and a work of art—a photograph or a poem—is the way art seizes ephemeral moments and fixes them in a timeless artifact. Artworks remember, but they add to memory the artist’s human response, saving even the hardest moments into an artifact to which all can add their own responses. And so artworks are meeting places. In Binh Danh’s portraits we meet ancestors, but we also meet the artist—and each other. In a gathering like the one this afternoon, for instance, the art is indeed a kind of altar around which we meet to remember, to contemplate, to question, to think and feel. To be human together.