A Race of Angels and Their Nameless Longings

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A Race of Angels and Their Nameless Longings

by

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I. Here Now as I Am Elsewhere -- a Diaspora By-Product

"... all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory."

- Viet Thanh Nguyen, Nothing Ever Dies

We have now seen worlds shift - worlds of nationality, ethnicity, religion - between bounded and boundlessness, which has resulted in mass wanderings; many caught in limbo between a home and a distant land. Exodus launches (cultural) identities on a course of continual transformation and 'Otherness'. I am a by-product of this wave of contemporary diasporas, and although I did not experience exile firsthand, I still am defined by the effects of location and relocation, adaptation and resettlement. I have inherited the traumas of wars, colonialism, and natural disasters through a collective memory. My parents migrated during the Vietnam war to Canada where I was born and where I have spent the majority of my life. I came into existence predetermined as displaced, as the ‘Other’, and positioned in an ongoing narrative of a devastating war that ended before my times. I am the distillation of a cultural sadness, a haunting history, and I recognize the aftermath in the way I’ve engaged with the world.
In order to navigate and cope with my own diasporic perception I use modes of negation and fantasy in artmaking to conjure ideas of estrangement and narratives of displacement. This feeling of displacement is difficult to explain. There’s this comprehensible, measurable distance between where I am and the country of Vietnam, but there is also a strange and intangible distance that takes on many ambiguous forms. This indecipherable distance has formed into an ongoing enigmatic desire, which informs the use of the imaginary and fantasy in my works as temporary solutions to issues of self-hood and nameless longings.
II. The New Breed: A Race of Angels

“We should not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of a rediscovered, essential identity entails.”

-Stuart Hall, Cultural Identity and Diaspora

Those arriving from war-torn countries are forced into a tug-of-war between being accepted and accepting themselves as inherently divided. Upon entrance to their new nation, they immediately become the ‘Other’ while being simultaneously stamped as ‘resettled’ so as not to be an inconvenience moving forward. The oppressor makes the oppressed self-aware of their status as Other and as inferior, using ways of “assimilation” to reinforce the conception that it’s for their own good to be kept within specific boundaries (Trinh T Minh-ha). Their histories are quickly molded for the comfort of the West, which has a habit of freezing Others’ histories in a primitive, ageless, unchanging past (Stuart Hall), using memory as a strategic resource. American war mnemonics compose the Vietnam war to fit into American history, not just to help ease the guilt about the human detritus left behind, but because the ability to control the narrative of past wars can justify wars in the present (Chaudhry). In terms of this dictating my own identity, it’s as if I’ve been sold a false narrative with a false beginning and ending and with nothing before and nothing after. I seem to witness a Vietnam trapped in a singular identity, expropriated and stranded in a period of warfare around
which my life has revolved. Some of us are stripped of our language and history, stripped from the motherland and left with only the clichés of Vietnam to return to.

Those affected by the diaspora have at times attempted to return to their pre-colonial mother culture. This return has failed because they live as hybrids oscillating as if in an unstable, semi-permeable membrane between their new and old worlds. They constantly morph and therefore participate inconsistently in both their past and present places. In the essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall focuses on post-colonial and diasporic identity and describes a surge in Third Cinema of the Caribbeans. Hall suggests that,

“It is because this New World is constituted for us as a place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins’, to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning. Who can ever forget, when once seen rising up out of the blue-green Caribbean, those islands of enchantment. Who has not known, at this moment, the surge of an overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for “times past”? And yet, this ‘return to the beginning’ is like the imaginary in Lacan - it can neither be fulfilled nor requited, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery - in short, the reservoir of our cinematic narratives.”

The parallel between the rise of an imaginary plenitude from narratives of displacement and Jacques Lacan’s theory of desire (that Hall briefly mentions) provides the mental space where my work lays. Lacan describes desire coming from a certain void, a lack, originating from the infant’s differentiation process of the internal and external creating a foundational separation between the self and its Other during infancy. Therefore, our desires come from the drive to reconcile the lack of unity of the self with its Other. We fail to forge this reconciliation because searching for the non-self, for the unknown
creates a desire that is enigmatic and endless. Lacan simply puts it, “Man’s desire is a desire for the other.” As a hybrid person, created by the diaspora, I seek to come to terms with my self-awareness as the Other in the West and the doubled Otherness I have experienced when returning to the motherland. My desire is to “go back to the beginning,” and to move freely between both worlds without rejecting one side of oneself, therefore condemning the other half to becoming “a stranger in his own land” (Fanon). This hybrid predicament is what Frantz Fanon expresses as “individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless -- a race of angels.” Fanon claims that to return to a pre-colonial culture is a fruitless pursuit, by which the former inhabitant quotes from outside their former traditions, costumes, and cliches, romanticizing history in a similar approach to that of the colonist (Fanon). Once again, having been displaced once, I was left purely with the cliches of Vietnam to return to, so the attempt to return left me displaced twice.
III. Longing and the Imaginary

“Other is never just to be found over there and outside of oneself, it is always over here, between us, within our discourse that the other becomes a nameable reality.”

- Trinh T Minh-Ha, *Elsewhere, within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event*

The projections of fantasy, as embodied in my large works on paper, offer solutions and relief from the impossible identity conundrums I face. Fantasy can answer the question ‘what does the other want?’, and decode these enigmas into terms we can manage (Lacan). It can compensate for what the world and social reality cannot provide. Fantasy offers the potential for a transgressive reconstitution of identity and a unitary culture, allowing relief from the oppression of social reality and divided identity (Gardiner). In my work an imaginary reunification of lost origins, internal and external, temporarily overcomes my sense of lack. Within art the self and other (my desires) come closer to reconciling with one another. In other words, art offers fantasmic solutions to real life problems.
Through drawing methods, I create realms of ambiguous alternate spaces/landscapes where the self and the other, here and there (motherland), the present and the past, can be consolidated by forming a visual context for my distant desires. Drawing creates the ability for me to give a tangible, physical presence to invisible, social obstructions that detain me from ‘returning’ and constrain my identity as the Other.

Much like archaeology, I obsessively and intricately excavate times past, discovering and bringing into light the unseen. I intuitively accumulate erasure marks from a solid layer of charcoal on paper, working from dark to light until something tangible appears.
My longing for spontaneous movement is in dialogue with my ongoing motifs of smoke and water, motifs that create spatial openness and depth, immersion and containment. To be in water is to be both free and constricted. Gravity feels distorted, even delayed for a brief moment, and offers a physical sensation of being both free and displaced. Smoke/fog seems to defy gravity. It is an unsettling obstruction, an unpredictable, organless organism chaotically shifting on its own will, revealing to you only particles of the whole while simultaneously deteriorating. In my work places become isolated, perception of depth is distorted, being is continually fading and altering, it’s like examining a molecule through a microscope, things seem concurrently far and near.

The drawings become evidence of my corporeal engagement with place; my gestures corresponds to the way I respond to the world. Since my marking and erasing actions are visible, constructing these spaces involves the movement of its becomingness (Trinh T Minh-ha). The drawings offer a sensory documentation of translations and transferences of my becoming and being. I am to be found over there, over here, and in between, (re)adapted, (re)located, and (re)settled.
Translation, transition, and transference are all terms we use to discuss processes of change in thought and discourse, but they all have etymological sources in acts that change the physical world. I use the physical actions they denote as important ways of creating metaphorical space and movement, through various materials that I modify using drawing, and installation methods. This is especially evident in works like *Voyage* (2015) and *Travel* (2017) in their relocation (displacement) from wall to floor. The movement from vertical to horizontal orientation is a movement from flat, wall-hung work to sculpture, changing viewer participation. Things that are solid shift into the dissolvable, fluidity shifts into stability, water goes from shallow to deep, liquid freezes into a solid or vaporizes into a gas, and these transitions reverse themselves. The
drawing itself becomes an object, an obstruction, a container. A displacement has occurred, therefore the viewer has to physically engage, readjust, readapt, and relocate as they are estranged from their expectations and encouraged to imagine the landscape through my sensory input.

In my large charcoal drawing, *Voyage* (2015), I depict a dissected swimming pool that I lay flat on the floor and placed at the edge of a wall. A diving board is rendered and positioned awkwardly in the middle of the pool. A reflection of a storm cloud on the surface of the water is visible, suggesting a metaphorical space above, and the palm trees reflected on the opposite end suggest some kind of land or place ahead. The drawing itself becomes an obstruction to the ambulatory viewer. A 2D surface with a
watery fictional 3D spatial presence translates into a 3D sculptural presence in which illusions of deep water are literalized (instead of looking “down” into a watery depth depicted on the wall, the viewer actually looks down as if into real water). This transposition of the drawing translates 2D into 3D, a surface into a solid, a drawing into a sculpture. Water becomes a barricade. The viewer is both too big and too little, the change in context renders familiar fictions into a fantasmagoria. One is stranded on the diving board or treading water, so to speak, left to contemplate the greater distance at hand, an unreachable, elusive distance between places and the other side.
In, *Nuoc* (2018), I use tracing paper and clothing patterns (the set of flat shapes that a tailor uses as a template to cut fabric preparatory to assembling the parts into a garment) as a direct link to the idea of transference and translation. I hung scrolls of tracing paper on the wall with the ends continuing onto the floor. I used erasure to render a hardwood basketball court with a reflection of smoke. The tracing paper is marked by the imprint of the shapes of the clothing patterns, which leaves translucent lines due to the removal of carbon from the tracing paper in the tracing process. Evidence of what was relocated remains. The original clothing patterns, the copy, and the potential clothes made from them are absent. The tracing paper becomes a stand-in for an in-between state, a state of alteration and oscillation. The ghostly lines become rules, strategies which turn into folds, cuts, mending - flat to sculptural to body-like movement, a choreography of migration that crosses borderlines. This is also mimicked by the imagery of the basketball court. The lines of the court become another tool for measuring and locating that emphasizes boundaries. The hardwood floor and the smoke fluctuates between reading the dimensions of vertical and horizontal, actual or virtual. They simultaneously become a path and a fence; connect and divide. A plan turns into a cartography, then turns into fabric, then into skin, then into a record of labor, then turns into play, a game, then into rules, back to a plan, a map, an object. The work constantly alternates between readings of inside and outside, out of bounds and in bounds, and here and there, oscillating between an unstable semi-permeable
membrane, and something static, always amidst acts of transitioning, translating, and transfering.

The grandness of the size of the drawings is undermined by the materiality of paper, which is fragile, thin, and highlights the ephemeral. The paper’s fragility counteracts the grandness implied by the size of the work, like some sort of failure of grasping and conveying a distance. In, *Voyage* (2015), the overall size is created by placing sheets of paper, 50”x 38”, edge to edge creating a grid like structure. This grid structure acts as a mode of measurement, a tool to locate, and extends the drawing toward the infinite through repetition. The complications between size and materiality create oppositions.
and transitions between readings of the delicate and monumental, the heavy and ephemeral, the visible and invisible: the viewer has to constantly shift as I shift.

The inherent ambiguity in the drawings emphasizes the idea of shifting and estrangement by allowing the location of the landscapes to become malleable for the viewer. It allows a place to be many; Vietnam, Hawaii, California, the tropical, the temperate forest, in paradise or terror, East or West. The individual is, ‘without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless -- a race of angels.’ In this context, ambiguity parallels the unsettled, the unknown, non-self, and the transitioning. Through this, a participatory process is provided. By means of the sensory, myself and the viewer alike can escape the confines of social forces and rules that govern reality, by scrutinizing my sensory input as a form of relationship to place, and an exploration of the unknown, the non-self, the other. We all want to belong, and have a relationship with our environment without complexities, even if that relationship itself is imagined. Imagining landscapes and the relationships to place is the performativity of belonging (David, Thomas), it is the movement of becomingness. My feeling is that landscape, by offering a created space where one can belong and move freely, can behave as a proclamation of freedom. By using ambiguity and choosing subjects relatively independent of socio-political import, the ability to move between places is amplified, and a sense of freedom is enhanced. Thus, art as compensatory to lived experience.
As a by-product of a diaspora, I am tied by the need for emotional compensation to an imaginary plentitude, “the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery,” which Stuart Hall speaks of. My drive for compensation allows my experience as dislocated and as the Other to articulate an alternate vision through my own sensory input into my work. Each piece becomes an attempt at an endless return to inalienable sources, and my ambiguous constructions aim to identify nameless longings. Decisions of transitioning, transferring, and translating become the framework of a cartography, and a choreography of limbo, of the space between my lacks and my compensations. I try to show this tension in my very existence through the creation of my own world of immersion, my inherent obstructions.
References


Exhibition Image list:

1. Nuoc, 2018
   144” x 168”, Transfer carbon paper
   Andy Van Dinh
   Exhibited: May 17th - June 2nd

2. Nuoc, 2018 (Detail)

3. Nuoc, 2018 (Detail)

4. Nuoc / Bounds, 2018
   120” x 168”, Transfer carbon paper
   Andy Van Dinh
   Exhibited: May 17th - June 2nd

5. Nuoc / Bounds, 2018 (Detail)

6. Nuoc / Bounds, 2018 (Detail)

7. Aqua I, 2018
   100” x 114”, Charcoal & watercolor on paper
   Andy Van Dinh
   Exhibited: May 17th - June 2nd

8. Aqua II, 2018
   100” x 114”, Charcoal & watercolor on paper
   Andy Van Dinh
   Exhibited: May 17th - June 2nd

9. Pool Dreams, 2018
   11” x 14”, Charcoal & watercolor on paper
   Andy Van Dinh
   Exhibited: May 17th - June 2nd
Exhibition Installation View

Andy Van Dinh, May 17th - June 2nd, Installation View

Andy Van Dinh, May 17th - June 2nd, Installation View