

VISITOR'S GUIDE

Reframing the Fragments: The Best We Could Do

September 22, 2018 through February 17, 2019

All quotes by Thi Bui from her illustrated memoir *The Best We Could Do*



Common Reading at UO is a year of conversation around a shared book. This academic year, all first-year students will receive *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui, and faculty will use the book to teach undergraduate and graduate courses. To complement this conversation, the JSMA is organizing its third annual **Common Seeing**, an exhibition that expands upon several of the themes in Bui's graphic novel memoir. Similar to years past, the art selected for this year's Common Seeing exhibition is diverse in media and intent, and aimed at generating dialogue around what we have inherited and what we will pass on to future generations.

In *The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui probes the depths of unspoken trauma and love during her family's journey from their war-torn home in Vietnam (Việt Nam) to a new life in California. The author was born in 1975, in Saigon (Sài Gòn), three months before South Vietnam (Việt Nam) surrendered to communist forces. In 1978, she and her family fled to Malaysia by boat as refugees, and then made their way to the United States. *The Best We Could Do* relates the author's experience of becoming a first-time mother and wanting to learn who her parents were before they became parents, and how they survived war, loss, separation, and frequent displacement.

In *Reframing the Fragments: The Best We Could Do*, artists from different places, contexts, and generations intersect the arc of history with the intimacy of personal recollections and storytelling. They select and re-present fragments of collective and individual memory, myths, and histories to renegotiate perception, meaning, and the tools and language of power. Their emotionally charged works, often based on famous, familial, and anonymous historic photographic images, are sites where the artist and viewer can work out relationships between things and their relationship to things. The artists' processes and images value the unresolvable and the reconcilable, the fixation of impermanence, and a determination to move beyond the intractable.



Binh Danh
(Vietnamese-American, b. 1977)
Ancestral Altar #16, 2006
Chlorophyll print and resin
27-1/2 x 13-1/2 x 1-3/8 inches
James and Haya Wallace Acquisition
Fund Purchase

"How much of ME is my own, and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined? I used to imagine that history had infused my parents' lives with the dust of a cataclysmic explosion. That it had seeped through their skin and become part of their blood. That being my father's child, I, too, was a product of war...and being my mother's child, could never measure up to her. But maybe being their child simply means that I will always feel the weight of their past." pp. 324-325.

Binh Danh often bases his imagery on photographic archives of war casualties. For this work, he selected mugshots of victims from the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh. The museum is located within a former prison and interrogation center where the Khmer Rouge or Communist Party of Kampuchea tortured and killed approximately 20,000 suspected enemies during their reign of terror from 1975 to 1979. The title of this work, *Ancestral Altar #16*, was inspired by Danh's experience growing up in a Vietnamese Buddhist household where many family rituals centered on the theme of death and ancestor homage.

What do the faces and butterflies in Danh's ancestor altar communicate to you? How do Thi Bui and Danh record and preserve memory? Do you or someone in your family keep a record of family history? How? What is Bui's relationship to her ancestors? Who would you represent on your ancestral altar?



Binh Danh
(Vietnamese-American, b. 1977)
Untitled [the Killing Fields of Siem Reap], 2008
Daguerreotype
23 x 17-3/8 inches
James and Haya Wallace Acquisition
Fund Purchase

"And though my parents took us far away from the site of their grief... certain shadows stretched far, casting a gray stillness over our childhood... hinting at a darkness we did not understand but could always FEEL." pp. 59-60.

Binh Danh's inventive approach to photography combines his interests in science, history, and culture. This work is a daguerreotype—a photographic process invented in 1839 that employs an iodine-sensitized silver plate and mercury vapor to make a one-of-a-kind, highly detailed image. Themes of mortality, memory, and spirituality influence Danh's artistic practice. This landscape is one of many sites throughout Cambodia where the Khmer Rouge regime conducted mass executions as part of a state-sponsored genocide that claimed over a million lives from 1975 to 1979.

How does Danh's use of the photographic process, time, and the role of the viewer differ from the other works in the gallery? What are your favorite passages in *The Best We Could Do* where Thi Bui merges the past and the present; landscape and the body? What makes them particularly effective? Is there a darkness you do not understand, but can always feel? How do you respond to this feeling?



Binh Danh
(Vietnamese-American, b. 1977)
The Leaf Effect: Study for Metempsychosis
#2, 2006
Chlorophyll print and resin
20 x 11-1/4 x 2-1/2 inches
James and Haya Wallace Acquisition Fund
Purchase

"What becomes of us after we die? Do we live on in what we leave to our children?" p. 323.

To create this work, Binh Danh used the natural process of photosynthesis. He sandwiched the negative of a portrait photograph, grass leaves, and a moist cloth (to keep the leaves alive) between two glass plates and exposed them to sunlight. After the image became one with nature, Danh cast it in resin to preserve it. The term "metempsychosis," in the title of the work, refers to the passage of the soul after death into the body of another being. The artist believes that matter is neither created nor destroyed, but only transformed, and that the remnants of war live on forever. In a 2009 article for VQR, Danh is quoted as stating, "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."

How does Bui use elements of portrait photography, water, time, darkness and light to tell her family's story? How do "the remnants of war live on" for Bui and her parents? What traits have you inherited and what do you want to pass on to others?



Phan Cẩm Thượng (Vietnamese, b. 1957)
Ac Mong (Nightmare), 2000
Woodblock print; ink on paper,
edition 19/20
20-5/8 x 28-1/4 inches
Gift of the Jack and Susy Wadsworth Col-
lection of Japanese Prints

If we can open a door between worlds...we can also shut it. And I can close my eyes and turn away. If I could close my eyes, I could sleep. And if I could sleep, I could dream. Though my world was small, I would sometimes dream of being free in it. This was my favorite dream. pp. 87-90.

During the American War (a term the Vietnamese use to refer to the conflict that occurred in Vietnam [Việt Nam], Laos, and Cambodia from 1955 to 1975) Phan Cẩm Thượng lived in several villages in Vietnam (Việt Nam) to escape the bombing of cities. In the countryside, he developed a love and respect for rural traditions and he went on to become a leading expert on the cultural customs of Vietnamese peasants from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries.

What's going on in this picture? What sounds do you hear? What types of experiences do Thi Bui's parents have in Vietnam's (Việt Nam's) countryside? What dreams and nightmares do Bui and her parents have in *The Best We Could Do*? Both Bui and Thượng work with ink on paper. How do their processes differ? List adjectives that describe Thượng's artistic style and three adjectives to describe Bui's artistic style.

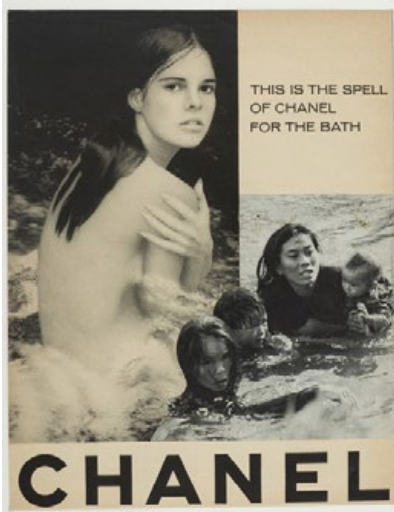


Violet Ray
 (American, b. 1936)
Polaroid: It's like opening a present, 1966
 Collage on paper
 13-1/16 x 10-1/4 inches
 Gift of Violet Ray

"Saigon Execution" [a famous photograph by North American photographer Eddie Adams] is credited with turning popular opinion in America against the war." p. 209.

In the winter of 1966, Violet Ray made his first collages against the war in Vietnam (Việt Nam) as part of an artist collective called the Eye Makers. Why do you think the artist collective chose the name "Eye Makers"? Realizing the psychological power of advertising—you are opening your present—Ray turned the media's utopian vision of U.S. culture into horror and an effective tool for antiwar protest. What are we doing in Vietnam (Việt Nam)? As we open our present, Ray brings the gruesome reality of the Vietnam War into the intimate spaces of one's private desires.

What is the role of photography in *The Best We Could Do*? What do you learn from the references to photographs in Thi Bui's memoir? What's going on in the black and white picture in Ray's collage? How would you go about finding the context of the image or what is outside the frame?



Violet Ray
 (American, b. 1936)
Spell of Chanel, 1966
 Collage on paper
 13 1/8 x 10 1/4 inches
 Gift of Violet Ray

"This—not any particular piece of Vietnamese culture—is my inheritance: the inexplicable need and extraordinary ability to RUN when the shit hits the fan. My Refugee Reflex." p. 305.

With a stack of Life magazines, a pair of scissors, and a pot of rubber cement, Violet Ray juxtaposed images of everyday Vietnamese people in life-threatening situations with glossy pitches for products to deplore the Vietnam War. Ray usurps the powerful influence of consumer culture on our subconscious desires and uses it for his artistic and political strategies. The artist's works were reproduced and distributed as fliers at protests in the U.S. throughout the 1960s and '70s.

Ray's collages are particularly disturbing because of the relationship between image and text. Like Surrealism, which used elements of shock and surprise to jolt society out of the spell of bourgeois conventions and complacency, Ray's collages challenged the standard imagery of political protest made at a physical and emotional distance.

In *The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui's cousin tells her "Don't be such a REFUGEE!" (p. 285.) Who is a refugee? What are your own narratives of refugees and what narratives have been manufactured for you? How does *The Best We Could Do* show that refugees are more than just the sum of their experiences? Have you ever offered another person refuge? What does it mean to be a place of refuge? How can a community blur the lines between newcomer and local?



Nelson Sandgren (American, born Canada, 1917-2006)

Moratorium Day (October 15, 1969), 1969

Lithograph, tusche washes and acid bitten tusche,
no edition #

15-1/2 x 21-1/2 inches (image size)

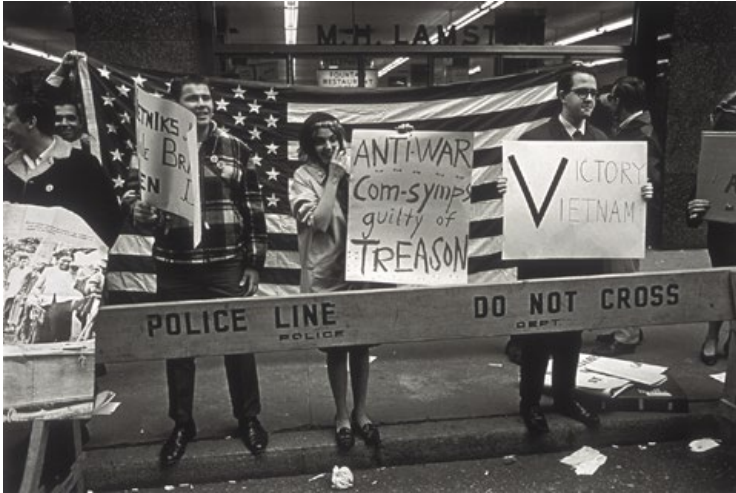
Donated by Jan and Erik Sandgren and Bill
Rhoades

"It was 1965. American troops arrived by the tens of thousands. American planes carpet-bombed a country dependent on agriculture with napalm and the defoliant Agent Orange." p. 200.

Canadian-born artist Nelson Sandgren, a University of Oregon alum (Bachelor of Arts '42, Master of Fine Arts '48) and longtime art professor at Oregon State University (1948-86) made this print on the occasion of the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam in 1969. October 15, 1969, was marked by massive demonstrations, closures, and teach-ins to protest the United States' involvement in Vietnam (Việt Nam). At the time of printing, Sandgren wrote, "October 15, 1969 was [a] rebellion against the unwanted, unpopular Vietnam stupidity which was foolishly kept alive by the infamous U.S presidents: Johnson and Nixon. Shameful years in U.S. history which were much resented by myself and millions of Americans."

In a 2017 interview for *The Comics Journal*, author Thi Bui stated, "The primary problem with American narratives about the war is the need to center American experiences in a conflict that was not all about America. So even when Americans go in with the intention of critically examining the United States' involvement in Viet Nam, they continue to keep the focus on themselves—look how bad we were, the damage we did—not realizing that in continuing to talk over the voices of those who have been heard from less, they continue the damage and prevent people from healing."

What is going on in Sandgren's lithograph? Compare and contrast Sandgren's quote and image to Thi Bui's quote and the other works in the exhibition. How do narratives about wars change over time?



Jonathan Brand (American, b. 1933)
Peace March, New York City, April 15, 1967, 1967
 Gelatin silver print
 10 x 16 inches
 Gift of the artist

"I think a lot of Americans forget that for the Vietnamese...the war continued, whether America was involved or not." p. 209.

From 1957 to 1968, Jonathan Brand took thousands of photographs chronicling New York City street life. The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art has fourteen images by Brand documenting the Peace March in Manhattan organized by the Spring Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam in 1967. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, and singer Harry Belafonte the singer, as well as several other civil rights and religious figures led over 100,000 demonstrators from Central Park to the headquarters of the United Nations. In a New York Times article summarizing the march and published the following day, Dr. King is quoted as stating to the multitudes, "We rally at the United Nations in order to affirm support of the principals of peace, universality, equal rights and self-determination of people embodied in the Charter and acclaimed by mankind, but violated by the United States."

Have you participated in or watched protest marches or demonstrations? What were your experiences like? How were they similar to or different from these photographic images? How did they affect your politics on an issue?



Jonathan Brand (American, b. 1933)
Peace March, New York City, April 15, 1967, 1967
 Gelatin silver print
 10 x16 inches
 Gift of the artist



Dinh Q. Lê (Vietnamese-American, b. 1968)
*My Lai in Additive and the Subtractive
Colors*, 2013
C-prints and linen tape
78-3/4 x 49-3/4 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach
Gallery; Collection of Kimberly Moyer

"Every casualty in war is someone's grandmother, grandfather, mother, father, brother, sister, child, lover." p. 157.
"Revisiting this game of war and strategy. I think about how none of the Vietnamese people in that video have a name or a voice. p. 185.

Dinh Q. Lê's work is based on combat photographer Ronald L. Haeberle's image of a group of civilian women and children before they were slaughtered by the U.S. Army on March 16, 1968. The United States refers to this event as the My Lai Massacre and in Vietnam (Việt Nam) it is called the Sơn Mỹ Massacre. In a 1999 email to art historian and art critic Moira Roth, Lê wrote, "In the My Lai case, as an artist and as a person, I feel that the victims are one of its most overlooked aspects. Our memory of the incident is only of the massacre. I do not want to remember the victims only at the most horrific moment of their lives. What were their lives like before they were taken from them and what would they be like today if they had not died? What gives them hope, keeps their dreams and happiness? ...Who were these people that have become a symbol of guilt in America's conscience? These are the memories that have been completely forgotten, and these are the memories I want people to start remembering."

Lê's handwoven pixilation activates the viewer's brain to complete the image, relying on one's imagination or memory of Haeberle's photograph. What can and cannot be conveyed in a photograph? What should our response be when faced with images of violence, pain, and suffering? Do you feel accountable for what the camera lets you see? How do you see yourself in these people? How do you see them in you? In a 2007 interview, artist Binh Danh stated, "Photography is more about death than life; it's used to preserve life, which is so fragile." Do you agree or disagree with this statement, and why?



Dinh Q. Lê (Vietnamese-American, b. 1968)
Immolation in Color, 2002
C-prints and linen tape
33-1/2 x 67-3/4 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach
Gallery; Collection of Elizabeth Leach

"The contradiction in my father's stories troubled me for a long time. but so did the oversimplifications and stereotypes in American versions of the Vietnam War." p. 206.

Dinh Q. Lê learned to weave grass mats from his aunt, and he incorporated this tradition into his artistic practice. In *Immolation in Color*, Lê wove the vertical strips of Malcolm Browne's 1963 image of the self-immolation of the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức in downtown Saigon (Sài Gòn) into the horizontal strips of film stills from Hollywood movies about the Vietnam War. How does the artist's process effect your interpretation of the work?

Immolation in Color is part of a body of work Lê titled "From Vietnam to Hollywood." In 2003, the artist wrote that the series "... is drawn from the merging of my personal memories, media-influenced memories, and Hollywood-fabricated memories to create a surreal landscape memory that is neither fact nor fiction. At the same time, I want the series to talk about the struggle for control of meaning and memories of the Vietnam War. ... Hollywood and the U.S. media are constantly trying to displace and destroy our memories about the Vietnam War to replace it with their versions..."

What are some of the U.S. stereotypes of the Vietnam War that Thi Bui mentions in her illustrated memoir? How does she educate herself about the war? How do you learn about historic events? What changes your understanding of them? How did *The Best We Could Do* change your perception of the Vietnam War?



"I keep looking toward the past...tracing our journey in reverse...over the ocean through the war seeking an origin story that will set everything right." pp. 39-41.

In a 2017 interview for *The Comics Journal*, Thi Bui stated, "The idea of grieving and walking, or walking as grieving, spoke to me as a very true representation of grief, one that is located in the body. Because so much of my story takes place in my head, as memory, as rumination, I loved when there was an embodied experience I could draw that conveyed more than words could."

How does Bui's use of line, color, space, and perspective change as she tells her family's story? Select a couple examples of different styles that Bui uses and explain how they create and reinforce concepts, emotions, texts and subtexts. What do you learn from seeing the author's original drawings? How do they compare to the final published images?

Thi Bui (Vietnamese-American, b. 1975)
Untitled 1-6, ca. 2015
 Ink on paper
 Loan courtesy of artist

"Even standing right in front of our old home, I had to rely completely on my family's stories to picture how it was when we lived there." p. 181.



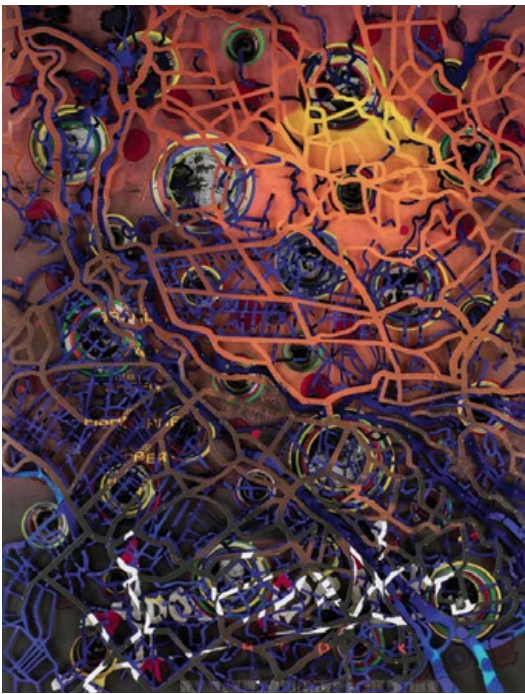
Ann Le (Vietnamese American, b. 1981)
Sisters I from the *Home* series, 2011
Collage
20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist

On her website, artist Ann Le states, "Memory is a retelling of what we think we remember; it's a collaboration of events and collected moments that have occurred in the mind. In my work *Home*, I recreated a series of faux family portraits. I scanned in old family portraits of my relatives from Vietnam, and paired them with images of family homes I photographed throughout Los Angeles. By doing this, I am fabricating a substitute family photo album—thinking of the many displaced families, and individuals that have escaped in search of asylum. The language in my work touches on separation and bridges the question of what came before, and what's to follow."

How do Le's faux family portraits relate to Thi Bui's images of her family and home? Why do you think Ann Le chose these types of homes as a backdrop for her relatives from Vietnam (Việt Nam)? Does your family take family pictures in front of their homes? Where is home for you? When have you felt uprooted, isolated or displaced? Have you ever created a collage or faux portrait? (i.e. Photoshopped yourself with a celebrity, cut someone out of a photo, etc.)? Have you ever fabricated a memory, and if so, why?



Ann Le (Vietnamese American, b. 1981)
Family Portrait I from the *Home* series, 2011
Collage
20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Matthew Picton (American, born England, 1960)
Apocalypse Now #1, 2018
Archival papers and boards
35 x 26 x 5 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery

"wounds beneath wounds." p. 93.

On view through December 2018, in the Artist Project Space on the first floor of the JSMA, is the exhibition *Matthew Picton Cultural Mapping*. It includes two works, *Apocalypse Now #1* and *The Mekong River, Apocalypse Now #2*, that recall Dinh Q Lê's comment about his series "From Vietnam to Hollywood" – "a surreal landscape memory that is neither fact nor fiction." The seven layers in Picton's *The Mekong River* include illustrations and prints by Vietcong artists, stills from Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film, *Apocalypse Now*, which is set during the Vietnam War, and texts from Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*. These sources are a point of departure for the artist's investigations of the continuing legacy of colonialization, violence, and plunder.

Think of examples of Thi Bui's mappings in *The Best We Could Do*. How are they similar to or different from Picton's layered topographies? What connections do you make between Picton's work and other artists in the exhibition *Reframing the Fragments*? What do Picton's cut lines and circular shapes suggest to you?



Matthew Picton (American, born England, 1960)
The Mekong River, Apocalypse Now #2, 2018
Archival boards, papers, ink and pins
53 x 53 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery

Many of the questions in this visitor guide came out of community conversations at the JSMA facilitated by Manuel Padilla, executive director of Portland Meet Portland.