

Art Reviews

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
TIMES ART CRITIC

Body 'Gestures': The richly sepia-toned, soft-focus images of hands, feet and limbs made by largely self-taught photographer Han Nguyen merge the delicacy of pastel drawings with the sturdy impenetrability of bronze reliefs. That the San Diego-based artist has turned the camera on his own body infuses their dual sense of transient fragility and ancient mystery with an introspective aura.

Nguyen calls his show of 26 pictures at Stephen Cohen Gallery "Gestures." Dated 1997 to 1999, they display fragmentary limbs isolated against blank backgrounds in a wide variety of poses. Hands hang limply, ~~clasp~~ one another, grasp air. Feet point, rest corpse-like on heels, stand formally in profile.

In a few pictures a hand grasps an ankle, joining two extremities

that bring the absent, unseen body between them squarely into the mind's eye. One especially lyrical work shows the soft inner length of an arm, cascading like a stream from the upper right to the lower left in a gentle display of vulnerability and exposure.

These physical gestures are poignantly mute, though, eschewing the legibility of sign language. Instead, it's Nguyen's camera that gestures, situating photography alongside older forms of art. The formal resemblance to drawing and bronze relief is compounded with quiet allusions to everything from the gesticulating hands in Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling to Stieglitz's photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe and Asian carvings of Buddha.

Nguyen, whose work is also currently the subject of a survey at San Diego's Museum of Contemporary Art, organized by the Museum of Photographic Arts there, employs a format that's highly reflective: Behind glass, the rich bronze tones create a mirror-like finish in which the inescapable reflection of your own inquiring face and body intermingles with the gestures.

The two most recent photographs show a slight shift. These pictures, color, cyan instead of bronze, recalls architectural blueprints. It's too soon to tell where Nguyen is headed with this change, but on the evidence of the earlier

photographs it will be worth watching.

• Stephen Cohen Gallery, 7358 Beverly Blvd., (323) 937-5525, through Sept. 4. Closed Sundays and Mondays