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## PHOTOGRAPHER GOES “IN STUDIO” TO EXPLORE LIFE

By ROBERT L. PINCUS, Art Critic

A stone, wood, a plant: Those things possessed one life in nature and another equally vital one in Han Nguyen's photographs. He doesn't simply make pictures of them; he communes with them.

It's hard to reach any conclusion after seeing his inspired museum exhibition, "Han Nguyen: In Studio," at the temporary quarters of the Museum of Photographic Arts in downtown San Diego. He reveals shape and surface with gorgeous clarity. You could swear that the rock in one of his "Rock Portraits" is about to push outward from the picture surface. The rational mind tells you the image is flat, but the roundness of the photographed specimen appears so real.

Portrait is a perfect word choice to capture the spirit of this series. Usually, of course, the term is applied to the likeness of a person - to a picture that reveals something distinctive about that individual. Yet that is precisely how Nguyen approaches the photographing of an object: to reveal its character.

This premise gets even wider play in his "Wood Portraits" from 1987, for which the subject is individual pieces of firewood. The idea of photographing them may sound a touch absurd, but a skilled artist has a way of turning conventions on their head. Nguyen does exactly that. He makes us believe these inanimate things a worthy of a portrait.

Look at one way; "wood #7" resembles a torso. Viewed with a different frame of mind, though, it seems a handsome abstract sculpture. But shape isn't the only thing on which he fixes our attention. He captures the many details of the wood's skin, with its prominent knot and areas alternately bathed in light and shadow. By contrast, "Wood #10" is flat, almost rectangular, as if it were not a three-dimensional piece of wood but a wood-grain pattern, precisely lighted to reveal every crevice and line.

The objects in these early pictures are organic, but the setting isn't. He places the wood on a draped pedestal and sets it against a uniformly dark background.

These pictures aren't the meditation on nature so much as a tale of the eye and the transformative power of the camera. Nguyen's stage is the studio, as the title of his exhibition suggests.

These breakthrough series are stylish. The celebrated fashion and portrait

photographer Irving Penn is an influence that both exhibition curator Diana Gaston cites and the artist names. The elegant lighting and neutral setting are qualities that Nguyen clearly saw in Penn's art.

From the start, Nguyen avoided that pitfall of all pitfalls: He didn't become an imitator of Penn's (or of any photographer) he admired. Instead, he perceived how subjects different from Penn's could gain a new life in the studio. It was the myriad possibilities of the studio that became his overriding preoccupation, which is why there is no identifiable style in Nguyen's photographs, but styles to fit each successive idea.

Even Nguyen photographed plants, for his "Garden at Night" series in 1991, the setting wasn't a garden. He brought flora, fauna and dirt indoors, constructing temporary dioramas.

In one, you can scrutinize "Twin Gladioli". They are side by side, like slender sentinels of their domain and gradually it becomes evident that subtle differences between them are as much the subject as their mirroring of each other. In "Sago Palm," the pictured plant leans to the right like a dancer, frozen in mid-gesture. In "Iris," the leaves are like slender, ghostly fingers, posed against a blurred studio backdrop of clouds.

His 1992 "Interiors" series might seem a dramatic departure from earlier group of pictures, unless we see Nguyen as a photographer who was - and is - willing to take risks, to explore an idea rather than aspire to have a signature style.

They are hypnotic little compositions, the first in which he uses a sepia tone rather than a crisp black and white. And the things in these images are made from clay rather than found objects: tiny furnishings, utensils, bowls and sculptures. So are the rooms that house them.

The space in some "Interiors" is tight. He focuses closely on a "Three Legged Stool" which looks as if it's about to go for a stroll. The scope is wider in the arresting "Brancusi's Bird," for Nguyen crafted tiny sculptures in the manner of Brancusi. He focuses tightly on one, which stands in the middle of the tiny room, while the others, set against the walls, are slightly blurred.

This series divides into domestic interiors and gallery or museum like spaces, adorned with sculptures. But that doesn't mean the furnishings are any less fantastical than the mock art. Perhaps the most haunting selection is "Fork on Table," in which the fork looks more like a fragment of an arm with three-fingered hand.

The sepia tone of the "Interior" series meshes perfectly with its content. The imagery is dreamlike, the product of fantasy. The antiquarian look of the pictures

makes them seem as if they exist in another time, which is apt, since they create a place that exists for us only in photographic form.

## **PRIVATE VISIONS**

Just as abruptly as he adopted this approach, Nguyen abandoned it. By 1993, he had rejected the constructed rooms and the sepia prints for everyday sights in more conventionally printed black-and-white images. Nguyen even ventured outside the studio, in his “B-Movie” series (1993-1998), photographing a jellyfish in an aquarium tank and a tiny skeleton at the Museum of Man.

Yet the vision remains just as private. We could say he brings the world into his studio, jokingly altering our view of the jellyfish by turning it into a visual double entendre, by dubbing three views of it “Spaceship Descending” (1998). An eerie photograph of skeleton, flanked by images of bird wings, becomes “Dead Angel” (1996).

By the time his “Gestures” series appears, it’s not surprising to find Nguyen shifting again. Hands and arms, softly focused, are frozen in pictorial space. At times, there is one; at others, two. Legs and feet appear, too. The poses are suggestive more explicit, implying a tense relationship between subject and world.

The subject, this time, is Nguyen himself. “Gestures” is a drama of tension, pitting communication against concealment. In style, they are seductive: large sepia images made with a pinhole camera. They also assert that the studio remains a place of fertile ideas for the 43-year-old photographer. The variety of the exhibition is rich and provocative, even as it hints that we should have high expectations for his future as an artist.