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Seen and heard

Nguyen's exhibits speak to us, questioning our perceptions

By Robert L. Pincus
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Many years ago, Han Nguyen thought he wanted to be a street photographer in the tradition of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Garry Winogrand. But in a 1999 interview he confided that he didn't have the gregarious temperament for that sort of work.

There has to be a bit of poetic irony in the fact that one of his new series finds him photographing rows of buildings. There's no street in front of them, but the suggestion of one is obvious.

Actually, the buildings are of the artist's making – little ceramic houses and apartment towers. And they appear in “Model Home,” one of two new series of pictures by Nguyen in his exhibition at the Joseph Bellows Gallery.

True to form, Nguyen makes these structures the subject of impeccably lit and printed images. He's a photographic artist with a philosophical temperament who knows how to make his ideas visual – a gift he's demonstrated for two decades in a memorable string of exhibitions, including a 1999 mid-career survey at the Museum of Photographic Arts, “In Studio.”

“Model Home” is vintage Nguyen, simple in style but sophisticated and complex in effect and concept. This series makes elegant use of black and white. The tiny structures gleam like ivory, and the space around them is uniformly black.

The structures themselves are childlike, with their tiny indentations as windows and doors punctuating elemental shapes: rectangular, tall and squat; some with flat roofs and others with peaked ones. “House #2,” for example, is a vertical box, with only two indentations to hint at windows and another to imply a door. “House #11” offers three quasi-rectangles, one smaller than the next and all misshapen on one side or another. “House #10” contains a highrise, which hovers over two little structures that hug its right side.

Nguyen turns these creations into platonic forms of home, and he underscores this idea by placing them in stark light. Only windows are in shadow. These edifices don't resemble buildings but ghost versions of them.

This is hardly the first time Nguyen has constructed things to photograph. Back in 1985, he arranged stones to resemble an uncanny detail of Stonehenge. In the early 1990s, he made haunting architectural interiors in which some of the objects suggested human fragments and others looked like sculptures.

As with these interiors, the new “houses” blur our sense of scale. We intuit that they are miniatures. But in a picture, a real building can look similar in size.

“Model Home” encourages us to register the pleasurable mysteries of perception that photography can produce. Of course, it only does this because Nguyen has the eye and mind to make pictures that evoke such large themes.

“Flow,” Nguyen's second series on view, reveals similar concerns, even though its images are radically different.

Stark black and white is replaced by lush color. For solid forms, he substitutes water.

This series doesn't so much blur scale as exploit the difference between flux and frozen form. A picture is a moment in time, of course, while water doesn't stand still. But in photographs, motion is arrested; ripples and eddies are arrested.

The traces of those ripples and eddies become pronounced because Nguyen has added a concentrated version of watercolor to the water for each image. It's a simple idea that yields lovely results, with the tinted water filling the entire surface of the photograph. “Flow #7” is a sea of lime green, “Flow #15” a dazzling purple, and “Flow #34” an aqua blue. There are brilliant yellows and additional shades of green in other examples.

From one vantage point, these pictures are akin to abstract paintings, with the lines in water suggesting brush strokes. It's as though Nguyen's using water as his canvas and watercolor as his medium.


In one sense, these photographs hardly seem like pictures at all. They are rectangles of pure color with accidental differences in their design. But in actuality, they are products of a carefully devised concept. And like Nguyen's “Model Home” series, they join an elemental kind of image to a fresh, sophisticated concept.

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