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The myth of progress that plagues our understanding of history also confounds our attempts at comprehending artist's lives and motivations. Time moves, persistently, in one direction, but human events follow a meandering course marked by deviations and internal contradictions that defy the logic of the conventional, chronological narratives.

Han Nguyen has produced several discrete bodies of work over the past decade. An account could be written that begins at the beginning and abides by the continuity of time, tracing the evolution of each series in its turn. But the richness and poignancy of Nguyen's work owes nothing to the predictability of the straight line. His images draw from the deep pool of sources and concerns. They dart between (and occasionally unite) opposing conditions - raw sensuality and calculated artifice; the home and body are primary, private sites of emotion; and the staged display of collective dreams, myths and histories.

"Gestures" Nguyen's most recent series of work, is his most stripped down and sensuous. A cumulative self-portrait made with a pinhole camera, the images show only the artist's arms and hands in a quiet ballet against sepia-toned darkness. The gestures are simple, eloquent, distilled to pure pattern in space, yet resonant with the whole body, whole mind dance of emotions. In the center of one photograph, Nguyen's hands clench in a knot; in another his palms press together as in prayer. In one image, Nguyen combines two negatives so he can show both of his arms entering the frame from opposite sides. Like the twin masks of comedy and tragedy, one cupped hand opens upward, with confidence, while the other droops downward, languidly. Strength fuses with grace, and power with yearning in this lush suite of images.

The nakedness of the "Gestures" work is countered by stagey self-consciousness in Nguyen's "B-Movie" series. Negatives stacked like film frames yield a disorienting scenario in the image, "Dream": on top, small dark beetles crawl up a glass pane; in the middle lies a fake dinosaur carcass from a natural history display, and on the bottom, as if the sum total of the ingredients, is a tight close-up of a screaming mouth. Other photographs from the series are similarly nightmarish, combining intense portraits by Van Gogh and Francis Bacon with images of animal and human skeletons. Like concentrated, condensed B-movies, they evoke a sense of horror through obviously artificial means (rather than depicting actual trauma), yet the impact on the senses is formidable and real.

Pictures from the “B-Movie” series overlap with earlier work Nguyen made using photographs of displays in anthropological and natural history museums in San Diego, where he moved in the mid 70s from his native Viet Nam. His “Hominid” photographs, as well as related work that layers lush landscapes with images of artifacts and skeletons, delve into the memory of the species. Nguyen shows us our ancestors as a reminder, inflected through his Buddhist faith, that the past co-exists with the present. Reincarnation keeps the spirit or soul alive, while its external form changes over time. Cutting and taping together negatives, Nguyen mimics the challenge of reclaiming memory and reconstructing history through its fragmented remains.

Nguyen’s stunning little photographs of constructed interiors shift the focus of our musings to the notion of place rather than time, though they evoke a primal simplicity that is tinged with nostalgia. In these tiny prints - just a few inches per side - Nguyen fuses the artifice of his photographed museum tableaux with the emotional authenticity of his “Gestures.” Like the work of James Casebere, these are staged, miniature, unpeopled environments steeped in human presence.

Enclosed by clay-washed cardboard walls, Nguyen’s “Interiors” are furnished with objects that identify the setting as either a home or an artist’s studio - in either case, a site of personal nourishment. The small clay objects within, whether tools, implements or sculptures, appear to be bare basics of survival, the answers to essential needs. They are barely one remove from the artist’s hand: tapered, twisted sculptural forms reminiscent of Brancusi look like they have been rolled between the palms; the three legs of a stool seem to have twisted between the fingers; and a set of bowls appear to be the result of depressing a thumb into dabs of clay. A disproportionately large fork leaned against the wall in one of the photographs even take on the qualities of the hand itself, its tines like thick, irregular fingers.

These are primitive interiors but also primitivist, self-consciously minimal. Domestic, but far from banal, they have a quiet sacredness to them, their humble forms casting rich, rhythmic shadows. Like all of Nguyen’s work, the “Interiors” are exquisitely printed and marked by concentrated beauty -a pensive beauty that embraces contradictions, disjunctions and deviations from the straight and obvious path.

