

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

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Awash in a Cultural Deluge
'The Hugo Boss Prize 2012,' Danh Vo Works at the Guggenheim
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Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

The Hugo Boss Prize winner Danh Vo has brought together thousands of artifacts and works that belonged to the artist Martin Wong, raising questions about cultural identity.

By ROBERTA SMITH

The exhibition as cornucopia — as an overwhelming array of found objects selected and arranged by an artist — has become something of a trend. You could call it the return of the repressed: a way for stringent conceptually motivated sensibilities to re-engage with materials and objects.

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The Hugo Boss Prize 2012 Danh Vo has installed art and artifacts that belonged to the artist Martin Wong at the Guggenheim.

“The Hugo Boss Prize 2012: Danh Vo I M U U R 2” at the Guggenheim Museum is the latest example of these ready-made deluges, but also one of the best. Which doesn’t mean your eyes won’t occasionally glaze over. It has been conceived and orchestrated by Danh Vo (pronounced yon voh), an artist born in Vietnam who grew up in Denmark and is the 2012 recipient of the museum’s biennial Hugo Boss Prize. (Its overlap with Asia Week is fortuitous.)

His mostly lively, high-density Guggenheim installation is a homage to the artist Martin Wong (1946-99) that is consistent with Mr. Vo’s self-effacing, shape-shifting art and his tendency to function as much as a curator or archaeologist as an artist. That said, it certainly runs counter to his penchant for spare, ephemeral works.

The installation consists of nearly 4,000 frequently small artworks, artifacts and tchotchkes that once belonged to Wong, crowded into a specially designed gallery lined with handsome laminated plywood shelves. The show’s open-armed Whitmanesque title — I am you and you are too — appeared on Wong’s calling card.

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A denizen of the East Village during its art heyday of the 1980s and early '90s, Wong was known for meticulously realist, implicitly spiritual paintings of the harsher, sadder side of Loisaida life. In the mid-90s AIDS forced him to return to California, where he lived out his last years with his parents in San Francisco. Less well known is the fact that he seems to have been an obsessive accumulator, with an omnivorous, erudite eye; broad tastes; and a sharp sense of an object's social and cultural connotations.

(One of the show's many subtexts is the frequency of racial stereotypes — in this case African-American and Chinese — in popular culture. It also drives home a more diffuse point: Just about any small, mass-produced, glazed-ceramic animal or human is to some extent demeaning.)

Wong was aided and abetted in what seems to have been a nearly lifelong buying spree by his mother, Florence Wong Fie. Their acquisitions included everything from ancient jade or ivory archer rings to dusty campaign buttons; from Disney characters in various materials and scales to original cartoons by Clay Wilson and Victor Moscoso; from sheets of Chinese, Arabic and Tibetan calligraphy to numerous printed cards, booklets and books. There is a circular feng shui compass as well as Wong's drawing of one; an ordinary lamp with a ceramic Chinese sage for a base that appears in a very early painting of Wong's that is also on view; and a white-glazed porcelain figure of a many-armed Indian Hindu goddess, a Mother's Day gift to Mrs. Wong Fie, still in its box, which her son inscribed to "A little lady that always has her hands full."

Some of the more valuable items were sold when money was short, including a Mondrian drawing and a Warhol Campbell's Soup box; and others were given to museums and other institutions. But much remains — including an excellent Japanese horse-eye plate and a charming little hanging scroll of an ink-and-brush landscape. Until recently Mrs. Wong Fie, who is 97, displayed it all, cheek to jowl, in her San Francisco apartment, where Mr. Vo first saw it three years ago, after buying one of Wong's paintings.

Mr. Vo's effort has numerous precedents among recent New York museum exhibitions. In 2009 the Chinese artist Song Dong filled the Museum of Modern Art's atrium with "Waste Not," which consisted of every single thing that his mother, who definitely had hoarding issues, had wedged into her tiny shacklike house, along with the house itself. Last fall the same space was stuffed to overflowing with a disorderly, dispiriting yard sale staged by the Conceptual pioneer Martha Rosler.

The Guggenheim itself, in 2012, showed "Asterisms" by Gabriel Orozco, scores of often bulky items that had washed up on a beach in Mexico, carefully arranged according to color, material and function. (Also worth mentioning is an exhibition opening Friday at the Jewish Museum: In "As It Were ... So to Speak," the artist Barbara Bloom has furnished and accessorized five rooms with 276 objects she selected from the museum's collection.)

Mr. Vo's installation has a head start on these efforts because these objects were preselected, gathered together by one artist's barrier-blasting passion for stuff. Ignoring distinctions between real and fake, old and new, kitsch and not, they challenge the eye and preconceived notions of taste, even as, again and again, they trace the trickle-down from high to low. They

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also form a rather personal self-portrait of Wong, especially when you factor in the small, loving and never-exhibited paintings he made as gifts for his parents. (Many feature symbols for his mother, a pair of dice showing the number seven; and his father, an eight-ball or a golf-club head.)

The installation raises interesting questions: Is it an exhibition of individual artifacts or categories (the endless, often eye-glazing ceramic figures), spiced with the odd artwork? Or is it a single piece of art? And if so, whose? A collaboration of Wong, his mother and Mr. Vo? Or is it Mr. Vo's work alone? Its presence at the Guggenheim is his idea.

In addition "I M U U R 2" is consistent with Mr. Vo's penchant for assembling objects, images and documents to create ambiguous narratives about the fluidity of cultural identity and history and the ways these larger currents affect individual lives. A recent piece consisted of a chandelier, bought at an auction, that once hung in the lobby of the Hôtel Majestic in Paris, the site of some of the peace talks that eventually ended the Vietnam War. Mr. Vo's first New York gallery show, opening March 20 at the Marian Goodman Gallery on West 57th Street, will consist of personal effects from the estate of Robert McNamara, the defense secretary who played a large role in the escalation of the Vietnam War.

Until now Mr. Vo's most robust piece by a mile and also his best-known effort is "We the People," some 300 irregular sculptures in hammered copper, each of which copies at actual size, bit by bit, the entire outer skin of the Statue of Liberty. These fragments have been shown in groups at numerous institutions. Eventually they will be distributed to museums around the world, signifying the spread, or the disintegration, of democracy or American imperialism.

"I M U U R 2" has a robustness all its own. It is certainly Mr. Vo's most colorful and encompassing work. It comes at you from all sides.

Along the right wall a large shelf holds Wong's brushes arrayed in vases and pots accompanied by two little paintings of the parental symbols. Another shelf is dominated by hamburger-theme objects overseen by several little reliefs of cherubic African-American children. A third — a little meditation on beautiful colors shared by very different objects — contains a large faux Ming vase, surrounded by rather rough, painted-wood whirligigs of flowers and hands by Romano Gabriel (1887-1977), a self-taught artist who lived in Eureka, Calif., where Wong grew up. One of the best moments is an expansive display of sundry calligraphies, sprinkled with examples of graffiti art and Wong's own rigorously stylized script.

To Mr. Vo's credit this show is about total visual immersion in numerous familiar motifs to ultimately mysterious effect. Aside from the opening text panel there is not a label in sight. You are utterly on your own, and furthermore you never know which combinations of objects are faithful to Wong's, or Mrs. Wong Fie's arrangements, and which were configured by Mr. Vo or his assistants. But you do get a sense of two artists raised in the West but with roots in Asia, talking to each other through this horde, ruminating and inviting us to ruminate on complex, contaminating ways cultures are manifest in objects.

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“The Hugo Boss Prize 2012: Danh Vo I M U U R 2” is on view through May 27 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; (212) 423-3500, guggenheim.org.

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