

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

KALEIDOSCOPE

DANH VO

March 26, 2013 interview by Andrea Viliani



Danh Vo, *Good Life (detail)*, 2007

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

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AV You moved from Vietnam when you were a child and you found yourself living in Denmark. What kind of projections did you have of the West before moving there? Did you ever experience a sort of reverse exoticism—I mean, did you ever perceive the west as an ‘exotic’ place?

DV I was quite young when I came to Denmark, only 4 years old, so somehow I have no memories of Vietnam and no exotic vision of the West.

AV Perhaps you experienced a sort of exoticism from your own background rather than from your everyday life.

DV Yes, I have, but most of the stuff came through ideas from my parents. Having been subjected to one colonial power after another, Vietnam was really bombarded with Western cultural propaganda.

The piece *If I was to Climb the Himalayas Tomorrow* (2006), where I present my father's personal belongings in a glass display case, is very representative of this. There's a Dupont lighter, a Rolex watch and an American military class ring—things that he had long desired when he was in Vietnam, but first managed to acquire only in Denmark.



Danh Vo, *Untitled (America)* (details) BSI Art Collection, Lugano, 2008
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

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AV On the occasion of your last show at Isabella Bortolozzi Gallery in Berlin, entitled “Good Life,” you presented several of these glass display cases, inside of which were a camera and photographs by Joseph Carrier. Carrier came from the international academy of science and was in Vietnam doing anthropological research in the 1960s and 1970s. What the visitor saw in these photographs was a fascination for their subjects, these Vietnamese boys with their supposedly innocent and pure behavior. Why did you select this particular character?

DV You have to take into consideration the fact that the first time Joseph Carrier came to Vietnam in 1962, there had as yet been no gay liberation in the West; he was living under extremely homophobic conditions. Male intimacy in Vietnam is very different from American behavior. Men holding hands or sleeping together doesn't threaten the heterosexual order—not that it's a more gay-friendly society, because in Vietnam they don't believe that homosexuality exists, at least not among Vietnamese men. Anyway, it was this situation that attracted Joe's attention on his visits to Vietnam during the war. What he projected onto them was the possibility of a different society where men could have affection for each other.

What also intrigued me was the beginnings of the project, how we came to know each other. In the gay community, you have terms for white men that are into a specific race—crazy terms, actually, like ‘beanqueen’ for a white guy who is into Latino guys, ‘junglefever’ for white guy who is into black guys, and finally ‘ricequeens’ for the Asian lovers. Well, Joe is a ricequeen and he was living right nearby a residency that I had in Los Angeles in 2006. During this residency, I had to give a talk about my work, and the tradition was to send out an invitation to the neighborhood. It was on this occasion that Joe saw my name and recognized me as an Asian guy, so he decided to come check me out.



Danh Vo, *Untitled (America)* (details) BSI Art Collection, Lugano, 2008
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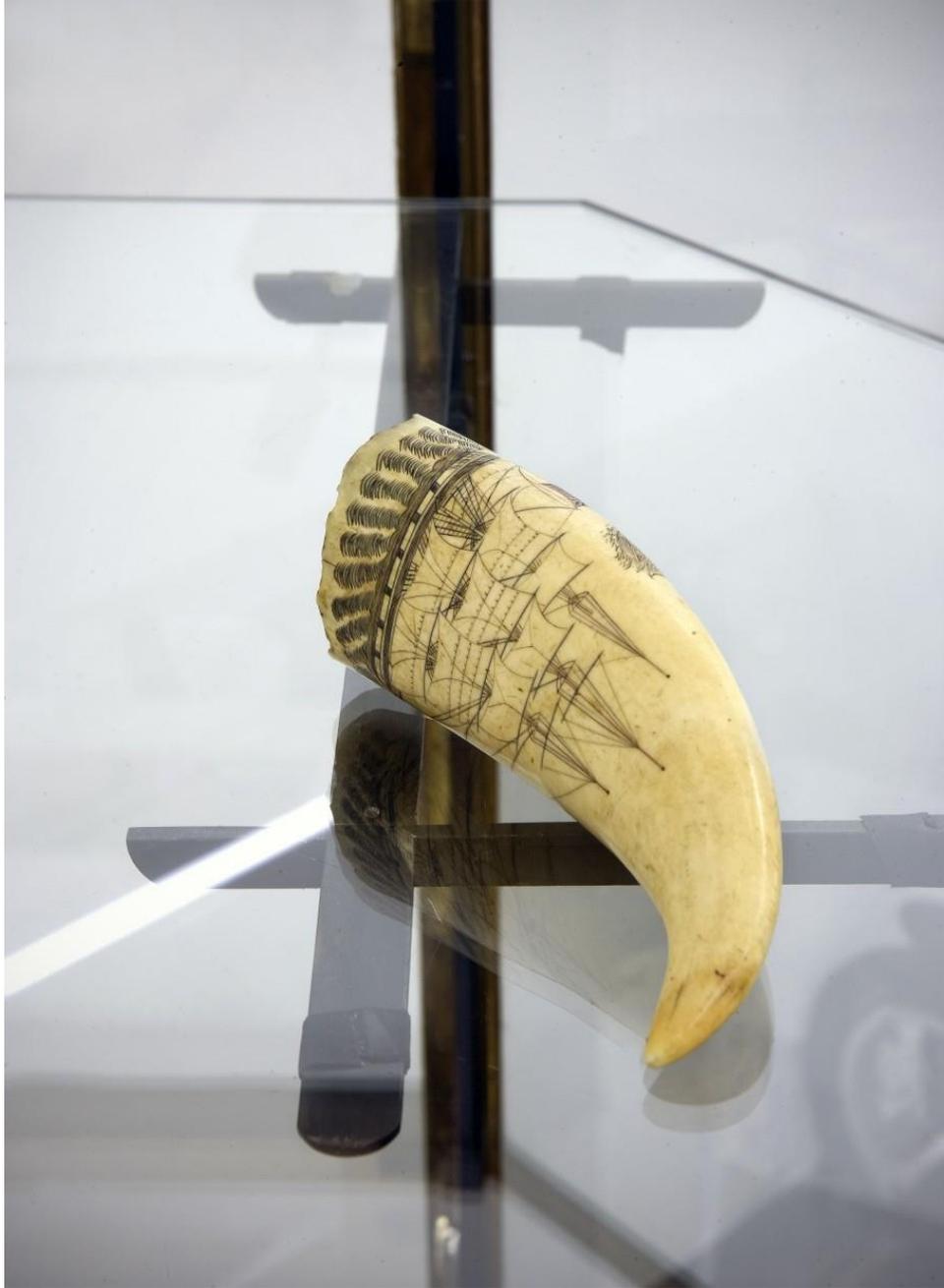
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AV In another project you did for *Frieze* magazine, you did a travel reportage with Dominic Eichler and Thai photographer Pratchaya Phinthong on a journey to Vietnam's central highlands. Why did you go with them? I read that it was for the purpose of meeting «the indigenous and missionaries, » two expressions which are indeed potential sources of historical concepts and exotic fundamentalism...

DV Yes, it's something I'm very interested in. The Central Highlands of Vietnam is an area where the indigenous people of Vietnam have lived for thousands of years, unnoticed by the Vietnamese because they lived in far reaches and deep forest. The Vietnamese always preferred the lowlands and the sea. So you really can see the imperial history of the Vietnamese in the landscape of Vietnam. The arrival of the French was the doom of the indigenous people because the highlands were ideal for coffee production, and also provided the perfect climate for the French. Cities were built high above sea level to imitate the French climate for the French colonists, who could then look after the plantations they ran with forced labor. The real tragedy came when the Vietnamese insurgency began, because insurgents would hide in the deep forest to fight against the imperial power. The indigenous people of Vietnam got totally fucked from all sides, and the final fuck was when the church arrived; while their land and culture were being taken away from them, the church was trying to save their souls. That is why I presented the saddle from the last missionary on horseback for the show I recently had at Zero... in Milan called "Last Fuck."

Since I had done a lot of field work in this area, I really wanted somebody to come see it. I always found it difficult to deal with and represent this material; deciding to publish a text with Dominic was a way out, in many ways eliminating the need for producing an artwork. In the end, I guided him around and he wrote about his experience, and I chose the images that my colleague Pratchaya Phintong took during our trip. I think this project made a very big impact on all of us. It still disturbs us a lot.

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Dahn Vo, Package Tour (detail), 2008
Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

AV Historically, the Orient has been perceived by Western people as a place where you can lose yourself. Think of the Hollywood imagery à la Shanghai Express...

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DV Before dark brown tans and cheap sex, there was really no good reason for people to go east. It was humid and wild—'the place where the lions are'. Mostly people would go because they hadn't achieved success in the West and were looking for another chance in the colonies. The exotic places have always been a garbage dump for Western leftovers—from French architectural Modernism, experimented on in their colonies because it would be unimaginable to change the face of Paris, to today's sex tourism. People didn't go east because the landscape is beautiful; desperation pulled them there, and the exotic image was created to attract these desperate people.

AV You once said that the most exotic thing is documentation itself, the way that our bodies are ruled by a sheet of paper. I am interested in how you use documentation.

DV I call it my exotic desire to be normal. I said that in relation to the official papers that I am collecting. This is a collection of all the rights and privileges that don't belong to me—getting married, having a Danish passport, being educated... It's my secret desire to be normal. I like Homi Bhabhas «Almost white, but not quite. »

AV How do you choose a particular story? I think exoticism is mainly about curiosity, desire and storytelling, a productive conflict between historical data and its fictionalization.

DV Edward Said always returns to this Antonio Gramsci quote: «The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.» It ends it with: «Therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory. »

I believe since the fabrication of reality always remains a fabrication, I can basically choose anything. How I do that depends on which leg comes out of bed first.