Binh Danh
February 19 to April 18, 2009
The Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University

In the Eclipse of Angkor
In the Eclipse of Angkor by 2009 Frances Niederer Artist-in-Residence Binh Danh, was published on the occasion of the exhibition organized by the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University from February 19 to April 18, 2009.

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"Imprint: The Historic Work of Binh Danh" © 2009 Amy G. Moorefield

"Binh Danh: From Memory to Memory" © 2009 Johanna Ruth Epstein, Ph.D.

The Chankiri Tree by Robert Schultz

Imprint: The Historic Work of Binh Danh by Amy G. Moorefield

Binh Danh: From Memory to Memory by Johanna Ruth Epstein, Ph.D.

Exhibition checklist

Artist biography
The Chankiri Tree

At the killing field, Choeung Ek, no bells are rung.
In a tall stupa, piled skulls cannot blame or resent
This staring crowd—emptied bones without tongues.

Pathways lead between excavations begun
And abandoned. The plain is scarred with shallow dents
Bordered by trees where children climb the rungs.

In a low building, victims’ photos, hung
In rows of black and white, draw the murdered present.
I scan across the peering eyes, struck dumb.

Back outside in the glaring sun, leaves are stung
With images—faces risen, called up and sent
To green the tree of knowledge rung by rung.
See, they return: In the wide ditch new grass has sprung
Where bones still lie, shaded by the tree’s broad tent.
When a breeze moves, leaves whisper what they’ve become.

The bark is torn. Against this trunk executioners flung
The bodies of children. Bullets, costly, were rarely spent.
We climb the tree of knowledge rung by rung.
O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues.

Robert Schultz
John P. Fishwick Professor of English
Roanoke College
Salem, Virginia
On behalf of the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University, we are pleased to welcome Binh Danh as the 2009 Frances J. Niederer Artist-in-Residence. The university’s renowned residency program invites internationally recognized artists to campus for one semester. While in residence, the artists create work in a campus studio and teach a seminar open to all students. Through public lectures and a solo exhibition of their work, the artists-in-residence enhance the university’s academic and cultural programming. The Eleanor D. Wilson Museum is honored to premiere Binh Danh’s new body of work, *In the Eclipse of Angkor*. In this exhibition and accompanying catalogue, Danh presents his chlorophyll prints, incorporating found butterfly specimens, as well as his Daguerreotypes—all of which document and interpret the genocide that took place in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. His subject matter stemmed from a trip in 2008 to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia; Choeung Ek, the site of the Killing Fields of the Khmer Rouge; and Angkor Wat, Cambodia’s famous Khmer temple. This exhibition continues the artist’s most important themes: his exploration of photographic processes meshed with his investigation of the collective memory of a country and the
principles of redemption and justice. “Photography has allowed me to meditate on death and its influence on the living,” he says. “The themes of mortality, memory, history, landscape, justice, evidence, and spirituality encompass this [work].”

Born in Vietnam in 1977, two years after the fall of Saigon, Danh and his family left their home in 1979 and immigrated to the United States in the early 1980s. The experience of displacement and his eventual trip back to his country of birth inspired the artist to create work exploring his homeland’s history using found and natural materials. By inventing a process known as chlorophyll printing, Danh found the perfect metaphor to honor the thousands of people murdered by the Khmer Rouge regime. Printed on the leaves of a variety of tropical plants such as nasturtiums and elephant ears, Danh’s portraits of the victims are permanently imprinted into the matrix of the leaves’ structure. Danh states, “I am using these tools of science to help me articulate these complex concepts... science for me is truth and knowledge and history is about preservation.”

In gazing at the subversively beautiful portraits of nameless victims, such as those in Transitional justice, 2008, the viewer acts as a witness in the larger historical context of the work.

This exhibition pairs Danh’s chlorophyll prints with Daguerreotypes that present a contemporary geographical context for the victims’ portraits, as depicted in the works Memories of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum #1 and A view from the center of a mass grave, Choeung Ek. Danh creates a delicate push/pull between the two bodies of work, providing both a microscopic and macroscopic view of the atrocities committed on a population. The work is quietly interactive. The viewer completes Danh’s intent by bearing witness to the tragedy of genocide, thereby being forever changed by what is seen.

This significant exhibition and supporting catalogue would not exist without the dedication and support of many generous donors.
individuals, all of whom gave tirelessly of their expertise and insight. Sincerest gratitude goes to Binh Danh for sharing his generosity of spirit and tremendous gift with Hollins and the greater Roanoke community. Deepest thanks to Johanna Ruth Epstein, Ph.D., Hollins University visiting professor of art history, for her insightful essay on Danh’s work. Deepest appreciation also goes to contributing writer Robert Schultz for allowing us to use in the catalogue his poem that was inspired by Danh’s work. Deepest note of gratitude to Jean Holzinger for her editorial expertise and to Anstey Hodge for their beautifully sensitive design of the catalogue. Thanks also to Lisa Sette Gallery in Scottsdale, Arizona, and Haines Gallery in San Francisco, California, for their support of the artist and this exhibition. Finally, this project could not have been realized without the multiple talents of the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum’s staff: Janet Carty, Laura Jane Ramsburg, Karyn McAden, and the museum’s student assistants.

2 Binh Danh’s Artist Statement, November 2008.
3 Danh’s technique of chlorophyll printing is described in Johanna Ruth Epstein’s Ph.D. catalogue essay Binh Danh: From Memory to Memory. December 2008.
4 Artist’s interview with Boreth Ly “The Leaves of g(race)” 2006.

Left: Detail from A view from the center of a mass grave, Choeung Ek, 2008
In the Eclipse of Angkor, Rahu carved in stone
2008
10.25 x 12 inches
Daguerreotype

Portraits of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum
2008
10.25 x 12 inches
Daguerreotype
Johanna Ruth Epstein, Ph.D.

Binh Danh: From Memory to Memory

California artist Binh Danh was born in a southern Vietnamese fishing village two years after the end of the Vietnam-American war. His family was among the boat people who fled the country and relocated from a refugee camp in Malaysia to San Jose, California when Danh was a toddler. The artist grew up in a traditional Vietnamese Buddhist household. There were multiple ancestral shrines at which the family left offerings: small cups of food, drink, fresh flowers, and images of family trees.

Hand developing photographs is a delicate, labor-intensive process; Danh’s “chlorophyll print” process is even more so. In college he invented a method that uses photosynthesis (the natural interaction between sunlight and chlorophyll) to make leaf prints from photo negatives. This process has the dubious distinction of being the slowest since the Daguerreotype.

Danh picks a leaf, immerses the stem in water, and places the photo negative over the leaf. He flattens the leaf and negative under a heavy sheet of glass and exposes them to sunlight over a period of weeks. As sun and water feed the living tissue, areas under clear glass retain the green pigment, while shielded parts of the negative fade and turn yellow from lack of sunlight. When the light/dark contrast produces a satisfactory image, Danh preserves it in resin.

In the current exhibition, several series of photographs (Iridescence of life, Memories of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Portraits of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Ghost of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum #1 and #2) include portraits of prisoners, many of them children, tortured and executed by the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979). At Tuol Sleng, a Phnom Penh high-school-turned-prison, each prisoner was photographed at the time of arrest, staring straight ahead, a number pinned to his or her shirt. The chlorophyll prints in Iridescence of life juxtapose photographs of children with butterfly wings, the victim’s head and shoulders carefully positioned so the vascular system of the leaf seems to originate within the child’s body. Each portrait is suspended directly above the outstretched wings of a butterfly, or sometimes a single wing, as in Iridescence of life #16.

Leaves, butterflies, and children are symbols of ephemeral beauty. Their lives depend upon protective conditions and no two are alike. Human faces, leaves, and butterflies also possess varying degrees of bilateral symmetry, but no face, no leaf, and no butterfly is entirely symmetrical. The power of Danh’s work lies in the inseparability of process from subject matter. At the formal level, it addresses the impossibility of perfect bilateral symmetry. His process is fastidious, even, one imagines, tedious at times, and infinitely destructible. A single photograph takes weeks to develop and only a fraction of Danh’s
Killing Tree against which executioners beat children, Choeung Ek
2008
13.25 x 16 inches
Daguerreotype

Iridescence of life #16
2008
12 x 10 inches
Chlorophyll print on nasturtium, Morpho butterfly specimen, and resin
Buddhas of Bayon
2008
11.375 x 9.5 inches
Daguerreotype
chlorophyll prints survive. Both process and subject emerge as deliberate meditations on vulnerability. Danh explains, “Butterflies are symbols of transmigration and metamorphosis, a process that we are all part of and from a Buddhist perspective, the Khmer Rouge victims are part of this cyclical process (karmic cycle).” Nonetheless, Danh adds, “I believe genocide is unnatural to the order of life. It’s a systematic destruction that has nothing to do with karma... I believe history has a lot to teach us. The more we participate in knowing history, the more we can affect the decisions of our leaders in the present moment, and events such as genocide will not happen. Now that to me is good karma.”

At the heart of Danh’s approach to portraiture is the notion of physical and spiritual ascendance. His leaves are almost always oriented upward, rising flame-like against a stark black or white ground. The youthful faces printed on their surfaces challenge us with questions of responsibility. The butterflies (real dead bodies) lend palpable corporeality to the spectral heads hovering above them. Their wings’ celebratory color offsets the austere, parchment-like surfaces of the leaves. Danh explains, "I believe we are reincarnated, not from soul to soul, but from memory to memory. I only hope that as viewers look at my work, the portraits of the victims are reincarnated or resurrected, in the present moment.
The dead are able to live for a time in our minds and be part of the material world. And maybe somewhere in the far distance of our universe the atoms that once belonged to those people glow a little.”

Portraits and sites of historic importance were among the first subjects to which early photographers turned. Danh’s recent work, inspired by a visit to Cambodia, revives the Daguerreotype, the earliest commercially available form of photography, developed in the early nineteenth century. A Daguerreotype is a silver-plated copper sheet treated with light-sensitive chemicals. There is no negative. Exposure to light creates an image on the treated surface of the copper plate. Like Danh’s leaf prints, Daguerreotype photographs are one of a kind. Original Daguerrotypes were developed inside the camera; Danh develops his Daguerreotypes in a darkroom, which affords him a greater measure of control over the image.

Particularly compelling are the photographs Danh has taken at Angkor Wat, the traditional capital of the Khmer empire in northern Cambodia. Rising dramatically above the flat Siem Riep province, Angkor Wat’s ninth-through-fifteenth-century towers were among the first non-Western architectural motifs captured by early photographers. The complex was built as a place of Hindu worship, and has served subsequently as a Buddhist temple, a capital city, and a mausoleum. The empire of the Khmers, ancestors of twentieth-century Khmer
Transitional justice
2008
17 x 16.5 inches
Chlorophyll print on elephant ear plant and resin
Rouge and many of their victims, reached its apex in the twelfth century. At the time Angkor Wat was the largest religious building in the world. It is a symbol of Cambodian nationalism, the central motif on the national flag. Its sandstone walls, carved with Hindu and Buddhist scenes, teem with plant and animal life—tendrils, foliage, bas-relief architecture, and scenes from the lives of the gods: Avalokitesvara, Hanuman, Vishnu, and Rahu, a snake that swallows the moon and causes an eclipse. For Danh this last image is a symbol of the reign of the Khmer Rouge, “the eclipse over Angkor, where darkness and evil took hold of the country.”

Danh’s use of the Daguerreotype refers to the origins of photography and results in a conceptual overlay between past and present not unlike the interaction between leaves and faces in his chlorophyll prints. The theme of bilateral symmetry reemerges in his close-up shots of the temple’s stunningly ornate walls. Ravana Shaking Mt. Kailasa, Wall Pattern of Angkor and In the Eclipse of Angkor, Rahu carved in stone are shot directly from the center. In Angkor Wat, a view of the temple from across the water, the outlines of the building are repeated in the reservoir’s undisturbed surface with the precision of a Rorschach inkblot. Plant life in the water, which registers as faint stippling along the bottom edge, is the only interruption of insistent formal symmetry.
In coastal villages, Vietnamese fishermen still lower their nets into the harbor to catch fish at night. Danh gathers elusive archival imagery into the flickering, inconstant light of contemporary consciousness. The spectral images he has rescued from historical oblivion are elements of a communal history from which he draws sustenance. The bodies and architectural sites are locus points of reverence and atrocity. History, as the artist puts it, “is not something in the past but of the here and now. It is all around us. We eat, breathe, excrete, and bathe in history. History is alive and is not a past event. It is happening right now. Everyone’s history is our history. And history is in our bloodstream and in the veins of plants.” These collective ancestral portraits are summoned again by the life-giving properties of twenty-first-century sunlight. If individual human lives are as fragile as butterfly wings, it is in infinite variation and a capacity for regeneration that the human spirit finds resilience.

2 E-mail from the artist, December 2008.
3 E-mail from the artist, December 2008.
4 French photographer Emile Gsell (1838-1879) photographed Angkor Wat in 1866, using the slightly later albumen print technique.
5 From the artist’s unpublished notes on the series “In the Eclipse of Angkor: Tuol Sleng, Choeung Ek, and Khmer Temples.”

13.25 x 16 inches
Daguerreotype

Angkor Wat
2008
13.25 x 16 inches
Daguerreotype
Iridescence of life #14
2008
12 x 10 inches
Chlorophyll print on nasturtium, Papilio Rumanzovia butterfly specimen, and resin

Iridescence of life #15
2008
12 x 10 inches
Chlorophyll print on nasturtium, Rajah Brooke butterfly specimen, and resin

Iridescence of life #16
2008
12 x 10 inches
Chlorophyll print on nasturtium, Morpho butterfly specimen, and resin

Memories of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum #1
2008
12 x 10 inches
Chlorophyll print on nasturtium and resin

Memories of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum #2
2008
12 x 10 inches
Chlorophyll print on nasturtium and resin

Transitional justice
2008
17 x 16.5 inches
Chlorophyll print on elephant ear plant and resin

Divinities of Angkor #1
2008
11.375 x 9.5 inches
Daguerreotype

Young monk of Angkor, Veasna
2008
11.375 x 9.5 inches
Daguerreotype

Ghost of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum #1
2008
11.375 x 9.5 inches
Daguerreotype

Ghost of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum #2
2008
11.375 x 9.5 inches
Daguerreotype

Buddhas of Bayon
2008
11.375 x 9.5 inches
Daguerreotype

In the Eclipse of Angkor, Rahu carved in stone
2008
10.25 x 12 inches
Daguerreotype

Divinities of Angkor #2
2008
10.25 x 12 inches
Daguerreotype

Portraits of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum
2008
10.25 x 12 inches
Daguerreotype

Portraits of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum
2008
13.25 x 16 inches
Daguerreotype

Memories of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum #2
2008
13.25 x 16 inches
Daguerreotype

Memories of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum
2008
13.25 x 16 inches
Daguerreotype

Ravana Shaking Mt. Kailasa, Banteay Srei
2008
13.25 x 16 inches
Daguerreotype

Killing Tree against which executioners beat children, Choeung Ek
2008
13.25 x 16 inches
Daguerreotype

Angkor Wat
2008
13.25 x 16 inches
Daguerreotype

A view from the center of a mass grave, Choeung Ek
2008
13.25 x 16 inches
Daguerreotype

Human skulls on display in the memorial stupa of Choeung Ek
2008
17.5 x 23 inches
Daguerreotype

Wall pattern of Angkor
2008
25.5 x 21 inches
Daguerreotype

Exhibition checklist

All images are courtesy of the artist and Lisa Sette Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona, and Haines Gallery, San Francisco, California.
Binh Danh © 2008
Education

MFA in Studio Art, 2004, Stanford University, CA
BFA in Photography, 2002, San Jose State University, CA

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2009  "In the Eclipse of Angkor," Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University, Roanoke, VA.
2008  "Life, times, and matter of the swamp," Clara Hatton Gallery, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO.
      "Life, times, and matter of the swamp," Mary Elizabeth Dee Shaw Gallery, Weber State University, Ogden, UT.
      "Jungle of memories," Chico State University, University Art Gallery, Chico, CA.
      "One Week’s Dead," Light work, Syracuse, NY. (catalogue)
      "Botanical Stories," Sanchez Art Center, Pacifica, CA.
      "The Botany of Tuol Sleng," Lisa Sette Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ.
2005  "Room for contemplation," Cantor Center for the Arts, Stanford, CA.

Selected Group Exhibitions

2009  "Post memory," Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York City, NY.
      "Life as a way of war," 18th Street Art Center, Santa Monica, CA. (catalogue)
2007  "One way or Another: Asian American Art Now," Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, UC, CA (catalogue, travels).
      "One way or Another: Asian American Art Now," Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, TX. (catalogue, travels)
      "Endless War: Made in the USA," San Francisco State University Art Gallery, San Francisco, CA.
      "The Landscapes of War," Throckmorton Theatre Gallery, Mill Valley, CA.
2006  "The Genius of the Place: Land and Identity in Contemporary Art," Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA.
      "One way or Another: Asian American Art Now," Asia Society, New York City, NY. (catalogue, travels)
      "Another Asia: Photographs for South and Southeast Asia," Fries Museum, Noorderlicht Photofestival Netherlands. (catalogue)
      "Reconstructing Memories," University of Hawaii Art Museum. (catalogue)
      "New Art of the West 9," Eiteljorg Museum, Indianapolis, IN. (catalogue)
      "The Missing Piece Project," Fowler Museum, Los Angeles, CA. (catalogue, travels)
“Visual Politics: The Art of Engagement,” The American University Museum at the Katzen Art Center, Washington, D.C.
“Disrupted: A Photographic Installation about Memory, History & War,” Intersection for the Arts, duo show with artist Elizabeth Moy, San Francisco, CA.
“Image as Objects, Sesnon Gallery,” University of California-Santa Cruz, CA.
“Picturing Eden,” George Eastman House, Rochester, NY. (catalogue, travels)
2005
“Director’s Choice,” Haines Gallery, San Francisco, CA.
“Recent Acquisition for the Permanent Collection: de Young Museum,” San Francisco, CA.
“Footcandles: History and Process in Contemporary Photography,” University Art Gallery at Indiana State University, IN.
“Persistent Vestiges: Drawing from the American-Vietnam War,” Drawing Center, New York City, NY. (catalogue)
“Stages of Memory: The Vietnam War,” Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, IL.
“Natural Reflections,” San Francisco Exploratorium, San Francisco, CA.
2004
“Award Show,” Center for Photographic Art, Carmel, CA.
“Cream: Recent MFA,” Arts Benicia, Benica, CA.
“Collapsing Histories Project,” Dago Fukuryu Maru Exhibition Hall and Gallery ef, Tokyo, Japan.
“MFA Exhibition,” Thomas Welton Stanford Art Gallery, Stanford, CA.
“The Cameraless Image," Photo-Eye Gallery, Santa Fe, NM.
“Agitate,” SF Camerawork, San Francisco, CA.

Residencies, Fellowships, and Awards
2010 Eureka Fellowship from the Fleishhacker Foundation, San Francisco, CA.
2009 Frances Niederer Artist-in-Residence, Hollins University, VA.
2008 Hurst Artist-in-Residence at Weber State University, Ogden, UT. Critic and Artist Residency Series at Colorado State University—Fort Collins.
2007 Visions from the New California, artist residence and fellowship at Kala Art Institute, Berkeley, CA.
2006 Light Work Artist-in-Residence program, Syracuse, NY.
2005 The GOLD award, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA. 2004 artist fellowship, Arts Council Silicon Valley, San Jose, CA.
2004 Residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris from Oct. 04 to April 05. Artist Project Award, Center for Photographic Art, Carmel, CA.
2003 Cantor Center for Visual Arts Fellowship, Stanford, CA. Artist Diversity Residency Program, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE.
2002 Lillie Webster Squires Memorial Fellowship, Stanford, CA.
2001 Individual Grant, Belle Foundation, San Jose, CA.

Teaching Positions
2008 Alternative Processes, Stanford University, Dept. of Art and Art History, Spring.
2007 Alternative Processes, Stanford University, Dept. of Art and Art History, Spring.
2006 Graduate Seminar in Photography, San Jose State University, Spring. Picturing Home, California College of the Arts, Spring.
2005 Home and Family Values, San Francisco Art Institute, Fall. Beginning Photography, Foothill Community College, Fall. Hologram Workshop, Foothill Community College, Fall.
2004 Photography for non majors, Stanford University, Dept. of Art and Art History, Spring.
Collections

Corcoran Art Gallery, Washington, DC  
DeYoung Museum, San Francisco, CA  
Colorado State University-Fort Collins, Fort Collins, CO  
Harry Ransom Center, Austin, TX  
Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, NY  
Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College Chicago, Chicago, IL  
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC  
Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, CA  
Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA  
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA  
San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA  
Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA  
The Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University, Roanoke, VA  
University of California-Santa Cruz Special Collection, Santa Cruz, CA  
University of Oregon, Eugene, OR  
William Benton Museum of Art, Storrs, CT

Right: Detail from Young monk of Angkor, Veasna, 2008