

THE CROSSING

and its reminder about our ways to seek the Other

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Portrait of Bảo Vương. Picture Tuấn Trần

“.... My whole family survived; we weren’t sure how we could survive the journey across the sea. I was only one year old then. In 2013, at the age of 35, I came back to see my relatives in Vietnam and decided to stay, even though I understood that back then I was just a foreigner...” So begins the story of Bao Vương, a Vietnamese French artist, after he put me, and possibly many others at the opening reception of his exhibition *The Crossing*, into an introspective state of mind. With a heavy heart, I stand pondering the many questions that come to my mind, the how’s and the why’s, wondering what it felt like going through a catastrophe that had befallen Bao Vương’s family; facing death, suffering physically and psychologically amidst the tempest of nature.

Yet what remains the most poignant is the art-

ist’s own tranquility, one that permeates the entire exhibit as if he and the artworks had been through a meditative journey together. In other words, the process of creating the exhibit is also the artist’s journey to contemplate, in complete silence, his family’s journey—a silent meditation to overcome pain, blame, suffering and agony after all those losses and fears.

And sensing that underlining silence leaves me, the viewer, deeply affected.

Bao Vương’s *THE CROSSING* (1) was showcased in a space of less than 20 square meters. Against the background of whitewashed walls and glass doors, the anthracite black of the paintings’ stands out in sharp contrast. Ripples - crowding over each other, the same pattern repeated over and over again – appear suspended in blank space. The painting’s upper half is

smooth and opaque; the bottom half is celestial light reflected off sooty waves. There is a reverse rotation, continuous flow under the undulating waves ... Only a sheer blackness washes over the surface, rippling or smooth, monochrome yet pregnant with emotions.

Bao Vuong doesn't rely on any garish element to demonstrate his artistry or creative experience. Rather, each painting only comes into fruition after a long creation process . One such example is Crossing No. 9, created with four thick layers of nothing but black oil paint on canvas - frame painted solid black – with the resulting piece weighing approximately 80kg.

Surrounded by black waves, the space is not a dense black mass but rather glimmers with light reflected by the paint, reminiscent of the soul's flame of hope during the darkest times.

There is not a single human being in these paintings. The artist played a role of an observer, standing outside to contemplate the anonymity of individuals amongst the immense blackness of nature. Or rather, it was as if he “drew” his

own psyche, a matured subconsciousness as Bao Vuong was only one year old when he made the trip across the sea.

The tranquility of Bao Vuong's artworks is what brings a hurricane of emotions to the viewer. If you know anything about Bao Vuong's life and his family, those stories will tug your heart strings and make you lean towards literary explanations that refer to the exhibit as an integral part of the family's history. Yet if you were a passerby and found yourself in a completely dark space - surrounded by waves, night sky, or the boundless immensity of an imaginary space - you're more free than ever to unleash your imagination. The contrast of black and white, monochrome - multicolor, smooth - rugged, human - space...invites the viewer to return to his own experience in contrasting fragments, factors or periods in his life or in positioning himself in the infinite life.

And the story of Bao Vuong's family is not unique in the flow of human history. The world still shares stories of people shifting from place to place, searching for alternative shores. These



painful stories of hopeful and yet tragic journeys appear in the media every day, infuriating us. Therefore, Bao Vương's work is once again enriched because it passes through the prism of his family's history adding a powerful personal touch just as all of us contribute our personal stories to a bigger universal narrative. Are you sure you have never experienced the plight of the soul, wishing for a new destination, leaving behind all the failures, disappointments, and meaningless pursuits that stemmed from a sense of directionlessness?... Would that be so different from another kind of exile within your soul?...

Besides the paintings hung on the walls, the exhibition also features a set of 336 plastic cups, aligned neatly on a rectangular table surface, named 336 pieces. In each cup filled with pure water, there are images of people of all ages and genders, in black and white, printed on clear paper. Images do not fade in water but rather mold causing a strong visual effect. All are portraits of real people that the artist found in antique and thrift shops along the sidewalks of Ho Chi Minh City. Being photographs of real people, they show us the truth but truth distorted and ambiguous. As a matter of fact, people pictured may or may not have themselves gone through the experience of exile at sea like Bao Vương's family. But the boat people are all of us as the search for identity continues every day. This physical movement and the mental search suggest humanity's unceasing desire for The Other - another world to call their own - although not everyone makes the physical act of crossing to discover what lies on the other side. With 336 pieces, the portraits of real people, the artist reminds the viewers of the grim reality of those who did step on the boat, setting sail for the far-away shores in search of alternatives.

The succinctness and tranquility of Bao Vương's exhibition leave the audience deeply moved. Joining the author on this intensely personal

journey, the audience follows the artist as he comes to terms with suffering, loss and heartbreak – an enriching and powerful contribution to art and to life.

The emotional richness and tranquility of Bao Vương's *The Crossing*, I believe, have given the viewers precious moments to treasure for time to come. Joining the author as he journeys through the tragedies of the past, the viewer also has a chance to cleanse their soul of heartbreaks, losses, and sufferings. This is an enriching contribution from art and the artist of life.

The artist himself opens up that after *The Crossing*, he feels that he has somehow fulfilled the biggest obligation and tribute to his wonderful mother.

These returns after many years of exile, like that of Bao Vương, his family members' and of many other overseas Vietnamese, speak of a lasting bond between an individual and their homeland. Thanks to the return he was able to create an exhibit as worth seeing as *The Crossing*; this is also a poignant and honest reminder for people who have contemplated migrating in both body and soul ■

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1. The exhibition is from 07-06 to 30-09-2018 at ARTS-VENTURES GALLERY, 32 Tran Ngoc Dien, Thao Dien ward, District 2, HCMC