

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

NAM PHI DANG CONSIDERS CULTURAL HYBRIDITY THROUGH IMAGES

Having grown up in Canada with Vietnamese parents, Nam Phi Dang took to photography to learn more about his roots, connect with his peers and share what it feels like to be a part of two different cultures.

“A Canadian is a hyphen,” once said the novelist Joy Kogawa, who was born in Vancouver to Japanese parents. I first encountered the quote in the book *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination*, which seeks to identify defining features of images made by the country’s photographers. Author, art theorist, curator and professor Penny Cousineau-Levine briefly addresses the role cultural hybridity plays in creating a distinct national visual identity and then moves on to focus on other matters. Yet, this is the part that has stuck with me the most and that I come back to, time and time again, when I look at the work of my contemporaries. Nam Phi Dang’s latest exploration of his Vietnamese roots is but one striking example.

Much like fellow photographer Marta Iwanek (covered in the August/September issue), Dang began to focus more of his attention on his heritage after his grandmother passed away. The 23-year-old photographer realized then just how much he relied on the stories and memories of older family members to connect with and craft the Vietnamese portion of his identity—and how precarious such dependence was. What would happen when they too eventually disappear? Which traditions, teachings or insights would he be able to embody and pass on to future generations?

“It became increasingly important for me to look critically at my own upbringing: to acknowledge the good and the bad of it, to accept it, and to develop a

healthy sense of pride in my culture. Growing up, part of me wanted to be white. I was tired of some of the customs I was made to uphold at home, of being mocked, of teachers not being able to pronounce my name, of people equating all Asians or yelling obnoxious, insulting slurs, and so on,” says

Dang, thinking back to when he decided to use photography to get a better sense of self.

His first instinct was to take a trip to the land of his ancestors to examine what his life would have been like had his parents never left home. Though he had visited it every other year or so throughout his childhood, Dang had never thought twice about how he perceived it, let alone felt the need to document it. “Most of what I knew about the country was negative since it was mostly centred around the Vietnam War. It’s what Western entertainment and history books zeroed in on. And, it was the background of my mother’s experiences, some of which she shared with me. She would tell me about having to run from city to city, trying to escape the bombings, or listening to ABBA and the Bee Gees in secret



© NAM PHI DANG

because the Communist regime wouldn't allow it," he explains. His parents eventually fled the country in 1989, by boat. Once in the Philippines, his mother made requests for asylum in several countries, including Canada. While waiting for her status to be determined, Dang was born. Since he had a tumour that the local health services couldn't treat, he was admitted and flown to SickKids hospital in Toronto. He and his family were thus given a path to Canadian citizenship.

In Vietnam, looking for scenes that evoked the country he found in his mom's old albums and journals, he had to come to terms with just how much had changed. "I went there curious of and fascinated by the local culture. My mom had told me about how strong expressions of a unique Vietnamese identity had been when she lived there, especially

The country didn't look like the one Dang had envisioned; it felt like somewhere else. And yet, at the same time, it felt familiar.



© NAM PHI DANG



© NAM PHI DANG

in response to colonizing forces—France, the United States—that tried to quell it. I expected that to still be true. But it wasn't the case. Nowadays, millennials there seemed to be more interested in us, than in their own history," remarks Dang. Case in point: one of his photos taken in a garden where people go and pay to take pictures shows a group standing on a platform around an apple tree. "It felt so strange to me because they're not native to Vietnam. Here was a set built for the sake of pretending to be somewhere else."

These last two words make up the title of the resulting series and convey the many tensions the photos allude to, including how those who navigate between two cultures often feel like they stand just outside of the circle. They're neither fully from here nor there, but always from "somewhere else." The images also explore how reality can differ from what the mind conjures from memories. The country didn't look like the one Dang had envisioned; it felt like somewhere else. And yet, at the same time, it felt familiar. "My immediate response was that I hadn't really left my own home and what I was seeing wasn't anything alien, as I imagined it to



© NAM PHI DANG

Back home in Canada, he wondered whether others felt a similar bewilderment and how they reconciled themselves with their dual identity.

answered. Dang's portraits of them are a testament to the diversity of the community. His subjects—a rapper, a writer, an entrepreneur, a financier, an architect, a designer and others—told him about the importance of language and food; about how leaving the family home created a disconnect; about the many ways their culture shaped their work ethic, personality traits and values; about feeling embarrassed by how little they knew about their cultural history; about wanting to hear from elders so those teachings can be passed on to future generations; and so on. "I found answers to my own questions and doubt through others," confesses Dang. The artist also discovered a sense of community, which he now understands as "a group of people, a safe place to speak about feelings and experiences without fear of being questioned or being made fun of, and knowing that everyone in it shares those feelings and experiences. Now, at least, I know that I'm not the only one that feels confused, and that it's okay to feel this way." ■

be. I was surrounded by the same lifestyle and society I had always been living in—just somewhere else," he reflects.

Back home in Canada, he wondered whether others

felt a similar bewilderment and how they reconciled themselves with their dual identity. Dang put out a call on Facebook and through friends for other second-generation Vietnamese-Canadians. Many

International School Of Photography
Join the class of 2018

Photo danielroyphoto.com

marsan
marsancollege.com