

PHOTOGRAPHER TUAN PHAM

The Art of Seeing

CAPTURED LIFE CYCLES

BY DONNA CEDAR-SOUTHWORTH



Tuan Pham

“The primary purpose [of my photography] is to bring the mind into contact with the subject matter—not as the photographer wants to see—but to see things for what they are.”

—Tuan Pham

A defining moment in the artistic journey of Zen photographer Tuan Pham occurred when he was confronted with less-than-optimal working conditions. His assignment was to photograph a birch grove in Ontario within a four-hour window of time, specifically between 8 a.m. and 12 p.m. Then he was to present his final project. However, Tuan was faced with one problem: sheets of rain were coming down, making it impossible to make out even shapes.

At 10 a.m., he pitched a tent in the middle of the grove and sat, hoping to at least photograph from inside the tent. “But the rain just kept coming down,” he says. “I was sitting there, looking outside at the rain and the greenery, and suddenly I saw birch trees all over—one tall, one short, one [knocked] down by nature, one cut down by man, one with disease, one was very healthy—and it dawned on me that this is not unlike a community of humans. I saw them as myself-equal.”

Shortly after 11:00, the rain stopped, and Tuan photographed what he saw: “This standing birch, this cut-down birch, this one very old, this young one, this one with skin disease, this one smooth and clean—from that I made my presentation.” While some classmates did not embrace it, others—as well as instructor Freeman Patterson—were deeply moved by it.

Eventually Tuan realized that his experience in the rain had changed how he perceived things. “Then the Buddhist background in me began to manifest itself,” he says, “and I somehow found beauty in things very ordinary. I realized that I’m prone to things that have seen their better days..., things that are in the latter half of their life cycle. And that is very attuned with the Buddhist teachings that everything is impermanent—everything is constantly changing—nothing is complete, nothing is perfect because of the changing nature of everything...” Though he did not consciously



seek out subjects that others might overlook, he was attracted to them, and his photographs began to receive recognition.

Tuan remembered the birch grove when he was confronted with disappointment earlier this year on a



"Birch Grove, Ontario"

tour of ten national parks out west. Viewing the trip as a once-in-a-lifetime project, he had signed up for the excursion with high expectations." The tour began in Las Vegas and made its way to Death Valley. One of the stops was at a field of Joshua trees. "From a distance,

recalls Tuan, "I could not see trees, but ballerinas performing on stage because Joshua trees don't have leaves.... I was excited, but when we got there, two buses had arrived before us—it was crowded—and difficult to take pictures...."



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—Tuan Pham

Above: “Beach Flowers, Myrtle Beach”; at right: “Groucho Marx’s Mustache, Point Lobos”

Opposite, top: “Nostalgia, Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens”; and “Whispering, Green Spring”



Upon arriving at Death Valley, Tuan found more crowds. He was deeply disappointed, questioning whether the tour had been a bad decision. Then he remembered the birches: “The birch grove came back to me and the thought that ‘this disappointment has a life of its own—if we do not feed the disappointment, then eventually it will go away...’” Then came a revelation. Tuan remembers thinking, “If I am unable to capture the iconic landscapes that I came here to do, then I will do the opposite—I’ll do something nobody wants.” From that point on, each time the bus reached an attraction, Tuan went in the other direction. The result is an evocative body of work Tuan calls *Photos of Nothing*, a series that premiered in November.

By focusing on objects or subject matter that might not ordinarily draw the eye, Tuan hones in on its simplicity and beauty and “shows viewers a new way of seeing things.” His craft becomes “the art of seeing,” he says. “Capturing the image [becomes] secondary. ...The primary purpose is to bring the mind into contact with the subject matter—not as the photographer wants to see—but to see things for what they really are.” And, in keeping with a Zen mindset, Tuan treats his subjects with respect, viewing them as partners in the creative process.



Tuan interprets a 13th-century Zen master's words to mean there are three levels of seeing: "with the inherited eye, with the liberated eye and with the wisdom eye. ...With the wisdom eye, you see things even inside the subject matter.... So if you see a flower with the wisdom eye, you also see clouds in that flower and rain, sun and moon, because without [those elements], you have no flower. It is now a flower, but ten days later, you could see trash in there—you don't differentiate between the stages of that flower.... Trash will eventually become flower and flower will eventually become trash—they will go through life cycles. I'm trying to bring that kind of seeing into photography so a fresh flower and a wilted flower each has its own beauty depending on how you relate."

Tuan teaches Zen photography and mindfulness meditation. He will discuss his work at two upcoming events: on January 3, at Marvin Memorial United Methodist Church in Silver Spring, and on February 15, at Osler Lifetime Learning Institute in Fairfax. ☺

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