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# Howard Henry Chen Interview

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Interviewer: Diane Nguyen

Artist: Howard Henry Chen

In-person interview: Artist's studio Chicago, IL

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*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Winter quarter 20010-2011 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*



### **Artist Bio**

Howard Henry Chen is an artist that is interested in the ideas of migration, assimilation, hybridization, the global system of change, and the way wealth affect the developing world. He was born in Vietnam in 1972 and left in 1975 with his parents to United States. He grew up in the east coast, Pennsylvania. He attended Boston University where he studied journalism and political science. After graduating, he worked as a journalist for a couple of years at newspapers. Howard mainly covered the issues from the television industry the demographics of the American South. He later went out to study photography at Duke University when he met a couple of photographers during the time he was a

journalism who then encourage him to pursue photography and art. He met a professor that taught him photography functions socially and politically.

Howard Chen does not only work with photography. He works with all different kinds of mix media. He believes that his art practice changes, and the main focuses is not particularly the mix media but the message and the issue the art piece represents. He has done photography as well as installations.

He has done a couple of exhibitions. His work has been found in the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, Illinois, Center for Documentary Studies in Durham, North Carolina, and Gallery Saigon in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Also he had received the first Fulbright Fellowship for Photography in 1999 and the Silver Eye 2006 Fellowship Award. In 2000 he spent the next six years going back and forth from Vietnam to America working on his artwork to document the changes in Vietnam's society. He currently resides in Chicago, Illinois.

### **Artist Statement:**

As a photographer working in Vietnam (2000), I witnessed firsthand the long-term effects of the war, the changing social and political sensibilities, and the reach of economic and cultural globalism. However, I wanted to make photographs that could balance the frenetic, news-driven images. As a Vietnamerican, I wanted to create a new set of pictures that could site somewhere in between the images of Vietnam to which the world has grown accustomed, and use a new visual grammar with which we can talk about Vietnam. I was constantly looking for images that bolstered the self-satisfied loneliness I felt as a returning refugee.

Chen, Howard. Howardhenrychen.com. 22 February 2010. <<http://www.Howardhenrychen.com/>>

### **Question 1: You want to start out telling me a bit about yourself?**

Grew up in the east coast, born in Vietnam, left when I was two. I grew up in Pennsylvania. Went to school in Boston, worked with a journalist for a few years. Then I met a couple of photographer s that were a big influence on me and left journalism and moved to Vietnam in 2000 to 2001.. 2002... I have been lucky enough to receive grants and fellowship that allow me to stay at extended period of time or to go back and forth which I have been going back and forth since 2000. So I spend any where in between in a given year 3 months to 8 months in Vietnam

### **Question 2: Is there any particular month you like to go?**

I like to go during the dry season because it's easier working as a photographer than during the monsoon, which is a pain in the ass to get around. Um.. But now since I got married I have to be careful being careful planning trips there because my wife is here ...since 2000 I have doing work that is based in Vietnam. I go to Vietnam and do my work there because a lot of the issues I am interested in as an artist present themselves really robustly in Vietnam...in a way society is changing... in the way trying to recover itself from all of these year of war and deprivation and living under badly plan economic policy

plan now there is so much money and investing and so much growth that its changing the society in a way that is really fascinating to me in a way that I like to think about and do work.

**Question 3: Any particular boundaries you can't pass in Vietnam?**

You can do almost anything you want in Vietnam beside you have to stay away from drug and sedition. So don't mill drug. So don't do anything that places you or people you meet in danger with government in terms of agitating for political change. Those are boundaries you have to be careful of um I have a lot of artist friends, who have, actually not a lot... two that have been blackballed from Vietnam because they worked with novelist ... like dissident and did it in a way that probably was not smart in a way very public. So it places them in danger as well as the Vietnamese dissident in a position that is kind of dangerous because if you are not Vietnamese you can just leave...but if you are there and you are agitating for political change or you're a dissident novelist or film maker or something... you can't leave... the secret police are there and they watch you ...Well certain people carefully.

**Question 4: Have you ever dealt with Agent Orange?**

No, none of my work dealt with Agent Orange. There are a couple of artist friends of mine who worked with Agent Orange. Actually its funny... lot of the art work there is two camps. There are people that are still making work about the war and the after affect of the war...so veteran issues.. Agent Orange issues chemical defoliant issues... um and there are people and I think I fall in this camp where.. I gotta stop talking about this f%\$ing war because it's so hard to... there are so many people doing work that directly link the war whether its literature visual art, music, film um... that there is a whole other dynamic that I am much more interested in...the way family structure is changing.

**Question 5: So you are not interested in the war?**

No, I am not interest in the war....I mean it will be naive of me to think that war doesn't affect everything goes on there. But In terms of making work of specific war related issue like agent orange there is enough people doing that that I am not sure I can add anything to it but there are other issue that no one is paying attention to because you need to be really have been there for a long period of time to actually see the way these issues presenting themselves. I mean everyone knows that there is agent orange there and you can go in there and spend a week or two weeks there and just get everything you need to know about agent orange and take picture and do work about it but there are more subtle issues about the way society is changing that I find more interesting. For instance the way youth culture is changing. The way young people there see themselves and the way they present themselves and the way they establish their place in the global world. The way money is changing the society ... there is a lot of things very tradition about the culture and money and the way people are consuming global culture their making subtle changes in traditional Vietnamese culture

**Question 6: Do you think it is a positive thing that they are changing?**

Yeah.. I am not one of these a romantic people that you know... like you know..I don't want people to cry "oh these traditional culture is dying "I think change is good...it needs to be manage but even if it is

bad it is still fascinating to make work about. There is so much money there now... that....its so unbelievable that it happen within two generation...so I am more interested in what has happen in these two generation rather than what happen in 1968 or 1975...

**Question 7: How did you first get involved in photographer?**

I think I was in my mid 20.. 23.. 24.. I was working at a newspaper in Baltimore there were two photographers there that I hung out with ...they were a bit older than me... I was 20..23..22..23 just fresh out of college...you think you know everything but you don't and ah these two photographer are older than people and been around the world.

**Question 8: Did their artwork focus on Vietnam too?**

No, no... they were not artist but photo journalist ... but I would go hang out with them and they would teach me about art and photography and encourage me to try it. So after I left Baltimore I got a job in North Carolina and I took some photography classes at Duke and met a photography professor there who taught me a lot about...not so much about photography but how photography function in the world...socially and politically... I actually don't do a lot of photographic work. Actually that is not true in the past 3 to 4 years I haven't done a lot of photographic work. My art work practice has expanded a little bit beyond straight representation photography... I am finding a lot of the issues I am interested in...in terms of making comments on how society is changing how money is changing...the developing world...or Vietnam in particular lend itself towards other art making practices like I have been doing some mix media installation work where I have been using a lot of biological...I don't know what's that word?... I have been using a lot of material ... natural materials ...plant matters... animal matters... things I collect from Vietnam and bring back and make installation out of.

**Question 9: What was the meaning of *Turfwar*?**

What I did was... I took...well I really like orchids...it's this plant its this fascinating plant...for me orchid, it has a reputation for being this beautiful slight delicate flower...but actually they are really hardy flower tough and adaptive and there are orchids that grow in every climate and that to me is this really elegant metaphor of immigrations and adaptability and assimilation... you know where immigrants leave from one place and move to another for whatever reason this... this... Transitional migration is reflected in elegant the way orchid propagate... or plant matter propagate. What I did was took orchid hybrid that was hybridize from native Vietnamese orchid and I place them in dirt or in umm dirt... in dirt that is American and water them over a course of months and when the show was up I water then with rain water from Vietnam that I have collected and brought back . I wanted to see if you can grow these hardy plants in American soil but water it with Vietnamese rain water ... like how these immigrants have to adapt in different society and see if they could thrive.

**Question 10: Is there any past work you would like to focus more on or expand on?**

Every body of work I have done I have been happy with... I stop doing the body of work because I feel I have said everything I could have said about that particular issues or else I will have still worked on it.

The issue for me as an artist is not ... the material can change and my art practice can change but there are certain set of ideas or dynamic I am interested in. I am interested in ideas of assimilation or hybridity or global system of change or the way wealth affect the developing world ... those issues don't change whether or not I use photography or orchids or other mix media practice ... those issues will still drive whatever art production I am engage in. It is not the question of certain body of work I will return to...but there are certain bodies of idea I will turn to.

**Question 11: Have ever been included in any exhibitions that labeled you Asian American?**

That is a tricky question... I am very careful about that... I think any artist that come out o... okay how do I answer this politely ... when I did the show MCA at Chicago, they asked me about how I wanted to label ... someone assumed I wanted to labeled Vietnamese... but I'm not Vietnamese so we ended up settling down on "American comma born Vietnam" in a way that many other artist present themselves. There is a danger... and this is a discussion I had a lot with other artist... that you get put into this ghetto of "he is that Asian artist... or he is that Asian writer" whereas you just want to be known as a writer or artist. So I am very careful in getting grouped into show where there is a group of Asian American artist or Asian artist or whatever. I rather want to be group into a show where other artist no matter where they are from are exploring the same idea. A lot of identity was big in the 80's a lot of that identity politics was big... I think artist now are directed beneficiary of that time you know in the 80 where identity politics were big because it put a lot of work on the map... but now I think the work about identity issues have been trumped over the last 10-years by the issues of globalization and the way people move the way people migrate and the way culture affect each other. I think that is what is a lot of the good work that is being done now. That is what is about, it is not able labeling .. like who we are or Asian Power ... or Black Power... because those labels... the world is changing ... I am not sure if the labels mean anything more... to say I am a Vietnamese American artist is even true... a lot of the issues I am interested in ... you don't need to be born there or Vietnamese to explore these issues...

**END**



**Howard Henry Chen - Journey to the West #8, 2007 - Courtesy of Schneider Gallery, Chicago**

In the large-scale photo-triptych *Journey to the West #8*, Chen appears dressed like a monk and wearing hunter's orange. Inspired by the 2004 shooting deaths of hunters in rural Wisconsin by a Hmong immigrant from Laos and the Chinese epic novel *The Monkey King*, Chen examines land use policies in the United States and Vietnam, and the divergent cultural norms of hunting. *Turf War* is an installation of objects from traditional Buddhist practice, which includes 30 bronze singing bowls; traditional French culinary practice; and horticultural practices that result in the hybridization and propagation of orchids.



*Multiple Entry Visa: To Vietnam and Back*, a collection of images by Howard Henry Chen at Silver Eye Center for Photography, tours a nation whose identity is elusive not only from without, perceived through the filter of the foreign. It also reveals the cultural, social and political landscape of a country no longer engaged in warfare with an outside entity, and instead battling to determine what contemporary Vietnam is and what it would like to become.





Thousands of Vietnamese war refugees can now retrace their paths, returning to live, work, or reunite with family, carrying elements of their new material culture, and mixing it with their native one. The Things I Carry consists of a series of photographs and handmade artist's books portraying landscapes and still lives, and focused on questions of migration, assimilation, and hybridization.