ARTIST
Pipo Nguyen-duy

TITLE
Untitled from East of Eden 2002 - 2006

DIMENSIONS
30 in H x 40 in W

MEDIUM
Inkjet Prints

IMAGE NOTES
Framed to 39.5 (h) x 48 (w) Archival Pigment Print

CATALOGUE NUMBER
2013.024

CURRENT LOCATION
Warehouse

PIPO NGUYEN-DUY

BORN
1962

BIRTHPLACE
Hue, Vietnam

GENDER
Male

CITIZENSHIP
United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE
Vietnamese-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP
Artist-in-Residence, 2004
Community Darkrooms Gallery, 2010
Pipo Nguyen-duy: East of EdenFine Print Program, 2007
Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery, 2018

Be Strong and Do Not Betray Your Soul

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

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BIOGRAPHY

Pipo Nguyen-duy's photographs are as emotionally moving as they are beautiful. His photography stems from the traditional style of landscape painting. According to Jennie Hirsh, his "reliance on the natural world as a theatrical apparatus uncovers collisions between nature and culture, past and present, in carefully crystallized visions that inscribe themselves onto classical Western visions of the (un)natural world." His photographs hold references to mythology and history, and capture a thought-provoking vision of the American landscape and people. His photographic style has been greatly influenced by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Before the attacks, his work was more focused on the "back-story" of the landscapes he photographed, while the work is now focused more on reality and what is happening in the present. According to Stephen Borys, his work "shows us a landscape developing, changing, retreating and advancing—a land of multiple hues and conditions." Pipo Nguyen-duy is a photography professor at Oberlin College. His work has been exhibited nationwide. He has received grants and awards from institutions like En Foco, the College Arts Association, the Ohio Arts Council, and more. He has lectured at universities and museums throughout the United States, and he participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence Program in 2004.

ESSAYS

Pipo Nguyen-duy's new body of photographic work entitled "East of Eden" comprises a series of large color prints revealing a carefully rethought vision of the American landscape and its inhabitants. These full and complex images, saturated with color and varied sensations, penetrate the natural vegetation and human fabric of the rural and often hidden landscape. The lush and expansive portraits from the heartland and beyond take us back to the soil, rock, and foliage of a forgotten time, a once unmolested idea of beauty and calm. This isn't the Eden of the nineteenth-century explorers and painters or the hallowed ground memorialized by distant forebears. The heroic and pastoral escapes made famous by the authors of the Hudson River School are present only in name. This is another world made real by the flesh and scents of present day settlers and survivors, moving as a bizarre disturbance across a tranquil canvas. But the sweeping panoramas and idyllic vistas, and the secluded grottos and trails, have not been destroyed or banished from our sight. They are all there—strong trees, reflecting waters, heavy leaves, chalky skies, and hard stones—rising beneath centuries of growth, decay, and rejuvenation. The artist shows us a landscape developing, changing, retreating and advancing—a land of multiple hues and conditions. br> The figures point to a forgotten past, and in some way they are linked to this lost or disfigured utopia. In these fertile surroundings, they take on something of the organic, but they remain awkward in their innocence and altered state. There is a harsh or startling man-made texture to their bodies and dress. In these ancient gardens made contemporary, they represent new ages of humankind and a reconfigured transience of life. In some way they are reclaimed by the landscape, their own physical decline arrested. It is a form of memento mori fixed in our minds. The women in the image "Three Graces" look down from a rise in the path. Their footing is unsure like their presence before the viewer—uncomfortable or out of place. Who is the voyeur? Under the plain covering of vacant shrubs, scatterings of natural debris, and a deadening sky, they are transfixed by the memory of a different age or another law. Hands clasped and lips closed they are peculiar mannequins in this set of dull greens and brown washes. In "Marching Band," the members of the troupe are stuck like bathers on the riverbank or discharged soldiers. The shiny instruments are quiet like their frozen bodies, and the red and white of polyester drapery injects a perverted palette into the dead forms and colors of the forest. They do not respond to our probing gaze nor do they commune with the land. But their reflections come alive in the inked reservoir as if to inscribe the heroic passages from a displaced text. "Mountain Fire" is charged by the boy looking across smoldering hills like Caspar David Friedrich's solitary figures scanning the mountains or sea. This child will not traverse the land before him nor penetrate its shifting facade—he will watch nature change. He is a sculpture of warm, beautiful flesh illuminated against a backdrop of grays and reds. The two are alive—the boy and the mountain fire—but they remain separated by a ground of unknown distance and experience. The noiseless figures of "The Expecting" and "Nomad" haunt us. In "The Expecting," a pickup truck, tree, pregnant woman, and wooden corn stand animate the otherwise dormant landscape. The woman is dwarfed by her surroundings—by the black metal of the truck, the towering tree, and the muted backdrop of lifeless earth. In "Nomad," the waves of sun descending on the greens of water and leaves become an apparition of light and shadow. Barefoot, wet, protected by a white mantle, the figure stares down to find another reflection of life in this garden. He is encompassed by natural beauty and a palpable heaviness of moisture and warmth; his unspoken despair or reverie is forced into this liquid pool. This is a form of Eden; it is appealing, and we are tempted to resolve its depths and its flavors, or recapture something of its familiar past. Pipo Nguyen-duy does this over and over again in his rediscovery of the material and the very nature of the garden called Eden and its many reincarnations. Stephen D. Borys (c)2005 Pipo Nguyen-duy lives in Oberlin, Ohio, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in 2004. His website can be found at http://www.piponguyen-duy.com/. Stephen D. Borys, PhD, is the curator of Western art at the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio.As a child, Pipo Nguyen-duy remembers hearing gunshots every day. Growing up in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, he particularly remembers the Tet Offensive that claimed his uncle's house and everybody in it only a day after he stayed there for a visit. Years later, at age thirteen, he immigrated to the United States as a political refugee. While the photographic series East of Eden is not autobiographical, the work draws on his complex emotions regarding his childhood in Vietnam. These emotions did not surface in his photographs until 9/11 reawakened his memories of a state of existence tainted by uncertainty. As the artist describes, "With September 11th, the idea of universal fear and anxiety became very similar to my thoughts and my reactions while living in Vietnam during the war. That is, at any given time, something is going to go wrong." East of Eden describes a world that has failed in its promise of paradise and well-being. While the cause of the threat is not present in the photographs, the work is saturated with an underlying feeling that something is either very wrong or about to go amiss. As felt through people's reactions, rather than in their actions, Pipo's world is one where physical and emotional safety can no longer be taken for granted. The series was partly inspired by the Hudson River School, a movement in early-nineteenth century American landscape painting that celebrated the grandeur of American vistas. Whereas people in paintings of the Hudson River School amplified a sense of awe of nature and the promises the American landscape held, the people in Pipo's images stand amid nature, frozen in their emotions by a realization or sudden awareness of something to come. So intense is the psychological impact of these private moments that the subjects in the images seem to have quite forgotten what they were doing just a moment ago. This mid-moment disconnection conveys a sense that time and existence have come to a standstill. Unlike a typical freezing of action through fast shutter speed of the camera, here all life has come to a quiet, uneasy stop waiting for uncertainty to reveal itself once more.

Unlike paintings from the Hudson River School, nature in Pipo's images has been redefined as a stage for drama, uncertainty, and danger. His images imply that a violation has been committed against the world as we know it, though there are no outward signs of emotional disturbance or physical danger in the photographs. It is the innocence of the paradisiacal garden dwellers that is the true casualty in this new world of uncertainty. Since starting this series in 2002, Pipo has staged his scenarios for East of Eden in different anonymous and non-descript places all over the United States. He recently returned to Vietnam to extend his project to a landscape that bears the physical scars of war, and with the people that have lived and survived its horrors. Cracking open the façade only hinted at in the East of Eden series, the Vietnam photographs mix dignity and acceptance with the physical reality of war. While the new work only exists in proof prints at this time, it reflects a different existence outside the garden of promise, one where symbolic emotional disturbance is manifested in very real, physical scars and war wounds. And while the American images depict people still frozen by the ramifications of their loss of Eden, his photographs made in Vietnam of people who appear unhindered by their personal loss and physical damage spread hope that there is life and happiness even east of Eden. Hannah Frieser Associate Director Light Work Body Doubles, or Uncanny Reflections on Pipo Nguyen-duy's East of Eden "It is only rarely that a psycho-analyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics, even when aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of feeling." – Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" 1 Subtly staged dramatic visions of curious characters and their traces, Pipo Nguyen-duy's recent body of work isolates subjects transfixed in moments of revelation framed by poignant landscapes. East of Eden traverses vast terrain, meditating on bucolic beauty embedded in rural locales and the less cultivated countryside beyond them. But Pipo's pictorial production remains a paradox—intimate in content yet epic in scale, his photographs investigate the natural world and the displacement of humanity within it. Glimpses of silent subjects amongst trees, mountains, and plains constitute an uncanny return to the sublime topography made familiar by Hudson River School painters such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, and George Inness, who combined romanticism with distinctly American natural settings. Just as these nineteenth-century artists explored the frontier with brush and paint, so too does Pipo cover similar terrain in scientifically-inflected photographic investigations of diverse American landscapes. But as the title of this series suggests, the tranquility exuded by paintings of the Hudson River School has been replaced by a postlapsarian pictorial revelation that both delights and disturbs. Though the territory recorded by Pipo's lens echoes the formidable impact of his painterly precedent, he exposes a world no longer pristine, rrevocably tarnished by destruction of self and other. East of Eden delivers unsettling pastoral visions drawn from places as distant as Alabama, Oregon, and Ohio. Strikingly anonymous, these seemingly familiar places resist identification, masked by the generic qualities that enable their dual status—they are at once anywhere and nowhere. And though the landscape still looms large, Pipo focuses on the disconnections created by failed human engagements with the natural world. Whereas the protagonists of the Hudson River School depict a landscape vast in comparison with its tiny human inhabitants, Pipo brings his human subjects and nature closer in scale in order to cast them in intimate dialogues. Whether richly colored, dense foliage or its desolate remnants, the intense presence of nature charges Pipo's mysterious mise-en-scène with fear and anxiety. As The Expulsion self-consciously attests, Pipo has captured places east of Eden rather than the Garden of Eden itself. Herein lies the essence of this project—he has designed and recorded vignettes that map a psychic geo-graphy that has witnessed the stained pages of history that contaminate the innocent world of the Hudson River School painters. Symptomatic of post-modernism's tendency to critique social, cultural, and artistic categories and prejudices through appropriative strategies, East of Eden is also about life in the United States in the post-9/11 moment that insists on the impossibility of a return to life before. As such, the landscapes captured in East of Eden are no longer virgin terrain untouched by human antagonism and suffering. Like writer John Steinbeck, Pipo appropriates the title of this series from the biblical episode of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:16), and indeed the postlapsarian ethos of the series is epitomized by images like The Expulsion and The Fall. In The Expulsion, a couple stumbles over a stream followed by a third human figure, perhaps an angel made flesh, as they tentatively travel toward a place beyond our view. Whereas The Expulsion restages a modern Adam and Eve in flight as the legacy of Western art's long illustrative history of their exile from the Garden of Eden, The Fall isolates the source of that predicament—the pursuit of knowledge. And here that pursuit is portrayed as a young man and woman voyeuristically exploring the hidden depths of what might be an abandoned industrial plant in a contemporary abstraction of excessive desire. But Pipo shares more with Steinbeck than a title—just as Steinbeck's fiction drew heavily on local history combed from Salinas Valley periodicals, so too does Pipo's aesthetic conjoin documentary with invention to combine realism with metaphor, narrative with allegory. At the heart of Pipo's understated perversions of the natural world lies his interest in water, a substance whose presence permeates East of Eden in multiple guises—rigid ice, fluid pools, and dense, foggy mists. Both a catalyst for transformation and changeable matter, water occasions metamorphoses that are physical, emotional, and even psychological. In what follows, I explore the uncanny effects of the water that flows through East of Eden to highlight the cryptic codes contained in these simple yet haunting images. In theory and practice, water remains central to the cultural rituals and physical survival of various societies, east and west, old and new—it is linked culturally and biologically to human life as a signifier of purification, baptism, identification, and subsistence. In Thirst (Winter), the bright red clothing of a diminished figure draws our attention to witness man's humility in the face of nature's cruel reality. Like trees without leaves, ground without grass, here the solitary figure remains prey to nature's caprices. In a second staging of Thirst, an ambiguous figure clad in an orange jumpsuit—prison escapee or construction worker—crouches down to drink from a flowing stream. Ubiquitous are natural mirrors, liquid planes that release mysterious doubles, or what Sigmund Freud describes as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."2 The so-called "uncanny" appears in various forms throughout East of Eden—as inanimate objects that behave like organic beings, as living creatures in deadly states, as lingering doppelgängers whose ghostly presence reinforces and renounces the status of their original subjects. But Pipo's interest in divided and doubled selves goes beyond the pairs featured in his Hikers, Twins, and The Street. Consider Marching Band and Swordmen, two images populated by choreographed characters arranged horizontally across elegant rows of skeletal trees, both striking for their artificial orchestration. Poised amidst broken branches and woody undergrowth, the despondent expressions and synthetic red and white uniforms of the thespian characters of Marching Band recur in the natural pool below. The tension between subject and likeness is further complicated by the concert of shadows cast by their stationary, youthful bodies and the ominous, delicate trees around them. Their uniforms and awkwardly held instruments remind us of carefree high school football games and pep rallies, but their disenchanted poses and exasperated gazes confirm their misplacement. Ditto for the surprising Swordmen who dance across snow-covered ground that extends their costumes, at once evocative of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) and A Clockwork Orange (1971). Finding the fencers amidst the bleak forest, rather than at home in a practice studio, underscores the artificiality of their animosity and rehearsal of their rhetoric. In works of classical mythology, water serves again and again as the element that changes one being's form into another. In Book III of Ovid's Metamorphoses, the angry goddess Diana sprinkles water from her bath onto the voyeuristic hunter Actaeon who gazes upon her and her nymphs' unclad bodies, triggering his transformation into a stag to be hunted and killed by his own hounds. But water enables deliverance as well, as the young nymph Arethusa-turned-spring begs Artemis to save her from the lecherous river god Alpheus. And, of course, water enables Narcissus to encounter his own irresistible likeness, a tale re-figured in Nomad, where we find a figure riveted by his own murky reflection in a dramatically lit pool framed by lush greenery. A self-consciously failed version of Narcissus' predicament, Day's End posits cement debris between a contemplative youth and a pool below; as such, the plenitude pursued by the Narcissus in each

of us is upset by the refuse around the perimeter of the pool. But Pipo's obscure images resist one-to-one correspondences. At first glance, Rapture alludes to centuries of representations of the myth of musical Orpheus, forever and again bereaved of his abducted lover Eurydice. Here she floats on a pool's surface, eternally linked to Hades below as she yearns to hear her young lover's lyre. But this ambiguous triad of characters recalls as well the floating Ophelia from Shakespeare's haunted Hamlet—a work beloved by the pre-Raphaelites—hence linking this elusive elegy to more than one painterly tradition or pictorial premise. As two young lovers gaze into a marshy pond, we struggle to identify The Gift. Is it the exchange of a single goldfish in a clear plastic bag, a common prize from a local carnival or, instead, the return of the fish to the water before them that suspends their reflection? Shadowy and dark, this mirror image takes on a life of its own. Similarly, the oversized puddle from the melting snow in Spring Thaw absorbs the young boy who stands within it, hypnotically drawn to something beyond the left edge of the composition. While he ignores the reflection of his body below, a simple, white clapboard house emerges as a menacing specter. Equally unnerving, the strewn pumpkins and lonely rocking horse imply violence and a missing child in Pumpkin Field, while the slightly raised footrest of the dilapidated Lazy Boy implies an absent human presence. These uncanny elements upset our expectations by replacing living beings with dead objects. As pendants, In the Garden and Sunday Morning similarly explore the iconography of modern suburbia. Strange snippets of residential life, these elusive tableaux vivants frustrate the spectator's attempt to decode enigmatic tales that hover between tragedy and comedy, echoing the cinematic sentiments of David Lynch and Peter Greenaway. But whether Pipo invokes the macabre world of Stepford or the bland irony of a generic, Simpsons-style Springfield remains unclear. The lawn sprinkler has been re-christened a spiritual font, a suburban signifier that transcends its own banal setting and the life associated with it. In the Garden surrounds us with meticulously manicured shrubs and a carefully mowed lawn divided by a miniature brick wall. The various shades of green of this lush backyard contrast sharply with the pure white of the fountain's spray, which in turn immobilizes a solitary, ambiguously-gendered figure who dons a kimono-turned-vestment before the secret altar of this sacred grove. In Sunday Morning, the camera steps back from a more sober scene to confirm our suburban setting—prosaic postwar ranch houses, simple cement sidewalks, a carefully cut lawn. All that is missing is a white picket fence, the trite element that would fulfill a 1950s domestic fantasy. And yet this male figure casually clad from head to toe in denim with a baseball cap pauses with his hands before him. Is this domestic paradise or prison? East of Eden suspends the viewer between dream and déjà vu by means of art-historical appropriations whose status as allusive approximations of studied masterworks unleashes the uncanny as well. The child dwarfed by the smoldering Mountain Fire extends the romantic pictorial project of Casper David Friedrich, while The Walk Home stereoscopically combines the fields of Jean-François Millet with the elegant costumes of the high society subjects of John Singer Sargent. Dead ringers of a different sort, the anachronistic Three Graces dressed in dowdy, ankle-length skirts and topped off with stiff coiffures cast classical mythology out of time and into the Deep South. Despite the horrors witnessed by Pipo's landscapes, these patient sites await rebirth and reproduction, whether natural or synthetic. East of Eden delivers us not back to Eden; instead, the project encourages us to rediscover the beauty that already surrounds us. Like the pregnant woman who anxiously clutches her belly in The Expecting, we must confront life now that we are all east of Eden, and, like her example, we must bring new life into the world, despite its threatened state. Turning to the classical myth of Medusa can analogically explain the rewards of Pipo's provocative lens. After all, only through his mediating shield can Perseus confront the gorgon of the Real. Only through photography's simulacrum can we confront the Real that haunts this landscape, forever now east of Eden. Jennie Hirsh 1. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 219. 2. Ibid., 220. Jennie Hirsh is a Hannah Seeger Davis Post-doctoral Fellow at Princeton University. She lives in Princeton, NJ.