



ARTIST

Pao Her

TITLE

Untitled (Opium poppy from my garden)

DATE

2019

DIMENSIONS

20" H x 16" W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

IMAGE NOTES

Artist Proof

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2019.058

CURRENT LOCATION

NA 09

PAO HER

BORN

1982

BIRTHPLACE

Laos

GENDER

Female

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Hmong

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2019

BIOGRAPHY

Pao Houa Her is a visual artist living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA. She works across multiple genres and technologies of photography to address Hmong identity and related notions of desire and belonging within the Hmong American community. Pao was born in the northern jungles of Laos in 1982. With her family she fled the conflict resulting from the American War in Vietnam—like many others, by crossing the Mekong River as an opium-fed baby on her mother's back. After living in refugee camps within Thailand's borders, Pao and her family were sent to the United States in 1986. Pao holds a BFA in Photography from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, MN, and an MFA in Photography from Yale University, CT. She is the recipient of many prestigious fellowships and grants, and has exhibited extensively in Minnesota, as well as across the United States, and more recently, in Southeast Asia.

ESSAYS

It was the harvest season when I found the pale husk of my naked body lying by a rotting tree. I could barely see myself within the thicket—the tall river grass had already wrapped their way around my mangled limbs. But there I was within the foliage, my skin aglow like some pearl longing to be plucked out from the shallow water. At first it was a fear that arose within me. I believed in death. I believed in the eternal black stillness that would greet me after life. And as my vision narrowed—as the colors of the world began to turn to gray—I was certain that all the rituals and ceremonies that we performed would be for nothing. But my own cadaver now laid before me. The fields of grass were once astir, but now there was no movement—the wind had seemed to pause against their frail stems. This is the ethereal plain the shaman spoke of. I understood this as eternity. Not of endless time, but of time collapsing—the once-long corridor folding in on itself: past becoming present—present becoming past. I am familiar with this hillside. I would always chase my daughter around these fields, peeking from the corner of my eyes to see the countless ways my wife adored us. I loved the way she laughed when she thought I wasn't looking, the way she showed her crooked teeth and smile, and how she'd rest her head against her shoulders after laughing for too long. And when I caught my daughter in my arms, I would lose myself inside her laughter. The waves of heaven washing over us. The sun against our backs. The way we'd tighten our embrace as we toppled to the ground. That elation was familiar. It was time collapsing—eternity bringing me closer to this ethereal plain that I pass through. I apologize to my wife and daughter's apparitions—for not being able to say goodbye in person, for not telling them I loved them for one last time. They dissipate into the hillside and I am alone with myself again, left to study my anatomy as I trace the bony structure of my face. It is somehow left untouched. Still pristine. Still beautiful. I hover over myself, aligning my face above my face, staring into my wide and crystalline eyes as they stare back into mine. The pale hue of graying brown once held a life. "What did it mean to be a father?" "What did it mean to be a son?" My fingers wrap around my ribcage and I pull myself much closer, pressing my lips against my own, pushing my tongue on through to taste the soil from which I come from. One day I will be in a land we call America, and I will learn of simulacra. It is me replacing myself as I decay within this hillside. No one will find me here. I have told my wife and daughter to go ahead, and I know by now they've crossed the Mekong into safer land. Soon, there will be no me. But I am here for now, my tongue against my tongue where there is no more room for language. It is winter when I am gone. Only I am left to wander through the frosted fields that extend for miles here before me, and in this vast expanse of space I am untethered. Walking through the frozen grass, I am reminded of what a shaman once said to my vessel. The shaman spoke of me as "lost," but there is nothing that I belong to. I am beyond space. Beyond time. Beyond matter. I was once a tiger of these vast plains. I was once the blade of grass that brushed against my fur as I walked past. I was the moon that laid her light across this land for me to hunt on. And I was the sun across my eyelids that awoke me in the morning. I was here billions of years ago when the eternal black canvas first shed light, and I was countless fragments then, stretched across an endless space that is still expanding. I am the beginning and the end—I am nothing. I am death. I am the eternal black stillness that awaits you after life. And as your vision narrows—as the colors of the world begins to turn to gray—all your rituals and ceremonies that you perform will be for me. Vlai Ly Pao Houa Her lives in Blaine, MN, and completed her residency at Light Work in August 2019. www.paohoua.com Vlai Ly (V-Lie Lee) is a Hmong American photojournalist and writer. He is also the editor-in-chief for maivmai, a digital Hmong American publication. [instagram.com/vlaily](https://www.instagram.com/vlaily).