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Oral history interview with Tam Van Tran, 2020 August 8

Tran, Tam Van, 1966-
Mixed-media artist

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Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Tam Van Tran on August 7, 2020. The interview took place from Tran's home in Los Angeles and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie, interviewing Tam Van Tran at his home in Los Angeles on August 7, 2020, for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project.

Could you tell me a little bit about how your life and work have changed since March of this year?

TAM VAN TRAM: Um, it's definitely gotten more intro—introspective, in sense. Um, just, I mean, you know, I'm starting to, for example, to, uh, just collect the avocado seeds, um, that I've been eating, and then, just, um, carving them. Incorporating them into, um, my paintings, and such, and drawings. So, that is kind of a way of marking time. And then, also, um, just doing, learning the I Ching [laughs]. And throwing the I Ching, basically, for just, you know, basic questions, and so forth. So, um, yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, tell me a little bit about the beginning of March. Were you traveling? Did you have any shows that were cancelled or delayed because of the onset of the pandemic?

TAM VAN TRAM: I was in, um, three weeks, I was in Madrid, actually, in Spain for three weeks. And then, um, went down to Morocco, uh, for a week. Drove down from Madrid to Morocco. So, this is right before the pandemic. So, luckily I—we, you know, my friend and I, got out of Morocco just in time, because they closed the border. And then, I left, basically, I left on March 6th, and I remember, um—I was there during ARCO [International Contemporary Art Fair], so it was—it was a lot of people. But I left March 6th and they started testing people, basically, um, the passengers were—that were boarding the flight. But they hadn't closed the country down yet. So, you know, luckily, I got out in time.

But it was a strange experience being there, you know, just right before they closed it. And the COVID was around. I mean, definitely it was in the air, but there was no, you know, governmental, you know, directives. So, it was very, very loose. Um, but luckily, you know, I mean, I thought maybe at the time, like, oh, it would have been great to have been quarantined in Spain. But, [laughs] just, you know, looking back, obviously, just—and then, just seeing how difficult it was for friends who were in lockdown, uh, very strict lockdown. You know, that I was lucky to get out just right before they closed the country, so.

BEN GILLESPIE: Your art has always been so interested in the idea of landscape and home. And how have your senses of those things evolved over the course of quarantine?

TAM VAN TRAM: Um, I think relating more to, you know, my garden, in many ways. Um, can you be a little bit more specific, just, uh, how it's—

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, I mean, what—so, how has your—your perception of the landscape, if you're stuck to one sort of scene all the time, or, even, your idea of home, by being, you know, stuck in one space. How does that sedentariness affect your sense of those things?

TAM VAN TRAM: Oh, I see. Yeah. No, it's—you know, you look at—I mean, you just, there's more—it's—you're trapped, you know. You're trapped at home. So, there's—you just—it's—you know, there's more walking, for example. There's more, just, connecting with friends who are just over the hill. And then, just connecting with them, and, um—um, I think, just, kind of—I mean, it's, yeah. It's just a different—totally different mind space, to be, um, you know, just being at home and then, just, you know, relating. Just looking at things closer at home. Just looking at, uh, you know, what could be done at home, what could be altered in the garden. Um, so.

BEN GILLESPIE: So, do you find the isolation particularly nourishing? Is there, um, something that's really generative about this time for introspection?

TAM VAN TRAM: Yeah, it's, um—it has been. I mean, I find it, uh—I don't have it as—you know, it's not as—I don't have a crisis over it, basically. I don't have—it's not conflicting, because it's, um—you know, I mean, as artists, we're—we spend a lot of time alone.

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Um, so, and also, you know, just, I mean, I also have some experiences in just doing, you know, for example, getting, you know, having some experience of, like, just doing some solitary retreats, and so forth. Um, you know, in Buddhism. And that's also, I think—you know, it's interesting, because I have talked to, you know, my friends, who are also, uh, medita—med—uh—meditators, and it's, you know, it's not—it's not as challenging. So, I think, for, you know, people that have, maybe, non-artists, or maybe, you know, um, non-meditators and so forth, it's harder—it's harder—I think it's more difficult if you haven't had the, you know, previous experience of, like, you know, being alone, and just dealing with your mind and such. There's no, you know, all you have is just you and then—and your mind. And then, how you can generate something from that, kind of, uh, silence.

So, I find, actually, it's—you know, I mean, I live in a, you know, a beautiful—beautiful environment with a beautiful garden, so—and that really helps to buffer it, as opposed to, you know, being stuck, you know, in an apartment with no outdoor space. Um, so I'm very fortunate in that way. And I have two dogs, and you know, it's [laughs]—it's—they're—they've been really good companions.

BEN GILLESPIE: And as the—the quarantine goes on, um, how are you dealing with postponed shows? Or changing your own workflow and timeline to—to prepare for a future that seems to be getting further and further away from us?

TAM VAN TRAM: Well, I have something scheduled for next year. So, I'm, you know, I'm continuing to work for that. But it's hard to know. I mean, it's like, I mean, it's, you're—what if the gallery closes? You know? I mean, I'm working toward a show, and, um, it's—it's very nebulous. I mean, it's, um, it's, yeah—it's—There's a lot of unknowns. Um, so, it's disconcerting, in a sense, you know. But what can you do? I mean, it's—there's no—what can you do, other than really, you know, recede back, and take refuge in your, you know, you're, you know, imaginative, you know, places where you can generate, you know, ideas, and make things, and, um, so.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well and also, to—to draw on the world around you. It sounds like your garden has been a really important space for you. And, I'm wondering about the—the sense of temporality, and how this very different cadence of life is feeling for your work. Using the avocado pits as a reflection of your everyday routines, and this relationship with the natural world, and what—and what you eat over the course of a day, and the remnants of that, and how they come back to your work. You've used so many organic materials in your work before, and do you feel like there's any sort of shift going forward? Do you feel an adaptation to this different sense of time?

TAM VAN TRAM: Um, yeah. Well, I mean, my work has always been really, kind of, um, I would say, you know, just, sort of—there's a—it's—it's always been private, in a sense, you know. And so, it hasn't really, I mean, it hasn't shifted because of what's going on in the world. Um, and my work's not necessarily—I mean, it's, you know, it's a lot, it's—there's a sort of, uh, there's, you know, there's an intuitive, you know, quality to it. So, it's not—it's—it's not, um, changed by just, you know, what's happening socially in the world. Um, because it's, you know, for me, the—my work deals larger idea of, like, just, you know, u—universal time. You know, uh, time as beauty, and how that beauty can—you know, as an artist, how I can contribute to society, in a sense. So, I'm, you know, my work has always been connecting to that timelessness. Um, that's, in a way, it's, you know, beyond language. So, I'm interested in that kind of space that's beyond language. Um, and it's, you know, when you think about it, the idea beyond language, it's—it's not a judgment on language, or anything like that. It's just, basically, connecting with that kind of primordial silence, that I feel, you know, as an artist, that's what, really, my contribution can be. Because, you know, as, you know, as human beings, as consumers, we're constantly distracted by, um, you know, what's being sold to us—told us—sold—told to us, sold to us, and what we should buy, and so forth.

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So, as an artist, you know, I feel like my responsibility is in that realm. Is, you know, the exploration of, um, you know, of a realm that's beyond, basically, I—concepts, in a sense. So, um, so, you know, generally, it's like, that's, I mean, it goes into a broader question of, you know, like, my exploration of, just, meditation, for example. And, you know, a meditative landscape, essentially. So.

BEN GILLESPIE: With that—with that meditative landscape, um, do you feel that, with the world, as it—as it feels shifted right now, that the—the distractions further away from you as you—you reach for that primordial silence, through whatever practices bring you in greatest contact with it? Or are there different forms of distraction that you now find?

TAM VAN TRAM: Oh, I mean, I'm constantly distracted [laughs]. And I think meditate—when I talk about med—when I think about meditation, it's not necessarily, like, just sitting still and, like, zoning out and being peacefully—you know, biding peace—you know, peacefully into that primordial silence, you know [laughs]. Um—I think it's just more, the meditation—it's just, kind of, basically, an everyday thing that you exercise. You know, like when you do yoga, or you lift weights, and so forth. It's just—because it's really difficult to, you know, alter our karmic, habitual tendencies, and so forth. And our pattern.

So, it's just little by little, you kind of chip away, through, you know, mindfulness. Not necessarily just mindfulness, but, you know, mindfulness and, uh, awareness, you know, in everything that you do, essentially. So, that's really difficult. It's so difficult and, you know, I'm a really bad practitioner, but it's, you know, I mean as, you know, as—as an artist, I'm interested in that kind of, you know—you could say, uh, it's, you know, wisdom, in a sense. You know, as opposed to, like, um, you know, knowledge, that is concrete, and so forth. So, I mean, it's the wisdom, there is, you know, you have—I mean, there's studies to it. And it's not necessarily just, you know, spacing out. But there's, you know, it's very, kind of, sharp, intelligent space. So, and just, kind of, connecting with that, essentially, uh. And so, it's hard, as anybody knows, uh, you know, just try sitting. Just the pure act of, like, calm abiding, or Shamatha, or just sitting still, is very, very difficult, you know.

So, you know, meditative space is not necessarily just this, kind of, like, peaceful zoning out. It's just, kind of, it's really an engagement with, uh, with the world. With your perception of the world. Um, so, you know, just basically—you know, like, Milarepa said, you know, there's, you know—the Buddha nature is the space in between two thoughts. So, it's basically—that's trying to connect to that space, you know, uh, every day. And just, sort of, remembering. Trying to, you know, recollect, and connect to it. I mean, it's—a lot of it is just trying to remember, because I'm, you know, constantly distracted as a human being. So, um, yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, if we—if we think ahead a few years from now, assuming that the world continues as it does. Perhaps, you know, we'll see what all changes. Um, what do you feel like are the most pressing memories, threads of wisdom, from 2020 that will carry with you beyond this year?

TAM VAN TRAM: I think, uh, maybe—maybe just the idea that we need less, I think. You know, essentially. That we don't need to accumulate so much. I mean, that's sort of—I've been really thinking about that, you know. It's like, you can't go out shopping for clothing, for example. Or, you know, you just can't, like, oh, I just think I'm going to be distracted, and, like, run off to the store, you know. Um, and, I mean, myself, as a human being, just trying to improve myself. I just—I think, just trying to connect with more—with the suffering of others. You know, just trying to, basically, be more flexible in my mind, and being less judgmental, you know. Because, you know, I'm quick, as we all—many of us are quick to judgment. So, I think, just, like, what's been happening socially, you know, just be—just be coming—to be coming more empathetic—empathetic, uh, in a sense.

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Um, and, you know, I think, just be more a responsible person, you know. Especially consuming less, you know, buying less. And recycling more, you know. Just, you know, just, like, the broomstick—the handle breaks, you know. Maybe just trying to glue it back together [laughs]. You know, and so, like buying more, you know, accumulating more things. So, um, yeah. I mean, there's been definitely, like, with everything that's happening, there's definitely more reflection on my part, just, like, how I can be just, you know, connecting, you know, emotionally, like, just—to the suffering of others, essentially. Um, and I think if, you know, I just—it just feels like this country is just really gone—at least on the media, you know, uh, so divisive. So, um, yeah. It's like, how can you, sort of, like, basically, just, you know, um, slow that down.

BEN GILLESPIE: And in terms of slowing it down and finding meaningful connection, what channels are you embracing to find connection with the suffering of others, through—is that through video chat, through, you know, through reading, through observing art online? Like, how do you—how do you connect and cultivate empathy in a time when we're all stuck at home?

TAM VAN TRAM: Um, well, I mean, I, you know, for me, personally, I, you know, I'm—I'm a dharma practitioner. So, I've been studying it for a really long time. Like, the last 20 years. So, for me—for me personally, my community is mostly through other meditator, through other practitioners. So we, you know, we, I mean—I think, just as far as the medi—like, just connecting more in that way, and, um, I guess I'm trying [laughs] to figure, it's like, how—how much do I want to talk about? Like, about that practice, you know. So, I mean, um, yeah, I think, just through, like, you know, my meditative practices and making offerings through that, essentially, I think. Because I—we were talking about earlier about that. It's like if, you know, each of us meditated—if like, one more person meditates, that means, like, less harm is done, you know. So, basically—because when you think about meditation, it's like oh, it's a super selfish thing to do. You know, how does it, like, you know, how is it changing the world?

How is it, like, um, you know, you're not out in the street protesting. And it's like, but you're sitting at home, and you're, like, meditating. And so, it's all very, very selfish. But then, when I think about that, it's like, if I meditate, then I'm improving myself. So, if I'm improving myself, then that makes my—I'm creating more of a beautiful environment when I'm around other people and, you know, when I'm alone, essentially. You know, hopefully being more, you know, conscious about my own, you know, behavior and so forth. But then, I think, oh, if I'm meditating, but then one more person sits down and meditates, and sits still for five minutes or 10 minutes, that means you are not harming, you know, yourself, or—with distraction or you're harming others. You know, um, either through the body, speech, or mind, so that means, like—so, if more of us can just sit, for example. Learn how to sit still for five minutes or 10 minutes, you know, it means, like, we're basically—more of us are connecting to our basic goodness. So, I think, you know, I think just personal practice, meditative practice, can be very, very beneficial for yourself and then, also, you know, just—just as kind of like a silent, you know, revolution, in that way, so.

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah. Well, thank you very much. Um, you know, it's really wonderful to think about the ways in which practices we might think of as selfish can turn into something selfless. And, um, going forward. And we're very excited to see your work in the years to come, and hopefully no more cancellations or delays. Thank you very much for speaking with me today.

TAM VAN TRAM: Thank you. I really like that you said. Self—from the future. Selflessness. You know, acting selflessness and so.

BEN GILLESPIE: Thank you.

TAM VAN TRAM: Thank you.

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