

FOREST IN THE ART AND VIETNAM'S FOREST PICTURE SERIES IN THE VIEW OF INGA KERBER, PHOTOGRAPHER

Once accounting for 2/3 of its territorial area, Vietnam's forest has been closely connected to people's lives throughout the country's long history, yet its manifestation in cultural life, in particular in art, has not been very distinct. In Vietnam's ancient art, forest was mainly only manifest in the form of stylized description of the plant world and modeled into cultural and religious symbols. Plant species such as lotus, daisy, pine, and bamboo appeared regularly over the centuries in sculpture decorating architectural works; domestic tools all carried a symbolic value, becoming motifs expressing common ideas of Buddhism and Confucianism – completely not for the objective description of nature.

Modern art only truly made its appearance in the unfolding of the process of colonization, with French acculturation. The French had brought a European art and aesthetics training model into Vietnam when they built the first art schools at the beginning of XX century, marked by the introduction of Indochina Art College (*École supérieure des beaux-arts de l'Indochine*) in Hanoi in 1925. However, in the first few decades after this art academy came into existence, the main subjects of artistic works were still mainly Northern mountain or plains landscapes alongside scenes of daily life, portraits, and still-life. Although nature commonly appeared in Vietnamese painting, it was the commonness of bamboo clumps, banana clumps, and rice fields that could be found anywhere. Forest subjects, if any in landscape drawings, were still mainly a familiar combination between elements of nature and religious architecture or civic works, in which forest always played such roles as a tranquil backdrop created by shimmering mountain ranges against the sky, interspersed with bamboo clumps and rice fields.

At the time, the forest landscape drawings of European Classic and Romantic schools were familiar to Vietnamese painters but had had almost no influence on aesthetics and painting technique. Moreover, though trained in European artistic methods, their roots in traditional Asian aesthetic thought respecting absolute assimilation between nature and humankind had led to their artistic creations failing to set the natural world, including forest, as a subject for careful objective and independent research and description. In “borrowing landscape to describe love,” nature was only a source of inspiration, an object for transmitting human feelings and thought, a creative concept shared across generations of artists. Even in the half century of art spanning two wars of independence and unification against France and the US with the flourishing of countless works in praise of the bravery and enduring fighting spirit of the Vietnamese people, forest appearing in artistic works was also only a background scene to heighten praise of the image of soldier. While the affection and attachment of soldiers in regard to the forest is visualized in a famous line of poetry “Forest shields the soldiers, forest surrounds the enemy” by renowned communist poet To Huu, despite its importance in war, the appearance of forest in revolutionary art is in fact very modest.

Vietnam's photographic art was also born in the French colony. From the end of the XIX century, French photographers were regularly taking pictures of forest in their depictions of a colorful eastern colony or to serve research in ethnography, biology, and geography. Forest at that time was again not a separate subject for the creation of photographic art. Although having lost millions of hectares of forest in the process of exploitation, overbuilding, and especially prolonged extirpative war, today, with over 40 million hectares diverse in natural ecosystems and abundant in species (evergreen broadleaf natural forests, semi-evergreen forests, deciduous forests, limestone forests, mixed broad and needle leaf forests, needle forests, bamboo forests, mangrove forests, cajuput forests, riparian forests, etc.), Vietnam's forests should be a source from which artists draw their creative inspiration, but instead the forest as a subject in photographic art knows neither abundance nor diversity.

Most of Vietnam's photographic artists still make use of aesthetic values based on idealization of natural

factors, colors, and light. They photograph forest using angles emphasizing spatial depth; select images of strangely twisted trees, or bulging ancient tree trunks, or colorful flowers, of meandering streams and waterfalls and imposing mountain ridges, and place their subjects amid illusory lighting effects or special weather conditions. Many artists use software to modify their pictures to enhance color and light. Of note, some have specialized for many years in photographing birds typical of tropical forest ecosystems.

In recent years, to campaign for awareness of forest resource protection, and to condemn indiscriminate, illegal forest exploitation and the adverse effects on the natural environment of losing millions of hectares of forest, cultural and art management agencies at national level organized photography competitions on the subject of protection and praise of forest resource biodiversity. However, selection criteria for exhibition and awards again gave priority to mass propaganda rather than to honoring creative effort. Almost no works were conceptually creative or of a nature that challenged familiar aesthetic values and methods to approaching photographic art. It may be said of Vietnam's photography on forestry in general that it is art for the promotion of cultural activities and tourism.

The photo series taken in Cuc Phuong National Park and Cat Tien National Park by artist Inga Kerber shows a completely different viewpoint, at least when compared to photos of forest taken by Vietnamese photographers. The way she exploits light in these pictures is far removed from the familiar light effects of Vietnamese photography, but one can almost certainly guess what feeling this forest of hers will attract among Vietnamese: extreme ease of recognition and a sense of the familial. Her forest pictures are so simple so that we can see almost no sign of the rolling about finding camera angles, sophisticated images, and special color and light. Such simplicity may even prompt the sudden thought that the artist needed only to hold up the camera and click on any random corner of nature as soon as she was few dozen kilometers from a big Vietnamese urban center. Inga Kerber's forest pictures show further that the forest is so familiar it is self-evident, a self-evidence requiring no consciousness, no observation, because of an ability to recognize the familial between forest and human equipped by a side-by-side process of existence. Inga Kerber's Vietnam forest photography series with a predominant focus of weak light on center frame has accurately created not only the gloomy feeling of primeval tropical forest, but conveys the feeling of the existence of a forest recorded by a camera lens in random moments of a distant past. The way she has exposed negatives several times with different durations, selecting variations of light and dark for the same photo, or the way she has reproduced the same picture multiple times, displaying them next to each other selecting chance aberrations of color from scanning to capture the unexpectedness and impermanence of living beings! Such immense forest, the feeling the moment the photo was taken, the moment it was developed; neither are these permanent or eternal, nor capturable or controllable absolutely.

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