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Hung Viet Nguyen

Lois Lambert Gallery, Santa Monica, California
Review by David S. Rubin



Hung Viet Nguyen, "Sacred Landscape III #2," 2017, oil on canvas, 60 x 48"

Continuing through January 6, 2024

Art and spirituality are still considered a taboo mixture in some elite art circles. Not too long ago I watched a panel discussion in which a nationally prominent curator who was trained on the East Coast felt the need to express caution before uttering the term "spirituality." Those of us from the West Coast, however, have long embraced the concept of a spirituality that exists outside the realm of organized religion. Artists such as Wallace Berman (1926-1976), Gilah Yelin Hirsch, Peter Liashkov, Jim Morphesis, and Jean St. Pierre (1947-1991) were all influenced by their religious roots which, in this group, includes Jewish, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, and Catholic. Yet none felt that they could find spiritual truth by practicing old world rituals. Rather, as creatives, they addressed through their art the issues they might otherwise be discussing with rabbis or priests. Also, we cannot overlook the influence of Zen Buddhism on Light and Space pioneers like Robert Irwin (1928-2023), whose work promotes meditative consciousness, or the impact of occult religions on transcendentalists such as Agnes Pelton (1881-1961).

Like the artists cited above, Hung Viet Nguyen doesn't practice any traditional religion, but he embraces the existence of divinity. An immigrant from Vietnam who was introduced to Buddhism as a child, he moved to Torrance in 1982, when he was in his mid-20s, and developed a fondness for L.A. beaches and hiking trails. Through his ongoing pilgrimage to these areas, he feels a connection with divine forces. In his paintings of the past several years, he envisions imaginary "sacred landscapes," as he calls them, where the spiritual energies of nature are made visible in the form of flowing lines, rugged textures, animated patterns, and vibrant colors. Underlying all of this is what he terms a "sacred geometry," by which he means nature's inherent structure.

Water is the dominant feature in the earliest examples on view, where we see ponds, lakes, and waterfalls neatly embedded within mountainous landscapes that combine the naturalistic detailing of traditional Western art with the spatial flattening of Asian prototypes. Approaching them is something like stumbling upon hidden Shangri-Las. In "Sacred Landscape III #2" (2017), the central focus of the composition is on the swirling movements of whirlpools that make up a large

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body of water that we view from overhead. Using a palette knife, Nguyen scratches into the thick oil paint to create linear striations that define ripples in the water, as well the crusty surfaces of the cliffs and rocks that surround it. In this and other paintings from the same year we can observe that the artist's view of the spiritual accepts the darkness with the light, as the skies in these works are cloudy and foreboding.

Nguyen was, like so many others, quite prolific during COVID lockdown. Feeling the need to provide a visual antidote to the prevailing mood of doom and gloom, he brightened his landscapes with a more polychromatic palette, and made the scenes lush through the addition of organic life in the form of trees, flowers, volcanoes, and, in a few instances, people. In "Sacred Landscape IV #2" (2020), two figures can be observed swimming in a distant reservoir enveloped by boulders, waterfalls, and plants and trees bearing colorful green and orange foliage. To reach this paradise, however, we must first cross another body of water in the foreground, so the journey is not necessarily an easy one. Nguyen certainly knows this from his own experience, having fled Vietnam as one of the "boat people." He first landed in the Philippines, where he remained for ten months before making his way to California.

Nguyen's ultimate vision is of a spiritually balanced universe, which he renders most succinctly and passionately in the masterful "Sacred Landscape V #57" (2022). In this and related paintings, the artist articulates the Buddhist yin/yang principle through the juxtaposition of water gushing forth from the mouth of a waterfall and smoke rising from the fiery orifice of a volcano. A similar dichotomy is evident in the contrast between the cheerful tone of yellow flowers and cellular patterns on some of the rocks with the eeriness of the smoky red sky. With nature's nurturing and destructive forces all around them, the two figures swimming in the distance are shown in peaceful harmony with their surroundings. They beautifully personify the acceptance of the things we cannot control, as well as the power of the human spirit to withstand the ups and downs of existence.

In his latest series of sacred landscapes Nguyen introduces a new feature, an arch-shaped gate that frames the water's horizon line and could be interpreted as a transition point to pass under on the road to spiritual enlightenment. Recalling to some extent the symbolism for life's trajectory in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), "GATE #2/Sacred Landscape VI #10" directs our gaze along a straight path from the foreground, rock by rock and upward, to the open skies where birds fly freely. With the gate's playful patterning and the depiction of clear, calm weather, this scenario expresses a healthy optimism that Nguyen derives from his love for the natural world.

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