A conversation with Toi Hoang

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

From the Studio

Toi Hoang left Vietnam at the age of thirteen, just after the fall of Saigon. His country was at war long before he was born, and his family suffered the loss of his father and sister. With his remaining family members, Hoang traveled through several refugee camps before settling in San Jose. He studied for ten years at junior college and then San Jose State, but was unable to pass the English language test required for graduation and finally left school to work on his own.

During the past two years, he has completed two series of works which exorcise his childhood experiences. The triptyches are mural-scale paintings which strongly suggest destroyed landscapes. The paintings of the second series are made on canvases constructed like medical stretchers; Hoang attaches to them objects evocative of pain and death. He recently was invited to participate in *Occupied Territory: Installations* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, where he appears with such artists as Chris Burden and Bruce Nauman.

Artweek *The triptych in the Oakland Museum show gave me the sensation of lying in the mud, of looking up through a devastated field to the orange glow of a burning building.*

Toi Hoang My work is more abstract than political. I do it from my own feeling. I don't do it to make people feel guilty. I think it's a very wonderful thing that I can make art work to interpret my feelings about the devastation and conflict that happened—and not only to me. Conflict is human nature. It's not a black and white experience, not a yellow and brown experience.

AW *What art or artists have been important to you in the development of your work?*

TH Mark Rothko, Anselm Kiefer, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Cy Twombly, Brice Marden. I am influenced by Asian philosophy but I like Western painters.

AW *How do you feel about the work of American artists who have dealt with the Vietnam War, such as Terry Allen?*

TH I cannot criticize them. It's very different in Vietnam than here. They interpret it in a very different manner. I lived there. I'm not into political stuff. I don't like communism. I don't like capitalism. I am more Zen. One person cannot change the world. I can only do it for myself. I hope my work in universal—not political. I cannot interpret everything. Content is secondary.

AW *How, then, do you start a painting?*

TH I have a lot of passion in my work. I'm very intuitive and I work very quickly. I plan something and then I do it, but I don't know what the end will be. The inner mind takes over. Things come out and for days and days after I finish the work I don't know what happened. But in my subconscious, it makes me feel good spiritually. Rothko has that emotion. I hope to get that quality in my work.

At the beginning of the stretcher series I had no idea how it would look. I ripped the canvas, stitched it, bandaged it. As the series progressed, the stitches became refined. The artificial flowers give it hope. In the beginning it was chaotic—now it seems to be getting quiet. This is what I need to do to purify myself, to become a good person.

AW *What does it mean to be a good person?*

TH To be able to express myself individually. You have to help yourself first in order to help others. If I make myself pure, maybe I can inspire someone else. But it's up to them to see things. Political artists make the message obvious, just for that time. I hope with my work you can come back to it and keep finding new things.

My work will change physically with time. I like the deterioration process. I think years from now my work will be better. I don't use very solid materials—roofing tar, clay and resin glue in oil paint. The layer of gesso is very thin so as time goes by it will eat up everything. And the tree branches have beetles. A curator once asked me to fumigate a piece—I did but I liked it better the way it was. In most of them the beetles are still eating the wood.

AW *Your father and sister both died during the war. Are there particular paintings that you think of as memorials for them?*

TH That is very personal. I prefer to keep those things ambiguous.

AW *Are there any references to Vietnamese culture or language in your work that the average American viewer would miss? There seems to be Vietnamese writing on some of the stretchers.*

TH The words are ambiguous. Like a sound, not a word. You could pick it up but it could also be something different—like Twombly. I like scribbling. The paint gets underneath the meaning rather than on top of it.

AW *In a recent interview, you said "I don't want to be like other Americans. There's something beautiful about my old country, the people, traditions of history." What are the strengths of Vietnamese culture that you draw on?*

TH Americans are more linear than the Vietnamese, who are very influenced by the Chinese. Western thinking is a line. Asian thinking is very circular—life is up and down. To me, to fail is to gain something. You lose one thing, you gain something else.

In Vietnam, people are very friendly, warmer. Vietnamese are quieter. I like the looseness of the Americans. Americans have macho, have a lot of energy, but that energy is very temporary. Vietnamese are comparatively low key but endure for a very long time. I would like to leave something of that behind, to share that. ▒

Meredith Tromble is a painter who also does art commentary for KQED-FM.

Toi Hoang, *Triptych (C)*, 1991 (with the artist), mixed media, 144" x 216" x 26", at the Oakland Museum, Oakland.