

difficult and still continue to pick up the fucking cans.

**AW** *There's a sense in which you and your colleagues in political art have continued to pick up the cans. Despite the trend to the right in national politics, you seem optimistic about the impact of your work when you write that "This resistance to the Republican rule has done much good, I believe, by preventing many bad situations from being much worse."*

**JS** If nothing else, artists of conscience have kept alive the notion that the situation is not acceptable. If only ten percent of the population accepts that message, it's still enough to keep the flicker of hope alive. People say you're just making art that preaches to the converted. I say that's bullshit—everyone makes art that preaches to the converted. People who are interested in progressive social change are a small group, and they need encouragement. When you see graphics or art that reinforces your beliefs, it's a really positive thing.

**AW** *I was surprised to learn that after years of intense work for community and political causes you don't belong to any particular political group.*

**JS** Most leftist groups are so dogmatic and inflexible that I wouldn't last long, because I'm neither. It would just be a matter of time before I was ejected. That doesn't mean that I don't support them, because I do. I support plurality, but other than working for Alliance Graphics I don't belong to any political doctrine.

**AW** *What is Alliance Graphics?*

**JS** It's a branch of the Middle East Children's Alliance, a humanitarian group. I had been doing graphic work for them, and they asked if I was interested in setting up a T-shirt shop to generate funds. There's now four of us who work as a collective. We drew up a union contract. The pay is good and for the first time ever I have health care, a pension, and can put a union bug on things, which is really wonderful. The thing I like most is that profits from the business—we're actually beginning to show a profit—go to an organization that I care deeply about. It was what we tried to do at the Mission Cultural Center. It extends the degree of autonomy. All during

those years I didn't give a shit what the National Endowment for the Arts said about anything I did. I think censorship of the arts is just going to get worse.

**AW** *After you were mugged at gunpoint in front of your home, you made a print about the attack called Nightmare. Despite the personal horror of the assault, the print relates it to a political cause, the government's handling of the 'drug war.'*

**JS** For everything that occurs that seems outrageous and horrible there's a bunch of complicated causes. I think that successful—and I hate the term—'political art' understands the complexities behind the issues. It doesn't just make reactionary statements.

**AW** *By reactionary you mean responsive?*

**JS** Responsive in a thoughtless manner.

**AW** *Not necessarily right wing?*

**JS** No. There's just as many left wing reactionaries—maybe more. Ten years later, the work seems a little ridiculous if it doesn't address the complexities behind the issues. After a

stuff so that we don't look like we're still making sixties posters. Political posters and community posters are so much more sophisticated now. We've made a quantum leap in thirty years. I sometimes think about making a clenched fist poster just for old times sake, to see if I could make it better.

**AW** *What are some of your particular contributions to that quantum leap?*

**JS** Blurring the line between photograph and drawing. Starting with the original photo sten-

flat, with opaque color. That's one of the advantages of the medium—the ink is so dense you can put yellow on top of black and have it read as bright yellow. But I use a lot of transparent color, glazing with color, more like traditional painting. That had not been done, but I'm starting to see transparent ink in other people's work.

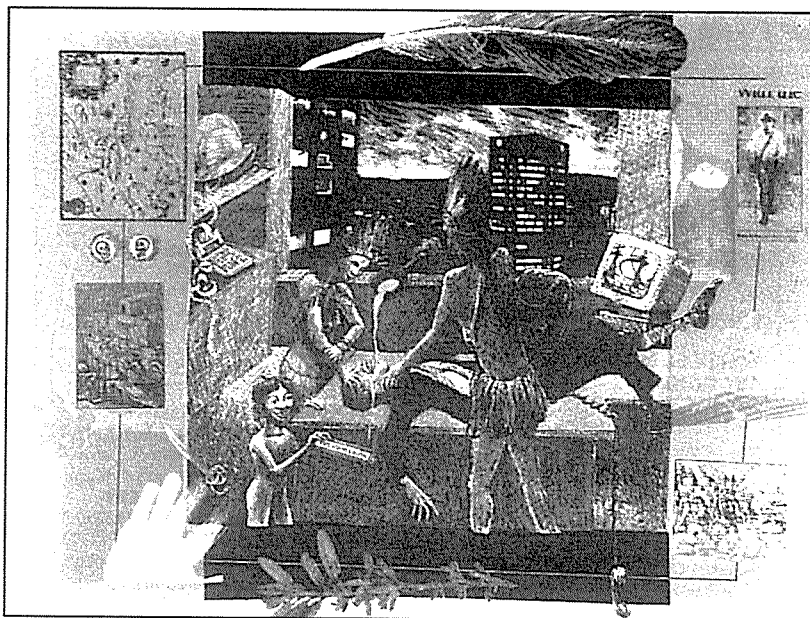
Photo stencils are a World War II offshoot, so it's pretty new stuff. It's going on hot and heavy here and there's a bunch of us who are looking at each other's things and feeding on

So I think it's logical that people would be interested in the medium.

**AW** *You've contributed to the growth of a local audience for screenprinting by teaching numerous workshops and classes. Your teaching includes four years of working with inmates at the San Francisco County Jail. How did that experience affect you?*

**JS** It was an enormously frustrating job. By the time a person gets to that institution the odds of rehabilitation are really low. You're watching the beginning

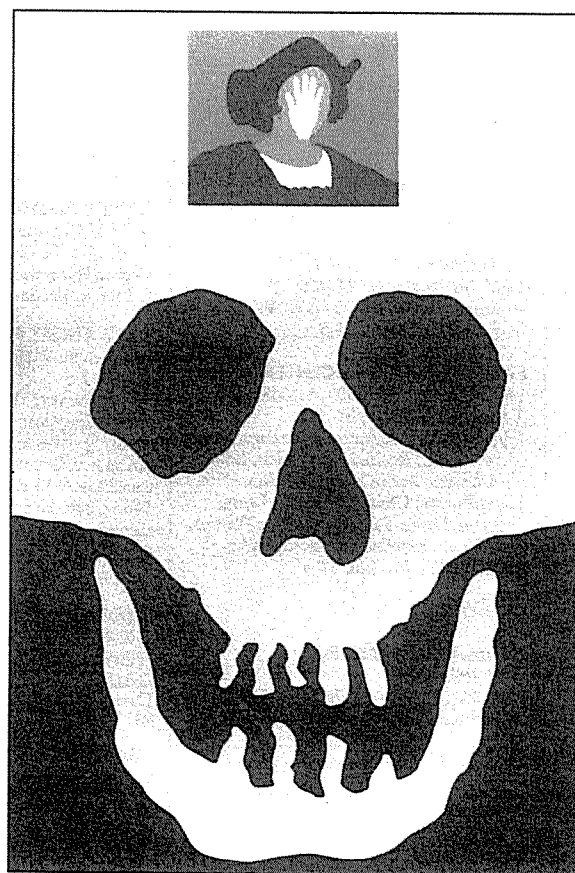
of a career of institutionalization, and the weight of that tragedy on me was enormous. Clearly art offered no alternative but it was an escape. Over and over again, inmates told me that coming to the art room was almost like being outside. That relief was probably the best thing I could offer. People get to the point in our culture where they don't see incarceration as a punishment, but it's a brutal punishment. It removes somebody and isolates them in a terrible condition, overcrowded with a bunch of other equally criminal people. It's not exactly a ticket to change.



Joe Sances, *Tax Return*, 1992, silkscreen, 22" x 30", at the Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley.



Joe Sances in his studio. (Photo: Ruth Morgan.)



Rupert Garcia, *Calavera Crystal Ball*, 1992, silkscreen, 30" x 22", at the Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley.

certain amount of time you realize that the same issues keep repeating. They just take different forms. But for artists who work the way I do, it's a responsibility to come up with new

them. I think that's a great situation for an art form. When you start to think, a guy like Andy Warhol, a screen printer, runs the risk of being one of the most important artists of the century.

look at. I get paid really well for what I do and not necessarily all the time financially.

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

# Blame It on Columbus

*Beyond 1992* at the Berkeley Art Center

BY BRUNO FAZZOLARI

During the course of this year just about every sector of the art and media worlds will perform a ritual homage and analysis of the Columbus Quincentennial. That such institutions as *Newsweek* have raised doubts about the heroic stature of Columbus indicates more about the current cultural climate than about Columbus himself, however. To take an example from *Beyond 1992*, currently at the Berkeley Art Center, the image of Columbus readily calls forth the man and his entire colonial legacy, but it is unlikely that the man himself would recognize his own likeness, for the portrait we know was produced long after his death.

*Beyond 1992* is a portfolio of serigraphs by ten artists which deals in a variety of ways with Columbus's actions and their effects on the present. In addition, the accompanying show includes other works by the artists which address these themes. With few exceptions, it consists primarily of didactic art which situates the Columbus Quincentennial within an arena of signs whose values and meanings are brought into the flux of doubt; images of Columbus, conquistadores, gold and severed hands reappear in an attempt to change their meanings as signs. The image of Columbus Heroic Explorer emerges as the image of Columbus Cruel Oppressor, while the range of ideas runs from the subtle to the ironic to something that verges on propagandistic.

Jos Sances's *Tax Return* is a reorganization of historical images cast in the medium of comic book color dots, in which a pair of Tainós pour molten gold down the throat of a man in a business suit. The scene is set in his contemporary

office, as Spanish ships appear on the monitor of his computer. Sances suggests that the past, which haunts the present in the form of white exploitation, also haunts the present in the form of an injustice which will be punished. Enrique Chagoya offers a similar mix of present and past in *What Appropriation Has Given Me*, in which a collection of hands, one sleeved in business suit, another the hand of Mickey Mouse, reach for corn chips named for Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera and then dip them in blood.

Rupert Garcia's *Calavera Crystal Ball* is a rather heavy-handed piece which exemplifies the less interesting aspects of the show. The blatant lack of ambiguity of the Calavera (Don't Touch! Poison!) fails to evoke the involved and difficult threads of history, politics and personal experience which find more sensitive treatment in prints by some of the other artists here, notably Mildred Howard. Garcia, along with Doug Minkler and Daniel Galvez, seems satisfied to portray the Oppressor in the lurid light of his cruelty. Yet their works are so concerned with making a case that they fail to range beyond the factual and into the more emotional and less defined area of the Quincentennial and its own ramifications.

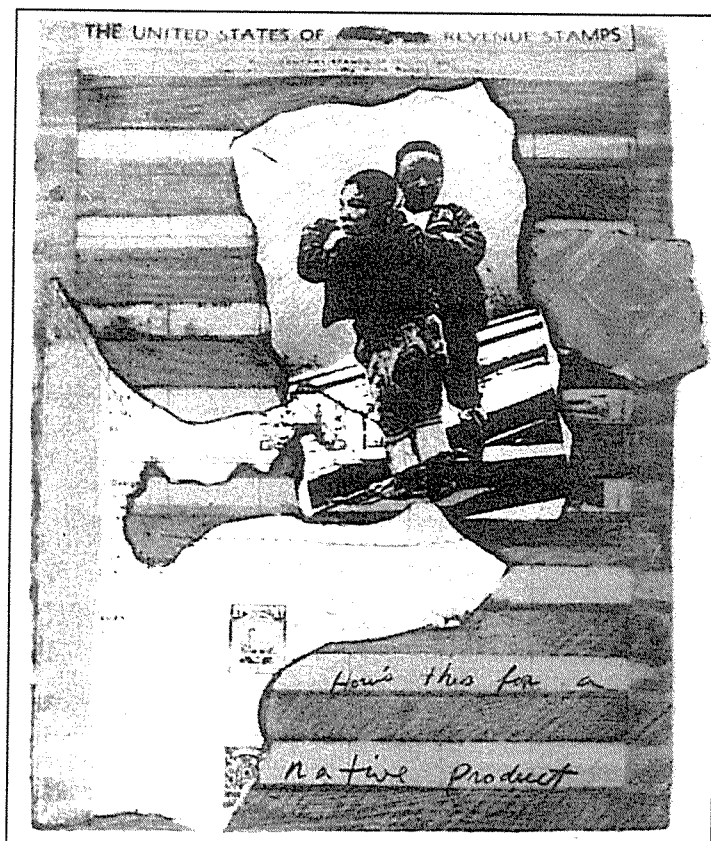
Kate Delos is the only artist to eschew the collaging of historical images. Her *All Hands Here Now* is an excited composition of many colors of hands, framed within a field of colors which suggest anticipation and possibility. The print underscores the absence of any similar work and raises an interesting issue: namely, because didactic art is a tradition which finds its Western roots in the Catholic church, another force of colonization and oppression, it is curious that few of these artists have sought to push beyond it.

*Beyond 1992* through June 7 at the Berkeley Art Center, Live Oak Park, 1275 Walnut St., Berkeley.

Bruno Fazzolari is a painter, writer and a former managing editor of the *Berkeley Fiction Review*.



Enrique Chagoya, *What Appropriation Has Given Me*, 1992, silkscreen, 30" x 22", at the Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley.



Mildred Howard, *The Last Train from Dixie*, 1992, silkscreen, 30" x 22", at the Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley.



Doug Minkler, *The Tradition Continues*, 1992, silkscreen, 22" x 30", at the Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley.

## A conversation with Jos Sances

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

Art historian Tim Drescher tells the story, when Jos Sances moved to the Bay Area in 1981 rumors of his screenprinting talents spread quickly through the community poster movement. Sances, whose politics were radicalized by the Vietnam War and whose skills were sharpened by work in commercial print shops, found a place among the activists at the Mission Cultural Center. He and Rene Castro co-founded Mission Grafica, a community print shop, where Sances worked until he set

up his own shop in Berkeley in 1988.

**Artweek** Aluminum Harvesters, *one of the prints you made for the Berkeley Art Center portfolio, reminded me of both van Gogh's drawing style and his paintings of peasants.*

**Jos Sances** It actually is from Millet's *Sower*. I did a series of prints that were remakes of pre-Impressionist art. In the original works, the artists were showing the shock of the Industrial Revolution. Overnight, society turned from

agricultural to industrial, and urban problems began. Looking at those pictures of peasants, their morbid condition looked very much to me like people now, as the industrial age gives way to the information age. The sower sowing fields that he won't profit from was easy to translate into a person with a shopping cart collecting aluminum cans to make some kind of bare subsistence. There's heroic quality in Millet's piece that I tried to get. It's a heroic act to struggle against an environment that's overwhelmingly



# A conversation with Toi Hoang

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

**T**oi 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

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, banded 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.

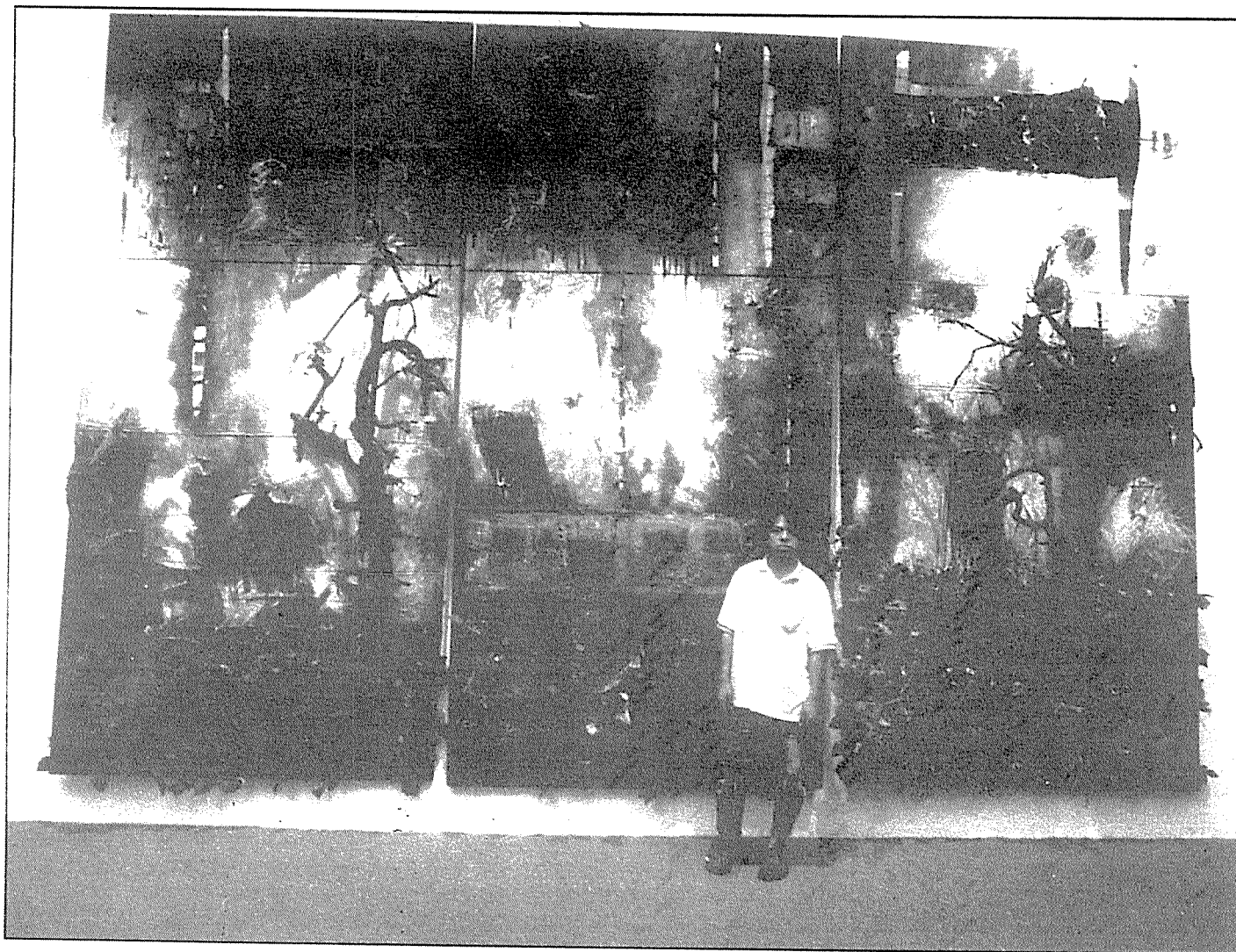
Meredith Tromble is a painter who also does art commentary for KQED-FM.

## From the Studio

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



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