

Take My Breath Away

The Vietnamese-born Danish artist, Danh Vō, was the latest artist to exhibit at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's iconic open rotunda in New York. The nautilus shell spiral design allows spaces to flow freely into one another while allowing for several levels to be seen simultaneously.

Take My Breath Away showed works created over the past fifteen years including sculptures, installations, photographs and works on paper. It was the first comprehensive survey of the artist's work in the United States to date.

Vō is an artist who explores how global forces including war, religion, colonialism and capitalism mould individual and collective identity. Recurrently, his personal history is explored in conjunction with the historical events that shaped it. These intertwined narratives and histories are vessels, currencies and readymade materials. The artist and his team conduct extensive research on the deep history of objects and the complexities surrounding the procurement of such historically charged entities, as well as fabrication techniques for instance.

As manifest, in *Christmas (Rome), 2012 (2013)*, we see the velvet that was used to line the walls of the Vatican Museum as the backdrop for the display of religious artworks, artifacts and icons. Due to the passage of time and thus light exposure we can see the outlines of these recorded objects against the faded material. These ghostly silhouettes, away from their original context, still trace their origin and time itself. Religious devotion and the complex global imprint of the Catholic faith are recurring references for the artist, who personally was raised Catholic, but the reason is intermeshed with Vietnamese history and struggle. In November 1963, after the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem, the President of the Republic of Vietnam, and his brother during a CIA-backed coup d'état and a major turning point in the Vietnam War, the artist's family converted to Catholicism as an act of protest. The act of acquiring itself is a key trope for the artist and the fact that an individual has the opportunity to acquire objects of immense historical significance.



Christmas (Rome), 2012 (2013). Photo: David Heald

Lot 20. Two Kennedy Administration Cabinet Room Chairs (2013), are created from two Chippendale Chairs that furnished The White House Cabinet Room during the Kennedy Administration. These chairs were gifted to the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, by John F. Kennedy's wife after her husband's assassination and were then later sold by McNamara's second wife. These changes in ownership and the often personal reasons for them are of fascination to the artist, who due to such reasons had the opportunity to acquire them at auction. The chain of ownership takes on a new form; as an artwork. These once functional objects are taken apart and rendered almost unrecognisable as abstract sculptures. The artist has, quite literally here, taken apart the seat of power yet due to their very existence they are still resonant with the charged histories of the two men who were instrumental in the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War which changed the course of the artist's life.



Lot 20. Two Kennedy Administration Cabinet Room Chairs (2013). Photo: David Heald

During a residency in Paris in 2009, the artist was struck by a photograph in the New York Times from 1973 documenting the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. The photograph showed this event taking place within the grand setting of the Hôtel Majestic in Paris in a room with a large conference table with three chandeliers over it. The hotel was used by the French Foreign Ministry and previously by the Nazis. The agreement formally ended the Vietnam War yet was only cover for the U.S. to egress leaving the conflict still raging on behind them. The artist set out to acquire the chandeliers and his team worked on complex negotiations to acquire them when the hotel was being sold. The objects served a decorative function and thus induced a masking effect as the artist described: 'Designed to make you forget, to make you leave your sorrows behind'. The artist took his father to the grand room, who was himself struck by the place of wonder – the antithesis of the decisions made there and their repercussions. The artist used the acquired chandeliers, objects which witnessed events that changed history and the Vō family's biography, as three sculptures each in a

different configuration. The date and the time reference when the artist acquired them, adding another layer to their history.



08:03, 28.05, 2009 (2009). Photo: David Heald

Untitled (2008) is a late sixteenth century German wooden sculpture of Saint Joseph, which has been sliced into six sections to comply with the discount airline EasyJet's baggage size restrictions. The fragments are put inside such typical travel bags and suitcases. A minimalist approach to a precious and historic devotional work creating a clear and aggressive clash. An appropriation that has gone wrong, which is all too familiar in the transmission of cultural artifacts through colonial plunder and international trade. This work marks one of the first times the artist had segmented and fragmented an object, which went on to become a key and recurring trope in his artistic practice.



Untitled (2008). Photo: David Heald

We the People (2011) is a large conceptual project comprising of an exact one to one full scale replica of the Statue of Liberty. The artist realised that the statue is comprised of a hollow shell, thin copper that is only approximately 2.4 millimetres thick, around an internal support structure inside. This project was forged in a factory in Shanghai using the same repoussé technique used to hammer the copper into forms by hand by the original French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi and his studio. Unlike the original, it will never be a unified whole but rather over three hundred separate pieces or fragments often exposing the internal support structures beneath through their display.

The pieces have been spread around the world as and when they have been exhibited and ultimately acquired, such as by public and private collections. They are also free to be sold on (they are often seen at public auctions for instance) and such changes in ownership engenders a sense of fluidity, which combined with its fragility questions this universal icon and cultural symbol whose image is stronger and more powerful than its physical materiality. *We the People* points to the statue's wide and complex currency and how its multiplex of potential meanings is circulated in the world – not least as a symbol of immigration, sanctuary, democracy, identity and abstract notions of freedom for so many past and present. All of which are especially potent for the artist and his family as, imbued with their biography, they fled the trauma of postwar Vietnam in 1979 on a handmade boat headed to the United States. They never made it there as their vessel was rescued by a Danish shipping freighter. They were brought to Denmark where they were granted political asylum and citizenship. This resonates even more as this exhibition was the first retrospective of the artist's work in the United States and specifically in New York. The title, again fragmented, is the first three words from the Declaration of Independence. In this exhibition, one is confronted by a selection of pieces and re-examines them as familiar yet unfamiliar debris-like fragments. Do they echo the sonnet 'Ozymandias' like relics of a past empire?



We the People (Details) (2011) Photo: David Heald

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