



In the Vietnamese-American artist's work, lo-fi science experiments enact a perpetual transfiguration of matter, catalyzing entropy with the elemental forces of gravity, smoke, water and fire. Emerging from the close-up world of her photographs, her newest video opens up the angle, embarking on a journey through the sprawling spaces of Ho Chi Minh City.



There's a funny paradox at the heart of Diane Severin Nguyen's photographs: they seem custom-made to confound language while inadvertently generating an excess of it. It's a conundrum I experience firsthand as I write this, vainly tethering words to her diminutive portals as they shift indifferently between states of matter. Not quite solid, liquid, nor gaseous—or at times simultaneously all three—they seep, bubble and ooze in a type of primordial hypostasis, a perpetual becoming that flirts with form while recoiling from its exigencies. One thing is certain: they're far too concrete to be described as abstract. Nevertheless, they remain slippery and resistant to easy taxonomy, only hinting at origins that might be more rooted in the mundane than the obscure. Here, fibers filtered by light could just be a pile of shed hair; there, alien flesh in an amniotic sack remnants of the catch of the day; a gelatinous membrane splits open to reveal a toothy, latticed smile.

"So much of it has to do with failure," notes Nguyen with a laugh. "Probably more than I should admit to!" "Contingency" might be another word for it, as her visual alchemy departs from the stuff that surrounds us: anything and everything that we touch and handle, from the things we ingest to the currencies we circulate to the devices that mediate our unbounded global views. It is a haphazard, gluttonous mix, with no clear distinctions between the organic and the inorganic, the fleshy and the mechanical, the constructed and the found. "I'm constantly looking and searching," she notes of her process. "Searching for materials and objects that echo the state of the photograph, that are somehow inbetween a fully signified ready-made object and something that's pure substance. It's pretty intuitive—mostly an awareness that certain things are inherently more photographable or photogenic in a way that's unexpected. I'm very interested in the transfiguration of something through the lens."

Far from arcane, this conversion of matter unfolds as lo-fi science experiments—a blind, incessant testing within the confines of the studio. At times, Nguyen employs provisional set-ups or palm-sized sculptural assemblages; other times, she simply pits matter against matter or catalyzes its entropy with elemental forces, from the mute pressures of gravity to smoke, water and fire (napalm is a favored reactant). The resulting micro-dramas are too active and unstable to be called still lifes, although they are undoubtedly indebted to that lineage. Rather, one might think of them as minor events or, better yet, a set of tactile conditions from which an image *could* emerge—and sometimes does.

"It's about keeping all of these opposing factors concurrent," she notes of the many free radicals that converge within the frame. "But also arranging the emotional architecture of an image. I want it to be accessed on as many planes as possible and also negated just as equally. I don't know what that is except some feeling of integrity with itself...but the language kind of fails me in this sense."

This very failure might be one of the reasons why it's all too tempting to filter Nguyen's efforts through the

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DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN

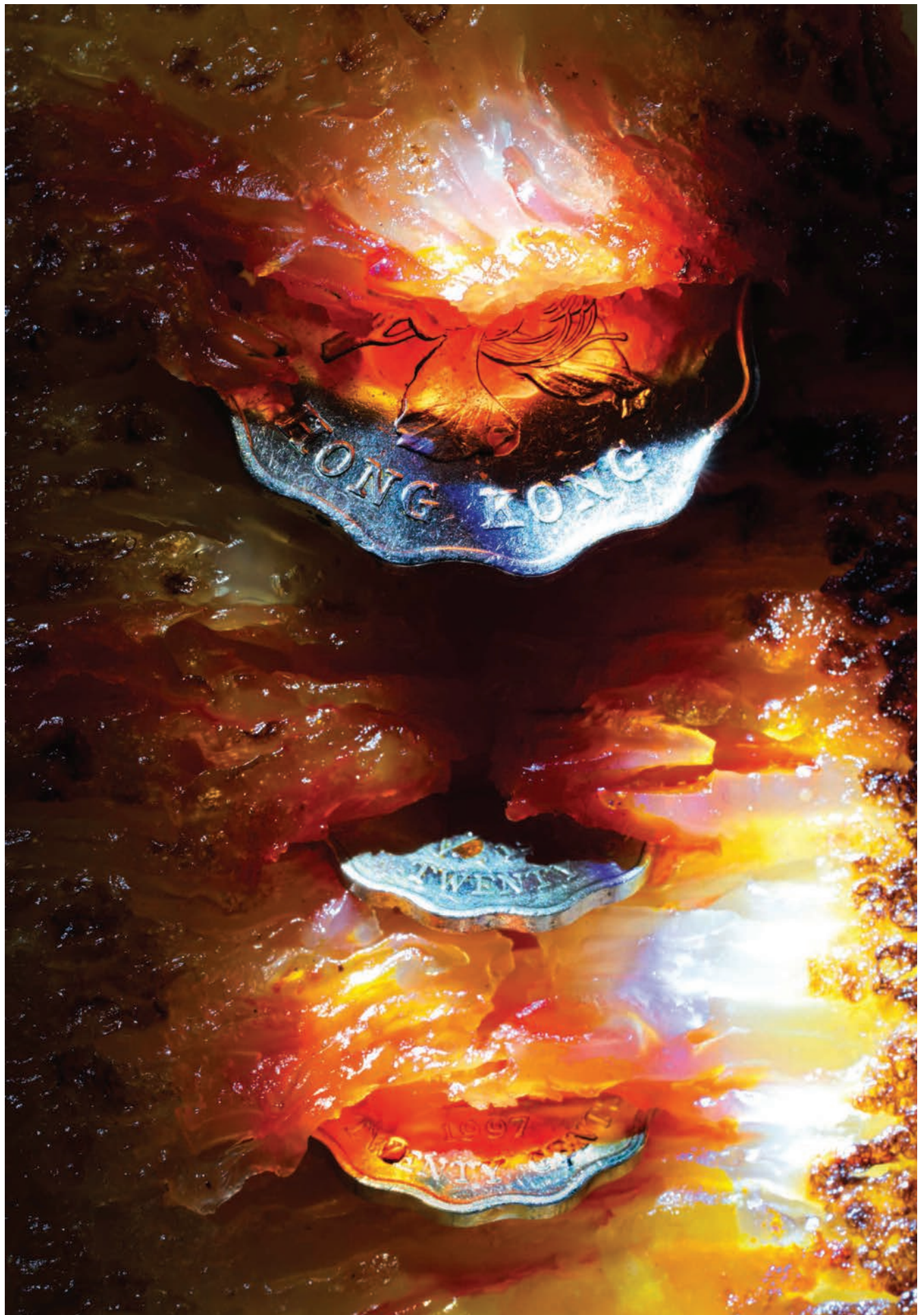
WORDS:

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critical legacy of thinkers such as Bataille and other practitioners of "*L'informe*." Her tremulous corporealities are littered with part objects as well as evocative orifices, ruptures and wounds that seem to appeal precisely to this type of primordial, pre-linguistic space. Meeting Nguyen for the first time, it becomes clear she is intimately acquainted with these discourses and their respective histories. Against the din of a raucous Frieze LA party in early 2020, our conversation weaves in and out of our favored critical theory hits, from formative texts by Hal Foster and Kaja Silverman to more obscure diatribes by Bataille and the child psychoanalyst Melanie Klein. During the exchange, it dawns on me that the textual is yet another materiality Nguyen adds to the mix—an astute inclusion that underscores her own positionality as well as the discursive parameters that have defined not just photography but the *photographic* as our favored epistemological/ontological model. "I try to be aware that I am formed by all of these French theorists and all of these inherited histories. And it's generative for my work and sanity to parse things out on a very studious level," she says. "But the practice is about trying to meld a body to some hyper-consciousness, and that's where the image comes in."

If *L'informe* does hold some use value here, it might be in simply underscoring how active Nguyen's images are. As Yves Alain Bois writes: "Nothing in it of itself, the formless has only an operational existence. It is a performative like obscene words, the violence of which derives less from semantics than from the very act of their delivery. The formless is an operation." Performativity is a key dimension that is often thematized and woven into the fabric of each photograph: filaments slowly melting in a fire, a work glove smoking with the residue of some reaction. The emphasis is always on something having been made through an unseen act that is both destructive and generative. Unruly and unpredictable, this also insists on the specificity of what we witness, a fact that reemphasizes a core maxim of Nguyen's practice: "Photography can't be abstract, it adheres to reality."

This reality principle was explored most intently in her most recent exhibition, "Reoccurring Afterlife," which was the culmination of a mini-residency in Hong Kong begun in October 2019. Originally envisioned as an exploration of the emotive qualities of the city, the project









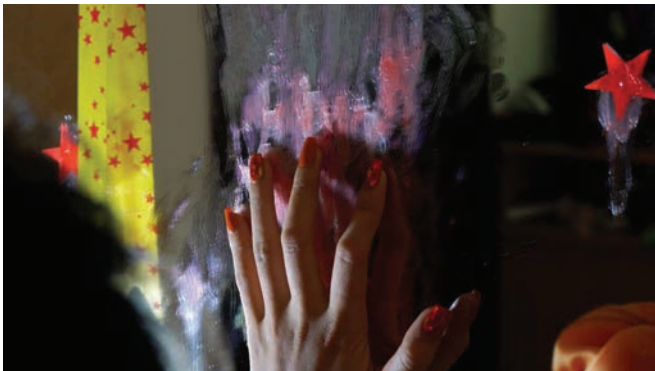












invariably came up against the socio-political as the clashes between pro-democracy protesters and the city police reached a terrible crescendo. As she recalls: “Being there, I was looking at the materiality of the protests and also constantly being bombarded by images of the confrontation that were so intense. Just seeing how teargas was photographed, or this blue pigmentation that was put in the water and seeing blood on the subway walls, or the ways architecture was being re-appropriated by the protesters.”

The resulting images are site-specific without being “site-specific.” Rather, they harness affective intensities as a marker, bearing witness to place through its charged details: the scalloped edges of coins embedded in fruity flesh, the unctuous comingling of semi-liquid jellies, the texture of melted scaffolding and paint splattered glass. Historicity is omnipresent but diffuse, a film that ionizes the air and sets it aglow. One particular arrangement features a tube surrounded by what appears to be melted tissue, like the innards of a makeshift organ that’s equal parts rococo flourish and Cronenberg nightmare. Titled *Breathing Bag*, the arrangement resonates deeply, both as a reoccurring motif in Nguyen’s work as well as an all-too-prescient dramatization of our current collective anxieties. In this way, it becomes clear that Nguyen’s micro-engagements open up onto the macro, brushing up against all the contingencies—material, historical, discursive—that determine the “I am formed by all of these inherited histories. So my practice is about trying to meld a body to some hyper-consciousness—that’s where the image comes in.”

parameters of making and consuming an image. It is a wide-ranging project that is also unexpectedly (and quite surprisingly) romantic. That much is evident in her latest undertaking, *Tyrant Star*, the video centerpiece of an upcoming installation set to debut at Art Basel Statements. Emerging from the close-up world of her photographs, the video embarks on a much more legible journey through the liminal spaces outside of Ho Chi Minh City, that unnamed expanse between the rural and urban sprawls. Successive shots trace its contours, from garbage floating on water in rhythmic undulation to a piece of Durian fruit being torn asunder. At first, this seems like a stark opposition to the photographs, a foray into the journalistic, but for Nguyen, it is simply an extension: an exploration of another side of her inheritance: “I work with all of these different materialities and I don’t name them. The video provided a space for that.”

This naming unfolds as an excess of language, from the layered voiceover soundtrack of traditional Vietnamese poetry (parts of which Nguyen translated herself) and their accompanying subtitles to zooms on signage to layered visual puns. “I filled it to the brim with words,” she stresses—a deluge that seeks to immerse us in the affective tonalities of *this* place, in a set of conflicting materials, configurations, and impulses that are indebted to a fraught history of pain, poverty and

disfiguration, but also beauty. Within it, we might also glimpse an analog for Nguyen’s photographic practice as it encounters unique sites and bodies, from children playing to an aspiring pop star.

The latter Nguyen found on YouTube and enticed to perform a re-arranged karaoke version of the ’60s boomer anthem “The Sound of Silence.” With party-light patterns dancing against her skin, she never quite crystallizes into that fixed glossy ideal, but rather emotes alongside incongruous elements that resonate one against the other to generate a weird type of synesthesia. For Nguyen, this performance captures one of the formative exchanges of her work:

“I like thinking about photography as a cover song, in that it twists the affect on a given reality.”

Diane Severin Nguyen (American, b. 1990) is an artist, photographer and filmmaker who lives and works in Los Angeles.

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SELF-PORTRAIT BY DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN

WORKS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE: TYRANT STAR (FILM STILL), 2019; IN HER TIME, 2019; INTERSECTIONAL, 2019; CHORAL OFF-SPRING, 2019; RAINDROP BODYWORK, 2019; ICON DEPRESSION, 2019; GORGEOUS INHERITOR, 2019; PROMISE TO WITNESS, 2019. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND EMPTY GALLERY, HONG KONG.

