155 DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN

TEXT BY
TODD VON AMMON

Malignant Tremor, 2019 Courtesy: Bad Reputation, Los Angeles (p. 154) Between Two Solitudes, 2019 Courtesy: Bureau, New York (p. 156)
Shallowed Spectrum, 2019 Courtesy: Bureau, New York (p. 157)

This looks like a melting tool. A drill bit has caught fire in a failed attempt to bore into a seemingly impenetrable disc. Any builder's deepest worry, that the tool will buckle under stress. Undue strain on the tool borne of misuse—the shameful error of the amateur. Closer inspection suggests that the tool bit is unfurling, exhaling into curlicues like a tightly wound roll of ribbon unbound or a paper roll coming undone as it smolders. The drill bit is a twirl of soft copper becoming limber in a bath of burning napalm; the unyielding disc is soft wax. The material referents peel away; a physiognomy of stress remains.[1]

Mechanically speaking, stress is a measure of direction. It is the force that keeps the form of the object and is not to be confused—nor correlated—with strain. Napalm is a common material in Diane Severin Nguyen's photographic stagings: a mixture of gasoline and styrofoam, napalm is like jelly—it holds together via elastic stress. Burning napalm causes the gasoline to combust, leaving the residue of caramelized plastic behind. Any delicate structure is filled with stress; disrupt a fragile object and strain occurs.

Stress in objects may signal pain within human bodies. *Co-dependent exile* depicts five colorful half-sucked lifesaver candies hanging from twine. The stress of torsion gives the twine its shape; torsion in medical science is synonymous with nauseating agony. Nguyen carefully selects the innards of each image to create a body that combines mechanical and sensual stress in equal measurements. In this sense, each photograph has organs whose shared physiological purpose is to decode one another as freely as possible.

If Nguyen's images involve language, it is one spoken at the bottom of a deep well in the dark. Far from the logocentric surface, language becomes primordial and sensuous. Dug roots, slime molds and pools of grime are seen as if they were felt. As if the optic nerve has leached away from the eyes and absorbed into the flesh, the cognitive becomes the haptic.

By working in photography, Nguyen inverts the cognitive instinct to metabolize these foreign bodies via touch, smell, or taste. The viewer must inscribe upon the image his or her own sense-memory. As if all other valves have been shut off, the multiple flows of nonverbal, uncoded data must be rubbernecked through the human visual apparatus. This is the cruelty of Nguyen's art.

The artist abhors binaries, especially those designating the organic from the inorganic. The content of the photograph is, of course, a crystallization of the artist's accumulated sense-memories and personal history. Any familiarity I have with her material choices is anecdotal and irrelevant. They were, of course, chosen, staged and lighted—and lighted often quite perfunctorily, either with a phone's flashlight or whatever incidental studio light was available.

Human psychological stress is an interesting discussion here because it is, too, the result of many different flows of intensity in the human body and in the brain. The Cartesian notion of the brain is a sort of "cooling station" for the sensations experienced in the body: a cerebral thought (or cerebral crystallization) is the end result of bodily happenings. The aching of joints and the pangs of hunger may bond with language to create a grandiose existential

longing. When the body experiences stress, it comes to resemble an assembly of cooperating life-machines and much more a locus of tension and difference.

Like a river which is just a long thread of water under stress in a certain direction, the stress of the body—of blood flow, of neural communication, of the tension holding liver tissue together—is what brings life to this assemblage of different smaller bodies with different intensities. There cerebral cortex (the site of language in humans) is where these different intensities are named, indexed and given the imprimatur of "human experience."

As Nguyen points out, the language of photography and of psychology follow very similar contours of history, which makes sense: never has humanity had such an efficient reinforcer of human hierarchies as it does with photography. Unlike traditional modes of making, the photograph can represent humans and human activity at a feverish rate. Modern psychology classifies a theory of mind to be essential for healthy social behavior. Possession of healthy theory of mind, in turn, causes sane humans to anthropomorphize non-human entities such as animals and objects. That is, we assume that non-human objects (including animals) are rational agents with beliefs and intentions. Most photographers seek to create an image upon which the viewer can inscribe his or her theory of mind.

Nguyen's photography is schizophrenic in the sense that the material signifiers tend to be out of joint with one another. The elements therein are typically deterritorialized. *Liquid Isolation* is a good example: a clear plastic bag contains a large section of chopped human hair suspended in water.[2] The vessel should really contain some aquatic specimen or a goldfish won at a carnival. The large lock of hair is stressed in every direction by the water via a slight tweak in pressure that gives the severed lock an uncanny animism which repels interpretation.

The schizophrenia of Nguyen's practice emanates from her chosen position somewhere in between objective and non-objective photographic traditions. The chosen materials are meant to decode themselves, and the environment into which they are introduced further strips them of any comfortable, intentional stance they may have originally had.

The photographer creates a machine of his or her own body, and the resulting photograph cements this bond. One could also argue that the subject of a photograph forms an assemblage with the photographic process itself. Like mind and body, the content of the photograph is composed of the cleavage between what the photographer witnessed and what has been finally inscribed upon the print.

The artist thinks of photography as a "liquid language" wherein hierarchies and value can move more freely than in more "plastic" arts. The physical surface of the photograph is a smooth space, made up solely of different energy levels manifested as color and density. It is conceptually weightless and has no plasticity. It is, however, traditionally borne of wetness: the darkroom print gains its features through various immersions in aqueous solutions. The end result of photographic development, however, is to chemically congeal a scrutable image. A uniform surface of undeveloped paper gains its definition merely through differentiation—chemicals put under strain, coaxed into a new energy state.

Stress in animals—unlike the indulgent and long-term use of it by humans—is the rapid accumulation of potential energy immediately preceding an act of survival. Like the elasticity of a drawn archery bow, stress is what gives an object its shape. In some ways, it is what keeps the material world together.

Napalm hangs in the atmosphere of Nguyen's photography: a glob of unfired napalm keeps its shape through viscous stress; a small napalm fire stays where it belongs because of the material's stickiness. A solid object may carry the wounds of prior and unseen napalm burns. It is a schizophrenic substance: protean, moldable, workable, volatile. Such is the artwork of Diane Severin Nguyen.

1. Diane Severin Nguyen, *Wilting Helix*, 2019, LightJet chromogenic print, artist frame, 15 × 10 inches (38 × 25.4 cm), Ed. of 3 + AP.
2. Diane Severin Nguyen, *Liquid Isolation*, 2019, LightJet chromogenic print, artist frame, 15 × 22.5 inches (38 × 57.15 cm), Ed. of 3 + AP.

Liquid Isolation, 2019 Courtesy: Bad Reputation, Los Angeles (pp. 158-159)

Breakthrough Sunrise, 2018-2019 Courtesy: Bureau, New York (p. 161)