

LOS ANGELES

PIPO NGUYEN-DUY
Sam Lee Gallery

PIPO NGUYEN-DUY'S "East of Eden" at Sam Lee Gallery is an exhibition of beautiful, large-format, staged color photographs that manage to be lyrical, sentimental, conceptual and narrative, all at the same time. A self-confessed response to the loss and rebirth of America's Edenic status in the post-9/11 imagination, "East of Eden" is Nguyen-duy's attempt to explore and



Pipo Nguyen-duy, *The Walk Home*, 2003

rebuild the mythos of American exceptionalism. Taking his historical cues from the Hudson River Valley School's use of the landscape to explore ideas of nationalism and optimism, Nguyen-duy presents us with landscapes that play out some of the fears, anxieties and grief in our Orange-alert consciousness.

Nguyen-duy's theatrical scenes are firmly fixed in the tradition of staged photography. Their aim is not to reinvent or question the medium, but rather to use its narrative potential to tell us the kind of stories that we need to hear. The photographs hit home because they point out something that we already know, crystallizing our more obvious fears (like terrorists in the grass, or a child witnessing an explosion at the end of the earth), but also pointing to the possibility of a path of mourning and moving on.

"East of Eden" presents an assortment of images on terrorism, the traumatic and the everyday. These staged photographs do not attempt to mimic reality, choosing instead to dwell in the theatrical world of make-believe. *Mountain Fire* evokes every disaster movie Hollywood has ever produced. *Pumpkin Field* and *Lazy Boy* are achingly beautiful landscapes that bring to mind the nature-as-enemy

genre of horror films (there's something evil in that water/pumpkin field/forest). But not all of the photographs are filmic; in fact most have painterly composition. For example, in *Marching Band*, a dozen bedraggled marching band members sit on the edge of a riverbank. Rather than marching, or even playing their instruments, they sit in somber contemplation, never more isolated than when in a crowd.

Swordsmen and *Walk Home* seem emblematic of the work's themes. In *Swordsmen*, a group of white-clad, masked fencers thrust, parry, fall, and help each other up in a snow-covered wood. They fight, but in a controlled way, with rules. It's a fantasy of benign, regulated aggression that I appreciate, one that is so laughably the opposite of the terror to which "East of Eden" responds, that I can only see it as a tongue-in-cheek, self-aware longing for a world where differences are settled in plain sight, according to a common set of rules, and with sportsman-like camaraderie. *Walk Home* is both an ending and a beginning, the proverbial walk of shame home after a one-night-stand, still clad in last night's party clothes. There is shame here, but also hope, anticipation, and excitement at the effulgent possibilities in the day ahead. Optimism in the face of ignominy, the desire for order and honor instead of chaos and disorder — Nguyen-duy presents a fantasy for us that is not quite paradise, but just east of it.

—Carrie Yury