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***Pipo Nguyen-duy* at Sam Lee Gallery**
By Carrie Paterson

In *The Garden*, Pipo Nguyen-duy seems to have discovered the temperate zone at the end of the world. His subject is the environment within thirty abandoned greenhouses located in Ohio, an important industrial center now considered part of the country's Rust Belt. Nguyen-duy's large format C-prints document the stillness that arises after dreams of progress grind to a halt; in many images, a mechanism—a type of hoist with gears and a broken chain—is seen slowly decaying overhead. The machine parts remind one of “analog” and “clockwork”—metaphors referencing past centuries' labors that can now be applied to the fate of humanity outpaced by its own growth. A junked car echoes the dwindling auto industry while oversized hay bales suggest a repurposing of agribusiness architecture and a return to small farms. In Nguyen-duy's garden, collapse is palpable.

A look at Nguyen-duy's past works will help viewers to access the ideas behind the disturbingly quiet works in this series. For several years the artist has been examining the apocalyptic through photography, an effort that could be compared to an attempt to gaze at the naked sun. The light that blinds—as well as illuminates—can shatter the eye and Nguyen-duy's central figures disappear the more we look at them, their environments swelling around the unknown. In an earlier series, *East of Eden*, Nguyen-duy often composed scenes with a solitary subject set in a gray, fallow, or dying landscape; a person, a rocking horse or La-Z-Boy was isolated in the foreground while in the distant hills, fires burned or pumpkins lay rotting. The scene in *Mountain Fire* (2002) has just one witness, a small shirtless boy with his back to the viewer, grazed by the sweet light of evening.

Poetic images are not to be trusted, Nguyen-duy seems to suggest, they reveal both our efforts to see and our longing, but not the subject of our gaze. There is a sorrow in his photographs that cannot be fully understood, for it appears to be uniquely his own. As a young boy in Vietnam who lost members of his family in the American War, Nguyen-duy survived a time period marked by some of the most iconic and traumatic photographs in history: The execution of a Viet Cong prisoner during the Tet Offensive, massacred bodies at My Lai, the effects of Napalm on Vietnamese civilians. His work returns to these sites of trauma, bringing viewers as far as their imagination and empathy allow, whether through the memory of historic images of American shame and defeat or reflection on more recent events—the aftermath of a terrorist attack, wildfires that cannot be contained or the devastation of a hurricane.

In earlier works, Nguyen-duy put considerable effort into crafting a narrative, misplacing objects in the field and directing actors on the shoot to demonstrate dismay. Images have

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included young Asian women hiking in hospital masks reminiscent of SARS, teenagers waiting on abandoned train tracks with only a battery-powered radio and an old man watering a dying lawn. The feeling is equally uncanny in *The Garden*, and just as carefully composed. An old bed with a fading mattress verges on the prophetic, placed just enough in the middle ground to be both disturbing and evocative of dreaming.

Environment disaster and the abandonment of place bring Nguyen-duy's work into the present times and within reach of the anxieties that plague us. The images of *The Garden* are nevertheless safe places at this point in history, when we still have the opportunity to turn the tide. However uninhabitable a photograph may be, it can serve as a prophetic cloak, a way of looking into the future to see what might come to pass.

Pipo Nguyen-duy: The Garden closed in October at Sam Lee Gallery, Los Angeles.

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