

Press release for exhibition

For Immediate Release: December 6, 2003

Euphrat Museum of Art

De Anza College,
21250 Stevens Creek Boulevard
Cupertino, CA 95014
(just east of Flint Center on the De Anza College campus)
408 864-8836

Art exhibition:

Closing the Distance: Binh Danh, Jim Gensheimer, Chen-Ju Pan, Soffia Saemundsdottir, Nazanin Shenasa

January 5- February 5, 2004
Closed January 19

Museum Hours: M — Th, 10-4
Open to tour groups by appointment.

Reception: Tuesday, January 20, 6-8 pm with artist presentations

Artists:

Binh Danh, Jim Gensheimer, Chen-Ju Pan, Soffia Saemundsdottir, Nazanin Shenasa

Closing the Distance presents art (sculpture, photography, and mixed media installation) by Binh Danh, Jim Gensheimer, Chen-Ju Pan, Soffia Saemundsdottir, and Nazanin Shenasa. The exhibition is about moving between one continent and another, about connections between the two locales, and how these connections change with time. It begins with a refugee story and turns to three artists' educational goals that take them abroad. The artworks and the circumstances of their creation reveal different understandings of distance in personal terms.

Closing the Distance developed from a concept of two photographers, **Binh Danh** and **Jim Gensheimer**, entitled *The Journey of Vietnamese Boat People*. Their project was to reclaim a journey that is the central experience of many Vietnamese Americans and to understand the risks people took. Since 1975, when South Vietnam came under Communist rule, some 800,000 people have left Vietnam by boat. Where they ended up often depended on winds and currents. About half were children and teenagers. After building new lives abroad, a number of survivors have returned to visit.

Binh Danh presents large black and white photos of an abandoned Vietnamese refugee camp in Malaysia, along with artifacts he gathered while exploring the island in summer 2002 with his mother. Danh was one of the boat people. He fled from Vietnam in 1978, ending up in Malaysia. This camp, where they had lived, was closed ten years ago. In his images the jungle is taking over. Boats decay in the middle of the jungle. Interior walls reveal old signage, translations, writings, and some poignant drawings of boats. Danh found records strewn about — documents, letters, testimonies, “why people escaped.” Each person had to write one of these. Now the stories were all over the floor. He found a boat record where 22 people had died and there was one survivor. While the work resonates with United States history, locally it has added importance for the growing numbers of Vietnamese Americans in the South Bay. Most were not part of this wave. Because it is too painful for some to revisit, this story is often not discussed among the generations.

Jim Gensheimer presents his compelling color South China Sea photographs. A staff reporter with the *San Jose Mercury News*, Gensheimer was sent to Thailand in 1987 to report on the Vietnamese boat people being attacked and murdered by pirates. Works on display include *Child Rescued by French Navy*, *First Meal Aboard Rescue Ship*, and the beautiful overhead view of tired sprawling bodies called *Sleep*. Gensheimer is author of the recent book *Pain and Grace, A Journey Through Vietnam*. Included in the exhibition are more recent images of life in Vietnam, taken on six trips he made to Vietnam between 1989 and 2000. “The oppression that caused so many Vietnamese to flee was not obvious or easily visual. Of course there was the poverty, and I photographed that.” We see everyday scenes, the lingering effects of war, how life goes on. In *Rice Harvest*, the rice stalks are caught flying magically through the air, as the work progresses on a beautiful blue-sky day. While Vietnam is the overt subject, the images can relate to diverse types of catastrophe and recovery in other parts of the world — such as the recent wildfires in Southern California. Loss. Raw emotions. Courage. Endurance.

Nazanin Shenasa's installation *The Mystics Have Fled the Garden* is composed of vines, dyed silk chiffon, and heat transfer of digital images on silk. She created it after a visit she made to Iran in 1995, in the middle of her graduate education. She had gone looking for the metaphorical gardens she had heard about growing up, but couldn't find them. Her parents came to the U.S. from Iran in the mid '60s. Shenasa visited Iran as a child. She read Iranian poetry and viewed Persian miniatures. To her, the garden is a sacred space, representing a state of bliss. Time is suspended. Her metaphorical gardens contain the silk and dye from her past, yet look to the future by incorporating computer imagery, CAD techniques, and video. Much of Shenasa's work is on a spiritual level, related to her bicultural life, trying to hold on to some Persian culture, but also understanding that culture is always changing. What her parents remember of Iran does not exist now. Her work in progress *Foreign Relations*, (heat transfer on silk) grew from a press article she read on the Internet in September with the U.S. giving Iran an

October 31 deadline for compliance regarding nuclear weapons. She read negative language on both sides. Combining figures and text in the artwork, she alludes to the question, "What would our ancestors think about this state of affairs?" These small wall pieces are studies for a future textile installation.

Chen-Ju Pan's artworks are large fantasy boats, one on the order of 8'x14'x17', made of mild steel, poplar, and white transparent fabric. She grew up along the scenic Eastern shore of Taiwan and always dreamed of venturing into the vast ocean, embarking on journeys into the unknown. Then in 1994 she came to the U.S. to study art. In time, she chose to build art kayaks, efficient at sea, an extension of her body, through which she could explore places where she is free of restriction and stereotype. Growing up in Taiwan, Pan understood her expected gender role: obedient daughter, then caring wife, then loving mother. The kayak is a means to escape, to embark on a journey into womanhood, a tool of empowerment, enabling her to explore new areas. She works with steel and wood, which are rigid, require some exertion, and signal her determination. It could be ironic that Pan uses fabric in her sculptures, an element of fragility, and at the same time builds suits of armor for protection, strength. Yet this strength isn't physical, but the acquiring of self-knowledge that allows one to face head-on the future journeys in life. In recent years Pan has returned to Taiwan, but now as an exhibiting artist.

Soffia Saemundsdottir came from Iceland to study at Mills College in Oakland, has since returned, and is planning a trip back to California. She creates large bold charcoal drawings, such as 9'x13'. "In the drawings I have a feeling that I am the traveler out in the unknown and maybe responding to the place where I was, California. I traveled a lot there but of course I was also at a new place in a city where everything was new and maybe frightening." The drawings in the exhibition were done on site over a week's time or so. "I do them mostly over a night or two with loud music, in my own world. In the beginning they were fairly small but I kept on adding paper and the drawing spread out to the wall. This paper was the biggest I could get, though the paper never seems big enough. In my paintings I am more narrative where so-called travelers, odd figures with wings, are on an ongoing journey in a landscape more symbolic than real." Saemundsdottir recently won a Joan Mitchell award, with a stipend that will give her the freedom for more journeys. "It is interesting now that I am back in Iceland my paintings seem to be so smooth and bright so I am curious to see where my drawing will lead me."

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Call Jan Rindfleisch 408-864-8836 for more information.