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DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN

Ophelia Lai, 'Features: Diane Severin Nguyen,' *ArtAsiaPacific*, 120, Sep/Oct 2020, p.60-61

DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN, *Tyrant Star*, 2019, stills from single-channel video with color and sound: 15 min 50 sec. Courtesy the artist and Bureau, New York.

DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN

A bloated plastic bag tied off with red tape expands and contracts—gulping breaths that disturb its sloshing contents and rustle the leafy surroundings. The film cuts to a close-up of blood-orange jelly stars, quivering within the bag's yellow, watery womb. These translucent shapes recur in Diane Severin Nguyen's *Tyrant Star* (2019), composed of three narratives that unfurl across static shots of garbage-choked landscapes, lonely domestic interiors, and a decrepit orphanage in Vietnam.

The film begins as a narrated stichomythia about separated lovers adapted from Vietnamese folk verse. The melodrama feels out of place, even absurd, set to images such as a durian being pulled slowly apart, or a VND 50,000 bill disintegrating in sinuous flames. As in Nguyen's visceral photographs of half-sucked sweets and napalm-burnt detritus, the degraded objects in *Tyrant Star* are associated with corporeal trauma. "The body is pain. I can't complain," a man intones as honey-hued slime drips in viscid streams over hacked up sugarcane.

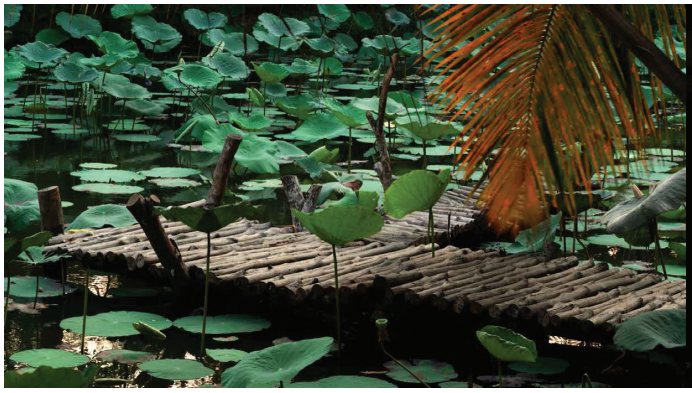
The second act consists of an aspiring YouTube star's syrupy synth-pop version of "The Sound of Silence," its original lyrics on alienation compromised by the upbeat tempo and the LED smiley faces and hearts that spin around the girl's bedroom. Only the finale's faceless, voiceless orphans—who appear partially out of frame, reduced to a pair of twitching legs in braces, a tiny body rocking like a caged animal—have any visible claim to the narratives of suffering invoked in *Tyrant Star*'s first two segments. Yet this is presumption, based on a subjective interpretation of Nguyen's divulgences and potential misdirections. Brief and inscrutably sequenced, the shots are peppered with metafictional hints, including a "Tyrant Star" sticker, signaling the work's artifice. Nguyen leverages the temporality of film, splicing scenes of staged entropy with moments of realism to further destabilize the boundary between authentic and fake. What could we know of the feeling and substance in these truncated unfoldings, when their meanings are as slippery and moldable as jelly?

OPHELIA LAI

Franklin Melendez, ‘Diane Severin Nguyen,’ Kaleidoscope, 2020

MICRO DRAMAS

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.




My heart so melancholy,
I hurt inside.


Now the husband is North. The wife, South.

VISTAS: DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN

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 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."

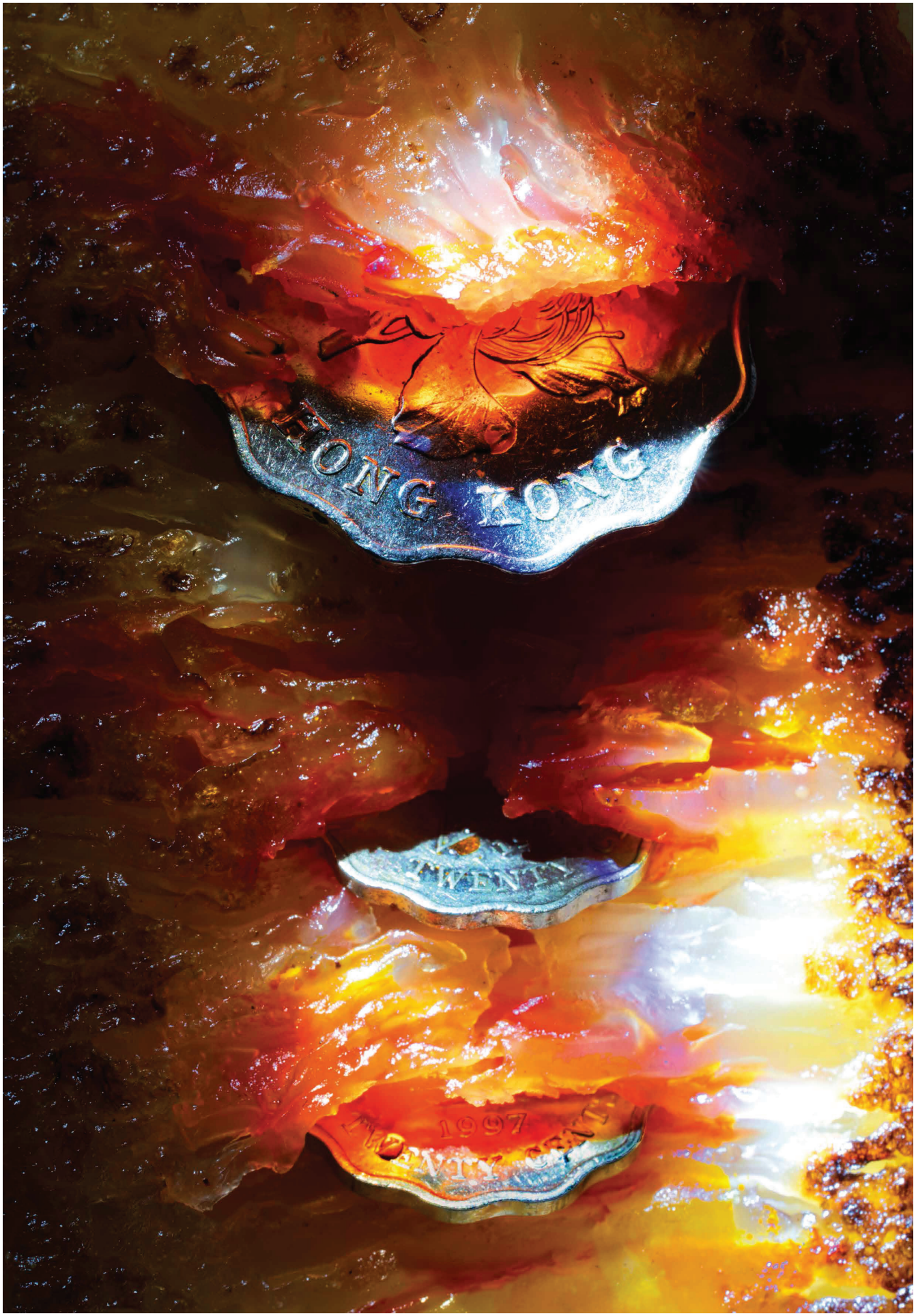
This reality principle was explored most intently in her most recent exhibition, "Reoccurring Afterlife," which was the culmination of a mini-residency in Hong Kong begun in October 2019. Originally envisioned as an exploration of the emotive qualities of the city, the project

PHOTOGRAPHY:

DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN

WORDS:

FRANKLIN MELENDEZ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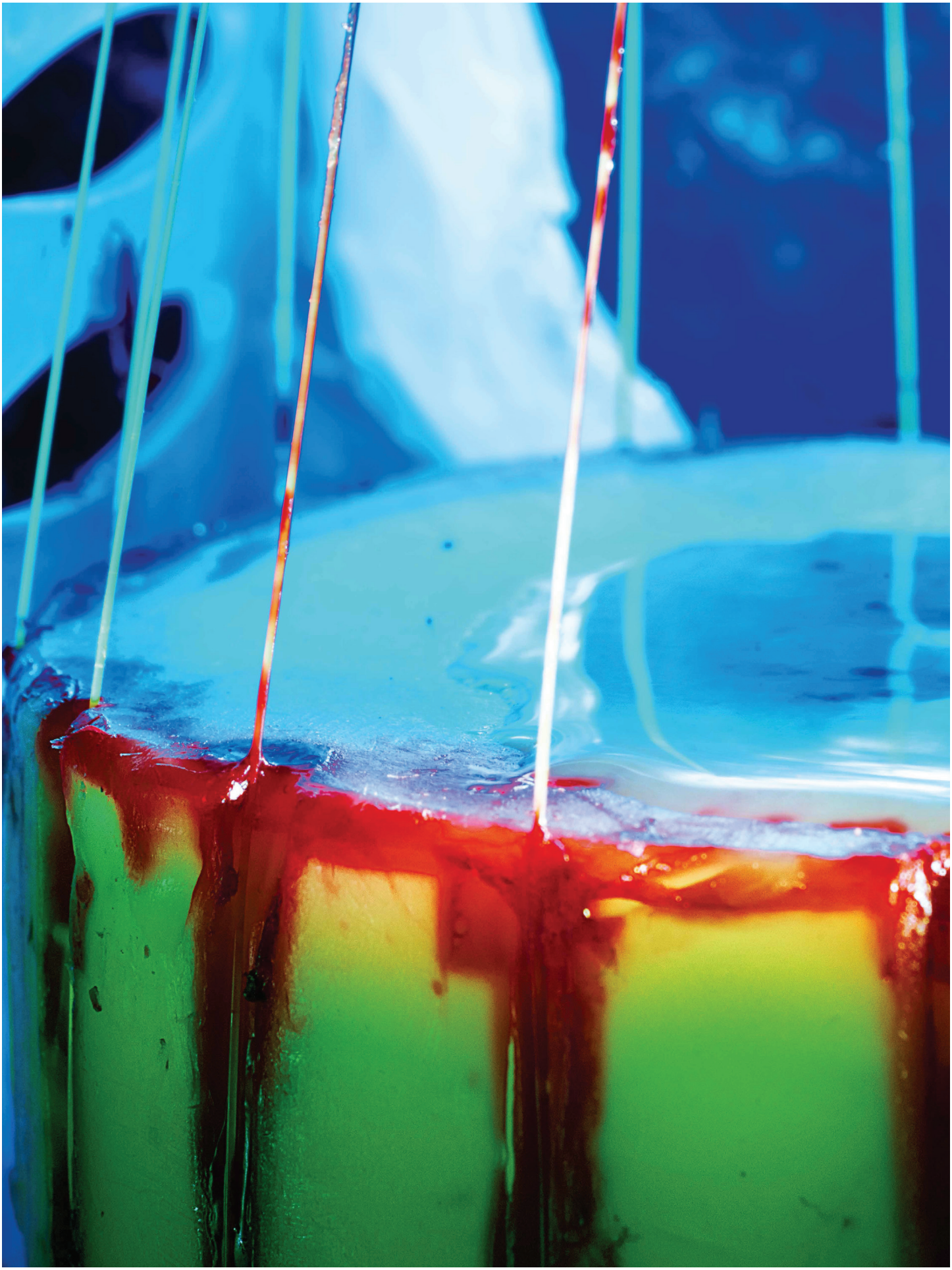
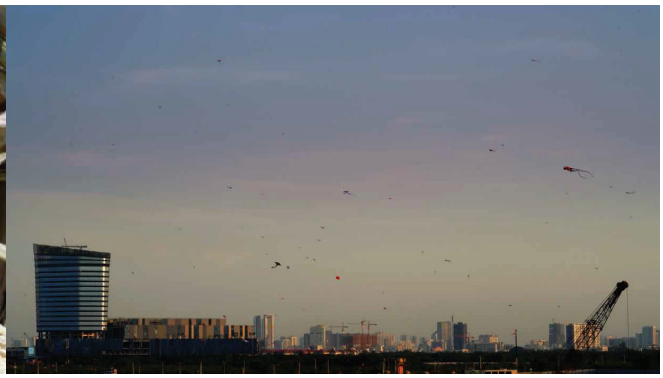
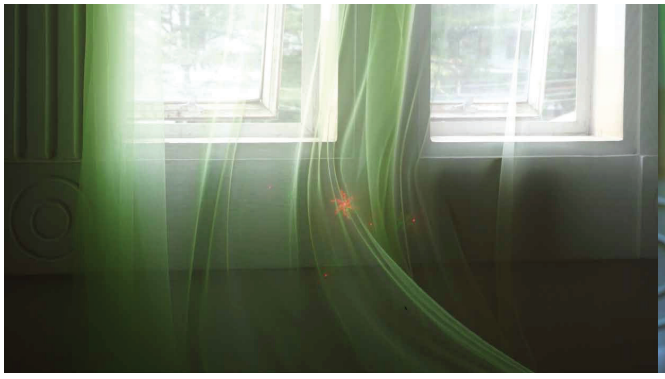
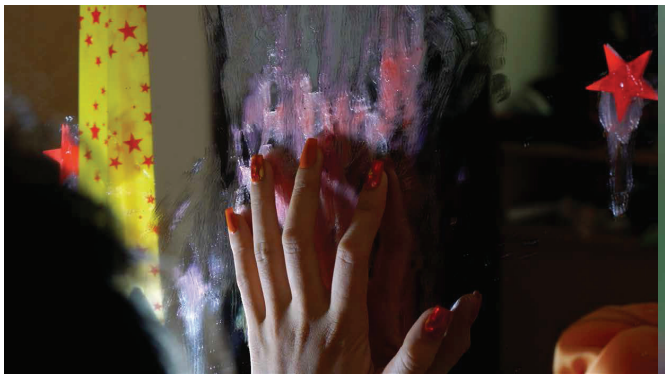



The body is pain. I can't complain.







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 parameters of making and consuming an image. It is a wide-ranging project that is also unexpectedly (and quite surprisingly) romantic. That much is be 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.

Franklin Melendez is a New York-based writer, curator and contributing editor of KALEIDOSCOPE.

SELF-PORTRAIT BY DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN

WORKS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE: *TYRANT STAR* (FILM STILLS), 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.

"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."

DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN

BY SOHRAB MOHEBBI

When we look at a photo by Diane Severin Nguyen we first register the work as abstract. the pictures are indeed hard to connect to specific things that we can recognize and identify. Further scrutiny leaves you with bits and pieces of objects or phenomena—candies, a glove, a plastic bag, coins, an orange—but also natural phenomena such as fire, water, decay, and smoke. What we see in each photograph is, on the one hand, a self-referential and idiosyncratic interiority, but, on the other, an invocation of universal feelings: pain, pleasure, aversion, discomfort, desire—and usually a combination thereof. The photos are of the arrangements and situations the artist creates in the studio and, as such, they can be considered documents of a process or still lifes. A photograph makes life still, it captures a moment, even if it later manipulates, contextualizes, and frames that moment; the photograph always pictures an absence, a death. As such, there is violence embedded in every photograph. Nguyen has closely studied the discourse and conventions of photojournalism and applies them in her studio practice —for example, how she does not use studio lights and follows the process of the material and their interactions. What could say, Nguyen is swapping "event" a la photojournalism, with process. The latter being mainly associated with artistic practice while the former is rooted in the photographic discourse and its relationship with truth.

What was once known as the photograph no longer exists (if it ever did). Instead, what we have is the *photographic*, which acknowledges the constructed nature of the photograph's claims. What you see in an image is not what the image shows. Yet photography discourse is, for the most part, built upon the photograph's truth claim and not its fables, the photograph not the photographic. The latter being the discursive apparatus that envelopes the photographic image. A different theory of photography would depart from the photographic and find the truth claim an exception. The photograph's said truth claim is validated through a discursive process that includes agents with various investments in the validity or invalidity of the claims. The validity of the photographic event is therefore contingent on the persuasive power of the producers, distributors, and interpreters of the resultant image. The event itself becomes a process, one begun at the moment a picture is made and never completed. In this scenario, the photograph's supposedly indexicality is relational; it relies on an interpretive assembly that acknowledges its relationship to a particular event/object but proceeds in many directions, from Barthes to an online vintage-sneaker shop's descriptions.

Rather than rely upon the semiotics of indexicality, Nguyen prefers Minor White's notion of equivalency and the photograph's ability to "evoke feelings about things and situations and events which for some reason or other are not or cannot be photographed" and "use the forms and shapes of objects in front of the camera for their expressive-evocative qualities." [1]

For example, Nguyen creates napalm in her studio, fires the found and sourced material, and captures the event with a camera. There is a torched red remote control and by silver fire-resistant gloves. There is an orange bleeding, there is a plastic bag knotted around a hose. Many of these images look like debris, the remnants, the aftermaths of a human apocalypse. These are images of material interactions, processes of devastation. You can enact these material and chemical reactions in the studio and photograph them. You can document how they are used in wars and publish them in print and digital magazines. Nguyen's images show that a process could invoke effects similar to an event and that both can be captured with a camera and presented as photographs. They are equally processed and rendered through lens consciousness, yet they are distinguished by violence of the operations that produce them.

Dean Kissick, 'Diane Severin Nguyen's Images Aren't What They Seem,' *Cultured Magazine*, 30 under 35 2020, November 27 2019

CULTURED

30 UNDER 35 2020

DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN'S IMAGES AREN'T WHAT THEY SEEM

DEAN KISSICK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUBREY MAYER

Filmed mostly on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City, Tyrant Star—which Diane Severin Nguyen created while enrolled in an MFA program at Bard—is a series of meticulously constructed shots of a landscape that is unnaturally alive and perpetually in motion: a garden that rustles more than it should. A plastic bag breathing in the woods. Money that burns green and violet. Nearly everything is theatrical; when you see two leaves brushing together, there's probably somebody moving them behind the scenes. Male and female voices recite a sort of magical realist love poetry to one another: "My love for you is deep-aching, endless. Tomorrow, if we should drift apart, I shall find you by this picture." The film climaxes with a Vietnamese girl in her early 20s singing a karaoke version of Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" in her house. Colored LED lights dance and spin across her, drawing symbols on her skin. A breeze blows through her hair. Nguyen found this aspiring star on YouTube and taught her the song. "I think it's interesting," she says, "to work with the inherently photographable subject"—in this case, a girl who wants so much to be a star that she is, in a sense, always posing for a camera.

When we speak, Nguyen is in Hong Kong working on a show for Empty Gallery. She's gathering material from the food markets and the streets for a new series of photographs. Her pictures, while not quite abstract (she doesn't think a photograph can ever be truly abstract), are always playing with ideas of abstraction. They're dank, abject, magical, alien mysteries. They don't look like anybody else's photographs. Often, it's very hard to tell what one's looking at. These photographs are of constructed, precarious scenarios—most of which, she says, could fit in the palm of your hand—and frequently involve a substance that degrades quickly, that's flowing away, or that's set on fire. Having set in motion a process of transformation, she then captures its turn in a photograph: not a purely sculptural form, not a sensuously painterly use of lighting, but a decisive moment.

ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MATERIAL

A conversation between Diane Severin Nguyen and Lucas Blalock.

I met Diane Severin Nguyen last August as she was passing through New York on her way back home to Los Angeles having finished the second of three summers on the MFA program at Bard College. Torbjørn Rødland, an enthusiastic advocate of Nguyen's work, had suggested we meet. Nguyen's visceral, materialist approach stayed with me. So this winter, when the 28 year-old artist was staging exhibitions of new work in both New York (at Bureau) and Los Angeles (at Bad Reputation) I was thrilled to catch up with her and talk more about her pictures, their fugitive subjects and how these two exhibitions came together.

Lucas Blalock I want to start with a general question about the impulse to make these pictures. Where do they come from?

Diane Severin Nguyen It comes out of a desire to juxtapose physical tensions and the failures of their linguistic counterparts. Sometimes words can claim entire bodies with their symbolic force, but sometimes they're nowhere near enough. Working within a non-verbal space can bring about very specific material qualities relating to touch. I work from these minute tensions, of being pressed on, pierced, pulled apart, submerged, falling, twisting, which are often related to pain. And I'm curious to see if they can be empathised with photographically, or how they can be transfigured into a different feeling.

LB The images are kind of 'grunty': they present more as sounds than as words. And this can be set in opposition to the central activity of the camera, which has been to show things clearly in order to enable one to name a thing.

DNS There's a poetic impulse in that sense to rearrange the language, because photography's claims to representation and the real should be the departure point for an artist. There's also a lot of political potential in being immersed in a medium that claims so much accuracy, which helps me think through many different texts that deconstruct essentialist approaches. For instance, my title for the show *Flesh Before Body* at Bad Reputation came from Hortense Spillers' words: before the "body" there is "flesh". Which is to say that before there's this symbolic unit there's the substance that makes it up and fills in the parameters of the symbolic unit, and how that dis-individuated life-form is what makes possible the individuated one. So I began to 'flesh out' this naming process that the camera relies on for its power, and work against its trajectory of naming bodies by starting with the nameless.

I was also thinking about the word 'impressionability' through this other text I was reading, *The Biopolitics of Feeling* by Kyla Schuller, which in one section emphasised the difference between the elastic and the plastic. When you apply force to a material that's elastic, and then you remove that pressure, it will return to its original form. When you pressurise something that's plastic, it will be permanently changed. So there are certain words that describe these physical tensions, and how they might affect consciousness.

LB Plastic strikes me as a very sculptural term, but you've folded these concerns into photography. Can you talk about the delimited space of photography in your work?

DNS I like approaching photography as a set of limitations, and also as something problematic. It forces me to begin art-making from a non-safe space, and reckon with this very violent lineage of indexicality, the pinning down of a fugitive subject in order to understand and place it. But when those tools and thought processes are exhumed or applied uselessly, we can make this Cartesian method less confident of itself. To accept the impossibility of 'knowing' takes us somewhere else, perhaps a more intimate place.

LB The connection to the fugitive subject is really apt because your material choices seem to be directly addressing this kind of pinning down. There's something about fragility or flow that comes up over and over again in your work.

DNS I think it's a lot about the provisional – almost like a material or bodily extension of 'the poor image' as proposed by Hito Steyerl, but actually enacting that in all of its precarity. Materials and bodies slip in and out of contexts, permeable to the elements but also political contexts. I try to echo materially what I find unstable about images, and I try to observe how materials are photographically disfigured, alienated from 'native' environments. I try not to rest in the place of sculptural object-making for this reason. A moment of re-birth relies on the possibility of everything shifting at once.

LB Yes, in object making, the thing is in the room with you and has to behave and remain stable, whereas the space of photography and of pictures has another set of possibilities. To me, it sounds as if you're kind of using the photograph against itself. You're talking about its history of violence enacted through this objectifying tradition of isolating and making a subject.

DNS It's like a process of essentialising. Which is problematic, but I see it everywhere around me. I guess the photograph has always been used in this way, but I see people trying to assign their identities optically. And I find this to be a dangerous space. I thought we'd worked past this, but maybe we'll never work past it.

LB There is this other way of looking at it that suggests some potential. Because we've used it as a parsing machine or an indexer, there's a way in which we're willing to read the photograph back into a bigger space as a portion of 'reality'. This is something we don't often do with objects.

DNS I think the reason why I'm not interested in claiming the sculptural labour in my work (even if I enact a certain kind of material experimentation) is because I'm too aware of the dispersion, the loss of authorship no matter how detailed the attempt – the permeability of an image. There's a certain relinquishing with photography, a constant referent to an Other. And there's a certain ownership with sculpture as an artist. I think what I'm doing is in dialogue with that dispersion, knowing that it will circulate. Even as I'm slowing it down, it's in reaction to knowing how images can be sped up, over-circulated. But I have to be on that time scale, and the moments I harness in my work are surrounded by that anxiety. They try to reference it.

LB When I look at your pictures, I'm aware of this sense of threshold, both between the interior and the exterior, and between the animate and the inanimate. It's something that has a particular resonance with the photographic. I was wondering if you could speak to this: how you see these thresholds, and if it's something that you're actively interested in?

DNS I'm always thinking about 'life' in this very big way, wondering how and why it's so unevenly designated. And photography plays a crucial role in such constructions. By working with these 'still lifes', a traditionally inanimate space, I'm allowing myself to study the bare minimum requirements for 'life' to be felt. Ultimately, I'm not interested in assigning binaries between the organic and the inorganic, or indulging in the ego of an anthroprocentric status, which just recourse to human centeredness in a particularly Western way. The suspension I try to invoke is that it could be both or neither. Somehow, when the human body is removed, we get to start more immediately from a place of 'death', which I think photography serves much better.

LB It feels less like a trade between the terms than like a membrane, as if elements are threatening to shift into the other space.

DNS Yes, that precariousness feels so inherent to the medium itself, the rapid swapping of reality and perception. And I'm very invested in having photographic terms converse with this 'language of life'. I believe that they're born out of one another. Maybe this is a very Barthesian way of approaching things.

LB Can I ask you to say a little more about that – the 'photographic language' and the 'language of life'?

DNS For instance, I'm always creating these wounds and ruptures for my photographs, this broken-ness which I think speaks to what a photograph can do to a body or to the world. But I'm also

Diane Severin Nguyen, F*lesh Before Body* (installation view), Bad Reputation, Los Angeles.

speaking to this photographic concept of a punctum, and wondering if it relies on the excavation of 'real' pain within a social space. I've depicted these evasive 'wetnesses'. I really see photography as this liquid language, literally and materially being born out of liquids. But also, socially and economically, photography is liquid in that it can shift in value very quickly. Symbolically, liquidness can represent a very female substance and that potential immersion, like within a womb space. Historically, photography's terms were developed alongside psychoanalytic concepts, Impressionistic painting, advertising, military technologies, and they continue to generate from/with these other sets of vocabularies. Within contemporary art, I really see the confluence with sculptural terminology as well. I guess I'm working with all those terms and trying to translate them materially.

LB This 'evasive wetness' you mentioned, or the way fire or burning or char act as subjects – it feels as if there are a number of ways or methods by which you get me as viewer into this pre-linguistic space. One of them seems to be describing certain kinds of chemical or physical reactions.

DNS These elemental qualities provoke or catalyse moments of becoming or un-becoming. The elements speak to pressures and their transferences into new forms. Traditional Chinese medicine has a whole logic built around these types of transformations, and there's definitely a primordial aspect to them that's pre-linguistic.

Again, it's not revealing the 'natural' that I'm interested in, but more all the adjacencies that can be triggered by a photographic moment. For instance, studying photography made during the Vietnam war is fascinating to me, an era when 35mm film cameras and toxic chemicals were mass weaponised in conjunction with one another. On one hand, we have this Western-liberal pro-peace photojournalism; on the other, we have something like napalm, which is incredibly photographable. So with the fire in my images, I recreated napalm by following an online recipe. It burns in a very specific way. It's sticky and can be spread into the shapes that I want. It lasts longer; it waits for me.

LB This makes me think about the myriad of histories you're drawing together. Photography was certainly part of the toolkit that set the scene for the secularisation of the world and the rise of our current era of scientific, technological understanding. And this of course was produced through forceful displacements. Looking at your pictures I think about these adjacent traditions that have a stake in patterns that aren't so ready to celebrate this turn: namely alchemy and science fiction. I'm wondering if either of these lineages play into your thinking?

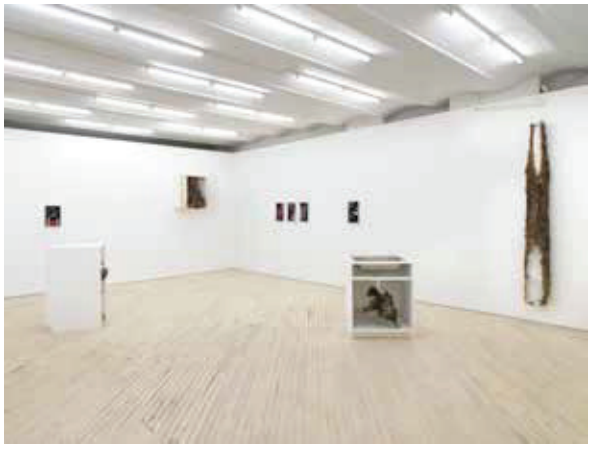
DNS I like this idea you're proposing of science fiction opposing secularisation or being displaced by it. Maybe the displacement is the part I relate to the most, the space of disaster that science fiction is always addressing, and the kind of resourcefulness that's required in those conditions. Again, with the Vietnam War, the North was at such a great material disadvantage and couldn't disseminate photographs at the same rate as Western-backed forces. There was a small agency set up by the Communists to glorify Vietnam through images, but the small number of war photographers would each receive a smuggled Russian camera and have something like two rolls of film for six months. There wasn't the privilege of 'choosing later'. So the results ended up being incredibly staged and remarkably 'beautiful', a twisting of poverty and political agenda. That sort of desperation to make an image that communicates is something I relate to deeply. And it's how I work in a sort of literal way, this grasping. It's much less rational than it should be really. It's more desperate than I'd even want to admit.

LB I relate to that a lot. So in some ways maybe the alchemical aspect is closer because it shares a thirsty quest for knowledge.

DNS It is alchemical, though I'm not sure to what end, besides the image. But it's also just me conducting bad science experiments. Everything is in the realm of amateur. Which I also find interesting in the space of photography. I find that echoed in what photography is: the accessibility of it and its amateurish qualities, its 'dilettanteness'. The thing is, if I was a really pro 'maker', I wouldn't be making photographs, so it's about what I can't do as well.

LB I understand that. It's funny though because I hear the way you're channelling this amateur quality, but there's also something really seductive about the pictures. Particularly the quality of light. There's a real fullness to them. You're not a 'Sol Lewitt / conceptual art' amateur. You're doing something else. Could you talk about that?

DNS It's the amateur imagination, an amateur expertness. There's a deep subjectivity to my work, and an emotion that I want to convey that usually has to do with the things that I can't convey, and a constant attachment to that loss, like melancholia: what can't be conveyed through a photograph. The images are



Diane Severin Nguyen, *Minor Twin Worlds* (installation view), Bureau, New York.

speaking to the fact that they can only exist under these terms and under these lighting conditions. And then without me, or me without them, there's nothing. So the lighting is also very provisional. I'll use my iPhone flashlight and I'll use anything that's around. I have an aversion to studio lights, and everything is in this small scale. I appropriate lighting in a certain sense, looking at how light creates different situations. And it becomes a personality of its own in the way that light disturbs time. Even when I use natural light, a certain time of day, it should be an in-between moment. I think it speaks to this journalistic mood that I'm working into, even though it's very staged. The mode is the capture.

LB Can you say a little bit more about this, because I love this idea of journalism in your work.

DNS I'm obviously aware of the lineage of journalism and it's probably what I've always worked against. There's some deep-seated aversion to street photography. But I can't escape it, and I realised recently that this is the very mode that I take on. What does this mean for me to set up these fugitive subjects, to recreate this model of violence and photograph it? I need to admit to myself that this is the moment that I work with. And so, the more I delve into that, the more I find it a way to speak to that directly. That mode of capturing a temporary state of being is something that photography can do really well.

LB This is all coming through very clearly: the encounter in terms of subject and also in terms of picturing trauma, the sense of possibility in the provisional, and the passing ability to see. One of the things that I thought a lot about in your show at Bureau was the tension in the work between the seductive and the repulsive. There are things that actually feel traumatic – even forensic moments. But then there are other pictures where there's much more of an invitation. I started to think about this group of situations as elements from a kind of nature film, in your attempt to capture this greater thing, a spanning from something that's beautiful and what we might see, in the natural order, as grotesque.

DNS I think that there are these different moments of propaganda and emotionality that I'm trying to express. And it comes through in the actual installation of the images, where I worked more poetically than, say, essayistically. The way that I view a body of work holds this concurrent repulsion and beauty and different levels of accessibilities. I don't really make these distinct series in a traditionally photographic way, but view the body of work as an actual *body* and part of a larger body. But I would say that most of the emotionality comes from trying to contain all the life within one image. Each image can operate on a really individual level.

LB One of the things that 'drives them home' is this sense of the irreversible: that though these objects themselves might not easily show what they are, it's evident that the processes they're going through can't be fixed.

DNS You asked earlier about the science fiction and I wouldn't say that my work is about any lived past or any lived future. A future is tethered to a narrative progress, which I'm really not interested in. But I do think a lot about the concept of the future of trauma and what happens during and after an event. Trauma, and how it's rendered as an image that reoccurs in this tension that I've spoken about between the material and immaterial, this ordinary and potential moment – all those things add up to this kind of irreversibility. Also, at the core of my work is a deep desire to de-essentialise everything; to not let anything be trapped by someone else's knowledge of it. So that irreversibility speaks to there being no state of purity to return to. That's what I'm into, the non-purity.

LB The way you just described it makes me think of the tradition of vanitas. Because in a sense it's a still-life practice you're working through and I'm curious to read the images as still lifes engaging questions of mortality or passing. I mean a vanitas that's denatured, pre-linguistic, more sensory than symbolic.

DNS They're very self-portraity in a lot of ways. They're more in that tradition than anything. They're making active lives. I do get asked if I work in the lineage of still life and I would say that I'm only working from that to understand something else.

LB Even asking if it's still life doesn't feel like a good way of approaching it.

DNS The more I think about that term, the more I think about how it has this political relevance: what does it mean to have a still life?

LB Initially it was a presentation of wealth and painterly acumen. I think a lot of the things you've been talking about are in some ways in direct opposition to this tradition.

DNS But it is nice when things get condensed into a moment of stillness. When new changes happen, with me embracing the distance, or holding on to a physical tension that's provoked by distance from the thing itself. That's all within that vocabulary.

LB I think that this whole idea of the provisional that you're bringing into your photography makes it so that the stillness is actually achieved in the picture making, which is different from still life. Still life will kind of stay there, whereas this is an interruption of flows of various speeds. It feels very central to the work that something is coming unglued.

DNS I think the touch of the pictures reveals a certain force that's applied by me, the artist, in order to create this still-life. Which hopefully brings their stability into question, and also my intentions as an arranger. To me it's a way of holding two positions at once - as a deconstructive critic of the apparatus but also as a highly subjective human artist.

LB You have two exhibitions up right now, one at Bad Reputation in Los Angeles, and a two-person with Brandon Ndife here in New York at Bureau. Are these two projects part of a body of work or do they feel separate for you?

DNS They were instigated by the installation requirements and conditions, by these two different spaces. I thought around those things. Obviously, it was interesting showing with Brandon because there's this sort of content forwardness – his work also is also quite photographic in its stilling of things.

With Bad Reputation I installed a circular window in the room, which is very small. There's a more immediate relationship to the body and I felt I could invoke through that. I'd say that they're an ongoing set – the images are part of a larger set of terms and tones that I'm piecing together before an exhibition.

LB It was interesting to see your work shown with an object maker, since your photography has been in a dialogue with sculpture for the past ten or fifteen years. But I feel your take on it is quite different. It's not the photograph as object at all. It's really a proposition.

DNS Because I can so easily indulge in the sculptural, or indulge in the painterly, I can abstract to a crazy extent, playing with lighting … and then I have to stop to remind myself what is the photographic moment. And that goes back to the journalistic mode, which maybe is the essence of photography and what we've been grappling with all of these years. In the way that I'm not interested in indexing an object that I made, or found, it's about that object being pushed through the threshold of what photography is.

LB In the press release, there's an interview between you and Brandon, and one of my favorite moments in the conversation is this kind of pairing you talk about between the ordinary moment and the potential moment.

DNS Which I think is when we talk about Eastern spirituality or object-oriented ontologies. It's about this object that can be talismanic on some level. There's this sort of spirituality to this idea that we're here, now, in this body and we're everything. But at the same time, I find that to be very closely related to experiencing trauma and how you're in your body, and experiencing the feeling of being somewhere else completely. They're two sides of the same coin. Part of me is dealing with certain political questions around how a body is identified and how you can change it. I'm interested in those narratives and those dialogues.

LB I was also really interested in your exchange with Brandon on found objects. It made me wonder about your relationship to the ready-made, and to Duchamp's act as a kind of trauma – a shifting of categories or states of being.

DNS I started out with things that were much more recognisable. I was looking at the condition of the photograph within these objects, and I viewed photographs as being plagued by objecthood. But now, I don't think that as much. The barriers between an object and a subject, they're just shifting at times and it's kind of difficult to pin down an object in that way. With the ready-made, it's less about an object space and more about materiality in a cleaner sense – literally more about surface.

LB The flesh instead of the body?

DNS Exactly!

Diane Severin Nguyen is an artist who lives and works between Los Angeles and New York. Most recently, Nguyen exhibited a solo show in Los Angeles at Bad Reputation, and was part of two-person exhibitions at Bureau, New York, and Exo Exo, Paris. She will complete her MFA at Bard College at the end of 2019.

p26 *Pain Portal*, 2019, **p33** *Co-dependant exile*, 2019, **p34** *Intersectional*, 2019, **p35** *Breakthrough Sunrise*, 2019, **p36** *Malignant Tremor*, 2019, **p37** *Wilting Helix*, 2019, **p38** *Impulses in-sync*, 2019, **p39** *Colonizing Hearts*, 2019. All images courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

Todd von Ammon, ‘Diane Severin Nguyen,’ *CURA*, Issue 31, 2019, p. 154 - 161

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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.

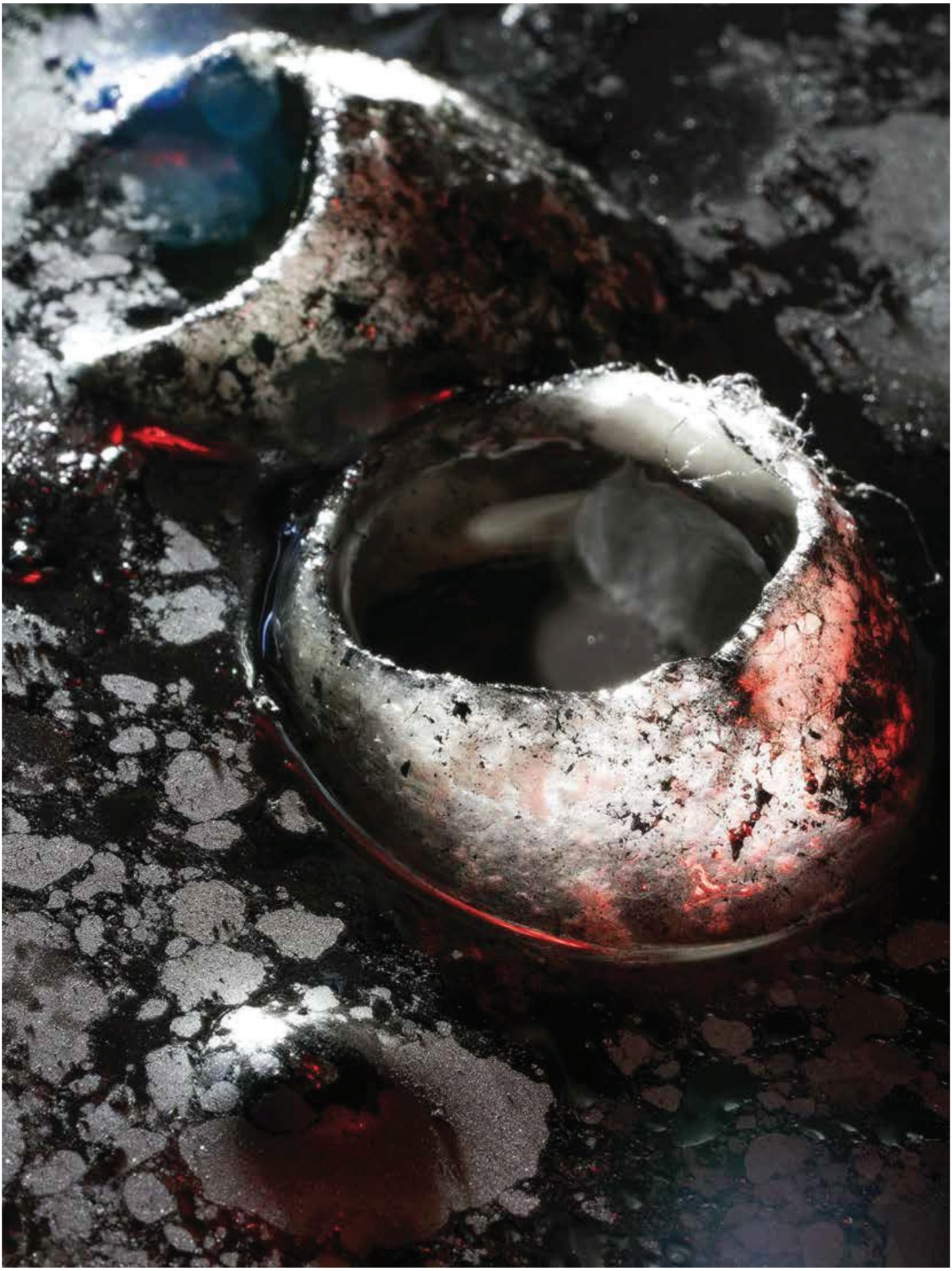
Stress in animals—unlike the indulgent and long-term use of it by humans—is the rapid accumulation of potential energy immediately preceding an act of survival. Like the elasticity of a drawn archery bow, stress is what gives an object its shape. In some ways, it is what keeps the material world together.

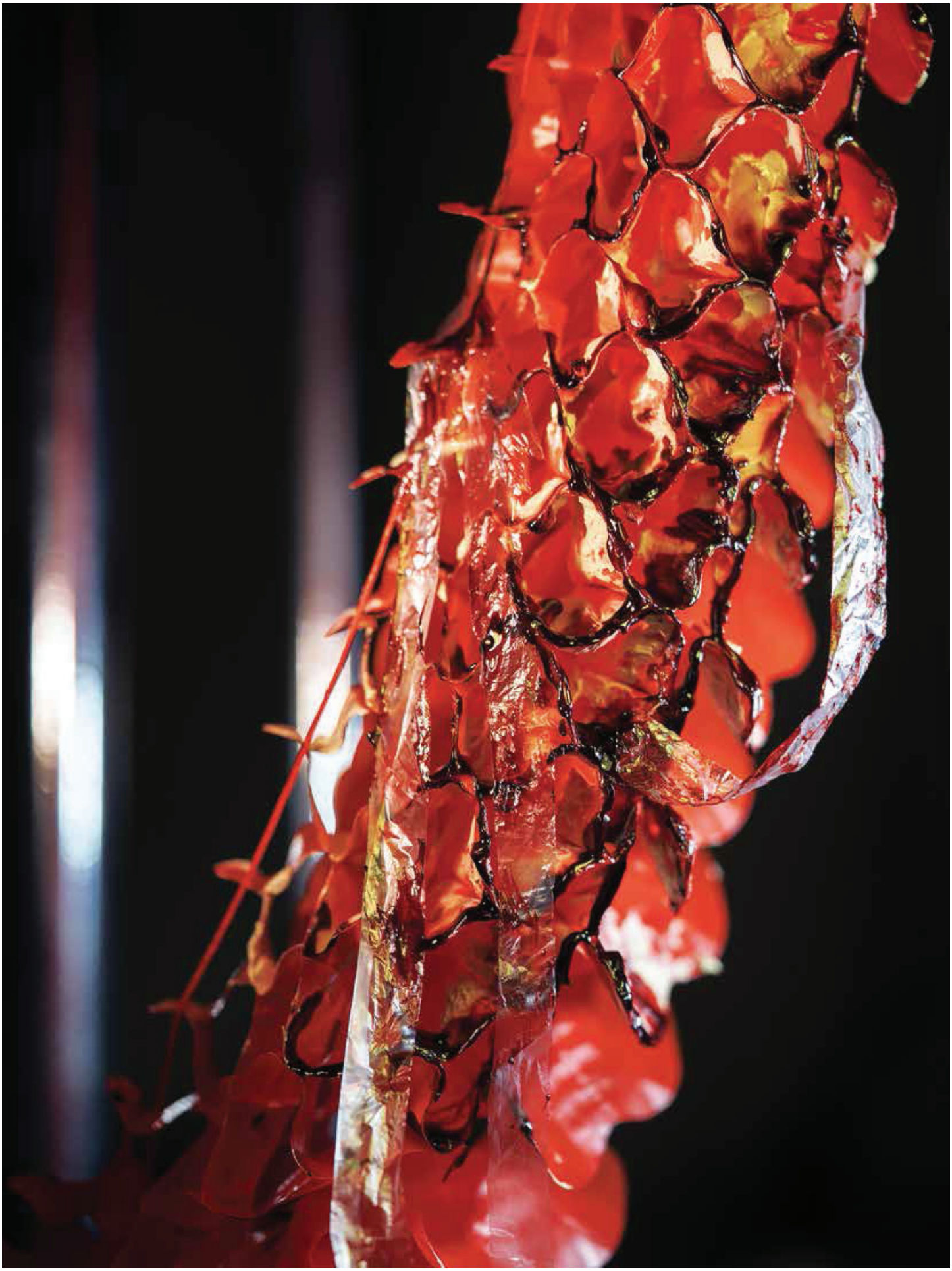
Napalm hangs in the atmosphere of Nguyen's photography: a glob of unfired napalm keeps its shape through viscous stress; a small napalm fire stays where it belongs because of the material's stickiness. A solid object may carry the wounds of prior and unseen napalm burns. It is a schizophrenic substance: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

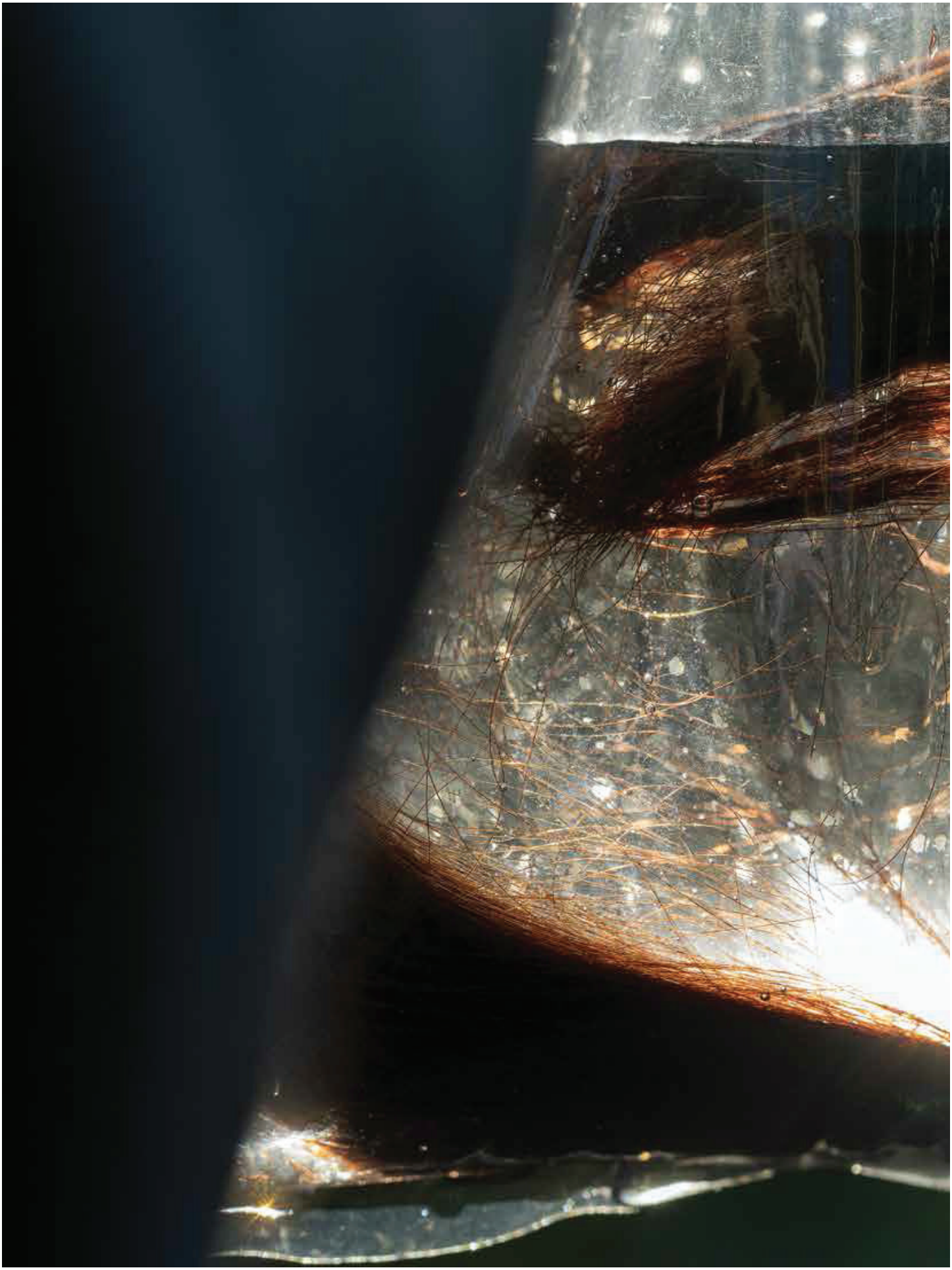
1. Diane Severin Nguyen, *Wilting Helix*, 2019, LightJet chromogenic print, artist frame, 15 × 10 inches (38 × 25.4 cm), Ed. of 3 + AP.
2. Diane Severin Nguyen, *Liquid Isolation*, 2019, LightJet chromogenic print, artist frame, 15 × 22.5 inches (38 × 57.15 cm), Ed. of 3 + AP.

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

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



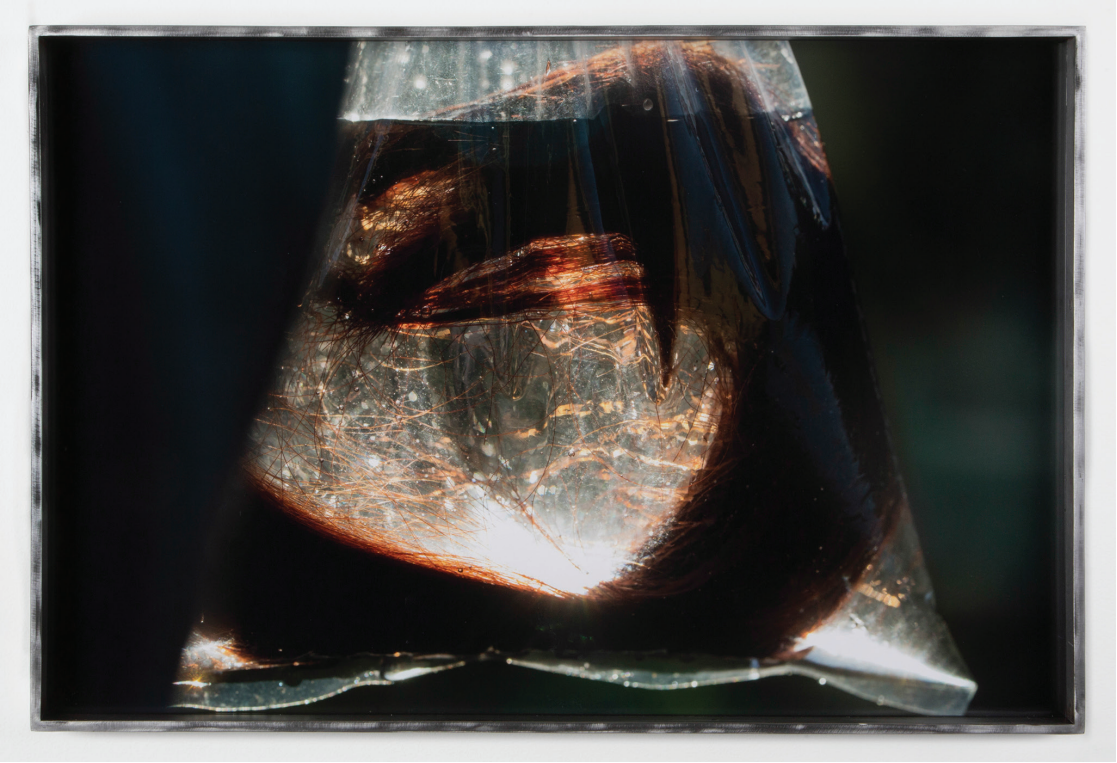




03.04.19 / EXHIBITIONS Kyle Thomas Hinton, Diane Severin Nguyen

To Dirty Them Immaculately...

Professor of French Literature Denis Hollier once wrote, "Whereas it is possible to see without being seen, it is not possible to touch without at the same time being touched. One never emerges intact from any contact." Artist Diane Severin Nguyen puts this proposition to the test with her latest photographs. eXhibitions strives to bring the conversation to the artworks, and X-TRA*'s Kyle Thomas Hinton met Nguyen at Bad Reputation in Los Angeles to discuss her show* Flesh Before Body*, on view until March 9, 2019. The following has been edited for length and clarity.*



Diane Severin Nguyen, *Liquid Isolation*, 2019. LightJet chromogenic print, artist frame, 15 x 22.5 in. Courtesy of the artist and Bad Reputation, Los Angeles. Photo: Bad Reputation.

DIANE SEVERIN NGUYEN: There are so many entry points to how I think about my work. I'm deciphering photography as symbolic language, and I'm trying to subvert the essentialism of that index. I never think that a photograph can celebrate a life, or fully contextualize a life in any way. And I believe that the attempts to assign one's entire identity in an optic way is problematic. The only thing a photograph can do, if anything, is maybe celebrate death. But it definitely cannot convey life. I think that's also why I work from the place of non-life or still life. I feel like I have to start there in order to understand how a photograph attempts that construction.

KYLE THOMAS HINTON: I'm really interested in that kind of conception. François Laruelle has this idea of a photo-fiction, where the photograph is insufficient instead of being an essential or dialectical thing, so it can never properly will truth or power to the idea of a life. The photograph can only ever be a kind of failure, in a sense, to properly demonstrate what a life might be or what a life could be.

DSN: Even in terms of emotional affect it seems like I'm rearranging failure. My process is incredibly defined by failure. Everything surrounding that one moment—to use photographic terminology, the decisive moment—is surrounded by failure. It seems like a really important dialogue to me, the things that I can't convey.

KTH: I think within your work there's a capaciousness to that failure. With regard to the materials you use, it's not that it's a celebration of inorganic over organic or vice-versa, or further claims to binary thought, it's that the object could be *both* and *neither*.

DSN: I reference a lot of subjective and photographic terminologies surrounding the image. And I like to look at the points in which they both conflate and deflate each other. It's kind of a conversional process. For instance, I often find myself making and photographing fake wounds, like in *Pain Portal* (2019). In a way, it's a reference to the punctum of a photograph, right? And if so, does the punctum emerge through some random, romantic idea of chance? Or does it have to rely on some moment of supposedly real pain within a social space? What does it mean to photograph someone's pain? Can pain be conveyed through an image? Can you be affected without having experienced the thing itself? I hope that the work can point to methods of constructing pain for consumption.

Without being grandiose, I think the most basic question I'm asking in my work is if one can be touched without having to touch. That's what we implicitly demand from images. So when I create a fake wound, I'm also questioning if pain could ever be transmitted in such an excessively symbolic way. Who can feel pain? How is that transmitted? What does it look like? I think there's something lingering in my images in that way... this idea of the capture of a suspended moment. I try to enact these things literally. There's a certain melodrama to it, but the whole point is that I've constructed everything, and the image is supposed to exude that overconstruction. It speaks to the absurdity of such an index.

Left to right: Diane Severin Nguyen, *Co-dependent exile*, 2019. LightJet chromogenic print, artist frame, 15 x 10 in. Installation view, *Flesh Before Body*, Bad Reputation, Los Angeles, January 26 – March 9, 2019. *Pain Portal*, 2019. LightJet chromogenic print, artist frame, 15 x 10 in. Courtesy of the artist and Bad Reputation, Los Angeles. Photos: Bad Reputation.

KTH: It's interesting that within your work everything is hyper-constructed, like in *Co-dependent exile* (2019) where you've tied hard candy to twine. Your hand is always in it, but simultaneously everything is indeterminate, like a quantum superposition where different states of being coexist simultaneously. There's an immanence where all potential interpretations are already there within the image. I'm also really interested in *Pain Portal* for that reason. I think something you explore with that work and throughout the show is the idea of the empathetic image, which is always its own limit...

DSN: I would say that there's a limit to it, but that the equivalence is always warped. I feel like with the hyper-textural, visceral reality that I'm creating, how

it's meant to act phenomenologically isn't supposed to feel exactly like how it felt when I was making it. The tactility happens within the translation, kind of like autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR). It's about non-catharsis. The feeling that you're getting is feeling *through* alienation. My work isn't meant to be this immersive experience, necessarily. I'm not trying to drown you in this slime and make you feel that. It's more the fact that you can't touch it. I'm interested in that distance.

KTH: Like the impossibility of a relation to the photograph?

DSN: Yeah. Again, the experience is non-cathartic. I'm interested in that state of suspension. ASMR isn't about orgasm, it's about impotence to a large extent, and the intimacy of it is based upon not having to be there, yet feeling something. It's intimacy instigated by distance. So I try to think about how physical tension is held in this way, how it takes on the gap of not being there.

KTH: So both the beauty of the work but also the dereliction is that one can only ever have a broken or improper relation to the photograph?

DSN: Because the photograph is flattened. So, what kind of new experience can one have when it's flattened? It's a transfiguration in the way that it points to a reality in between a definitive moment and a potential moment. That time-space is something I'm very interested in, because that points to a self that can be tethered materially, but at the same time is immaterial and abstracted.

KTH: So your work is both within and without the realm of optics?

DSN: There's a transference of subjectivity or an identification with the object. I think the idea of a boundless self that can identify with all things is a spiritual clarity but also motions towards an experience of trauma. You're here in your body, but then you're also somewhere else, intensely. I think about the rendering of trauma in that sense, as an image.

Left to right: Diane Severin Nguyen, *Wilting Helix*, 2019. LightJet chromogenic print, artist frame, 15 x 10 in. Installation view, *Flesh Before Body*, Bad Reputation, Los Angeles, January 26 – March 9, 2019. *Malignant tremor*, 2019. LightJet chromogenic print, artist frame, 15 x 10 in. Courtesy of the artist and Bad Reputation, Los Angeles. Photos: Bad Reputation.

KTH: So it's this traversing of space-time but it's not necessarily lived for a specific future? It just kind of *is*, precisely because the object is without time and it can move freely. If the viewer is to encounter your work knowing they can only possess a distant or an improper relation, then what does that mean for both the essence and position of the image? Historically the photograph has served to redeem a limited imaginary capacity through representation. With the image failing to represent itself, then it would be released from any presupposed doctrine or command...

DSN: While I believe that everything can be referenced within the image-plane, it's not about some holistic redemption within that space. To me, the broken relation is a precarious but somewhat eternal position. This broken-ness is something I'm implying visually without having to break or alter the physical plane of the print. I don't want an allegory built around process. This is a state of being that isn't looking for an origin point or justification in the real. I think that most people don't get to live within the faith of, "this is the real, this is the origin point, this is what happened." It's much more this constant negotiation, or a certain alertness to meanings that could shift.

KTH: Maybe it's like a plenum in physics, where a space is full of matter and infinite possibilities... This is where the conversation about the indexical image, or the thing that is represented, and the platitudes about utopia or dystopia are

interesting. I would approach your work rather in terms of atopia, or placelessness, where the thing can be everywhere precisely because it is nowhere.

DSN: I see each of the images in this show operating simultaneously as a camera, within the narratives of the material relationships. *Liquid Isolation* (2019), which images human hair suspended in a bag of water, forces the camera to admit to its own immersion, as facilitating containment and absorption, rather than being a dry, offshore observer. There's an illusion of dryness in photography, or the reliance of the camera on being dry, watching from some distance, but it's the only medium where you can actually capture what liquids look like. It can capture liquidity in exceeding detail, as well as other temporary states of being. I feel like these temporary states of being as they are "captured"—that is the violence of indexical photography because it pins down the fugitive subject. That's problematic in a way that is productive to me. I like the idea of collapsing that binary between the apparatus and the image itself, or the image's product. I think that these images come out of a documentary lineage, which is very violent. I'm working within the provisional moment, the waiting-for-something-to-happen, and I compose my images with these strategies, but to totally defunct ends.

Diane Severin Nguyen was born in 1990 in Carson, CA. She lives and works in Los Angeles. Nguyen completed her BA from Virginia Commonwealth University (2013) and is an MFA candidate at the Milton Avery School of the Arts, Bard College (2019). In addition to her current show at Bad Reputation, Nguyen is part of a two-person show at Bureau, New York.

Kyle Thomas Hinton is a writer and poet based in Los Angeles.

Owen Gwynne Vince, 'What Does the Future of Photography Look Like?,' *Another Magazine*, March 21 2018

AnOther

What Does the Future of Photography Look Like?

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY / ANOTHER LIST

Flesh Before Body Photography by Diane Severin Nguyen

MARCH 21, 2018

TEXT Owen Gwynne Vince

Some 95 million photos are shared on Instagram each day — of sunset boulevards, snow-swept mountains, and flash-lit faces. Sorting through this sea of images can become quickly overwhelming. Helpfully, London-based publisher **MACK's First Book Award**, announced annually during Photo London at Somerset House, celebrates the emerging photographers we should be training our lenses on. Attracting submissions that give voice to compelling visual stories, the winning book, announced on May 16, will be published by MACK, and the photographer's work exhibited during the event. Here we delve into the list of ten shortlisted photographers.

Flesh Before Body Photography by Diane Severin Nguyen

5. Diane Severin Nguyen

Jellies, whipped soap, punctured metal cans – Diane Severin Nguyen's *Flesh Before Body* explores, in often bizarre and uncomfortable close-ups, a world of alluring substances and materials. "I'm interested in photography as a means of material transfiguration," says Nguyen, whose work uses Vietnamese desserts and other familiar objects. For her, this is about creating "new tactilities"; while her images are about bodies, it's not the body itself on display. Instead, these materials and their odd configurations become a mystifying portal into other places. The series is really about empathy, Nguyen suggests, especially when materials are being pushed to the limits of our ability to recognise them. We're forced to get up close and personal.