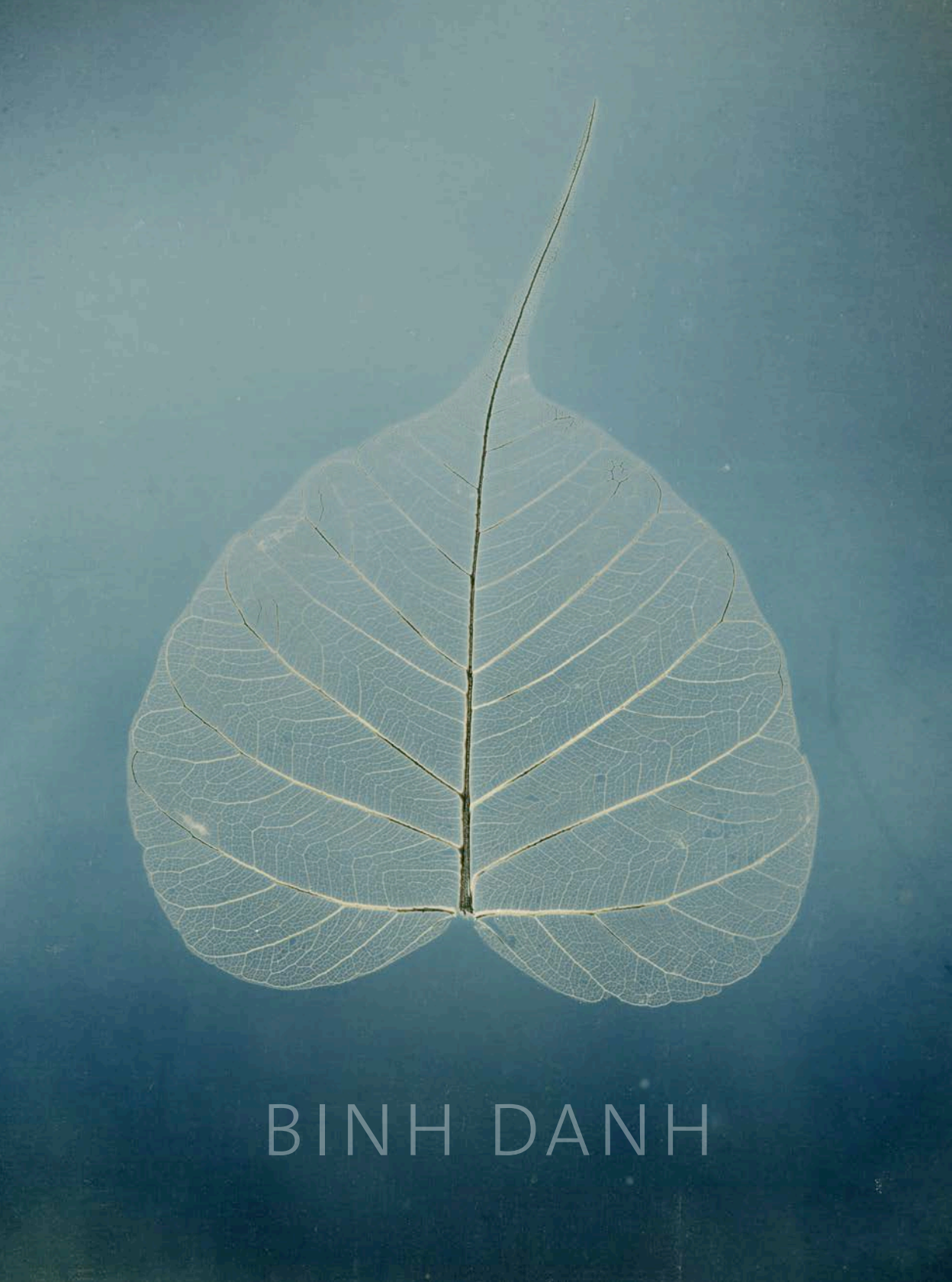
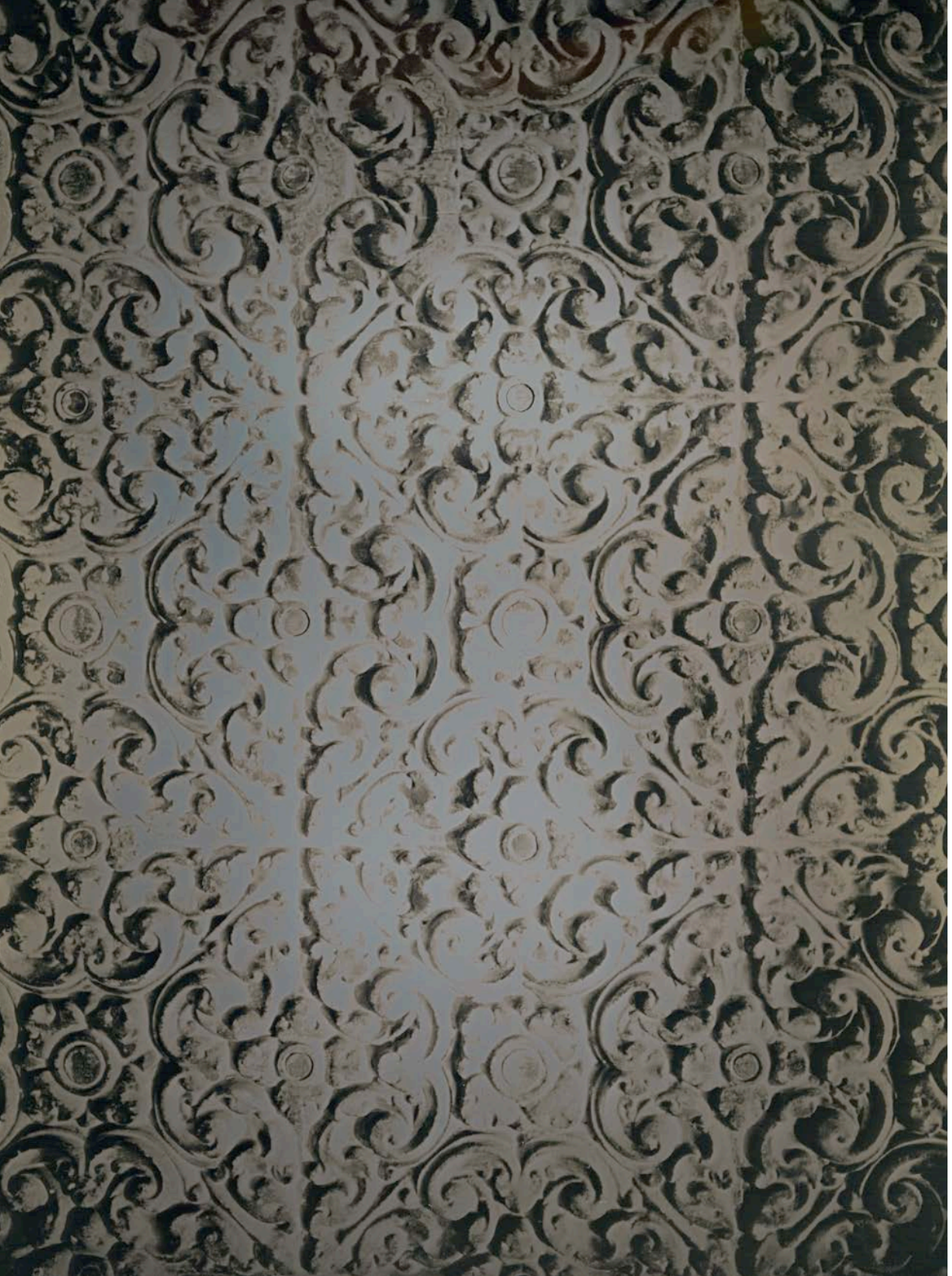
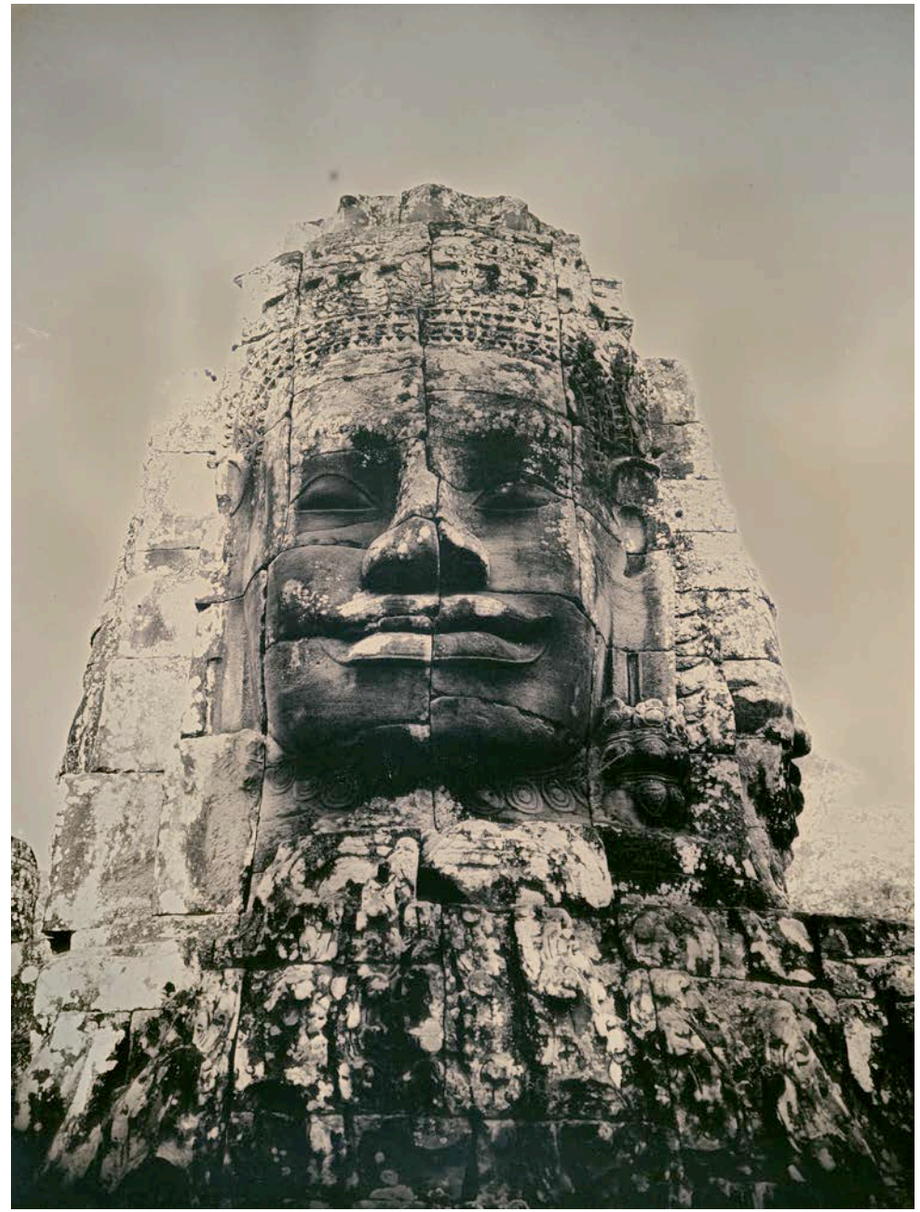

BINH DANH





"The Ghosts of Khmer: Light and Memory"

In the comfortable histories of our youth, genocide seemed an answered question; the retrograde horrors of a generation removed, a closed book. A decade before the present moment of uncertainty in our global existence, the photographer Binh Danh refused this pat conclusion. Danh's early work compiled the Khmer Rouge regime's eerie death portraits—taken in the moments before victims were executed—and transformed them into a living archive of proliferation: Danh devised a method for creating chlorophyll prints on tree leaves, and inscribed hundreds of portraits of lives lost in the Cambodian genocide upon the tree's organic surfaces.

During his travels to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, the former prison and execution site where the Khmer Rouge portraits were taken, Danh found himself drawn to views of the bleak rooms, cases filled with victim's belongings, beds with shackles,and menacing outdoor spaces. Later, when conceiving of his recent works, Danh remarks, "I was not sure why the images of these places stood out to me. But in thinking about them I began to remember the images we saw from the prison at Abu Ghraib [in Iraq], and it occurred to me that I have actually been thinking about the images of Abu Ghraib since they appeared in the media several years ago. Maybe we have all been thinking about these images."

In "The Ghosts of Khmer: Light and Memory," we are invited to explore the issue of human individuality and responsibility, and the ways those concepts shift over time, in both the ethereal reflective surfaces of Danh's large-scale Daguerreotypes and the images' paradoxical subject matter. Portraits of genocide victims etched on the Daguerreotypes' silver surfaces recall the bas-relief idols on the walls of Angkor Wat's temples, which are also the subject of several of Danh's images.

"With Angkor Wat," says Danh, "here is this beautiful architectural achievement of art and religion and Buddhist culture. And it was through the beauty of the Angkor Wat temple that the Khmer Rouge emerged, as the regime sought above all to return Cambodia to its glory days. In order to do that, they had to remove anyone who did not go along with their ideology. This is a theme I return to: the darkness and beauty in our history."

Cover: *Untitled #5, Bodhi Leaf, from the series, "Aura of Botanical Specimen"*
2017, photogram on Daguerreotype, 7" x 5"

Inside cover: *Angkor Wall*
2017, Daguerreotype, 12" x 10", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Page 1: *Buddhas of Bayon # 3*
2017, Daguerreotype, 8" x 6", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Revisiting the chlorophyll portraits in his current body of work, Danh documents the leaf images with Daguerreotype photograms. "Once I make a chlorophyll print, the leaf is fragile and degraded. The Daguerreotypes hold that ghostly quality of the chlorophyll print." The reflective surfaces of Danh's Daguerreotypes act as a mirror, and the portraits are created at human proportions: "You will see the leaf and the portrait," says Danh, "and you will see your own face overlaying the face of the victim."

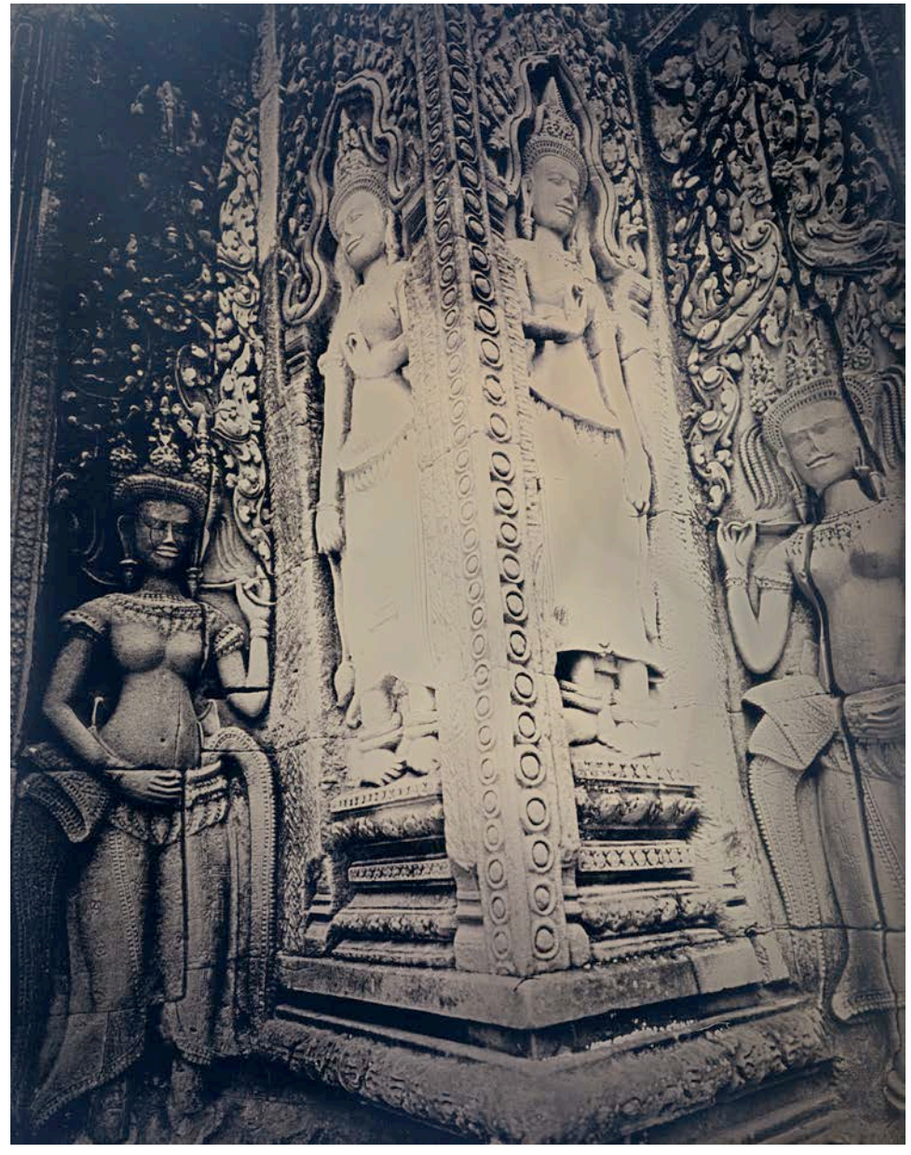
In these photograms Danh invests a personal discourse about the moral implications of photography. He found himself returning to the philosopher Roland Barthes' description of the role of death in photographic works. Says Danh, "In an image of someone who has passed, they don't know they're dead, because they're alive in the photograph. But we know they're dead, because we have lived beyond their time." In this way, continues Danh, "photographs change society and the way we think about time."

Danh also considered a far earlier transformation in human perception in the process of making these highly reflective works: the introduction of the mirror. Prior to the moment in the thirteenth century when reflective silverized surfaces were popularized as mirrors, humans defined themselves as members of a group. "At the beginning of human evolution, we didn't see ourselves in a way that required self-reflection. When mirrors became common, humans became individuals and stopped thinking in terms of the group."

That essential conflict of human life—how we exist simultaneously as individuals, and as very small parts of a much larger pattern—is illustrated in both Danh's transformative portraits of the dead, and his scenes of vast and ancient Buddhist statuary in symbiosis with the forest around it. Influenced by the early photograms of Henry Fox Talbot and cyanotype prints of nineteenth-century botanist Anna Atkins, Danh's Daguerreotype plates are glimmering tributes to the photographic moment, seeming to capture in monumental scale a world left behind, and a glimpse at the extremes of our tenuous existence.

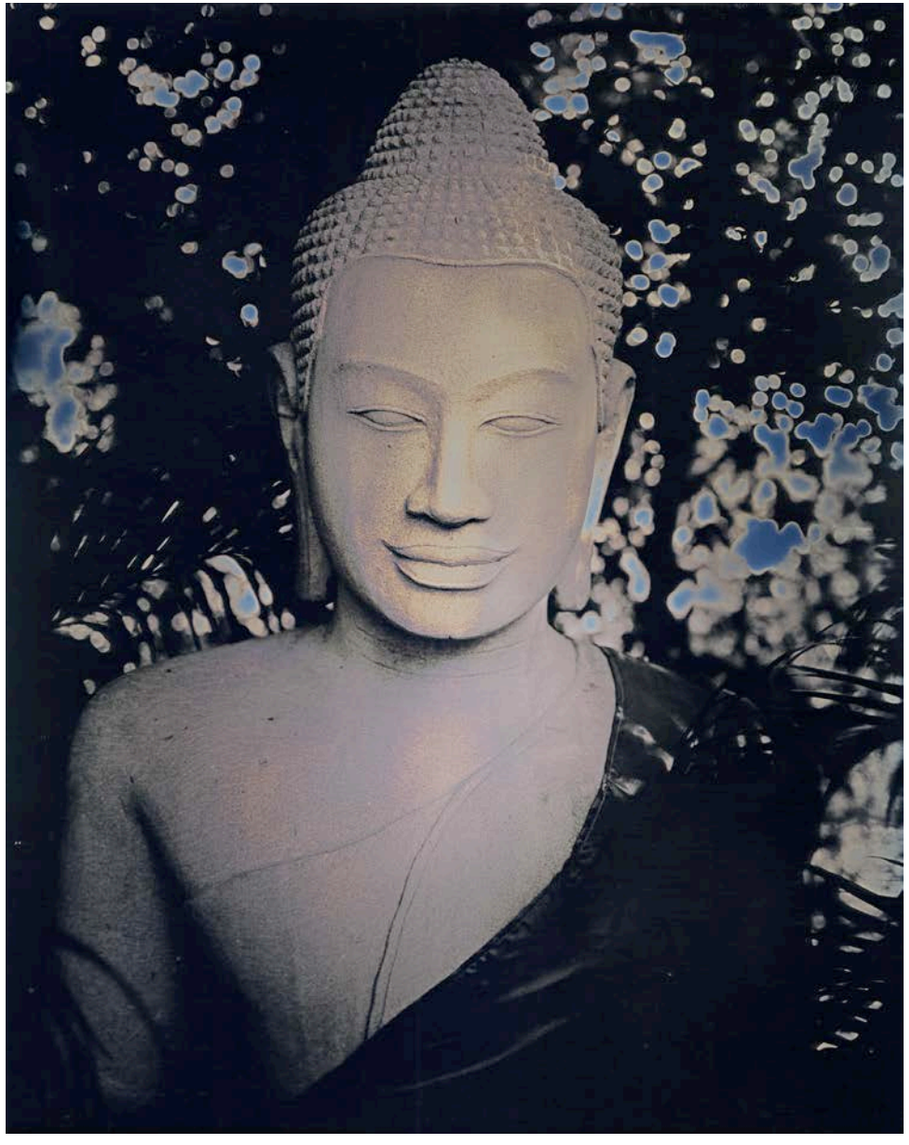
An homage to both contemporary photographic theory and the black and white binary that defined early photography, the intensely argent surfaces of Danh's works present a secondary imagery resembling a double exposure, a vibration of shadow and light around the composition's edges. Whether in the stark chambers of injustice or the luminous expressions of monumental gods, Danh's images record a secret energy at play in all human endeavors. As we contemplate the mysterious machinations of human destruction, we cannot lose sight of the generative mystery of the Buddha's form, rising up from the forest floor.

— Megan Bates



Left: *Meditating Buddha of Bayon, 2017,* Daguerreotype,
8" x 6", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Above: *Divinities of Angkor Wat #1, 2017,* Daguerreotype,
12" x 10", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs



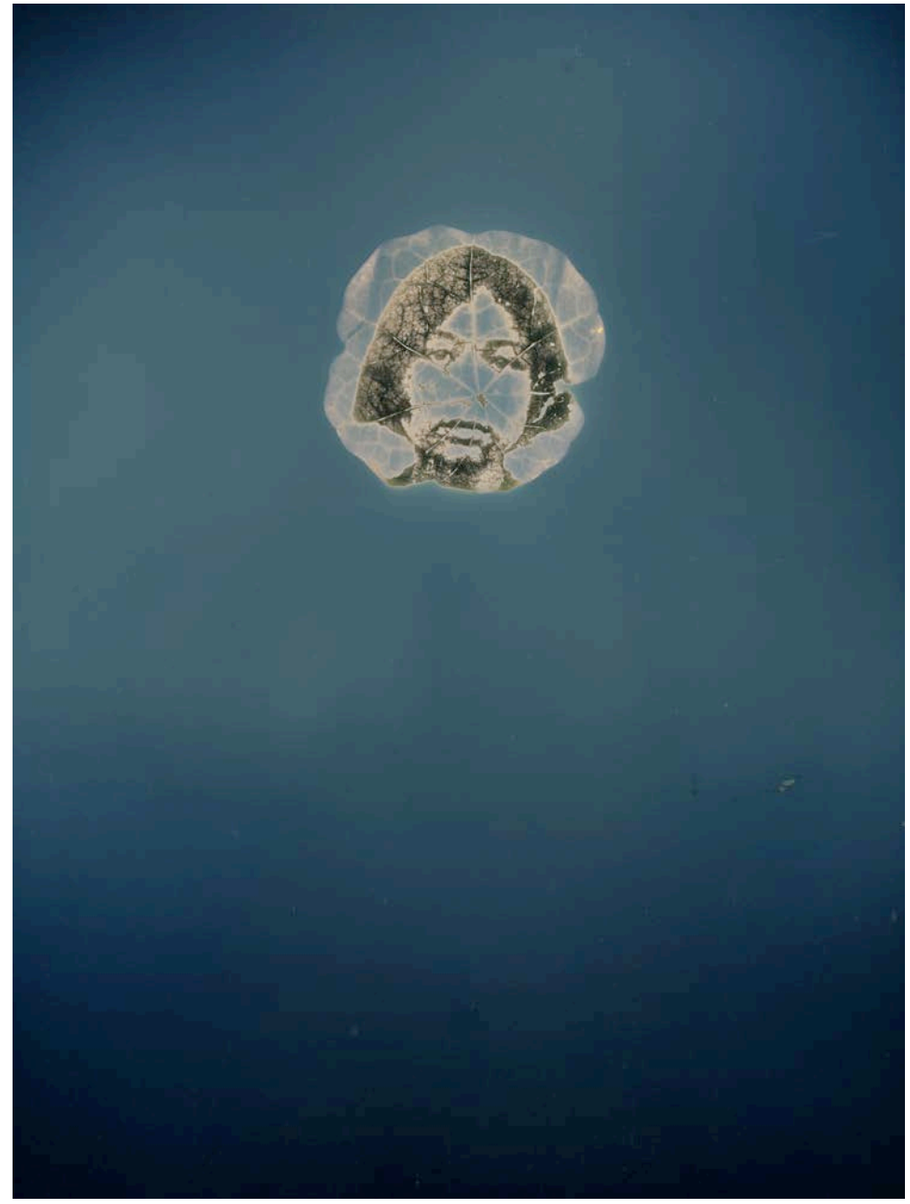
Buddha of Phnom Penh # 1, 2017, Daguerreotype,
12" x 10", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Buddha of Phnom Penh # 2, 2017, Daguerreotype,
12" x 10", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Previous spread: *Entrance to Angkor Thom, 2017,* Daguerreotype, 8" x 10", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Opposite: *Untitled #11, from the series, "Aura of Botanical Specimen", 2017, photogram on* Daguerreotype, 7" x 5"

Untitled #9, from the series, "Aura of Botanical Specimen",
2017, photogram on Daguerreotype, 7" x 5"



Untitled #3, from the series, "Aura of Botanical Specimen",
2017, photogram on Daguerreotype, 7" x 5"

Untitled #8, from the series, "Aura of Botanical Specimen",
2017, photogram on Daguerreotype, 7" x 5"

Untitled #6, from the series, "Aura of Botanical Specimen",
2017, photogram on Daguerreotype, 7" x 5"

Untitled #7, from the series, "Aura of Botanical Specimen",
2017, photogram on Daguerreotype, 7" x 5"

Untitled #4, from the series, "Aura of Botanical Specimen",
2017, photogram on Daguerreotype, 7" x 5"

Mother and Child, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Cambodia
2017, Daguerreotype, 12" x 10" , Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Lambency of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum #2
2017, Daguerreotype, 8" x 10", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Killing Tree, Choeung Ek Park
2017, Daguerreotype, 9" x 12", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Lambency of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum #3
2017, Daguerreotype, 8" x 10", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Opposite: *Photo Enlarger at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum*
2017, Daguerreotype, 10" x 8", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Skulls at Choeung Ek Genocidal Center
2017, Daguerreotype, 8" x 10", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Former Torture Cell at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum
2017, Daguerreotype, 8" x 10", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Opposite: *The Skull Temple at Choeung Ek Genocidal Center*
2017, Daguerreotype, 9" x 12", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Following spread: *Reflection of Angkor Wat Temples, Siem Reap*
2017, Daguerreotype, 10" x 12", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

"The Khmer Rouge Enlarger: Light and Shadow in the Art of Binh Danh"

Binh Danh's Daguerreotypes capture and recapture the fantastic temples of Angkor and the horrific photographs of prisoners who perished under the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) in Cambodia. These are two opposing and yet interrelated images of present day Cambodia. Cambodia is arguably known in the media for its ancient stone temples (ca. 9th to 12th century) and for the Khmer Rouge genocide that murdered 1.7 million of the country's population. [1] These black and white interrogation photographs are found at the Tuol Sleng or "S-21" (="Security 21") detention center, a former high school located in the heart of Phnom Penh, the capitol of Cambodia; the Khmer Rouge converted Tuol Sleng into one of their prisons. Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979 and put an end to the brutal regime. Vietnam subsequently occupied Cambodia for ten years. In 1979, the Vietnamese invaders "discovered" the many mugshots of prisoners who were detained and executed in the nearby killing field of Cheoung Ek. These interrogation photographs were displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1997 without any wall text; this exhibition was heavily criticized for the unethical way in which it elevated these photographs into works of art. [2] Danh, an Asian-American artist who was born in 1977 in South Vietnam to a Cambodian father and a Vietnamese mother, wants to create a body of art that addresses the legacy of the United States' involvement in the Vietnam-American War. This was perhaps more aptly called one of the "secret wars" that gave rise to the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. The artist relates: "As an American, I have a responsibility to remember our historical wrongdoing. We could start by acknowledging this history. I came to the United States as a refugee after the Vietnam War. I want to make Americans aware of our historical responsibility in this genocide." [3]

Danh is most knowledgeable about the history and process of photography. He has been contemplating this medium for decades. To this end, he turns to the paradoxically mysterious, scientific and artistic medium of the Daguerreotype to memorialize and to liberate many of the dead Khmer Rouge victims whose portraits are held captive in the materiality of the original photographs. Unlike the total visibility of printed photographs, the visibility of an image on a Daguerreotype is mediated by the reflection of light on the silver surface. The artist's insight came from one of his visits to Tuol Sleng Museum. Danh saw an enlarger that a Khmer Rouge photographer had abandoned under the staircase in one of the buildings. This enlarger haunted the artist: "This enlarger had projected the dead into light, and for a moment, their likeness became photons. It occurs to me that my Daguerreotype plate also projects itself on the wall or the floor of the gallery, a photographic image, like the way an enlarger would." Unlike in paper printed photographs, the visibility of image depends on light that illuminates and brings the apparitions into focus. Thus it is photon, which literally means "visible light," resurrects the dead and perhaps liberate them from the materiality of the photographs. Not surprisingly, the history of Daguerreotype harkens back to capturing images of deceased loved ones as memento mori in the nineteenth century.

The interrelated terms such as light, shadow, photograph, memory and memorial reminds us of a phrase poignantly inscribed on the Sanderson sundial found on the ground of the Qutub complex in New Delhi, India: Transit Umbra Lux Permanent ("Shadow passes, but light remains"). Indeed, life is transient, like the coming and going of shadow, but light is permanent. Danh's series of Daguerreotypes is a memorial to Cambodians who perished under the Khmer Rouge genocide. More important, Danh's art reminds us that we, as Americans, are entangled in this dark chapter of history and memory.

— Boreth Ly
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University of California, Santa Cruz

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[1] David Chandler, Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): vii.

[2] Linsay French, "Exhibiting Terror" in Mark Philip Bradley and Patrice Petro, eds., Truth Claims: Representation and Human Rights (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 131-156.

[3] E-mail exchange with the artist, October 15, 2017.

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Left: *Angkor Thom Ruin (detail), 2017,* Daguerreotype, 10" x 12", Edition of 3 and 3 Artist proofs

Back cover: *Untitled #1, from the series, "Aura of Botanical Specimen", 2017,* photogram on Daguerreotype, 7" x 5"