

# Dacchi Dang: An Omen Near and Far



Centre for  
Contemporary  
Asian Art

**Dacchi Dang: An Omen Near and Far** is the first survey exhibition of one of the preeminent Vietnamese-Australian artists working today. Presenting works spanning three decades by a founding artist member of 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Dacchi Dang's practice across photography, printmaking, video and installation is principally concerned with articulating the complex nature of diasporic experience. Born in Saigon as the Vietnam War was intensifying, Dang fled on a boat to be eventually accepted as a refugee in Australia. His life and art is informed by this trauma and an ongoing redefinition of place and of home.

*An Omen Near and Far* unveils a new installation work, *Et in Arcadia Ego* (2017) commissioned by 4A, that embeds small hand-printed photographs in bamboo forms cast in wax. Set to burn and disintegrate entirely over the duration of the exhibition as a series of performances, the spectral scenes of Hanoi captured on film by the artist earlier this year—significantly, his first ever visit to the north of Vietnam—underscore the work's ephemerality. Referencing Nicolas Poussin's painting in the Louvre by the same name, Dang's *Et in Arcadia Ego* similarly serves as a *momento mori* in its rendition of the destruction of a civilisation in an idyllic rural landscape. The symbolism of a melting bamboo forest is suggestive of the disastrous effect that chemical defoliants have wrought in Vietnam as a legacy of war.

This new work is conceptually connected to an earlier sculpture and performance originally staged as part of the exhibition *Upstairs/downstairs* at Sydney's National Art School in 1994. This seminal work in the artist's early development—photographic documentation of which is presented alongside *Et in Arcadia Ego*—saw Dang burn a wax sculpture imprinted with photographic imagery recorded by the artist in Vietnam in that same year, his first visit to his country of birth since he fled as a refugee.

Dang's dislocating experience of returning to Cholon in 1994, Saigon's Chinese district and where he grew up, and visiting family members in Bến Tre province in the Mekong Delta, prompted him to photograph the people and landscapes of Vietnam voraciously. Having shot over 100 rolls of black and white film on his Hasselblad camera, Dang's photographic archive of daily life in urban and rural Vietnam documents a time concurrent with the momentous historic occasion of the lifting of the trade embargo between the U.S. and the Republic of Vietnam's that had been in place since 1975. Dang's source imagery—now a rare time capsule of the developing nation in flux—prompted a highly productive period of experimentation. The *Spectacle* series (1996), a suite of monochromatic photogravure prints and their corresponding gold plates, present montaged street scenes and intimate portraits of ordinary Vietnamese—farmers, labourers and children—that emanate an uneasy balance between empathy and difference.

Other bodies of work investigate notions of landscape as metaphoric sites of colonised and contested cultural memory. In *Liminal* (2005), produced following a lengthy residency in Paris two years prior, we encounter nine montages comprised of watercolour and gum bichromate, a mid-19th century photographic process that emerged at the same time as the French began to occupy regions of modern-day Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Dang juxtaposes urban scenes of Paris and Saigon in circular format with intricately designed geometric patterns that reference Bronze Age Vietnamese Đông Sơn drums. Troubled by the fact that many such revered artefacts were stolen from Vietnam for French national collections, *Liminal* evokes the spectre of distance—geographic and historic—that such cultural displacement ruptures. Extending this theme in *Phoenix* (2011), a sound and moving image work that tracks the slow burning of a wax cast Đông Sơn drum, Dang tracks a more personal history with a deeply moving meditation on his life's journey.

*Lens of the Other* (2011) extends Dang's experiments with the foundational principles of photographic technology by converting an abandoned hut on Peel Island (Teerk Ro Ra) in Queensland's Moreton Bay into a makeshift pinhole camera. The resultant inky images, inversions of the outside world exposed on photographic paper that lined the hut's interior wall as in a film plane at the rear of a camera's prism, hauntingly renders one of Australia's most concentrated sites of Indigenous dispossession by colonial invasion, further marked by the island's past as a lazaret, asylum and leper colony.

"Maybe nothing's so unfunny as an omen read wrong" is the most cited line in Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), a searing account of the experience of American troops in the Vietnam War that helped define what came to be called "New Journalism", a highly subjective style of writing that—much like artists—prioritised "truth" over "facts". Speaking of the double bind of traditional Vietnamese beliefs in omens and their connection to ancestral spirits against the American military's hubristic and ignoble enterprise, Herr succinctly articulated the tragic consequences of misinterpretation, wilfully imposed or otherwise. In this sense, *An Omen Near and Far* is a testament to the central importance of art in coming to terms with the contingencies of the past so that we might better understand the meaning of our present and shared futures.

**Dacchi Dang** (b. 1966, Saigon, Vietnam) is an artist who lives and works in Sydney. Dang was born to a Chinese father and Vietnamese mother, and at the age of sixteen fled Vietnam with his brother and sister on a fishing boat. After a traumatic sea voyage the boat arrived on Malaysian shores where Dang was transported to the refugee camp of Pulau Bidong. Following nine months at the camp, he was transported to Kuala Lumpur where he was accepted as a Vietnamese refugee by Australia in 1982.

Dang's work has been exhibited in Australia and internationally since the early 1990s. Solo exhibitions include *Full Circle* (2009), Metro Arts Gallery, Brisbane; *Liminal* (2006–2008), Horsham Regional Art Gallery, Victoria; Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne; and 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney; *Spectacle I* (1996), Firstdraft Gallery, Sydney; *Spectacle II*, Stills Gallery, Sydney. Group exhibitions include *DDESSIN [14]* (2014), Paris Contemporary Drawing Fair, Atelier Richelieu; *Crossing Boundaries* (2014), Sydney Town Hall; *Edge of Elsewhere* (2010–2012), 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney; *Planet Ueno* (2008), Taito Community Museum, Tokyo; *Re-StArt* (2008), 733 Art Factory, Chengdu; and *News From Islands* (2007), Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney.

He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (1991) and a Master of Arts (1996) from the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney; Graduate Diploma in Archives and Records Management (2000) and Graduate Certificate of Applied Science in Cultural Heritage Studies specialising in Photography (2003) from University of Canberra; and a Doctor of Philosophy (Fine Arts) from Queensland College of the Arts, Griffith University, Brisbane (2013). Dang has undertaken artist residencies at Bundanon Trust (2001), Hill End (2001); Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris (2003) and Tokyo University of the Arts Geidai (2008). His work is held in public and private collections in Australia, France, China and Hong Kong. Over 2015–2018 Dang is producing new works commissioned by the Australian War Memorial Gillespie Bequest that explore the wartime experience of Australian and Vietnamese–Australian veterans.

Curator: Pedro de Almeida  
Curatorial Assistant: Harriet Reid

## LIST OF WORKS

### Ground Floor:

*Dang family former residence and business*, Tân Binh, Saigon, 1994  
black & white gelatin silver photograph, 17 x 11 cm.

*Untitled* (photographic documentation from the exhibition *Upstairs/downstairs*, National Art School Sydney, 1994), reprinted 2017  
installation: photographic emulsion on wax candle panels, charcoal drawing, black & white gelatine silver prints; 81.2 x 121.2 cm and 43.5 x 59.5 cm.

*Self-portrait I* (from the series *Full Circle*), 2009  
pigment on photo rag; 91 x 91 cm.

*Et in Arcadia Ego*, 2017  
installation with wax, photographs, bamboo leaves; dimensions variable  
commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and supported by the Australia Council for the Arts.

### First Floor:

*Certificate of Commendation*, 1982  
ink and watercolour on paper; stamped official document, Pulau Bidong Refugee Camp, Malaysia; 22.8 x 32.0 cm.

*Spectacle I*, 1996  
gold plates, series of nine; 42 x 42 cm.

*Untitled* (from the series *Spectacle II*), 1996  
photogravure; 41.5 x 41.0 cm  
Horsham Regional Art Gallery Collection, Victoria, purchased through the Horsham Art Gallery Trust Fund with assistance from the Victorian Public Galleries Foundation, 1998.

*Spectacle II*, 1996 (reprinted 2017)  
photogravure, series of six; 22 x 102 cm.

*Untitled* (from the series *Phantasmagorie*), 2000  
photographic liquid light emulsion on plywood with lacquer; 39 x 39 cm.

*Artist book*, 2001  
cyanotype on paper, bound with hand-stitch, 35 pages; 8.5 x 32.0 x 1.5 cm  
Bundanon Trust collection, New South Wales.

*Liminal*, 2005  
photomontages, gum bichromate print & watercolour drawing on paper mounted on archival board & Perspex; series of nine; 85 cm diameter (each).

*Shadow Chasing I–VI*, 2006  
black & white gelatin silver photographs; 32.5 x 30.0 cm (each).

*Essence of Land* (from the series *Lens of the Other*), 2011  
pigment on photo paper; 74 x 102 cm.

*Island Memory* (from the series *Lens of the Other*), 2011  
pigment on photo paper; 74 x 102 cm.

Janelle Evans  
*Dacchi builds a camera*, 2017  
documentation of Dacchi Dang, Peel Island, 2011  
16:9 DVC loop, 5 mins  
courtesy the artist.

*Phoenix*, 2011  
three-channel HD video (reformatted as two-channels), 16:9 Pal, 48khz stereo sound, 10 mins; commissioned by Campbelltown Arts Centre and 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art for *Edge of Elsewhere* with support from the Australia Council for the Arts. Production credits: Dacchi Dang: Artist & Director; Janelle Evans: Creative Producer & Camera; My Le Thi: Choreographer & Dancer; Leonardo Cremonese: 2nd Camera.

Selection of archive material, 1994–2009  
gelatin silver photographic proof sheets of black & white negatives: Vietnam (1994), China (1994), Bundanon and Hill End (2001), Paris (2003); *The Boat* (2001) documentation, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art: black & white and colour photographs and transparencies (displayed as PowerPoint); print ephemera: exhibition room sheets, reviews and texts (1994–2009). Courtesy the artist's collection and 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art archive.

All works courtesy the artist.

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## 9 June– 30 July 2017

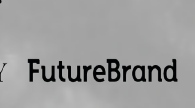
Front & back cover image (detail): Dacchi Dang, *Untitled* (from the series *Spectacle II*), 1996, photogravure.

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