

MARTIN LAM NGUYEN, C.S.C.

# MOMENTS



**UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS**

*Beatrice M. Haggerty Gallery*

October 5 – November 5, 2017

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**UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS**

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The artist is one who is fully aware and surrenders silently to the moment. He has honed his senses, his awareness, by quietly watching and listening and seeing gently the flickering life revealed in a moment, trying not to breathe too hard. The moments enter into the artist like seeds in a rich soil germinating in the greenhouse of his studio.<sup>1</sup> He cannot rush the process of their arising. They must grow. Their tendrils pushing out in all directions—without premeditation—grasping upward to the sky, tumbling downward to the earth. Yet the time will come when the artist must allow another to perceive them as well (fig. 10).

The moments are birthed by the artist into a new medium from one space to another. This is an artistic journey from “the central mind,” imagination, God, the “highest candle” lighting the dark in which the artist lives (fig. 11), to a shared dwelling together, which is the encounter of the viewer and the artist before the moment enshrined in the work of art, per Wallace Stevens, “in which being there together is enough.”<sup>2</sup> The artist reconstructs for the viewer in the open air of reality moments when real life had taken place, often the lives of others. In this process, the artist can use many different media from the traditional paint, brush, and paper; to the stone and chisel; to the digital bytes of a cinematic image. What was a moment in the artist’s memory becomes a time-and-space-based creation for all to encounter, for all to change. We, as viewers, are called to create the moment anew in our own gazing, going beyond the limits of the artist’s sensibility. In this way, the artist, in creating, is not only slowly perfecting his own awareness—learning to feel *into* the life of another whose moment he recreates for us—but also training the viewer to likewise purify his sensorium. We are urged in our seeing of the moment to not rush to judgment but to sit with our silence, our conflicting memories and emotions, and wait and peer and hope.



FIGURE 10  
Rev. Martin Lam Nguyen, C.S.C. teaching students in the Department of Art, Art History and Design at the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, 2013

#### MOUNTAIN WAITS

Each of the moments of the mountains in his first project (cat. 1) is, as it were, a sacred place looming out of the sea of the memory of Rev. Martin Lam Nguyen, C.S.C.. Each painting crystallizes the memories in the accompanying *Book of Memories*. The painter is a ceaseless explorer of the vastness of his own life and the moments of the lives of others, the events and holy places of those who have shaped his imagination. He returns to them seeing them as if he were meeting another person with another history. As T. S. Eliot famously wrote: “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.”<sup>3</sup>

The mountain stands, waits, in silent witness to the stories with which it is charged by the artist. The artist can only stand in awe surrendering to each new facet, each glimpse of the rock that endures and continues to endure, and of the greenery piercing up into his own life and the lives of those who touch him. He cannot change the past, let alone forget it, but he can—like Dante in the *Purgatorio* drinking of Eunoë, the river of Good Remembrance—remember his past life as a life emerging anew from the fog shimmering with the glory of eternity.<sup>4</sup> All the pain, all the leaving, the fleeing, and



FIGURE 11  
Rev. Frank Quinlivan, C.S.C. holding a Lenten mass, Bangladesh, 2005

the joy in returning was never merely accidental as it was braided together with the rope of grace. God shaped each turn and each moment and holds them in his own eternal memory. As Nikolai Berdyaev said: “Immortality is memory made clear and serene.”<sup>5</sup> The artist co-participates in this divine sanctification of time through painting the moment, through painting time.

#### LUCIE

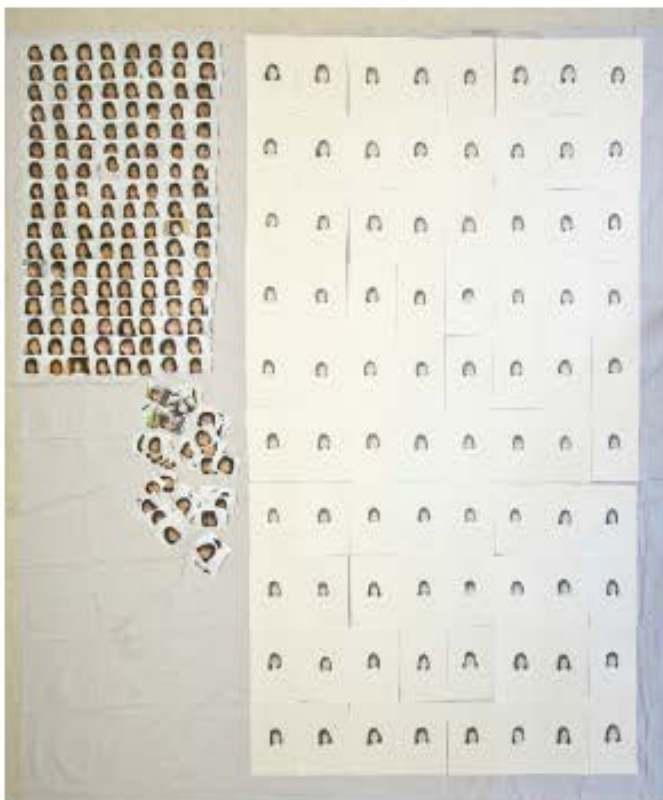
The second project (cat. 2) consists of 365 drawings of 365 photographs of 365 moments from the end of each of 365 days in the life of the child Lucie from 2001 to 2002. What is apparent here is a sort of artistic antinomy (fig. 12). On the one hand, the artist is many times removed from Lucie. He depicts an image of an image. With the lead of the pencil on the surface of the handmade paper, he recreates the photo’s digital bytes printed out on photographic paper of the unique moment of the distinct life of Lucie (see figs. 13, 14). They are different and apart. To create the moment of Lucie he must become alien to her. Yet, on the other hand, in contradistinction, the drawings are an attempt by the artist to cross space and time to enter into union with Lucie. He loves *into*, feels *into* the life of Lucie, “for true cognition is *loving*, is *feeling* in a human way.”<sup>6</sup> His is a





FIGURE 12  
Martin Lam Nguyen working on the layout of *Lucie* (1998-99; cat. 2) in his studio at the University of Notre Dame, 2013. Ongoing work on *Painting of the Social Network* (2007- ; cat. 3) is also visible in the background

FIGURES 13, 14  
Overview and detail, respectively, of the partial layout of *Lucie* shown in fig. 12, including the photographs on which the portraits were based



gazing of what is always absolutely Other. Yet his gazing is a gazing into in an attempt to manifest the invisible gazing of *Lucie* of Father Martin himself. It is as if the 365 moments were one long momentary self-portrait of the artist.

#### PAINTING OF THE SOCIAL NETWORK

The last project (cat. 3) is the most recent. Three massive canvases are filled with hundreds of individual portraits of the “invited friends” of Father Martin at distinct and often crucial moments in their lives. Some of these portraits are last pictures, sacred memorials, as is the image of Father Martin’s father taken just weeks before his death (see figs. 1, 2). Others are of friends at joyous as well as solemn instances in their lives. Yet what strikes one here is not only the same attempt by Father Martin to paint or depict time, but also how art in this instance becomes a sort of sanctification of time seized from the decreation characteristic of technology (see fig. 15).



Technology—and here one thinks of the flip-flip-flipping through images that one does on a smartphone using a Facebook or Instagram app—can seem like a ceaseless wash of shards, partial images disconnected from any center, any integrative vision. We have no way to hold together the .gif of an endlessly looped smirking Donald Trump, the videos of a gyrating Rihanna and Lorde, the pictures of a friend’s children playing on a summer afternoon, and images of Pope Francis embracing a homeless person. It is as if we were in a “wilderness of mirrors”<sup>7</sup> with trillions of fragments scattered across the desert, each with just one part of some face reflected back at our emptiness, as T. S. Eliot wrote: “These fragments I have shored against my ruin.”<sup>8</sup> But we are never able to see



who in these fragments is looking out at us. We cannot enter into the person. We cannot love them. We cannot feel them close to us. There is no union.

But here enters the artist. He could simply hold up a mirror to nature. This would be to mimic the fragmentation and dissociation of a society he could engage in an act of integration. Instead he brings together the images scattered on the desert floor and hammers them into unity. The artist fashions out of the fragments a new image, a whole moment which is rich and strange and filled with a light shining through the cracks. These social network moments are Father Martin's means of reclaiming and resacralizing disassociated images with a wholeness that speaks of our call to eternity by God.

#### ARTIST AS PRIEST AS CO-CREATOR

Our meditation now is ended, for the moment. Yet here now I would urge the viewer to carry on this reverie alone and participate in a making holy of time and space. For what we see with the painting of time by Father Martin is a co-participation of the artist in God's sanctification of creation. This is a sort of co-creation: a perfecting and finishing of God's very good work, and so a completing of creation. It is akin to Mass, where the priest lifts on high the elements of bread and wine in gratitude to his Creator and Redeemer. And we receive them back transformed as the very beating moment of the eternal God in the flesh. This is time no longer as that force that rends us in pieces, but time as a chalice of eternity with the art, the moments, being the very cup which God gives us to drink Himself: "Come taste and see that the Lord is good."<sup>9</sup>

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FIGURE 15  
Martin Lam Nguyen at work on *Painting of the Social Network* in his studio at the University of Notre Dame, 2013

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See the artist statement by Rev. Martin Lam Nguyen, C.S.C. in this publication.
- <sup>2</sup> W. Stevens, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" in W. Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York, 1990), ll.1-18, p. 524.
- <sup>3</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," in *Four Quartets* in T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York, 1952), V, ll.26-9, p. 145.
- <sup>4</sup> D. Alighieri, *The Purgatorio*, trans. J. Ciardi (New York, 1961), Canto XXXIII, pp. 329-38.
- <sup>5</sup> N. Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, trans. R. M. French (London, 1949), p. 158.
- <sup>6</sup> J. G. von Herder, *Johann Gottfried Von Herder: Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. M. N. Forster (Cambridge, England, 2002), p. 214.
- <sup>7</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Gerontion," in Eliot 1952, l.66, p. 23.
- <sup>8</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," in Eliot 1952, V, l.431, p. 50.
- <sup>9</sup> Psalm 34:8.