

Bockley Gallery



Pao Houa Her: My Mother's Flowers

Opening Reception: Thursday, June 23, 2016, 6 to 9 pm

Exhibition: June 23 through July 30, 2016

Gallery Hours: Wednesday through Saturday, Noon to 5 pm

Bockley Gallery is pleased to announce its first solo exhibition of photographs by Pao Houa Her titled *My Mother's Flowers*. Her is recognized for her provocative and unflinching photographs of the Hmong, the indigenous people of Laos, hundreds of whom immigrated to the United States following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Her's family fled Laos in 1983 before finally settling in Saint Paul, Minnesota in 1986 when she was six. In *My Mother's Flowers*, Her explores through a highly personal lens the enduring presence and significance of flowers in Hmong culture. Working in both black and white, and saturated color, Her's ink jet prints shed light on the almost numinous role of flowers - and their seeming ubiquity - in ethnic Hmong culture, whether in contemporary Laos or the United States.

Her's black and white images of vases filled with bouquets of silk flowers signify the enveloping backdrop of her family home in Saint Paul. Shopping at thrift stores and yard sales, Her's mother collected countless numbers of silk flowers, which she would then carefully arrange in vases before placing them in specific spots in the home. To breakup any potential uniformity of the floral bouquets, she often added colorful birds or rice sticks to create visual and textural interest. Thus, these flower arrangements signify more a Hmong aesthetic sensibility and the perseverance of cultural memory, than fashionable home décor.

Drawing on the traditional Western genres of portraiture and still life, Her chose to photograph the colorful flower arrangements in black and white, against an austere neutral ground as if they were official portraits. "Color distracts from the form of the plants," Her explains. "I wanted to give them a formal treatment. For me, they seem to symbolize home, like a larger community of homes." The high-resolution images reveal not only the detail of every flower and leaf, but also the soft layers of dust collecting on their surfaces. In their isolation and simplicity, they become resonate objects of memory, a cultural connection with the past. Her's images are a not-so-distant

heir to Robert Mapplethorpe's acclaimed photographs of flowers; only Her's are of bouquets not single flowers, artificial objects not real flora. Also in black and white, Her has photographed exotic Hmong women against uninflected neutral grounds – making stripped down, formal portraits that closely share an aesthetic with the flower images.

Her has focused her perspicacious eye on the way flowers often serve as backdrops for young women on Hmong dating websites, sites where Hmong American men search for 'pure' Laotian females. To indicate their interest, these frequently much older men send large sums of money and gifts to the girls, often buying them airplane tickets to travel to the U.S. so they can be married. An understood business transaction from the beginning, these women sometimes arrive in the U.S., but often do not, leaving the suitor empty-handed and much poorer. In addition to these images printed from Hmong websites, Her has created other photographs in which she has purposefully digitally inserted images of Hmong women into images of vast fields of colorful flowers.

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Pao Houa Her was born in 1980 in Laos, and was raised in Saint Paul MN. She currently lives in Lino Lakes, a suburb of the Twin Cities. In 2012 she received a MFA in Photography from the Yale University School of Art, New Haven CT and in 2009 a BFA in Photography from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. Her is a 2016-2017 recipient of a McKnight Foundation Visual Artist Fellowship. In 2013 she received a Jerome Foundation Fellowship for Emerging Artists and in 2009 and 2012 Her was awarded Initiative Grants from the Minnesota State Arts Board. She also received an Alice Kimball Fellowship in 2012.

Since 2012, Her's photographs have garnered solo exhibitions at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Franklin Artworks in Minneapolis, the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum in East Lansing MI, and her work has been included in group shows at the Center for Hmong Studies, The Gordon Parks Gallery and The Bindery Projects, all in Saint Paul. Her's photographs have also been featured in group shows at the Telemark Art Center in Skein, Norway, the Minnesota Museum of Art in Saint Paul, the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago IL, and the Camera Club of New York in New York City, as well as in galleries in New York and Los Angeles.

For further information or press photos please contact Bockley Gallery.

images: untitled, 2016, 20 x 16 inches, digital archival inkjet print on paper





