

## Pipo Nguyen-duy

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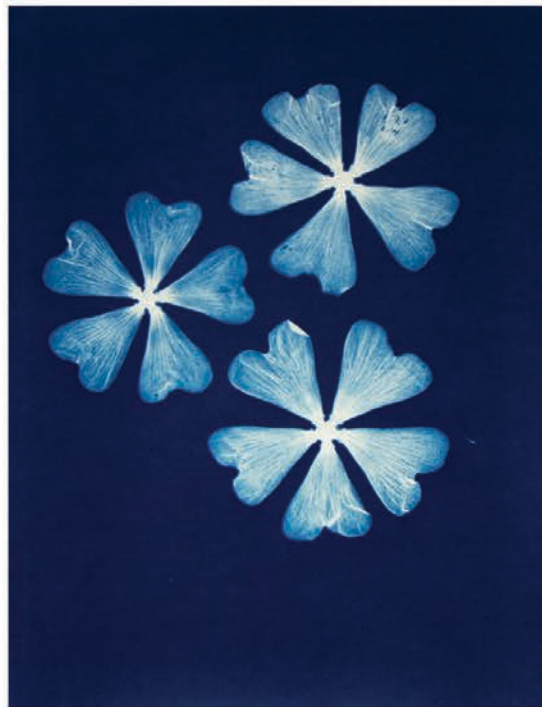
The show is a kind of wonderland: Fifty cyanotypes, all made in 1998, all untitled, and all portraying flowers, seeds, soil, and water from Monet's garden at Giverny, France, neatly line the walls of the narrow gallery. They are the creations of Pipo Nguyen-duy, a political refugee from Vietnam and now a professor of photography at Oberlin College in Ohio. One can't help but admire the sheer beauty of the ghostly images, each hovering in space like a mirage, each coolly composed and self-sufficient, each alive with immediacy and formal verve. The specimens sparkle like stars in a cyan sky. However, this prettiness is deceptive: We are looking at corpses. Elemental nature has lost its élan vital, is reduced to a denatured Hadean shadow. Like pages from a botanical textbook, the cyanotypes demand disinterested analysis and study. Nguyen-duy reinforces this sense by exhibiting a collection of test tubes, each containing a real specimen taken from Giverny.

Nguyen-duy's cyanotypes have many precedents, including scientific fluoroscopy and radiography, as well as more obviously the nineteenth-century botanical photographs of William Henry Fox Talbot and the groundbreaking botanical cyanotypes of his student Anna Atkins. Nguyen-duy's art may also bring to mind such twentieth-century examples as Man Ray's rayographs and László Moholy-Nagy's photograms. But if Man Ray's and Moholy-Nagy's works are particularly cold and colorless, Nguyen-duy's—in spite of their scientific detachment—are warmly hued. The heavenly blue suggests that the skeletal remains of his specimens have become angels.

Many photographers have lavished adoring attention on

flowers. The series of botanical studies Imogen Cunningham, a serious gardener, made in the 1920s and Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt der Pflanze* (The World of Plants, 1924) are noteworthy examples. Yet Nguyen-duy's work is distinctive for the way he appears to annihilate nature: His photographs look like negatives. In fact, his work is closest to contemporaneous art from the 1980s and '90s that sought to investigate and critique the conventions of museological display. One thinks of Christopher Williams's "Angola to Vietnam", 1987–89, comprising photos of fake flowers at the Harvard Botanical Museum's Ware Collection of Blaschka Glass Models of Plants, or Mark Dion's detoured *Wunderkammers*. In the exhibition press release, the gallery describes Nguyen-duy's show as "a simulated natural history museum installation of a fictitious Vietnamese colonial expedition to France." The aim is "to subvert the historical European Gaze on Asia, to deconstruct the invention of photography as a colonial tool, and finally to question the authority and validity of Western cultural institutional practices." This theoretical backdrop—and the postcolonial narrative it prompts us to imagine—exists in intriguing tension with the images' exquisite beauty.

—Donald Kuspit



Pipo Nguyen-duy,  
*Untitled F40, 1998*,  
cyanotype, 15 × 11 1/2".

