Sports Photographer Andrew D. Bernstein
The Darkly Radiant Images of Edgar Angelone
Les Horvat: An Australian’s View of Vietnam
Les Horvat

AN AUSTRALIAN PHOTOGRAPHER’S TALE OF VIETNAM

by Nga Hoang

And can you tell me, doctor, why I still can’t get to sleep?
And night time’s just a jungle dark and a barking M16?
And what’s this rash that comes and goes, can you tell me what it means?
God help me, I was only nineteen...

The melancholy song “I Was Only Nineteen,” an anthem for Vietnam War veterans penned by Australian singer-songwriter John Schumann in the 1980s, crackled from the Melbourne office/studio of Les Horvat. It blared over the speakers of his laptop on a desk cluttered with drained coffee cups, computer printouts, photography books and a hardcover copy of Bao Ninh’s novel The Sorrow of War.

The song has a particular resonance for Horvat, a commercial photographer who grew up in the tumultuous time when Australia was involved with America in the Vietnam War — a time that was part of his “political awakening.” When he turned 18, he was almost conscripted; his acceptance letter from the University of Melbourne arrived just in time. Little did he know that he would visit Vietnam 40 years later, peeling off the veneer of that formerly war-torn country.

With 25 years of experience in commercial and advertising photography under his belt, Horvat has taught at RMIT University and Photography Studies College in Melbourne. He has earned consistent praise and a cascade of awards and accolades, including the Kodak Professional Photography Achievement Award as well as gold and silver medals at the Australian Professional Photography Awards. In 2005, he co-authored the book Digital Imaging — Essential Skills, published worldwide in...
Cremaillere Railway Trai Mat, 2008
four languages.

Horvat and most of his compatriots were baffled by how little they really knew about present-day Vietnam. During the 1960s, shocking headlines and pictures were plastered all over the newspapers, accompanied by graphic broadcasts on television every night. “My impressions of Vietnam were very much slanted towards those types of images,” he explains.

In the ’80s, many Vietnamese immigrants settled in Melbourne and Sydney. Horvat heard some of their tales of their homeland, which aroused his curiosity. The siren call of Vietnam echoed in his mind and eventually evolved into the idea for an exhibition, *Momentum of the River’s Flow: An Australian’s View of Vietnam’s Long Journey*. The exhibition of 34 photographs opened at The Bui Gallery in Hanoi in June 2010 as part of cultural activities sponsored by the Australian Embassy to mark the 1,000th anniversary of Hanoi.

The river in the title is a metaphor for Horvat’s perception of Vietnamese history. It signifies how he sees Vietnam as having “an undeniable force and momentum in its trajectory towards independence, nationhood and prosperity.” He uses imagery of the river and its long journey as a key element in the Vietnamese psyche and mythology.
Horvat developed his Vietnamese photography project over the course of three years, bouncing back and forth to Vietnam between 2006 and 2009.
He made a deliberate decision to travel in South Vietnam, which shares a convoluted history with Australia. Horvat yearned to “reinterpret Vietnam through Australian eyes, 40 years after Australia’s military involvement.”
Horvat developed his Vietnamese photography project over the course of three years, bouncing back and forth to Vietnam between 2006 and 2009. During each trip, he dedicated three to four weeks to visiting historic sites. While he took countless photographs, he says, “Many more pictures were rejected than included in the exhibition.”

Horvat’s photographic philosophy hinges on the notion of “a peopled landscape,” one that becomes “a repository of individual and collective memory, a vehicle for the representation of past, present and future.” As a solitary vagabond armed with an open mind, he made a deliberate decision to travel in South Vietnam, which shares a convoluted history with Australia. Horvat yearned to “reinterpret Vietnam through Australian eyes, 40 years after Australia’s military involvement.”

The exhibition travels down memory lane to Ba Ria-Vung Tau, where a former Australian army base is now a densely grown rubber plantation. Then, Horvat whisks us to a now-defunct American radar station. The journey carries on, wiping wartime scars clean and rewriting the book on Vietnam.

Horvat is spellbound by the giant leap from “1970 Vietnam,” recorded in lifeless black-and-white, to “2010 Vietnam,” sparkling with color and pulsating with life. Rather than merely capturing the beauty of landscape, he drills down into the lives of ordinary people through the spy hole of his camera. A man sitting cross-legged on a stone meditates while bathing himself, as shafts of golden sunshine dance on the mirrored water of Hoan Kiem Lake. At Vung Tau Back Beach, hawkers in their conical hats carry baskets of fruit slung over their shoulders while the sun veers from pink to burnt orange. Long wooden fishing boats draped with nets dock along Phu Quoc Harbour at dusk. A rainbow of neon lights cascades across the Municipal Theatre in Ho Chi Minh City, buzzing with motorbikes and cars.

Vietnam has a strong regional character, and each town has a distinct essence. Horvat refers to his experience as “the constant discovery of new sights, sounds and flavors.” What captivates him most is the local people’s resilience and infectious enthusiasm, which mirrors “the immense power and dignity of their culture.”

While photographing people in the landscape, Horvat shows the respect for the dignity of the individual which governs his work first and foremost. He explains, “I have no desire to take my camera into places where it is not welcome, nor do I try to use subterfuge to extract an image that shows people in a way they would not like to be depicted.”

By juxtaposing the coldness of wartime history with the warmth of the modern-day Vietnam, Horvat is not striving to defy the stereotype, “Think Vietnam: Think War.” He says, “I’m not so much altering misconceptions with my work as adding to the rapidly altering new perceptions that the world is forming about Vietnam.”

During his trips, he shifts from town to town, completely descending into the vibrant frenzy of colors. He says, “I’m generally a patient person, so when I’m in the center of the rich color and movement that typifies Vietnam, I’m happy to wait until the picture forms itself in front of my camera.”

He adds, “Each image has a color palette that aims to elicit an emotional response from the viewer. It could be as simple as beauty or as complex as wonderment, but I hope these images are never sterile.”

While Vietnam’s goldmine of dreamy landscapes has become an overused subject in photography, Horvat enlivens the subject
Phu Quoc Harbour no. 1, 2008
“I’m not so much altering misconceptions with my work as adding to the rapidly altering new perceptions that the world is forming about Vietnam.” —Les Horvat

© LES HORVAT
with a narrative voice and human element — far removed from typical travel brochure and postcard photography. He emphasizes, “It’s not my endeavor to capture a unique subject, but rather to show it in a new way.” He photographs Vietnam not to show what the country is like, but rather to show how it is changing. *Momentum of the River’s Flow* is a testament to Vietnamese society that has hiccupsed over a long, uphill battle.

Horvat worked in film-based commercial photography when he ran his own multi-studio complex, Twilight Zone Studios, in Melbourne. He switched from film to digital photography after he left the commercial world, becoming a photographic educator and initiating his own projects. He is up front about using digital techniques as part of his artistic license.

"Many of my images have been digitally manipulated — to alter color, add elements and even merge multiple pictures into one. That’s the whole point of it,” he says. He always asks himself two questions: first, does the manipulation add to the scene without changing its meaning? And second, does the manipulation remain in the background and not scream out of the image? “If I can answer yes to both questions, then I feel that the manipulated image is a success.”

When asked whether it is too ambitious to portray a long journey with only 34 photos, he replies, “These pictures are like a river with an endless flow of water — a small portrayal of something that would take forever to photograph. The exhibition is merely a breathing space and resting point along the journey. I never really consider my work to be finished.”

Following his successful exhibition in Hanoi, Horvat showed his work at the Ballarat Mining Exchange as part of the core program at Ballarat International Biennale Foto in August and September 2011. Again, the public response to his exhibition was no less exuberant. “The reactions to my pictures have been rather consistent,” he observes. “Everyone who sees them wants to visit Vietnam and find out more for themselves.”

At noon, the sunlight streams into his studio. Horvat slouches on the couch with a steamy cup of tea and shares his favorite Vietnam story:

A 12-year-old girl lived in the remote village of Binh Ba in South Vietnam. One day, Australian troops patrolled the village and she hurried down to the underground bomb shelter. A military tank rolled right up to the front of her house, but for no apparent reason abruptly veered off. She was naive enough to believe her family’s carefully tended front garden with its display of giant pumpkins saved her family, as all the other houses were completely destroyed.

Horvat was struck by the purity of that young girl, now a mature woman still living in the same village. This story represents exactly what Horvat is striving to do: encapsulate a multifaceted Vietnam through a pure, less slanted prism. The Vietnam he had always heard about through the media was mysterious, torn apart, petrifying. The Vietnam he has met and come to love is alluring, an unfinished patchwork, still being unearthed.

Hanoi-born freelance travel writer Nga Hoang writes for a number of international titles, including Texas Monthly, Lonely Planet, The West Australian and Film International. She is currently based in Vietnam.
Rather than merely capturing the beauty of landscape, he drills down into the lives of ordinary people through the spy hole of his camera.