

# HEAD OR TAILS?

## NGUYEN DAI GIANG'S DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

BY MAHA MAJZOUB



cultureclash

Art, in general, should not be taken at face value. In the case of Washington-based artist Nguyen Dai Giang, this statement takes on a whole new meaning. Nguyen turns art on its head, literally. If you have the tendency of tilting your head when you gaze at an artwork, expect to do more of that when you stumble upon one of his pieces, although with time you will do less of that. The art of Nguyen, and any artist for that matter, should not be pigeonholed – that is something most artists dread like the plague. But it is commonly and universally agreed that he paints upside-down art, or upsidedownism. The Vietnam-born artist does not merely follow this approach; in fact it is a school of art he himself has created and developed.

“The substance of man is good and bad, right and wrong. The art of upsidedownism makes them live together in peace, day, and night.” So says Nguyen of the artistic movement that has established an impressive following across poles. Apart from the thousands of Internet users from over 25 countries who regularly visit his Website, tens of artists visit his Seattle studio to practice upsidedownism, which is something he started exploring around 1996 – two years after arriving in the land of opportunity. “Living in a community where I am surrounded by Americans and Vietnamese while seeing how the world is constantly changing, the concept of my art became the views of everyday life,” says the 67-year-old artist.

“So far, artists often paint in one direction. Upsidedown art aspires to express the different aspects of human feelings: Both joy and sadness... life and death in human life.” Nguyen says his paintings have both irrationality and rationality. “That does not mean I protect the irrationality but I want to mention the immensity, the infinite universe,” he points out. “In other words, upsidedownism is from life.” He writes in his upsidedownism manifesto: “In life, there is the germ of death... The dual division is the evident truth of life. Right and wrong, life and death, happiness and suffering... Nothing is eternal. Nothing is changeless. Nothing is stable.” ▶



ABOVE:  
THE WOMAN RED,  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
76 X 102CM,  
2011

OPPOSITE PAGE:  
DAI GIANG NGUYEN,  
SELF PORTRAIT

"IN LIFE, THERE IS THE GERM OF DEATH... THE DUAL DIVISION IS THE EVIDENT TRUTH OF LIFE. RIGHT AND WRONG, LIFE AND DEATH, HAPPINESS AND SUFFERING... **NOTHING IS ETERNAL.** NOTHING IS CHANGELESS. NOTHING IS STABLE."

## TWO-FACED TRUTH

Nothing is what it is for the players of Ô ăn quan, a traditional Vietnamese children's board game, which Nguyen depicts in warm tones using acrylic – the players could be winners or losers at any given moment. You get the same feeling with his “New Year” revelers, their bodies are dancing vivaciously, yet their faces tell a different story, as if to say “so much happiness, so much sorrow”.

Through such abstracted scenes, the artist-philosopher reflects on the rapid change the world is going through and its effect on human life. So on his canvases, the unconscious meets the conscious, and they are both wide awake. His subjects and their positions change depending on the angle, depending on where life throws them. The emphasis on the change lies in the eyes, nose, mouth, arms, legs...

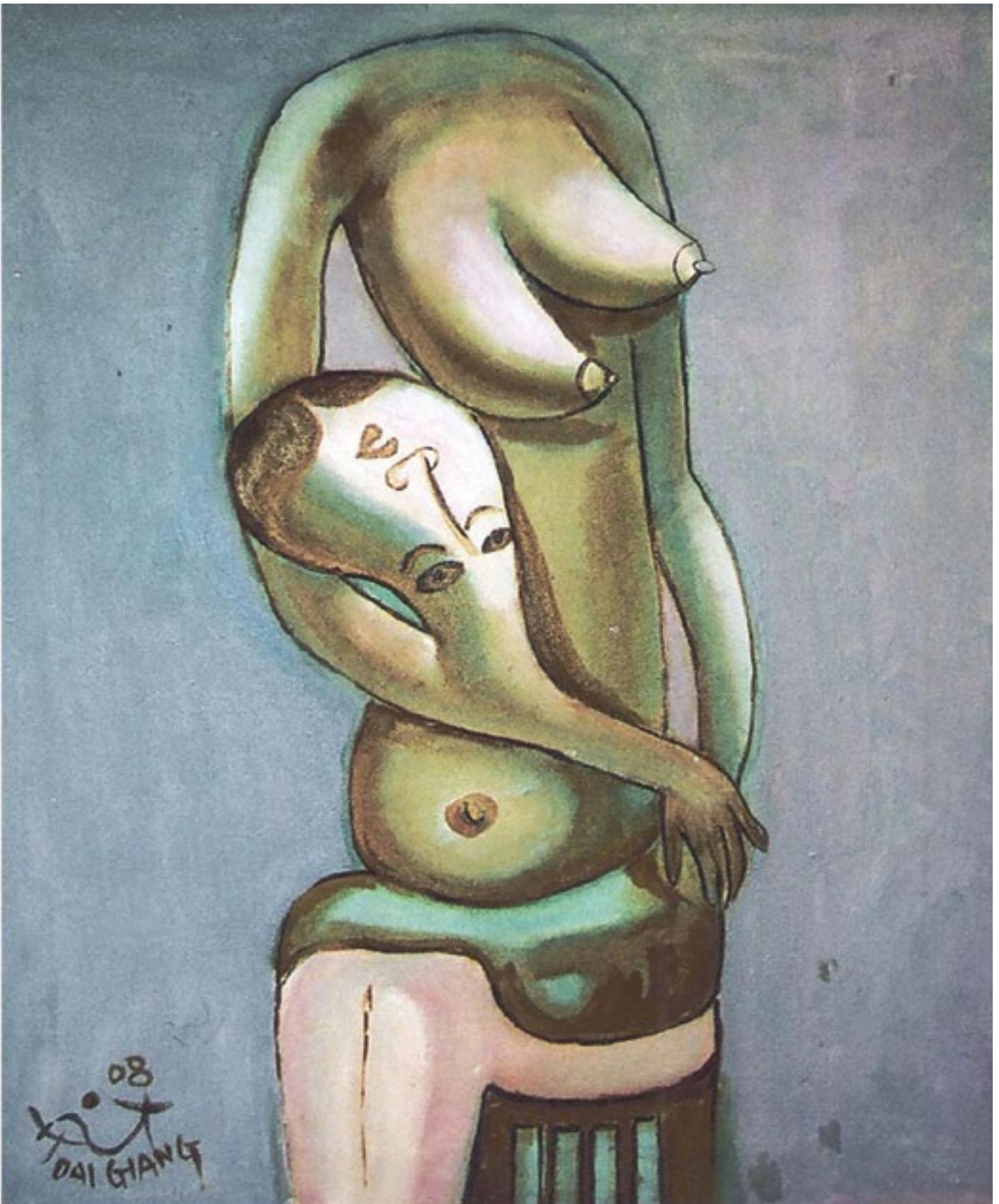
The inside becomes the outside, up becomes down, what's large becomes small and vice versa. Nguyen tells me that even though the portrait is “changed, distorted, and unnatural looking”, the basic characteristics and personality of the figure never changes. “An artist of upsidedownism creates something that is borderless between right and wrong, the beautiful and the ugly, the body and the bodiless,” he stresses. “It is an intensive marriage between logicity and illogicality, where invisible things live together with the visible.”

One of the better examples that illustrate this illogicality is Nguyen's oil painting “Sleeping”, where we see fantastical figures that appear monstrous, yet human, both man and woman. Here, we are reminded of the cubism of Pablo Picasso, the

abstractionism of Morgan Russell, the symbolism of Gustave Moreau, with generous strokes of impressionism, surrealism, and futurism. Like his work, Nguyen is a yoyo, oscillating from the very colorful to more somber tones, leaving little room for predictability. Nguyen's body of work is notably loaded with iconography about change in his home country as well as the role of women, which are his favorite subjects. Most of the time, he paints her nude, revealing her lines and cracks with a great deal of symbolism as part of his regular commentaries on life. This explains his affinity with painting the mundane, society, and people. ▶

“IT IS AN INTENSIVE MARRIAGE BETWEEN LOGICALITY AND ILLOGICALITY”





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OPPOSITE PAGE:  
SLEEPING,  
OIL ON CANVAS,  
71 X 55 CM,  
2008

ABOVE:  
WOMAN ON CHAIR,  
OIL ON CANVAS,  
45 X 63 CM,  
2008



LEFT:  
DAN BAU,  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
127 X 122CM,  
2010

BELOW:  
NUDE 1,  
OIL ON CANVAS,  
50 X 60CM,  
2008

HIS SUBJECTS AND THEIR  
POSITIONS CHANGE DEPENDING  
ON THE ANGLE, DEPENDING ON  
WHERE LIFE THROWS THEM.  
THE EMPHASIS ON THE CHANGE  
LIES IN THE EYES, NOSE, MOUTH,  
ARMS, LEGS... THE INSIDE  
BECOMES THE OUTSIDE, UP  
BECOMES DOWN, WHAT'S LARGE  
BECOMES SMALL AND VICE  
VERSA



BELOW:  
PLAYING GAME O AN QUAN,  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
120 X 127CM,  
2009



**‘AN ARTIST OF UPSIDEDOWNISM  
CREATES SOMETHING THAT IS  
BORDERLESS BETWEEN RIGHT AND  
WRONG, THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE  
UGLY, THE BODY AND THE BODILESS’**

It doesn't take him very long to do that – perhaps two or three days, one week if he's going through a dry spell. Although oils and acrylics are his chosen mediums to date, Nguyen does not feel bound by these two, remarking, "If you are an artist of upsidownism, you can use all mediums." He also doesn't bind himself to series, preferring to do one artwork at a time. Like his portraits, Nguyen's style changes too. Though he usually works with medium sized canvases, at the moment he is burying himself in a big mural he calls "Born, Old, Ill, Die". Things have not always been so upside-down, right and left for the Hanoi-born artist. At the age of seven, Nguyen had his first brush with painting. By the time he was a teen, he knew what he was to do with the rest of his life. He earned an associate of arts from the Hanoi College of Arts in 1968. But he decided to take his

artistic education beyond borders, all the way to the former USSR, eventually graduating with a BA in arts from the Moscow College of Arts in 1974. He pursued that even further at the University of Washington after settling in the U.S. some two decades later. It would not be long before Nguyen's art would leave audiences and art critics with their jaws hanging. In 1994, he walked away with gold at Washington State Convention Center's international art competition. This was beefed up by a string of other nods that fueled interest in the artist. Shortly after penning his upsidownism manifesto and putting the philosophy to practice, he was featured in the "Who's Who in the World" by International Biographical Center (IBC) of Cambridge, which is a world leader in biographical publishing. He was also selected in the "500 Founders of 21st Century" book by J. Gifford and IBC.

The prolific artist continued to exhibit in the U.S. during that time, as well as European capitals. In 2006, his "Mother and Son" received top mentioning at an international art contest in Spain. A year later, "Ca Trù", where he portrays Vietnamese musicians, scooped the Diploma of Excellence in a London-held competition. Nguyen's upside-down art can be found in the Museum of Art in Voronezh, Russia as well as the Museum of Seattle. It is also in permanent private collections in the U.S., Japan, Canada, Hong Kong, Belgium, Vietnam, France...

Through his new art movement and philosophy, Nguyen plays an undeniably important role in today's contemporary art, as he has completely turned art on its head, playing games with our eyes and judgment ■