

Duy Hoàng: The Art of Mad Science and (Quasi) Natural History



Duy Hoàng, *Second Sightings*, 2019, mixed media, natural materials, yarn, drawings, digital prints, tools, 20.25 x 14.5 x 10.5 ft, Wave Hill, the Bronx, NY.

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During his residency at Wave Hill, artist Duy Hoàng could be spotted at the far corners of the garden's grounds, camera and binoculars in hand, trailing after fledgling robins and collecting samples of fallen petals and pine-needles. Often arriving before the staff and working in his studio until closing hours in the winter months of February and March, Hoàng's zealous curiosity for the flora and fauna around him almost served as a performance piece, highlighting a remarkable potential for playful scientific inquiry most of us have likely left untapped since childhood. (I used to collect arrowheads and geodes in a patchwork leather pouch with white feather tassels. What happened to that impulse?)

In Hoàng's workspace, he installed botanical sketches on graph paper, photographs of trails and animal tracks in the snow, tea bags, compostable plates, push pins, glass vials, tweezers, glue, newspapers in a variety of languages, succulents in coffee cups, prickly things and band aids, scanned prints of antique botanical artworks, and piles of grass, twigs, and dirt collected from his "field work" throughout the garden. Orange and blue string tied to light fixtures, crown moldings, and door hinges held blooming branches up in cups of water on table tops. Reclaiming the cabinet of curiosities *Wunderkammer* tradition from a problematic history of colonialist plundering, Hoàng neither sells nor keeps his vegetal collectables. These artwork worlds, which the artist considers "basecamps" or "expeditions", live only once before being composted, or "put back" in their original

outdoor locations, at the end of their installation. The works resist commodification (and, by extension, the art market) in their ephemerality, and instead prompt a subjective reflection on mortality and the inevitability of the decay of all living things, resonating with the art historical *memento mori* and *vanitas* traditions.

On one wall displayed enlarged photographs of the Google Translate app applied to trees and leaf piles, the program translating these random natural forms from "Chinese" into English words like pollution, carefully, data, supremacy, mobile, fuel, news, beaten, memory, heat, and

innumerable others. In this humorous demonstration of the absurdity of our classification systems and technology dependence, Hoàng shows us that sometimes the thing we hope to understand exists beyond the limits of our expectations. Reflecting on this project, the artist shares, "The generated words resemble a poem, composed by nature and human extension through technology; the result also feels like a desperate attempt to communicate and understand between the natural world and human." Though this workspace installation no longer exists in Glyndor's middle gallery, Hoàng will create another highly experimental and site-specific world of quasi-scientific natural wonder in Glyndor's Sun Porch opening on September 15.



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After moving to the US from Vietnam in his adolescence, Hoàng developed a keen sense of observation and awareness—necessary social assets for a young immigrant. His family's edible garden traveled across the ocean with them, and Hoàng continues to think about transplanting as a metaphor for migration. Indeed, his accumulation installations resonate with an intention of nesting, of creating a temporary home or sanctuary. A self-proclaimed "mad scientist wannabe", Hoàng holds an MFA from Columbia University (where he used an archaeology lab room as an artist studio). He was recently awarded a 2019 New York Community Trust Van Lier Fellowship at Wave Hill, a year-long program which includes the opportunity to participate in both our Winter Workspace residency program and the Sunroom Project Space. The artist's complex and often interactive sculptural practice engages with topics of survival and memory, notions of "home," and the potential of growth and inevitability of decay of both cultivated plants and their human caretakers. In a time when digital screens demand more and more hours of our daily attention, Hoàng's work revives our better instincts to wonder, wander, play, and discover.

Left: Duy Hoàng, In-progress Google Translate project, 2019.

Previous Works:



Duy Hoàng, *A Wide Area Where Three Rivers Gather*, 2018, plants, rocks, ink on paper, books, 11.5 x 8.5 x 9 ft, Maruseppu, Japan.



Duy Hoàng, *Archipelago: Mayfly*, 2018, mixed media, wood, insects, moss, drawings, spore prints, tools, dimensions variable, Rabbit Island, Lake Superior, MI.



Duy Hoàng, *Septal Nectary*, 2017, plants, water, food coloring, container, tools, wood, light, mixed media, 58 x 48 x 127 inches, Singapore, Additional documentation: Cheryl Chiw, Denise Yap, Caterina Riva, Joel Chin.



Duy Hoàng, *Cultivar*, 2018, mixed media, edible plants, water, food color, light, plastic sheet, 52 x 198 x 157 inches.

All images courtesy of the artist.