



## *My grandfather turned into a tiger*

A response to the work of Pao Houa Her  
by Mariana Muñoz Gomez

Through the images making up Pao Houa Her's exhibition *My grandfather turned into a tiger*, Her offers glimpses of specific scenes; constructed images that don't quite make sense. Or rather, uncanny and unsettling in the way they do make sense. In one shot, pink flowers line the sides of silky stage curtains; in another shot, looking closely, one sees the distinction between flowers and flesh, and then also recognizes the distinctions that are telling of fake or fresh flowers. What is real or true, then?

Within this exhibition, Her uses photography as a medium of witnessing and myth-making. A myth: "A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events."<sup>1</sup> Let us take into consideration this notion of myth-making, one that focuses on storytelling and explanation. In this body of work, Her reinterprets a myth recounted to her by her great-aunt. The story goes that, after Her's grandfather died in the Vietnam War in the early 1960s, he reappeared at her grandmother's home as a tiger, watching over her and leaving only when finally asked to.<sup>2</sup> Instead of being a straightforward document of her grandfather and his mythology, Her picks up the themes of transformation, construction, and illusion from the story, and this is what runs throughout her images.

When a loved one dies, their spirit watches over us. Watching and witnessing are central themes in this body of work, imbued with tensions between real and un-real, construct and natural. In the lenticular photos, it's interesting to note the careful construction of the image: subtle enough that, glancing through, you might not notice anything off. Upon inspection, you can see some jagged edges leftover from Photoshop selections on those lush, green leaves. The image of the tiger is also convincing at a distance. Moving closer and watching the light play on the textured surface of the photo, layers of the artist's hand once again become evident within this medium that's supposed to be a direct link to the material world; a medium said to document what has been for certain.

As the tiger's eyes follow you through the gallery, so do other pairs of eyes. Her's subjects in this exhibition have a calm air to them (save for a crying child). Most of the eyes that are visible in the photographs look into the camera, reflecting both the viewer's gaze and Her's gaze as she records them. A young person in heels is likely the first subject to encounter as you step into the gallery, only to turn and discover another figure in a photograph has watched you enter without you noticing. This figure reappears a number of times within this body of work with slight variations each time, but always standing among a layered and constructed representation of nature.

Construction is essential to the exhibition not only through visual cues, but also in what it means for a historically documentary medium. Hmong individuals are part of a community that has faced numerous misrepresentations by anthropological and ethnographic studies, as well as educational and academic texts. By taking photos of her family, community, and environments, Her asserts her vision of this part of her family's story, their present and history, and of her experience of the Hmong community and diaspora. In Her's images, the narratives one begins imagining keep getting disrupted the longer you look. Her's careful decisions within the exhibition subvert the straightforwardness of photography and patterns of linear thinking, in turn complicating one's understanding of the ways in which stories, truth, and reality are constructed.

- 1 "Myth," Oxford University Press, accessed January 22, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/myth>
- 2 *Pao Houa Her*, interview by Will Glaser, Ain't Bad, July 10, 2018, <https://www.aint-bad.com/article/2018/07/10/pao-houa-her/>

**Pao Houa Her** was born in Laos in 1982. She received an MFA in Photography from Yale University in 2012 and attended the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. She has had solo exhibitions at Bockley Gallery; Minneapolis Institute of Art; the Eli and Edyth Broad Art Museum, East Lansing MI; and Bindery Projects, St. Paul. She has participated in numerous group exhibitions at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston; MALLIAM, Chiang Mai, Thailand; SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, Cambodia; Telemark Art Center, Skien, Norway; the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago; and Camera Club of New York, New York City. She is represented by Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis, and lives and works in the Twin Cities.

**Mariana Muñoz Gomez** is an emerging artist, writer, and curator based in Winnipeg, MB/Treaty One Territory. Her practice is situated at the intersection of identity, place, representation, and language.

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**IMAGE** | Pao Houa Her, from *My grandfather turned into a tiger*



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