

Name of Interviewer: Han Park

Method of Recording Interview: Digital audio

Language of Interview: English, Vietnamese

Location of the Interview: 9004 Briardale Dr., Austin, Texas

Date: November 6, 2008

Themes: Art (Microart); wartime and post-war Vietnam

Name of Person Interviewed Tien Nguyen

Contact Information of Person Interviewed: 9004 Briardale Dr., Austin, Tx, home: (512)-719-4308

Name

Transcript

00:01

Han Ok, let's start with your name and your birthday.

Tien My name? Tien Nguyen

Han And when were you born?

Tien Born in Vietnam.

[Vietnamese]

Tien Date? DOB?

[Vietnamese]

Tien 6/9/1949

Han Ok.

Han Where in Vietnam were you born?

Tien Gia Dinh, Vietnam.

[Vietnamese]

Tien Gia Dinh, Gia Dinh

Tien Gia Dinh, Gia Dinh Vietnam; Saigon, Vietnam, Saigon, Vietnam, Saigon, Vietnam.

Han Ok, so, what was it like growing up in Vietnam?

[Vietnamese]

Tien I learned in high school huh, during the 12th year, yeah? After that I go to school I went to I joined to army. Ok, do you want year by year?

Han Sure
Tien Yeah, from 45 to 62, 47.

[Vietnamese]

Tien 47 to 67 every year. I come...

[Vietnamese]

Daughter So he enlisted and joined the military when he was 18.

[Vietnamese]

Daughter After that he just go to school.

[Vietnamese]

Tien Drawing, yeah?

Han Ok, can you tell me about learning art, learning how to draw? Painting?

Tien I learned about art myself right? By book and train.

Han How old were you when you first started?

[Vietnamese]

Tien 10 years old.

Han 10 years old?

Tien Yeah, 10 year old.

Han And what kind of work did you do? What kind of art?

[Vietnamese]

Tien I begin with pencil. After that watercolor, watercolor.

[Vietnamese]

Tien I look for money to buy. I go to work some by the movie theater, I draw panel. Accident only because I did small, accident some people who had picture paint big panel. Opera.

Han So, opera?

04:48

Tien Yeah, opera.

Daughter His dad did art, too.

05:00

Han What kind of art? What kind of art did he do?

Daughter His dad?

[Vietnamese]

Tien My father also paint panel like me; he paint a panel for theater.

[Vietnamese]

Daughter He paint like the...

Tien He paint the landscape, you know, for the theater...

Daughter For the opera.

Tien For the opera.

[Vietnamese]

Tien But he went... He died a long time ago, when he had me. He had me about 3, I don't remember. But i see some panel he did. I look that and I know something, you know.

Han Ok. Now, from the last interview you told me about being 15 years old and teaching at the art academy. Can you talk about that?

Tien Academy of military, right?

Han No.

Tien The art?

Han Yeah.

Tien When I go to drawing for the art somebody exam go to the academy of art, by accident, by accident. I follow some student, I help them, drawing. About some deer. Forgot and they present them to me and go to art shop, big one around the city

[Inaudible – Phone goes off]

Tien People for money. Yeah, many cars.

Han So, what did you teach at the academy?

Tien I teach art back home from the jail. Some friend, you don't know me, invite me to take care some grass.

[Inaudible – Phones goes off]

Tien Like some, something to do. Some young man want to learn, I guided them.

Han So, we'll move on from that.

Han Do you practice any traditional arts? The ao dai?

[Vietnamese]

Tien You want to know how I learn right?

[Vietnamese]

08:30

Tien Of course, I live in Saigon, and we...

[Vietnamese]

Daughter You get food, like Chinese drawing.

Tien Look like, when I begin water color. Some friend, my friend, guided me from Chinese style first. Black on white, white paper. Friend show me, guided me and I learn from friend and from book, and not much else. After, some year, you know my technique up, grow up. Look like someone told me I saw young man. Everything not official. I don't have any certificate or any graph at tech. Because i need to go looking for money and i go to the art work, art shop, art shop.

10:00

Tien Everything I did looking for money, buy art, buy drawing. Day by day, year by day, year by year. I grow up, my technique and this one important: at academy, art academy Saigon, we know there, in Taiwan, some picture and drawing on the hair, on the rice.

10:52

[Tien goes to get examples]

Tien I know some news in newspaper and I collect them and learning how they do. I show you, make it like mine, micro art book. Micro art from around the world. Here, on hair one artist, China artist in Taiwan they do “The Journey To The West.”

Daughter Drawing the Monkey King

[Vietnamese]

Daughter From "Journey To the West."

[Vietnamese]

Tien You know about the four persons in the west, journey? You know that? Somebody can carve, you know, rice in the water then the small seed then. Then I collect all small book of the world and I want to do like it.

Han You wanted to make it?

Tien Yeah, right? But when I

12:48

so young, I don't know what I want. After I back to jail, I begin to collect by news paper and magazine, small souvenir of the world. By paper small

[INAUDIBLE]

Tien right, by... Around the world, by Europe, Oriental. (Pointing to examples) This one new millennium, small violin, little watch, clock, about half inch, you can do (imitates violin). I do aluminum. I want to do big one. I was a pilot of this one. I borrow some this one from model kit from friend. I borrow to copy, to exact detail, and I copy, more and more, to scale. I sharpen in U.S.. You want to make fly, you want model and in Vietnam they do, but you can't because of aluminum when you do that for the market. This one has high detail in the symbols, high detail.

15:00

And I do this one, you see. I need; I cut this one. From the metal, I can cut the propeller.

[INAUDIBLE]

Tien From metal, to make limb and I got something how to do. I want to do small marking for sticker on top the wing. With the canopy and I take plastic and I make the mold, hot air, and do like this, cut and cut, cut good. For skin of helicopter I do this, aluminum, saw. See one clip, cut and drill the hole.

16:45

Tien I need some tools, good one. I have that and, in Japan, they can do a good one, good, good. Cool, cool. You seen my tools, right?

Han Yeah.

Tien You seen my tools; the first one, like, goes... OK, I have a long time after I got back to jail, 1980, 1981, 1981-1993 wait a long time to go to the United States, right? I work, look like a farmer. You know peasant?

Daughter Peasant.

Tien Peasant, yeah. I have a long time, and I have good time for micro art. Yeah, for big, for first. I relax cause I have a long time, I had to do everything, I do everything. I enjoy myself too... Inside my house in Vietnam, my poor house. We do work, look like a coconut.

Daughter Oh, coconut leaf.

Tien This one right here, after I go to the United States, I look for some tools.

Han Can I ask you about the time after...

Tien United States or after jail?

Han After being in prison, reeducation camp?

[Vietnamese]

Daughter Did you want when he was in the reeducation camp or after?

[Vietnamese]

Han Both

[Vietnamese]

Tien You know when I was in military camp, I also do some art. I know which soldier, inside the wall of the camp. Yeah, my boss like me, right? I can do some art, for give my art. You know, inside jail, art is so hard, you know to relax.

20:00

I do some microart inside camp. You don't have the more metal, or big to work, you have a little bit. Ok, you work small, it OK right? You need the big one, then I don't have the aluminum. I need the small one. I have the small aluminum right?

Han Did you start out with rice or did you start out with models?

[Vietnamese]

Tien You know a long time ago, I like the model kit because it was little and it was what I saw. Big plan and I have small plan, right? I bought model kit, model kit plastic, no more when I go to the military. Listen: and I go to jail and I need that, I need to do that for enjoy and I start work with my hand.

Han So, you started collecting models?

Tien Yeah, I started with models first. Then one day I think I need to do rice right? Because long time ago in the art academy, some Taiwan. Do, do, do in the jail. Ok pick pocket some...

Daughter Small supply, they don't have...

Tien Easy for me to do. Yeah, I do, do, do. Look like my grain, right? I need to do like this, but it start so hard because no body show, teach me how to do. I need to do correctly, and I do the first one. Bad. Second one. Bad. Ten one. Bad. Right now, we don't have about micro art. Micro art motor airplane only. No rice, right? But one day I think maybe. I quit, I quit, I quit. I went through all my rice, but then one thing; I did follow my dream, right? Do that, you know that? It look like type of new art right? Because you can't do, you can't do. So difficult! I said ok, I feel so good. Look like up there, up here right? More, more. I remember right now, I show you the first one.

(leaves)

Daughter I've never seen the first one. (laughs)

Tien Look at this one, so long. The first one, you know. I see all the time and I say, "Ok, good."

[Inaudible]

Tien 1979 - before one year, or 2 year I did this one.

Han 1979? That's when...

[Vietnamese]

Daughter Oh, it's a gold fish!

Tien Yeah.

25:14

Tien You see? From time it becomes like this. I mean you don't see anything. This one took over a year old. This one over 20 years. I try to put in some chemicals, and melt. No good, and I'm looking for a good chemical. So dry, it doesn't protect the rice. No never, never.

Han Can you tell me about the actual camp itself?

[Vietnamese]

Daughter What he does every day? In the concentration camp?

[Vietnamese]

Tien Inside the jail, you know labor, plant the rice, and potato. Plant the food, you know, for survive. You also have some relax time during like weekend or after work or new year. You have some day you don't have to work, you can do anything you like.

Han Can you tell me about the different camps you were at? Bien Hoa?

Tien First time it was Bien Hoa, right? Bien Hoa, Bien Hoa, both time it was Bien Hoa. I went to many camp but this time was I was out some mile. We go walk, walk, walk, walk, walk and we do. We built this camp and somebody take it from an old soldier base about some thousand men right, some thousand national built another camp right there right, Bien Hoa? After some year they, the communist, not doing so good, you don't want to escape. You can go to the jail, you can go to the jungle, jungle jail. You can follow the plane to closest city. That camp close to the city, and they bring everybody go to the jungle in Pannin.

[Vietnamese]

Tien Second camp: Jungle.

Han Loc Ninh

Tien Loc Ninh! yeah, Loc Ninh. And we cut the bamboo and we built the camp with the bamboo or we would have been shot.

Han Can you tell me when you first went to the camp/the jail?

[Vietnamese]

Tien The first day, the first one? The first year we not so happy you know. You know about the communist? SOUTH KOREA! (referring to interviewer's ethnicity) You create outside, you come, you scary, you hungry right? No food for a lot of people; five thousand people, one camp.

30:00

Potato like this and you work hard. You bring all the American military camp before and they can come back here, come back United States. They take airplane home, or we build a house or a building. It was so hard but at that time I had some tools, because I get some metal. I pick up some metal and I find someone's camera and so I had my lens.

Han So when did you first consider that idea? To build your models?

[Vietnamese]

Tien I start with the model first; I look for material, I look for like aluminum, you look for like copper, or sometimes...

[Vietnamese]

Chalk, but not so good. It crumble like that. It looking for some hard material in wall; wall for storing. For the first year, in 75 to 70... 77. That was the first year I did model first. And from 79 to 80 I did rice. I go to the kitchen. I go to kitchen and I look in the back and I bring my own some rice. Rice after model, that was the plan.

Han Can you tell me about your time in the military? When did you start?

[Vietnamese]

Tien Before jail, I can draw. I told you some military camp, like lithogram, or some newspaper. Or you need... that's it. Not the model; I had one model in my bunker. Only one: helicopter. I enjoy only one before the military. Not comfortable bunker so nothing I know about that time, about 7 year, a lot of time. My technique about art grow up so, so it grow up so strong after I back from jail. In jail begin so simple, after I get back to jail, can go back around the city. I can look for more tool for my technique. I go for more and more detail you know. Make it look so good; when I begin I look for more and more for my technique. But you know I need to take care of my children, for money.

Han So, with your rice art, what kind of images do you do?

[Vietnamese]

35:00

Tien Maybe i can first. Animal first, because easy. Then i do house, but animal first. Then do to landscape, Vietnamese landscape, then around the world landscape. Animal, landscape and some architect, look like capital here, look like great wall in china. Very difficult. Little more, little more technique. I make it for some person. I also do some portrait. The portrait, it so, so scary.

Han Why?

Tien Because of detail. I can do that, but that expensive guy: one doctor, Korean guy, hire me. He drive a motorcycle, like this. Look like the boss, right? I draw on the rice, he pay me \$1000. I say, "Ok, I can do that." (laughter) But like this: he wear the helmet. I say, "Ok, good small guy, on motor cycle. Small, like this. You know I can do that. I hide it; Ok, \$1000 at low price. and my friend, my friend you make a lot of money you order me.

Han Do you do any other art? Your water colors, what else?

[Vietnamese]

Daughter Microart?

Han Does he do any other art like the watercolors?

Tien I don't remember but you can can look at my museum. Come for a little bit, I can remember.

38:08