

Weaving memories



by Thanh N. Tran

"A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Le," currently at the Bellevue Arts Museum, is the first major survey of the photographer and conceptual artist and Vietnamese refugee.

In early September, as locals at the exhibit admired the works, the artist himself strolled around, greeting visitors and thanking them for their kind words.

Le is best known for his practice of a traditional mat-weaving technique used in Vietnam. But instead of grass to create baskets and floor mats, he cuts photographs into strips and intricately weaves them together to produce his art. He often uses startling images from his childhood experiences, from the Vietnam War to the invasion of the Khmer Rouge, to highlight the struggle many people have in finding a cultural identity in America, after experiencing such dramatic scenes with one's own eyes.

Le was born in Ha-Tien, Vietnam, in 1968. At the age of 10, his mother took him and his six siblings to America by boat, with courage and hope that America would be better than the war zone they had just escaped.

They settled in California, though, growing up, Le never felt at home there. Something was always missing. In his studies in math and engineering, he also felt something was amiss. So he took a risk that many Asian-Americans seldom take: He enrolled in photography classes and loved them so much that he changed his degree to fine arts at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

"Even though I was taking art classes, I tried to convince myself not to pursue it (a career in art)," Le recalled. "It wasn't the American dream that my mom had hoped for me."

Diep Doan, Le's mother, like many other Asian American parents, was hesitant to support her son's passion for the arts; it wasn't a secure profession, financially anyway.

Le couldn't resist his love of the arts, however. He went on to earn his master's degree in fine arts at the Photography School of Visual Arts in New York.

After many years of experience and artistic development, Le continues to contemplate and reminisce about his childhood days in Vietnam. His utmost concern remains, however, to use

his art as a framework for people to remember their cultural roots and their personal obstacles as victims in their country and as refugees in their new one.

One of Le's favorite displays is one that didn't involve the weaving of one picture, but many black and white pictures of people from Vietnam. The pictures have messages written in Vietnamese on the back of each one. The words have a natural brown, antique look, having faded through the years.

Le was interested in finding photographs of his family that had been lost in Vietnam, so he searched numerous thrift stores, hoping to recover them. Instead, he ended up restoring hundreds of other Vietnamese photographs.

"I don't know who these people are, if they are dead or alive, still in Vietnam or here in America, but I hope this will help them remember who they were," said Le.

After his visit to Seattle, Le traveled to Taipei to build a museum on what once was a prison island. Currently, he is back in Ho Chi Minh City, where he lives and works, launching his non-profit organization, Vietnam Foundation for the Arts. He hopes his organization will create a space where Vietnamese artists can come and learn more about the profession and discover new artistic skills.

Visit "A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Le" at the Bellevue Arts Museum Sept. 1-Dec. 30. 510 Bellevue Way NE. For more information, visit www.bellevuearts.org or call 425-519-0770.