

On-ramp to the Apocalypse: An Interview with Truong Tran

By Wei Ming Dariotis

Truong Tran is the author of five books of poetry: *Four letter Words* (2008), *within the margin* (2004), *dust and conscience* (2002), *Placing the Accents* (1999), and *The Book of Perceptions* (1999). He also wrote the children's book *Going Home Coming Home* (2003). Born in Saigon in 1969, Tran graduated with his BA from UC Santa Cruz in 1992 and his MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University in 1995. He has taught creative writing throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, including at San Francisco State University, the UC Berkeley Extension, and Mills College, as well as at Goddard College in Vermont. His first solo exhibition as a visual artist, "the lost and the found", was held at Kearney Street Workshop in San Francisco in 2010. This interview took place on February 25, 2013 at Four Barrels Coffee on Valencia in San Francisco, California.

AALDP: What questions have you tried to answer with your poetry?

Truong Tran: It is the same question I ask my students all the time, which is: Why? Why are we doing what it is that we are doing?

AALDP: How have you seen yourself grow as a writer since 1992, when you moved to San Francisco to go to the MFA program in creative writing at SF State?

Truong Tran: I've grown to distrust language. I've grown to extend my thinking beyond language. I see myself not as a writer but as an artist. Language is part of that equation, but not the limit of it. I've grown to think that all art forms are ways of thinking.

AALDP: How does teaching creative writing influence you as a writer?

Truong Tran: I see the hope that my students place in *The Word*, but I also see that by the end of their time as students, they've been conditioned to pursue the professionalism of writing in a way that can be destructive of their own capacity as thinkers. In a way, writing can never be a career. Career writers produce shit. Many of those careers that are embedded in academia are writing to protect a way of life, not to take risks or to advance their thinking or the thinking of society.

Wei Ming Dariotis is an Associate Professor of Asian American Studies, with an emphasis on Asian Americans and Chinese Americans of Mixed Heritage and pan-ethnic Asian American and Chinese American Literature, Arts, and Culture, at San Francisco State University. With Laura Kin, Dariotis co-edited *War Baby/Love Child: Mixed Race Asian American Art* (University of Washington Press, 2013).

AALDP: What is your favorite writing prompt to give to your students?

Truong Tran: I ask my students three questions to test their storytelling abilities:

- **What haunts you?**
- **What hunts you?**
- **What are you hunting?**

AALDP: And how do you answer these questions?

Truong Tran: What haunts me? The fear of not seeing. The fear of looking and not seeing. What hunts me? Practicality. I grew up in a working class family, so the monster of practicality is always right there, telling me, "You have no business doing the things that you do." What am I hunting? Ideas. Always, ideas.

AALDP: What idea do you have the scent of now?

Truong Tran: Privacy and intimacy. That my work need not be about addressing the Other. I think in the latest phase of my thinking, the work is about a conversation with myself, no longer about a conversation with others. Am I being too cryptic?

AALDP: How does living in San Francisco influence you as a poet and as a visual artist?

Truong Tran: I don't think I would have been a writer or an artist anywhere else because there's a sense of freedom here that I really appreciate. Maybe more so during my time coming up as a writer than now, I felt a sense of hope. I once heard a far-right Christian describe San Francisco as the on-ramp to the apocalypse. Hell, if I'm going to live, it might as well be in the on-ramp to the apocalypse, right?

AALDP: What role has the local Asian American art scene played in your work?

Truong Tran: It has been a hugely supportive community. Kearny Street Workshop (KSW) published my first book and gave me my first solo visual art show. Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center (APICC) has showcased me in many shows and given me much needed exposure to my community. And in 2013 I will be the first male artist featured in an Asian American Women Artists Association (AAWAA) show. Part of me is very honored and part of me feels like I'll be taking up space.

AALDP: Who are your favorite Asian American writers?

Truong Tran: Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, and Myung Mi Kim.

AALDP: And which Asian American writers do you assign to your students?

Truong Tran: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Myung Mi Kim. But to be honest, I also feel that writers such as Erica Hunt and Harryette Mullen, who are both African American, have a great deal to contribute to our discourse as Asian American writers as well.

AALDP: They're all women.

Truong Tran: And rightly so. My mother used to say that men have it easy because they're charged with the task of going to war, while women have the burden of carrying on with life.

AALDP: How are your visual pieces related to your poems?

Truong Tran: My visual pieces are poems. Be it a poem or a piece of art, what I'm trying to get at is a gesture towards an idea. My poems and art pieces never arrive because my goal is not to nail down the ending; the ending is the journey of the reader or viewer. But this gesture presents me with a dilemma because sometimes my greatest successes are also my greatest failures as an artist. My goal is to create surfaces, but when I'm too successful at creating the surface, the reader or viewer sometimes doesn't realize there is something beneath that surface. They think that they don't need to look beyond the surface beauty. If the work doesn't have an underbelly, it doesn't have anything to hold it.

AALDP: Tell me about your current work as a visual artist.

Truong Tran: The reality is I have not written in several years, but I don't differentiate between visual and written art, it's all the same to me. My thinking now is facilitated by materials rather than by words. I work with discarded materials. I don't call them recycled; I call them discarded because there is a metaphor there. I'm concerned with the things and people we as a society discard—that we throw into the margins. Using these materials extends this metaphor for me. I also want to push past the boundaries of the fine arts. My current work is landscape sculpture and my primary tools are a hatchet and a hammer. I spend my days splitting wood. My tools are not tools meant for fine art, but I've always worked that way. My father was a carpenter and my mother was a seamstress. Neither one of them saw the inside of a museum, and it is hard not to acknowledge the impact of that influence.