

WWD

Artist Diane Severin Nguyen Found Inspiration in K-pop and Poland

Nguyen's new video art piece, "If Revolution Is a Sickness," is on view alongside a photo installation at SculptureCenter in Long Island City.

By KRISTEN TAUER OCTOBER 8, 2021, 4:46PM



Diane Severin Nguyen: "If Revolution Is a Sickness" installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2021. COURTESY OF CHARLES BENTON

"Sometimes, in order to transform your pain or your story into something that is legible to others, you have to join a regime," says the artist Diane Severin Nguyen. "You have to join a group to give your story symbolic value."

SculptureCenter

Group identity is at the heart of Nguyen's new video **art** piece, "If Revolution Is a Sickness," on view alongside a photo installation at SculptureCenter in Long Island City. In early September, during a press preview, the artist watched the film from start to finish as part of the group within the lofty exhibition space. Afterward, people approached her with their reactions; some were moved, some felt sad and others cried.

The nuance of similar but individual experience within a larger group is the crux of the video. Nguyen traveled to Poland this past summer to film the project, shortly after the country's lockdown order was lifted. The piece explores the politics of identity through a young Vietnamese child in Poland who becomes immersed in a K-pop dance group. Working closely with a Vietnamese choreographer who often works in Korea, Nguyen cast local teenage Polish dancers to perform original choreography.



Diane Severin Nguyen: "If Revolution Is a Sickness," installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2021. COURTESY OF CHARLES BENTON



Still from *"If Revolution Is a Sickness."*

Nguyen was drawn to the tension of division within Vietnamese diasporic groups in Europe, lines often invisible to those outside of the group. Several years ago, while in Berlin, she noticed two distinct Vietnamese communities within Germany, defined mainly by whether they were from North or South Vietnam. Those differences were influenced in large part due to alliances made during the Cold War. In Poland, she noticed a sizable Vietnamese population relative to the rest of Europe.

During the pandemic, Nguyen also became more interested in K-pop – both as a fan and an artist. She noticed there was an Eastern European aesthetic in many K-pop music videos. And then, she discovered the world of Polish K-pop dance cover videos.

"It was kind of an obsessive thing," she says. "I make photographic images, and so I'm always thinking about the space of image formation," she adds. "In K-pop, everything is so dense with imagery. Even the dancing is extremely schematic and imagistic in the way they genre-mash everything. And I find that type of movement, of combining all these disparate things and almost alienating them from their original source, to be a very photographic way of thinking and looking at the world."

The militaristic aspect of the genre — the perfectly synced dance routines — made her also think about the division between North and South Korea. From seemingly disparate inspirations, her video piece emerged.

The show's title, "Revolution Is a Sickness," is both the title of one of her earlier photographs and a chapter from a book debating whether revolution is a rational or irrational act.

Nguyen remains ambivalent. While critical of groups and efforts to represent a group, she recognizes their importance — and is interested in exploring that contradiction.

"As an artist, I'm probably more critical of the space of the group," she says. "I distrust symbolic power. And I don't like how capitalism co-ops every space of difference and doesn't allow for negativity to exist," says Nguyen. "I think the film is a little bit about bringing back some of that negativity, even though it shows the process of assimilation."

"If Revolution Is a Sickness" is on view through Dec. 13, 2021.



Diane Severin Nguyen: "If Revolution Is a Sickness," installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2021. COURTESY OF CHARLES BENTON



Diane Severin Nguyen, "As If It's Your Last," 2021. LightJet C-print, steel frame. 30 x 24 inches (76.20 x 60.96 cm). Courtesy the artist and Bureau, New York.

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