

# Do you see What I see?

A tribute to a Vietnamese artist

## Le VanKhoa

Growing up in a 3-story concrete townhome without a garden, I promise myself that some day I'll surround myself with trees I can either hug or hold. Hug? I have hugged plenty of trees, especially palm trees every chance my family went on vacation by the beach, whether in Viet Nam, the Bahamas, Belize or Hawaii. Hold? I have also done plenty of that as well, since I fell in love with little trees over five decades ago. When my trees don't seem well, especially after the cold 3 days & nights that killed a lot of vegetation around town, I started to hug the weakened, sing to them, and together, we pray for speedy recovery. Most enjoy the special kindness, the extra dose of tonic and thanked me with abundant buds.



*Organza like fabric in 30 shades of mauve and cream*

Try that on your bonsai and share your results with me. Perhaps I am not the first to tell you about the magic power of love for our little trees. In truth, everything about trees is magic, from leaves to flowers, fruits to roots, their endurance, patience and bravery. The most

captivating part to the tree lover in me is their bark.



*Trees have eyes and some have ears too.*

Tree bark come with limitless textures, some smooth or flaking, some even or irregular in patterns, some with extreme or subdued colors. In short, they come in more imageries than the mind can perceive. Created by Mother Nature and living in Nature, trees big or small always offer refuge to many living creatures, insects, squirrels, rats and birds. A few, especially the thousand year old ones, are claimed by invisible spirits or deities as their permanent residence, from which vantage point, they watch over the folks who worship them. All through my years of exploring ancient myths and legends, every civilization in the world has its own tree deities. Thousand year old oaks and sequoias are often revered as connections between the physical and spiritual worlds, a direct conduit as well as source of life and wisdom. Indeed, trees are humans' closest physical personifications of supernatural beings, of gods and goddesses.

Japan has *Kurozome*, the tree spirit of a sacred Japanese Cherry. Thailand has their *Nang Mai*. Egypt has *Nut, Isis and Hathor, the Lady of the Sycamore*. In India, the Brahma Daitya, ghosts of Brahmans, are believed to live in the fig trees, the Piplal (*ficus religiosa*), or the Banyan (*ficus indica*),

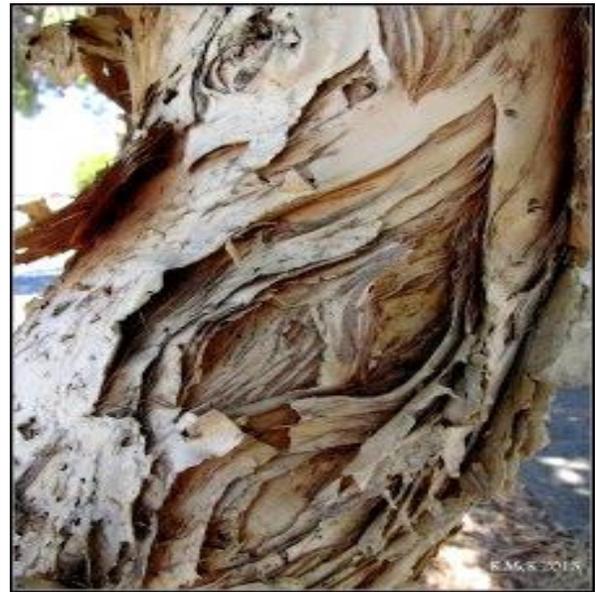
awaiting reincarnation. Indonesia and China have thousands of such spirits, one of every tree. Most European cultures adore their nymphs and fairies. In *Avatar*, the movie, The Tree of Souls, a biological neural network and the tree resident goddess Eywa serve as a living link between this world (with its roots buried deep in the earth) and those of The Creator (with arm-like branches stretching toward the Heaven). In most ancient beliefs, trees more often identified with maternal deities than male (such as Zeus) are vital parts of the structure of the universe.

Take a close look at each of these unique bark photographs borrowed from Pinterest. Trace the curvatures of each line, follow the path of each brush stroke of colors, and study the fragile contrast between the shadows and highlights. Now, close your eyes and open your mind's eye to review those images. What do you see? Are the images your mind remembers any different than those your eyes just saw?



*Mouth or eye? What do you see?*

Last Saturday, when visiting Palette, a local art gallery to get a chance to meet a famous Vietnamese genius, Mr. Lê Văn Khoa, I stumbled on the visions of another tree lover, a much more mature and advanced one than I.



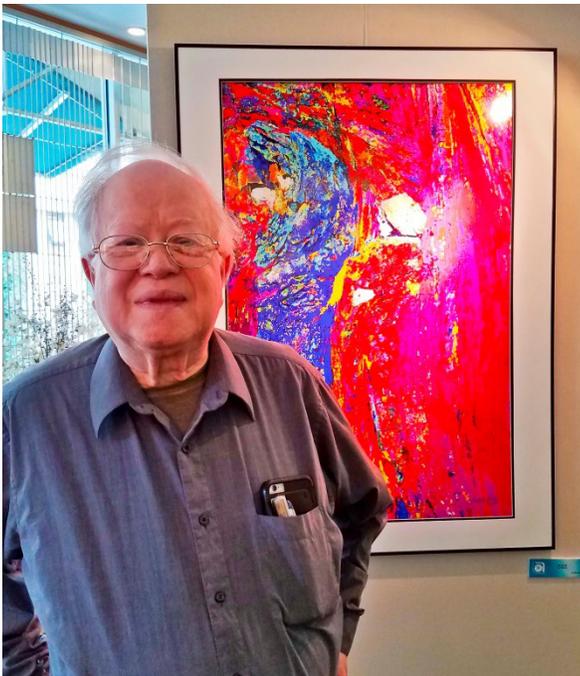
*Do you see the pairs of eyes staring back at you?*

The Lê Văn Khoa I met is witty and serene, sharp of mind although already in his mid-80s, and down to Earth. In my early years, I only watched him on TV, in an educational youth program similar to Mr. Rogers' in the US, but the topics encompass many more disciplines, such as music, arts, literature, hygiene, and nutrition. At the time, no other entertainer/educator was more suited for such a program than LVK. The program was his *carte blanche* and blank canvas, where a musician, an artist, a photographer, a writer and poet, a composer a conductor can just let the creativity flow. Overall, he was one of the greatest and most treasured teachers of all times. Over the years, I watched him stand in his penguin suit with long tail and bow tie, high up on a stage, waving his long chopsticks in the air, in front of hundreds of musicians in Viet Nam, in the US, Austria, Russia and so many other nations. He genuinely had fun.

Today for the first time, in front of me, the bigger than life LVK is off that pedestal, within my embrace. 65 years of devotion to education and the arts in Viet Nam and after 1975, in the US as well as in the world, had

weighed down on his shoulders. Beneath the diminutive frame in a simple grey shirt, I still recognized the man with an angelical smile. That's the smile of a gentle soul who had lived a fulfilling life.

Mixed in with his dramatic Black & White photos of the old Viet Nam, were bizarre paintings or serigraphs under glass. As I moved from one stunning stroke of genius to another, it became apparent to me that LVK has evolved over time far, very far indeed, from the Realist with an empathetic camera lens that captured the war time suffering that won him endless awards, to the Abstract. He has transformed into a Surrealist painter of joyful spiritual images. Aided by his mind's eye and the most up to date tools (digital cameras, fancy lenses and yes, PhotoShop), this wizard's hands orchestrated lights and colors, emotions and images into magical masterwork of dynamic waves and vibrations.



*The multi-talented prodigy Lê Văn Khoa*

Enthralled in the moment with each and every one of those enchanting gems, I let go of my critical mind and surrender to my senses. No

one artist I have studied has so



successfully depicted non solid waves, sound and light waves in this context, into such magnum opus.



From this pine bark, LVK sees *Two Mothers, sheltering their babies in their arms, on their long journey to peace. He misses his mother so.*

The gallery director whispered to me that they were all photographs of real tree barks. When the crowd started to dissipate, I got my chance to speak to LVK. He greeted me with a sweet smile: *Do you see what I see?* That happens to be the title of his digital photographic interpretations of tree barks.

As the son of a preacher in the South of Viet Nam, LVK was blessed at a tender age with the teaching and mentorship of an American missionary couple. They began teaching him English, but once they recognized the genius in this young boy, they devoted all their time to train him in music, arts, and literature. Blessed with so many seeds of culture and

knowledge, LVK opened many doors to the world and went on to explore many other fields on his own.



*From an elm bark, LVK saw a fairy dancing and **Singing For Freedom**. Could this lively creature be the artist himself?*



In 1968, this self-taught photographer founded The Artistic Photography Association, the very first club in Viet Nam to exchange knowledge and experiences with other enthusiasts. Today, that group is still very active all over the world, especially in Houston and the California coast.

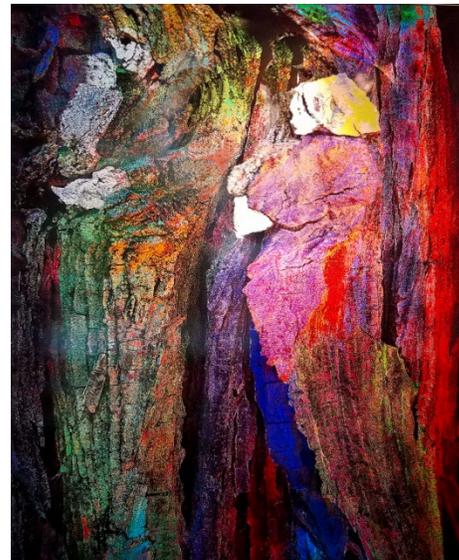
LVK moved to Saigon in the last two decades before the war ended, to teach English, music, photography, and to write many compositions for performers and orchestras, besides working on his weekly TV educational program and his weekly radio show. Having lost his mother at the young age of 11, he spent his little free time to take war orphans living on the curbs of the city's slums under his wings. To hundreds of underprivileged children, abandoned or rejected by society, LVK was the only loving parent and kind teacher they have ever known.

LVK was blessed with so many gifts but he did not use them to pursue fortune and fame. The multitude of awards and prizes came to

him by default, for his monumental works in diverse fields. He lives a simple and modest private life, devoting most of his time, energy and resources to share those talents with others. He knew without a doubt, that if he continues to do God's work, the creative inspiration as well as financial rewards will follow. For that selfless devotion, I am forever grateful.

Back to his tree bark images. Having worked with music, lights and shadows for over 6 decades, written and performed over 600 compositions and songs for orchestras, LVK acquired a heightened awareness of not only cycles and rhythms of the universe, the circadian rhythm of the sun or the lunar rhythm of the moon that beat within us and all around us, he is also sensitive to the vibrations of music and colors, especially in matters we often mistook as solid.

*In many cultures and religions, the spirit of trees is usually personified in female form. From this, LVK saw a **Madonna**.*



He realized that as human beings, we all throb to the pulse of the universe, which is in fact, an



immense reflection of our individual consciousness. His knowing of Quantum Physics escaped me, but I continue to listen attentively. True to his life driven purpose, LVK the educator has so much to teach me with his spoken and even unspoken words.



*In the nooks and crannies of the sycamore bark, a Beast appears.*



Over the years, in the same way and with the same intensity, he observes his surrounding with all his 5 senses and his heart, but every year, he observes as a much more mature mind, from a different point of view, from a different place in time and age, with a very different set of lifelong experiences.

His memory gave birth to new interpretations of very mundane still life, such as tree barks.

*From the whorls and grooves of agnarlywillow bark, **The Dancer** came to life.*



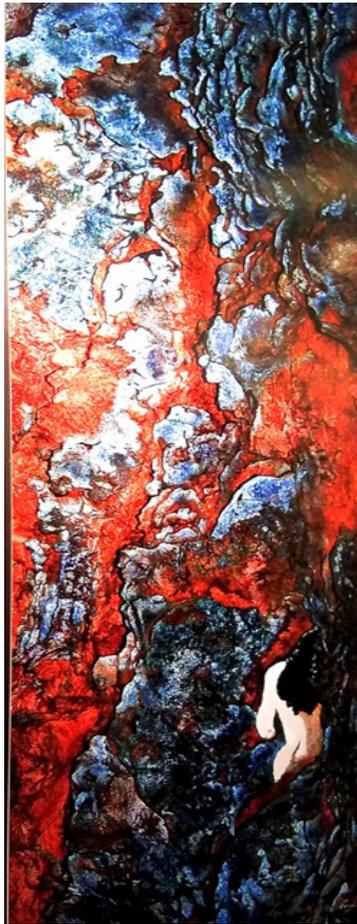
His emotions come and go, depending on situations, circumstances and relationships, some times in a blink of an eye, sometimes within an hour or two, but rarely days. However brief they may be, his emotions play an essential role in shaping the reality of those ephemeral moments. I am overjoyed that such illuminating moments happened often enough and lasted long enough for LVK to commit them to music sheets, to CDs, to canvas, to photographic prints or lately, to digital imaging.

From his music, with my eyes closed, I can feel waves of beautiful images flowing by. From his paintings and photographs, I can almost hear music streaming. From his novels and poetry, I seize the vibrations of both awe-inspiring imageries and enchanted melodies. If emotions are recycled energy, this prodigy - who seemingly possesses a special connection to the universal intelligence - believes that his most original thoughts and personal visions are rare glimpses of the divine. Actually all quantum leaps in creativity originate from and

occur in the same recycled bed of universal information.



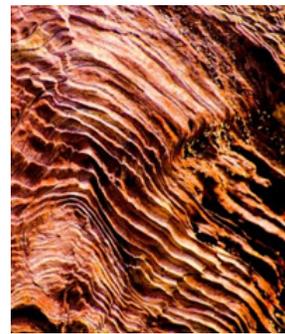
*Of Nature, in Nature was born from a scaled pine bark.*



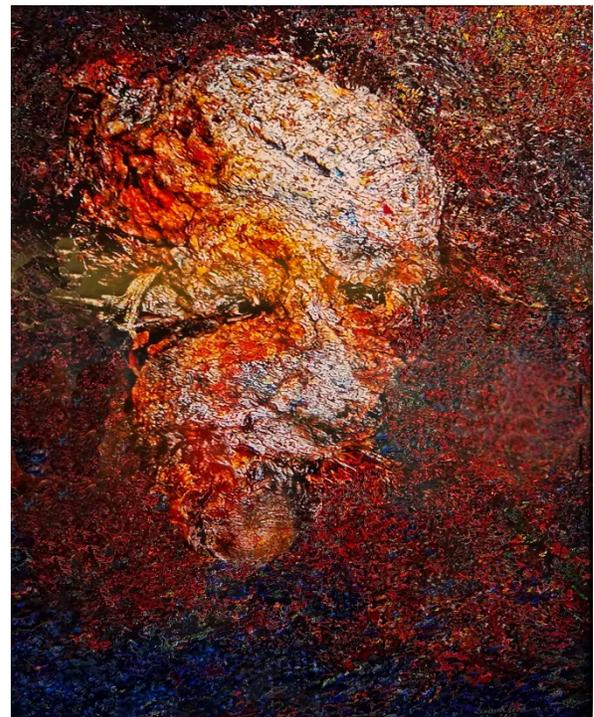
What a great thinker he has become, despite being born from humble beginning in war time. The Vietnamese have a saying: *Thờ ỉ tạo anh hùng*. Circumstances create heroes. LVK managed to free himself from societal programming or self limitations, free himself from fear, hatred and anger. He rose to become the ultimate teacher to the people of Viet Nam, and now of the people of all nations. His talents flourish when his courage abolished his own boundaries. His creativity kept the kaleidoscope of feelings, visions and thoughts engraved on paper or on vinyl CDs, a treasured legacy for future generations. As a spiritual lightning rod, always at the helm his people's boat, LVK received a rare knowing of which direction to take. Always with a tenacious conviction, he braved all rigorous

circumstances, battled all malevolent forces, to lead his students and his people to higher education. Like most humans, he did not always know the mind of God, but his customary resolution is to surrender to uncertainty in order to savor life's sweet opportunities.

LVK's paintings, children's books, his novels and poetry, his lyrics and songs, old and new photography, all speak one language, the international and universal language of love.



*As LVK mind's eye follow the nooks and crannies, the ridges and ripples of a weathered willow bark, somewhere in the lights and shadows, Albert appeared.*



*Beauty was inspired by more subtle*

*nuances of nature.*



Mr. Lê Văn Khoa,

By creating beauty in everything you do, you have created a beautiful life for yourself, your loving wife and three daughters but beyond the family, you also have touched the life of every countryman – and woman - and the life of countless others around the world, with your compassionate heart and mind. Give plenty and you shall receive plenty. That you have done, very generously, more generously than anyone I know.

No one has interpreted their life encounters and orchestrated such infinite artistic possibilities to enrich our life as you. You are a living proof of Dawna Markova's words in *I will not die an unlived life*.

*I choose to risk my significance,  
To live so that which came to me as a seed  
Goes to the next as blossom,  
And that which came to me as blossom,  
Goes on as fruit.*

As I have observed from afar, over 6 decades of award winning achievements, you have learned to live from the level of your soul, diving past the ego and its limitations. Through countless obstacles you overcome, innumerable twists and turns that fate throws at you, conquered predictable changes and unsurmountable rocky roads, you have attained extraordinary series of quantum leaps and made miracles. In the end, you have made big things happen within little time, in the space of an ephemeral human life.

May God bless you with another decade or two, of good health and clear mind, so you can fulfill your life driven purpose he has intended for you.

Forever grateful, I am and will always be.

*Nguyễn Thuy Trang*