

# 2006 California Biennial

**Pre-Visit Activities  
for High School Students**



**Orange**

COUNTY  
MUSEUM  
OF ART

850 San Clemente Drive Newport Beach CA 92660 949-759-1122 [www.ocma.net](http://www.ocma.net)



These pre-visit activities will help prepare your students for their museum visit to the *2006 California Biennial*. The *2006 California Biennial* showcases thirty one of the state's most exciting and innovative emerging artists. This exhibition of over 125 new works presents a vision that reflects California's eclectic communities and cultures. Including large-scale installations, sculpture, painting, wall drawing, photographs, film, video, and digital art, the works on view exude the diversity and vitality of art today.

Your museum visit and pre-visit activity support interdisciplinary learning by connecting Visual Art, Language Arts, and Social Studies content areas, and address the California State Content Standards in the visual arts.

- 1.0 Artistic Perception
- 2.0 Creative Expression
- 3.0 Historical and Cultural Context
- 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing
- 5.0 Connections, Relationships, Applications

Please adapt these activities according to your classroom needs.

## // Learning Objectives:

Students will view a work of art from the 2006 *California Biennial* and use their observations to derive meaning. Students will consider the relationship between history, photography, and memory. Students will explore artistic innovation as a purveyor of new ideas.

## // Featured Artist:

Binh Danh, *Life: One Week's Dead*, 2005



## // Materials:

1. Transparency of *Life: One Week's Dead* by Binh Danh
2. Pencils
3. Lined Paper
4. Internet Connection
5. Printer
6. Newspapers/News Magazines
7. Cardstock
8. Scissors
9. Glue
10. Markers

Tell students that they will visit the Orange County Museum of Art to view the 2006 California Biennial. A **biennial** is an art exhibition that occurs every two years. The only exhibition of its kind in the state, the 2006 California Biennial showcases thirty-one diverse local artists on the verge of international recognition. With works in a variety of media, including installations, sculpture, painting, photographs, video, and digital art, the exhibition offers a survey of new developments in **contemporary art** (art of today).

As many contemporary artists explore and respond to issues relevant to society today, they often seek out new means of representation to effectively express their ideas. Like historical precedents Francisco Goya or Pablo Picasso, today's artists also push artistic boundaries in order to adequately respond to the world around them and communicate with their contemporaries.

Innovative artists are frequently referred to as the **avant-garde**, a term that originated in the military to describe soldiers who ran ahead of the troops to stake out new territory, but now generally refers to artists exploring new creative terrain. As in science, music, and other creative fields, experimentation in art is important, because it can lead to new insights and understandings about the world and our place within it. Of course, artists learn from each other, and build on one another's discoveries. Eventually, what is cutting-edge becomes absorbed into the culture, similar to the way a fashion trend may be introduced by a bold few, then adopted by many, until it seems commonplace. We may even forget the original "shock of the new." In this way, the avant-garde is **temporal**, or limited by time. Much like history or memory, our understanding of what is considered innovative or experimental is defined by time.

Since the California Biennial occurs every other year, it provides a forum for the exchange of new ideas. One of the artists we'll see in the exhibition, Binh Danh, explores relationships between history, imagery, memory, and time. He **appropriates**, or borrows, media images from the flow of history and **recontextualizes** them, placing them in different circumstances to illuminate new meanings. In the process, he has invented a new form of photography.

## //Look:

Project the transparency provided. Tell students that this is one of the artworks in the 2006 *California Biennial* by artist Binh Danh. Ask students to describe what they see in this image. Where and when could this image be from? Does it remind them of anything they have seen before? How is it different from their remembered image? Examine the expression on the face. What does it convey? Does there seem to be a story behind this image? If so, what could the story be?

Danh found this image on the cover of *Life* magazine's May 28-June 3 issue from 1969, devoted to memorializing 250 young American soldiers who died during one routine week of the Vietnam war. With so many images at his disposal, why do you think Danh chose this particular one for this piece?

In making this work, Danh created a new photographic technique allowing him to print directly onto leaves using the natural process of **photosynthesis** (synthesis of compounds from light). Danh scans found media images or documents into his computer and then prints a transparency of the scan. Putting the transparency directly on a leaf, he places it in the sun and the image transfers to the leaf. For this work, Danh printed on leaves indigenous to Vietnam. Why do you think the artist developed this process? How does the material contribute to the meaning of his work? How does Danh's innovative means of representation help to communicate his ideas?

In art, when a copy of an original image is made, it is referred to as a **generation** removed. The more generations removed, the less the image resembles the original. History follows a similar pattern. As history is passed down through generations of people, its meaning becomes diluted, as it no longer reflects the experience of an individual, but becomes part of a collective memory. Binh Danh was not alive during the Vietnam war, though he was born in Vietnam in 1977 and moved to the U.S. with his family 2 years later with a wave of immigrants profoundly impacted by the war and its aftermath. He did not return to Vietnam until twenty-five years later, seeking to understand this complicated heritage. Does this knowledge of Danh's personal experience alter your understanding of his art?

Why do you think Danh uses images from the media in his artwork? What role does the media play in our understanding of past and current events? Whose point of view does the media represent? Is it possible to separate our experience of an event from the version presented by the media?

In the exhibition, Danh has **juxtaposed**, or placed side by side, these images with those from the current war in Iraq. Do images from the past affect how we view war and other events today?

## //Write:

Ask students to list several historic events that occurred before they were born, recording responses on the board. Instruct students to select a single event that resonates with them, and close their eyes, imagining this event. Next, ask students to write a detailed description of the image that came to mind. Finally, ask students to explore in writing the reasons this event resonates with them. Was family involved in this event? Did this event happen in a student's country of origin? Are media images from this event particularly powerful? Was this event taught in school? Where did they get their ideas about what this event looked like if it happened before they were born? For homework, ask students to look for images of this event on the internet, in their textbooks, through newspapers and magazines. How closely did their description conform to found images? If possible, students may interview people who experienced the event directly and compare their descriptions to these first-hand reports.

## //Create:

Ask students to create a poster juxtaposing the historic event from the "write" activity with a current event that also resonates with them. Distribute 9" x 12" cardstock paper, and instruct students to draw a line halfway down the middle of the surface. Next, ask students to draw or paint a frame around the edge of the surface. They will write words in this frame later in the lesson.

Using the internet, newspapers, or news magazines, ask students to collect images of their historic event, and a current event that also resonates with them. Instruct students to arrange found images from the historic event on one half of the poster, and those from the current event on the other side.

Next, ask students to make a list of words that they associate with both of these events. Seeing the two events juxtaposed will shed new light on the relationships between these two events. Compose these words inside the frame of their poster.

Display the completed posters. Discuss the relationships between past and current images and new meanings that are generated through their juxtaposition and recontextualization.

## //Vocabulary:

**Biennial**

**Avant-Garde**

**Appropriate**

**Photosynthesis**

**Juxtaposition**

**Contemporary Art**

**Temporal**

**Recontextualize**

**Generation**

Thank you for taking the time to complete these lessons with your students before your visit to the museum. Please remind your students to refrain from touching the work on view, as much of it belongs to private collectors, or to the artists themselves, who have lent it to the exhibition and expect it to return in good condition. Enjoy your visit to the *2006 California Biennial!*



## //Who is Binh Danh?

Binh Danh was born in 1977 in Vietnam. He and his family left Vietnam two years after his birth, eventually settling in the United States. He completed his undergraduate studies in art at San Jose State University, and received his masters in fine art from Stanford University in 2004. He currently lives and works in San Jose, California. His work reflects his Vietnamese heritage and his interest in natural science and the history of photography. Borrowing from nineteenth century photographic processes, Danh invented a new technique of image transfer, allowing him to print images onto vegetation. Combining history, memory, and emotion, Danh provides contemporary context for images from the Vietnam War. Danh notes, "In my work, the art is used as a vessel to embark on a journey of exploration, discovery, and education. . . My goals are to weave these findings into the larger society and explore the shared commonality among people of the United States in making multicultural history."