

Quang Bao – Owner, 1969 Gallery

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Quang Bao (b. Can Tho, South Vietnam, 1969) has worked as an editor, writer and curator. In September 2016, he opened 1969, now in two locations (Tribeca / Lower East Side). He is currently studying writing and art at Harvard University.

What was your first job in the Arts?

Executive Director, The Asian American Writers' Workshop, NYC, 1999

What was the most useful or important thing you learned at that job?

How to interact effectively with a wide range of different personality types – it doubled my EQ.

Tell us a little more about yourself. When did you realize you wanted to pursue a career in this industry?

Books and magazines are my great love. I can't go bankrupt in a bookstore but I can consume visual art so much faster – walk away even. I earned my curating chops in Berlin. Those exhibitions were hella-hard. I remember a moment in Germany with Jennifer Packer: "Quang, you work fluidly." I realized I truly belong in New York City. Opening 1969 just became a way to get (and keep) me home.

What is the arts community like in your birthplace?

The MeKong defines the culture of my birth city; the community is mostly traditional arts made by locals.

Has where you come from shaped what you do in the arts today?

I am the daughter of no one and the art world let me in without a harangue. I mirror that open attitude with everyone who comes into the Gallery.

What is the best piece of advice you can give about working in the art world?

Choose good people.

Ask more than answer.

Keep your word.

What is one of the greatest accomplishments in your career so far?

The students of color at Amherst College presented me with a Lifetime Achievement Award. That was special and made me feel that death was coming closer.

What has been a challenge for you?

Patience.

What is something you do every day at the office (or your current home office)?

I draw Xs all the way down an 8 1/2 x 11. It's meditative and keeps me steady. I'm not exactly the most chillax person.

What is one of the weirdest things you have had to do on the job in your career?

I put a piece of blue packing tape vertically over my lips. In solidarity with an artist from Los Angeles for an hour every day during his 7-week exhibition. It was probably weirder for people who tried to engage with me. I love myself silent. On a regular basis, accepting art deals involving cash in a brown paper bag – the pickup spots are always weird.

What do you think defines a good employee? And what defines a good boss?

Don't suck, don't lie and bring your competencies every day.

A good employee partly determines how the boss should allocate his work time, calls out her own errors and does not confuse doing bad with being bad – or else it’s a whole damn, debilitating week of talking about character versus deed.. *again*.

A good boss empowers and motivates a team. I sometimes imagine a gentle lasso in my hand when trying to execute my job. Most importantly, I see far.

What do you think makes a person hireable?

One quality shines brightly for me – nimble.. Smart is not what you know but how you go about finding answers. That muscle is built from a wide range of experiences and backgrounds.

What is your advice for making yourself stand out in your workplace?

A friend once told me that I was art-world memorable because I wasn’t just another pretty blonde woman from Germany. I suppose making an impression is important, with one’s own personal style and point of view. Sincerity is key, too.

For me, difference is powerful. Difference creates tension, which creates energy, out of which something new might come. I don’t mind confrontation.

Also, I am totally confident in my feelings about an artwork or artist and I use language to try to convey my thoughts and enthusiasm to willing listeners.

Any good tips for giving a great interview?

A great candidate at an interview toggles between self-possession and vulnerability. I listen for how many times a person says “I don’t know” and then assess the capacity of that individual to figure it out.

Is there any advice you would like to give people entering the art world?

Drop pretense.

Don’t buy new clothes.

See a lot of art in person.

Build relationships with people who are generous in spirit.

If you are not having fun along the learning curve, then you are going about it wrong.

Any other anecdotes about your working experience that you would like to share?

I love meeting the families of my artists. Mothers are often proud and darting around in love and confusion at openings. Fathers seem bewildered, as if they are waiting for their daughter to come out of the fitting room at a department store ...only she won't.

I always take time to explain to families the prices for artworks and how the gallery does business with its artists. Still, I can do very little to alleviate a parent's worry, except maybe downgrade it to concern.

What is the best exhibition you have seen in the last year?

Matthew Wong. I instantly started to miss him while standing inside his posthumous solo at Karma. His canvases generated so much feeling in me. When art does that, the viewer's experience is gilded.

Have you seen any virtual exhibitions recently that you would like to comment on?

Galerie Ron Mandos from the Netherlands does amazing and complicated online presentations. I admire their staged photos. Someone always seems to be getting an award or prize at Mandos. The Pit in LA is great; the spirit, aesthetics, roster and artworks all align and that's evident online. The more money spent on an online viewing room the less likely I am to enjoy it. I'm allergic to shine.

What artwork is in your home office?

Matt Chambers first strip canvas is my Zoom backdrop.

María Fragoso red drawing of two lovers sharing an apple.

Two boys in a Brancusi lip-lock by Louis Fratino.

Mary Ryan Chariker and a biblical gem.

Pau Atela and a backside view of a man looking at a painting of a swimming scene (disclosure: he's my boyfriend).



Quang Bao's home office



Work by Anthony Cudahy and Mark Ryan Chariker



Work by Cristina BanBan, Coady Brown, Rebecca Ness, Louis Fratino, and Maria Fragoso

What is/was your greatest WFH challenge? Or a WFH luxury you don't want to lose ever again?

I thought looking at art online was limiting but try selling a canvas over FaceTime to a couple in their 70s in Hong Kong. "No, Mrs. Lee, he is not holding in his hand what you think he is holding. It's just a very, very big candle."

The sheep skin rug under my desk is luxurious for naked feet, especially with our 10-year-old Westie, Goya, who sometimes nestles on it during Zoom or class.



Quang Bao in his home office with work by Pau Atela and Matt Chambers behind him

How do you think art can play a fundamental role in the world's recovery from COVID-19?

Art is a safe, touch-free activity for the viewer. Looking is one of the safer senses. And since art is partly about communication, witnessing completes the project. Otherwise, I am not one of these people running around convincing the world that art can change lives and move tectonics.

What is your go-to snack these days? And your go-to soundtrack?

Gummy bears. I grew up in a convenience store and they soothe me. The chewiness allows me to complete my thoughts or help the thoughts to drift away altogether.

Taylor Swift, *Shake It Off*. It's an anthem to the unpredictable, daily rigamarole in gallery life.

If you could own a work by 5 different artists, who would be in your collection?

Jennifer Packer, Kour Pour, Aki Sasamoto, Richard Tuttle and Arshile Gorky.

Since we have been exploring more exhibitions, galleries and museums online, when you start making plans for your next trip – what will be your first art filled destination? Art destination bucket list?

1969 will be exhibiting at the fairs in Miami in December 2021. It's a chance to meet a lot of people more than to see specific exhibitions though visiting collectors' homes and foundations is hectic fun. And Marfa, Texas...

It can be argued that the art world has finally been forced to adopt and adapt technologies that have long been a part of other industries. Agree or Disagree?

Agree. The art market is probably a year behind all the markets – stocks, hiring, tech. Technology is a tool but an app or Web site cannot replace the fact that working with art takes time and a great deal more gets affirmed and accomplished IRL.

And finally, do you think the art world should be more transparent?

It doesn't matter what I think because it won't ever be because it doesn't have to be. The art world does not have many enforceable laws or regulations. That's why relationships are so important. In practice, I think everyone should cooperate and not just be hyper-competitive or intensely hoardy. When I call gallerists and ask for advice, most of my peers turn out to be very forthcoming.