Homage to Binh

Our friendship

I first met Binh Pho in 2003, at the Totally Turning regional symposium near Albany, NY. I had been turning for only three years. I took several of my new cross-grain African blackwood vases, because I had heard of Binh and thought that perhaps piercing the bland sapwood vessel tops might make them more interesting. I sat in on Binh's piercing and airbrushing demos, and he was generous (as always) with his time in showing me his setup. I was blown away. On returning home I immediately bought a large compressor, an airbrush and a dental drill and set to work. I pierced the vase rims and airbrushed gold paint over the crude piercings so the burn marks were not visible. I still have a few of these vessels, shown on my website.

As I evolved I made a point of not imitating Binh's style, and developed my own. I maintained contact with Binh, and in 2010 was invited onto the AAW Board to help resolve a governance crisis. Binh was a Board member also, and we collaborated often, including on a list of 300 prominent wood artists and collectors whom we identified and wrote to individually for their statement of support for the AAW. This was a very stressful time; we came to know each other well and remained in frequent contact after I left the Board.

In May 2015 I organized a tour of Ottawa, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland for Binh. He demonstrated to a record turnout for the Ottawa club, and we visited the National Gallery and the Canadian Museum of Civilisation.

Binh at the Canadian Museum of Civilisation, 2015.

At the National Gallery of Canada and the giant “Maman” by Louise Bourgeois.

Demonstrating airbrushing to the Ottawa Valley Woodturners, May 2015.

Jan cooked him her Vietnamese chicken dish, which he loved.

Binh flew to the Maritime provinces and in Newfoundland showed a preview of the film *The Last Days of Vietnam*, in which he is featured, to a full-house audience in St. John. Back in Ottawa with us he admired a piece which I had just completed for a symposium which had been cancelled, and asked if we could do an exchange. I said "of course", and he took it home with him. A little over a year later, at the 2016 Atlanta symposium, he gave me his exchange vessel. He was already ill and had worked hard to complete it for me. The next month he was diagnosed with the gastric cancer which killed him. He died a year later on August 23rd, 2017. I had a plane ticket to visit him for August 30th, but I was already in New Zealand where I had rushed to see my sick brother. Binh died on the day of my brother's funeral.

Here is a photo of the vessel which Binh made for me:

The Making

Not long after this I had a conversation with collector Randy Pi, who observed that all the old wood artists were falling through the hourglass of time. I thought about this and decided that it would make a good theme for a new work. Randy agreed and commissioned it, but it took me quite a while to think about the concept and how I would do it. I decided to make a large hollow form vase from a bigleaf maple natural edge form which I had roughed out many years previously and left to sit. The neck of this hollow form would be the hourglass of time. I began it in August 2018. The hollowing was technically difficult and at one point I very nearly went through the wall. I managed to save it by brushing the inside of the vessel with about 30mL of West epoxy onto the thin section while it rotated slowly on the lathe to spread it evenly. This did work.

It was not until the following year that I was able to reflect on what I would do next, and find time to begin the piercing and painting. I decided to represent Binh, fallen through the neck of the large vessel, by a smaller parabolic form, and decided to make a replica of the piece which Binh gave me in 2017. I had expressly never before copied anything made by Binh (and will never do so again), but decided to do it just this once because the work given me by him was Binh, totally, with all his iconography, skills and emotion put into it. Looking back, it is interesting that I decided to put a small vessel inside a larger vessel, just as Binh did in his later years. It was a serendipitous decision which I came to, and was not consciously influenced by Binh's double vessels.

In August 2019 I began the making of the duplicate vessel. I consulted with Binh's wife Vi in order to understand Binh's iconography, and although I had read *River of Destiny* in 2006 I

never absorbed or understood much of the symbolism. Vi told me that the cranes represent longevity, and that the peacock feathers represent a dream. In addition, Binh's gift to me included a number of images which looked very like F-15 fighter planes, down to the vapour trails. Did Binh put fighter planes on the vessel as a reminder of the turmoil we went through on the AAW Board in 2010? I found these images in only one photo of Binh's work, on p. 108 of *River of Destiny.* After completing my replica I asked Vi about them, and she told me *"I still don't think Binh wanted the fighter jet images. They are maple leaves because you are Canadian. Binh always draws free hand… nothing looks like in real life."* This made sense, given the title of the work (Autumn Dream). I wished that I had noticed these icons when he gave me the work, and asked him about them. Too late now.

Binh's is on the left; mine is on the right

My vessel is very similar to Binh's but not quite identical, as one can observe. In particular, the interior of Binh's vessel is painted, and mine is not. This is because, in my view, Binh's life was unfinished. So I left my vessel unfinished.

It was fascinating and rewarding for me to make this small delicate piece, because I had to reinvent and figure out for myself some of the techniques which Binh had used, and it certainly improved my airbrushing skills. One example is the panel with the cranes. Binh used a technique where he carved fine V grooves in wood, and then airbrushed a colour onto one side of the grooves by obliquely positioning his airbrush, and then from the opposite direction airbrushing a different colour on the other side of the groove. The colours are complementary. When viewed from different sides the panel changes colour. I knew of his use of this technique but had never noticed that he had used it on the vessel he gave me. On my replica I airbrushed green from one side and red from the

other. Viewed from the front the panel appears brown. Viewed from each side one can see the red and the green separately.

I found myself wishing that I had taken some classes with Binh whilst he was alive. I finished this small vessel in October of 2019, and began work on piercing and painting the larger form.

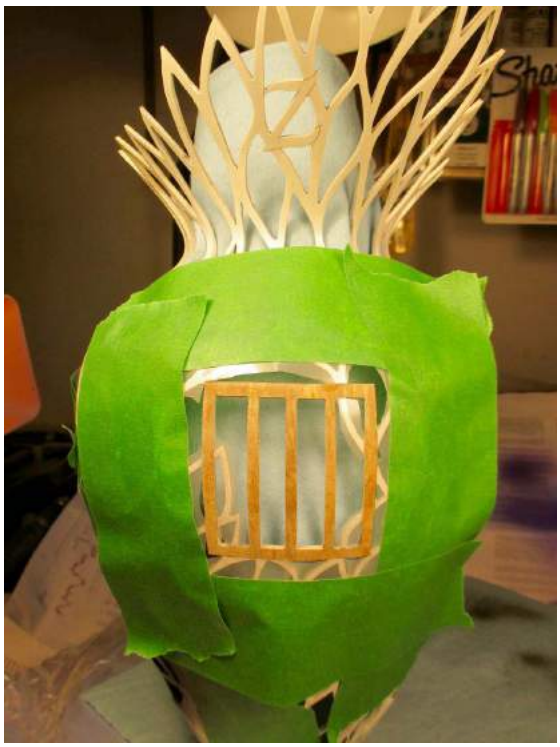
Here are a series of five photos taken of the piercing of the larger form, in the first of which one can see the light showing through the ~1mm thick near-disaster which I thickened with epoxy (which transmits the light well).

Note in bottom left corner, on blue shop towel, a trial crab piercing and painting

One will notice also in the fourth photo several cracks and glue lines. The scars of another near-disaster. The vessel was turned with the base attached to a face plate (something I very rarely do for a hollow form), because it was the safest way to thin-turn a vessel of this large size. On completing it I put it down on its side on the floor in order to remove the sixteen screws holding it to the faceplate. I inserted the Robertson drill bit into the first screw and pressed the trigger of my powerful drill. The screw did not loosen and instead the whole piece was whipped out of my hand and smashed on the concrete floor. The thin walls were broken in multiple places. I immediately pieced it back together and ran cyanoacrylate glue over the joins to hold the pieces in place. Sanded surfaces clean, inside and out. I knew that once the vessel was pierced and painted these joins would be invisible, and I could redo/reinforce them with epoxy, which is less brittle and more archival than the CA glue. I designed the piercing patterns to avoid making weakened struts wherever possible. It worked.

I completed the painting of this large form at the end of December, 2019, just before leaving Canada for two months to escape the winter.

Here are two photos of the masking prior to painting the crab and the prison bars, framed precisely by transparent frisket film which can just be made out in the first image by the joins where the frisket overlaps. This protects the area surrounding the crab and the bars from the airbrushed colour.



Here is the finished vase form with the smaller vessel inside.
(Yes, I did check to see that it goes in before I even made it ☺)

All that remained now was to make two butterflies, one very colourful (like Binh), and the other with golden wings. These were completed in early June, 2020, after my returning to Canada in March and being delayed by the initial Covid-19 events.

Dimensions: Large vessel (bigleaf maple) 12" tall x 6.5" wide; small vessel (box elder) 4.6" tall x 2.4" wide.

The Story

Binh's fall through the hourglass of time into the clutches of the Crab was clear to me from the beginning. But there is much more. In the early 1970s I read the book **Z** by Vassilis Vassilikos, published in 1966. It tells the (true) story of the great Greek WW2 resistance leader, athlete, surgeon, pacifist and patriot Grigoris Lambrakis, who was murdered in 1963 by the thuggish military dictatorship ruling Greece at the time. (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grigoris_Lambrakis). This book made a huge impression on me, and I never forgot the poetic lyrical middle chapter ("*A Train Whistles in the Night*") which describes what happened after the death of Lambrakis. I attach a copy of this chapter as a separate PDF ("**Z**) including a copy of the book back cover and synopsis. It is essential reading in order to understand Homage to Binh.

For nearly fifty years this passage has remained in my mind, and I knew it would be the foundation of *Homage to Binh.* Vassilikos uses the butterfly as a metaphor for the soul. When I spoke to Vi I learnt that for Binh the butterfly had the same meaning. A felicitous coincidence. On reading "*A Train Whistles in the Night*" we meet the butterfly soul and we learn what happens to it. We understand why one butterfly is caged in the main vessel, struggling to escape, and we understand why the second butterfly, having left its earthly cage and rising

skyward, has wings of gold. We learn, critically, the meaning of the golden **Z** which I have placed on the scaffold of the main vessel beneath the butterfly, and we learn from the butterfly the meaning of immortality.

I read this beautiful elegaic chapter again only at the end of 2019, when the two vessels were completed, and it made the same impression on me as it did nearly 50 years ago.

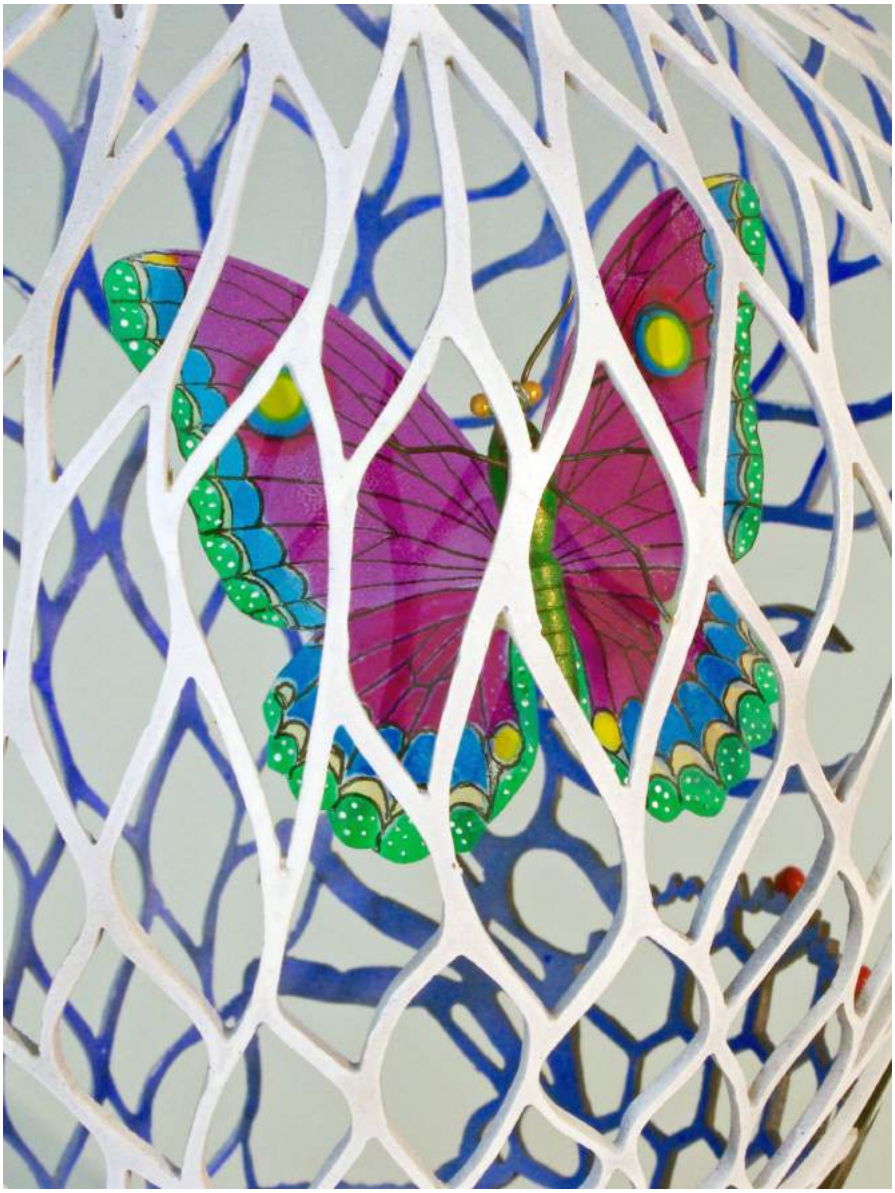
Immortality is indeed what remains in the minds of those who are left behind, and in the case of Binh he indeed lives on in the memories of the many people he touched, in photos and video of him, in stories told, and of course in his work - an inspiration and a legacy which will last for many years to come.

MZ
Ottawa, 2020

Images of the complete work are below.

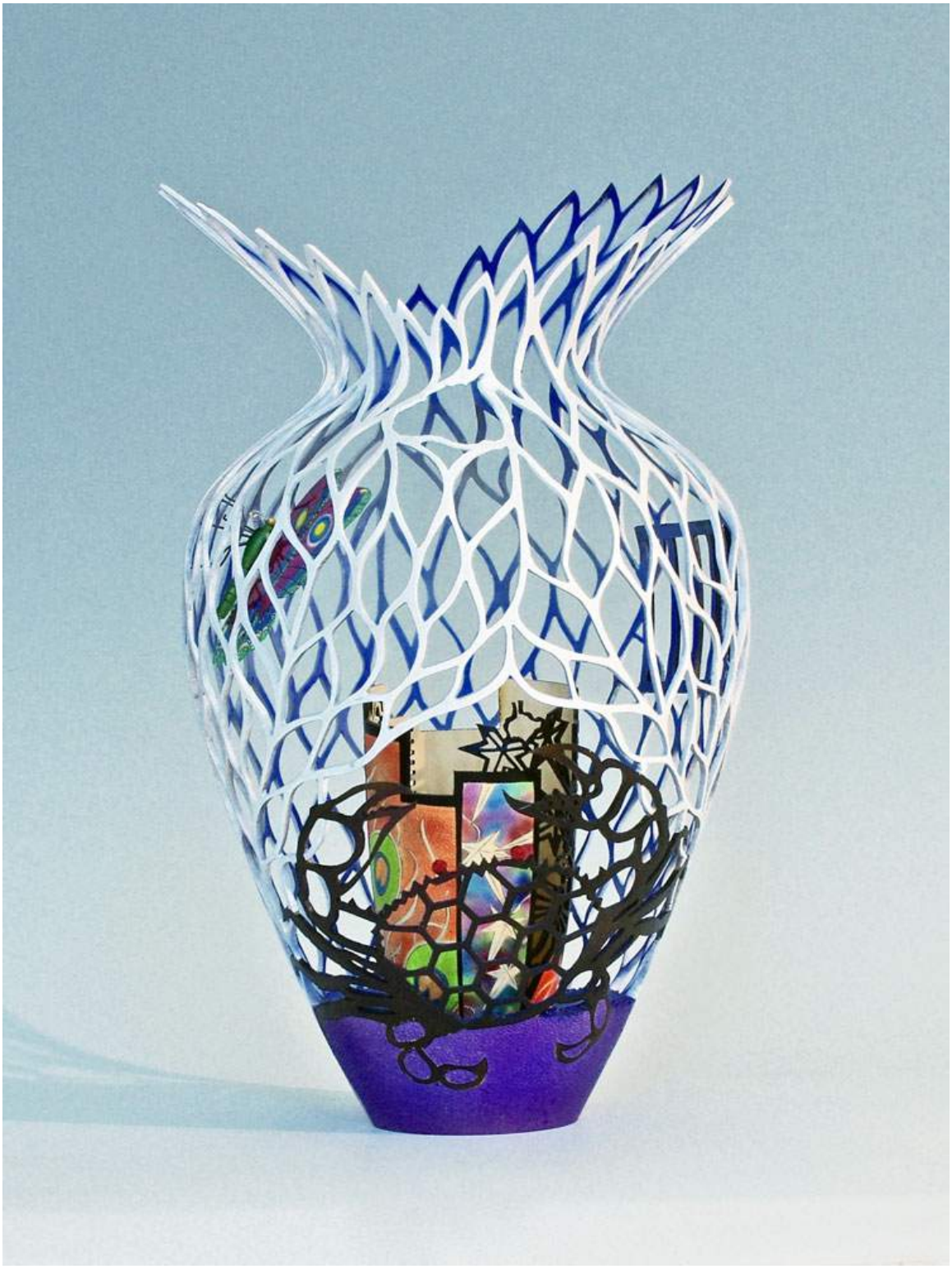
The Crab. Painted in burnt umber, oversprayed with iridescent red.

The butterfly soul struggling to leave its cage.
The peacock feather on the base represents a dream.



Close-up of the butterfly

Butterfly taking wing



Binh gripped by the Crab, as the butterfly soul leaves him and floats upwards.

The butterfly soul has passed through the hourglass of time,
and is at top right, rising skywards as the sun burns its wings

Additional images:

Note the **Z** at top above the prison bars. See close-up on following page.