A portrait of the painter in her West Village studio. Words by *Laura Rysman* & Photography by *Billy Kidd*

Anh Duong

With rouged lips, red-lacquered nails, wide eyes and bowed brows that look inked by a fine-tipped brush, the artist Anh Duong sits on a velvet couch in her West Village apartment. Graceful and pole-straight like the ballerina she once was, Duong, now 57, is a rebuke to the notion that beauty belongs to the young. Behind her hangs a self-portrait—an almost gnarled reflection of herself in thigh-high stockings and garish smudges of makeup, a cluster of wilting, vulvic calla lilies gripped between her legs. One eye stares you down while the other, unnervingly, wanders. The 2008 painting *Philosophy and Prostitution* is Duong, but inside out.

Duong is a portraitist and, as her own most frequent subject, a diarist on canvas. She's painted famous friends, among them: Anjelica Huston, Susan Sarandon, Natalia Vodianova, Simon de Pury and Diane von Furstenberg (a work which was purchased by the National Portrait Gallery in Washington). She paints lesser-known characters as well, along with occasional still lifes of flowers, shoes, even breakfast. Self or other, something writhes in the paintings, an angst impossible to discern in her composed countenance.

"Art has always been about the male gaze," says Duong, as she leans back on the couch. "What's so great about being an artist now is that it's finally about the woman's gaze. It's finally about how we view beauty, desire, thoughts and ourselves." Duong, with her intimately personal portraits, seems more relevant than ever, but when she began her career in the late 1980s the skepticism was greater. Duong was not just an attractive young woman, but a famous model and the girlfriend of a very famous artist. She was, at first glance, easy to dismiss as a hobbyist.

The French-born daughter of a Spanish mother and Vietnamese father, Duong grew up outside of Paris, training throughout her youth to become a ballerina. At 22, she met the renowned fashion photographer David Seidner one night while partying at Paris' Palace club. He cast her in an Yves Saint Laurent campaign, her first modeling gig, and one of the most prestigious bookings possible. "I didn't fit into the beauty standard of that era when Christie Brinkley was the ideal," Duong observes. "But David put his stamp on my kind of beauty and made it fashionable." She was catapulted to muse status for many of the breakthrough designer talents of the 1980s—Dolce & Gabbana, John Galliano and Christian Lacroix—and became a regular on their runways.

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Styling: Debbie Hsieh, Hair/Makeup: Ashleigh Ciucci

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In photos from the time, Duong is as elegant and attenuated as a designer's illustration, seeming to embody the most stylized opulence of the era's high fashion. However, she recalls it as a pose struck under rigid scrutiny. "As a model, the whole world is staring at you and saying what's right and what's wrong," she says with a grimace. Dance had already instilled in her a foundation of tense self-consciousness. "As a ballerina, you grow up judging yourself in front of a mirror, watching every millimeter." By 26, she considered herself to be aging out of modeling and decamped to New York City.

"Coming from ballet and modeling, I was craving having my own voice and my own vision," she explains—her voice betraying only the slightest French inflection, after now having spent more years in New York than in her native land. In the downtown New York of 1987, she found the art scene to be a flourishing wonderland of inventive, bohemian autonomy. "Artists create their own world. I was attracted to that freedom," she explains. Her mother had been a painter but abandoned the craft early on; Duong herself grew up painting, turning to self-portraiture even at a young age, though she never considered it a career possibility or contemplated art school. "As a kid, I was shy," she says. "I was in my dreams and in my head all the time. [Painting] was just a great way to process my inner world for someone who didn't know how to express things."

In New York, Duong found an urban cadre of free-spirited creatives. She met artists who were radically reshaping the art scene, including Francesco Clemente, George Condo, David Salle, Eric Fischl and Alex Katz (who would both paint Duong), and Julian Schnabel. Duong became the muse and girlfriend of Schnabel, an artist who had made a name for himself by painting portraits over smashed-up plates in a neo-expressionist style, and by introducing himself to people as "the most famous painter in America."

"He never taught me how to paint, but he saw the painter in me," says Duong. "He encouraged me to have a career as a painter, to live the artist's life, and when someone who's very successful gives you reassurance, it helps." During their five-year relationship, Duong and Schnabel lived together in a former chemical plant in the West Village where she painted until she later found her own studio. It was there that, side by side, they painted a friend, David Yarthu, who posed standing on a chair dressed for Halloween as a king in an ermine cape and crown. Duong used one of Schnabel's eight-foot canvases for her version of the portrait—a sad-eyed and childlike depiction of the man in his ersatz finery. Dennis Hopper stopped by the studio to visit Schnabel and fell for Duong's painting—it became her first sale. She continued to favor large-scale canvases from then on, and by 1990 she had her first solo show of 12 giant portraits at Sperone Westwater Gallery.

Duong was known as a model, as a beauty, as the girlfriend of an egotistical and larger-than-life artist. She found it easy to get attention, especially from *Vogue* and the fashion world, but obtaining critical acclaim was another matter. "The 1980s were so macho—everyone wanted to be Jackson Pollock," she says, standing up to stretch her legs across the living room. "Back then, most female artists had to look and act like guys to be taken seriously. I felt like I had to downplay modeling, being feminine, how I looked, even my personality, and I didn't want to pretend to be a man. I wanted to be authentic."

In an era when men were expected to relay the big ideas and universal truths of art, it's easy to understand why the idea of a star female model mostly painting herself was taken by some to be facile narcissism. However, Duong's portraits are the inverse of the serene loveliness that she exudes in her fashion photographs. Her body is often bared and painted without pleasing eroticism or romance. She peers out at viewers with a mix of unguarded emotions, reflecting the state of the self alone and uncircumspect—full of doubt, anguish, resentment, defiance, despair or even tedium.

Queenie Wong, a curator at New York's Sonnabend Gallery, which represents Duong today, reckons that "the most compelling and intriguing components of her self-portraits are the eyes. She gazes directly at the viewer, as if her true self is yearning for a connection, hoping to find a common ground through empathy." In a sexually charged painting from 2004, Duong squats on a fluffy fur rug wearing a lacy dress and heels, a dildo in her hand at the center of the canvas. The arrangement suggests an exchange of sensuality, but the title, *Il a repassé ma jupe (He ironed my skirt)*, suggests otherwise, and the expression on her face broadcasts a private, timid look of dispossessed hope.

Duong's paintings are her daily journals—notes taken on her state of being in the form of a portrait, neither flattering nor grotesque. "People ask me, why did you paint yourself so ugly?" she says, wrinkling her nose in displeasure. "But it's not about that. I was just expressing a lot of uncomfortable emotions. They can be quite hard to look back on for me," she sighs. "They're a testament to what I was feeling, and it leaves

As an actress, Duong appeared most recently in *Appropriate Behavior*, a rom-com in which she plays an Iranian expatriate whose daughter comes out as bisexual.

Duong also had roles in movies including *Scent of a Woman*, *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *High Art*.

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me very exposed." Her practice is to put brush to canvas straightaway without first sketching what she'll paint, sitting herself in front of a true mirror (a mirror angled to reflect the actual image, rather than the image in reverse) and arranging herself with the garments and objects she feels attracted to on that day. "It's about trusting the dialogue with the subconscious," she says. "That's what's interesting about any creative process—your work will uncover something about you that you're not aware of consciously."

In the personal, Doung finds the universal. Her self-portraits are "not about painting myself," she says, but about revealing an intuitively recognized experience that will resonate with viewers in different ways. "The role of the artist is to create emotions in other people," she says. Though she began her painting career three decades ago, her unchanging message is more timely than ever, as a repositioning wave of feminism opens up space for women to narrate themselves, to be the directors and authors of the stories being told about themselves and to find, in those particularities, a new universality. It's a moment when there is more room not only for women, but for the candidly feminine.

"Painting has always been the place where I experience the most freedom," says Duong, leaning forward. "In painting, I'm never vain or self-conscious. I don't care how I'm going to look." After the physical perfection demanded by ballet and fashion, painting gave her footing in a world where she was in charge, where she directed herself, where the perhaps unsightly prospect of her inner reality could supersede the surface representation of herself. "Every self-portrait reflected another day, another emotion, another thing happening in my life," she says. "It was where I could finally express anxiety or fear, and remove this pressure I'd always had as a dancer and a model." Duong tried acting as well, gaining smaller parts in several movies, but says, "I always knew I needed to paint. The revelation came when I realized a person could live as an artist."

To paint is to meditate, she contends, and it comes with all the same difficulties and discipline: "There's no such thing as waiting for inspiration." You have to force yourself to start, you have to hurdle the noise in your head—your ego and your fears and your doubts, she says. "You have to push yourself out of the way to be true to yourself and to be true to the creative process." Although Duong owns an old fisherman's house out in East Hampton where she built herself a painting studio, she finds it "too beautiful and relaxing to paint there." She prefers to paint in her West Village apartment—a handful of diminutive rooms once home to Mark Twain—where she has "the psychological drama that the city induces" and all of her props and clothes that she may need on hand.

The clothing in her paintings evokes femininity, modeling and fashion. But it also recalls the sartorial cues of more classical portraiture—and of the artists that have inspired Duong, like Goya, Velázquez and Manet—where brocades and laces serve to frame potent and unnerving characters. Even her nudes owe something to the audacity of Manet and his picnicking woman scandalously disrobed on the grass—a nude freed from the traditional, moralizing confines of mythological and biblical narrative depictions. But Duong's nudes tell her own story, a woman's story—a story with scant representation in the art world.

Thirty years into her career, she's still industriously pursuing her craft, painting and even sculpting self-portraits (a first for the artist) and she describes the last two years as some of the most work-intensive of her life. For the Statue of Liberty Museum that will open in 2019, Duong is sculpting a set of 50 gilded stars that will hang from the statue's restoration armature, gleaming in the entrance of the new institution.

In recent times, she's even returned to modeling for Pomellato, Bottega Veneta, Kate Spade and H&M, as transforming ideas about female representation brought in a wave of women well past the typical youthful ideal of the industry. "I felt so silly and superficial about modeling when I was young," Duong says. "It's just something you did because you're born a certain way, and you were just a face back then." Today, she points out, she's in demand as a model precisely because she's an artist, because she proves that "women over 40 have a life, that we deserve to have the right to age. Today I feel like a feminist when I'm modeling. We put shame on women for everything—like you're dirty because you're getting older." *Shame*, she repeats, her eyes narrowing. It's a powerful way to diminish women. "I'm happy we're seeing this start to change."

The pressure to please with the external and the desire to give voice to the internal is the tension that pushes and pulls women's lives. "I'm aware of my privileges," she says, "But we all have doubts. We have to pretend we're so perfect and so fabulous, but who actually feels that way about themselves? No one." Her expression has changed, her poised public face replaced with the vulnerable layers of private disquiet glimpsed in her paintings. "As an artist, what I'm interested in portraying is not me as a model, not the image of me that's been projected into the world, but the inside suffering, the contradiction."