

A life in pictures

Long Thanh's photographs of Vietnam speak of sorrow and love, beauty and hardship, writes Anne Crawford.

We are in an upstairs store-room of a Collingwood gallery exhibiting the works of the internationally acclaimed Vietnamese photographer, Long Thanh. We are trying to make sense of English.

Downstairs, a language more powerful than words speaks of sorrow, love, beauty and hardship. Long Thanh's evocative black and white images of people and their landscape are being hanged for his first Australian exhibition, *Visions of Vietnam*.

Passers-by walk in off Smith Street as the works are arranged, and are entranced, stirred by what they see: a woman and child embrace as they sit on parched earth gaping with cracks; wide-eyed, solemn-faced children stare directly into the lens. The crepey skin of an ancient woman contrasts with that of a smooth-skinned baby, speaking of both ends of life and of love. An elderly woman contemplates a lost loved one, a small dog beside her has its front legs planted on the grave.

There are lighter moments. A boy perches on the back of a water buffalo, taking time out from work in the paddies to read a children's book. Two elderly women roar with laughter at a private joke — or maybe at being photographed.

Long Thanh's daughter, Nha Trang, whose name is the same as their coastal home town, also acts as translator.

She tells her father's story, of a boy who watched his uncle take "souvenir" photos in his camera shop, and "had it in his heart" from then on to be a photographer. Long Thanh took his first photo at 13 and still exhibits it.

He fought in the Vietnam War then came back to his town and took wedding photos. He was asked to take photos of meetings for brochures but largely resisted commercial photography. "Long Thanh says that he just thinks art," says his daughter. "His mind doesn't have any talk about business! Sometimes he feels lonely and he feels sad. He had emotion, that's why he takes his camera and goes out."

He wanders around his town and takes photos in the hinterland but never more than 200 kilometres away. His studio is the small living room of the family home, owned by his uncle: it's also a dark room, guest room and sometimes bedroom.

He exhibits too on the walls of the bar of the Nha Trang Sailing Club, owned by a Melbourne friend. Long Thanh is featured in *The Lonely Planet*



Long Thanh, whose family living room is his studio, wanders around his town and the hinterland, taking extraordinary photographs of ordinary people.

travel guide, something that brings his work considerable attention, new friends from overseas and helps him sustain a living. Other shots are permanently exhibited in a San Francisco gallery.

Long Thanh's works have

been shown in 53 exhibitions in Europe, Asia and the United States and he has won numerous international awards.

His images were chosen from among 17,000 photographers from 164 countries in the MILK (Moments Intimacy

Laughter Kinship) competition. They appeared in two of the MILK trilogy of coffee table books recently published in Australia by Hodder Headline.

Long Thanh says it's hard to make a living as a photographer in Vietnam and that most

photographers have two jobs. He sells 95 per cent of his works to foreigners; the rest to Vietnamese people living overseas. His are archetypal images of Vietnam — conical hats, bicycles, baskets and rickshaws, crones with betel-stained teeth.

Moments of everyday life taken by an extraordinary photographer.

Visions of Vietnam by Long Thanh, is on at the Collingwood Gallery, 292 Smith Street, Collingwood. Wednesday-Sundays, 10am-6pm, until June 13.