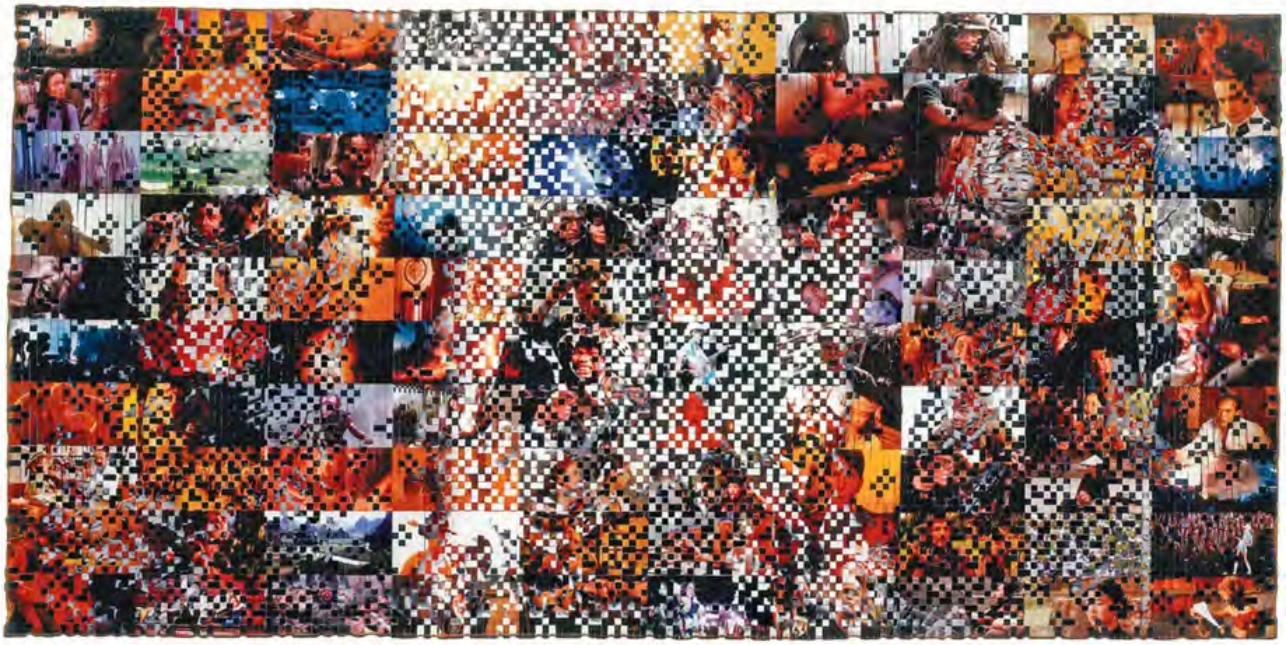
ARTFORUM

Dinh Q. Lê

Elizabeth Leach Gallery

By Richard Speer



Dinh Q Lê, *Immolation in Color*, 2002, C-print, linen tape, 33 1/2 × 67 3/4".

Although his practice encompassed works across many media, Vietnamese American artist Dinh Q. Lê (1968–2024) was best known for his elaborate photo-weavings: strips of photographic paper interlaced to form tapestries of often incongruous imagery. He adapted this technique from traditional grass-mat weaving, a skill his aunt taught him during his childhood in Hà Tiên, near the Cambodian border. Nine photo-weavings were included in "Dinh Q. Lê: A Survey 1995–2023," among them an example from his breakout series From Vietnam to Hollywood, 2001–2005, exhibited to much acclaim at the 2003 Venice Biennale. For Immolation in Color, 2002, he painstakingly crisscrossed long, thin ribbons of chromogenic prints into a grid. The strips' horizontal axis lines up images from big-budget Vietnam War films such as Apocalypse Now and Platoon, while the vertical axis coalesces into journalist Malcolm Browne's disturbing 1963 photograph of Buddhist monk Thích Quang Đúc self-immolating at a crowded Saigon intersection. The piece appropriates cinematic conventions to counter Hollywood's grandiose, condescending fantasia of Vietnam. Its dimensions mimic wide-screen aspect ratios, while the woozy superimposition of images suggests the midpoint of a cross-fade, when two shots commingle in ghostly overlap.

The dissonance between diametric paradigms—the crass illusionism of movies versus the principled decision to commit suicide as protest—underlines the fun house–mirror grotesqueries of the conflict Americans call the Vietnam War and Vietnamese people call the American War.

Four photo-weavings in the gallery's rear alcove referenced the Khmer Rouge's invasion of southwestern Vietnam in 1978, which forced Lê's family to flee to Thailand when he was ten. In Cambodia, 1995, and Untitled (Tuol Sleng and Angkor Temple), ca. 1998, serene imagery of Buddhist and Hindu statuary contrasts with mug shots of prisoners interred, tortured, and murdered in Tuol Sleng, Phnom Penh's most notorious extermination center. Untitled (Gandara Buddha with Sistine Chapel), ca. 1997, and Untitled (Self-portrait with Angel), 1997, suggest the uneasiness the artist felt as a refugee in Thailand and, later, an émigré in the United States—a perennial outsider wedged between cultures. In the self-portrait, he depicts himself caged inside the robes of an angel depicted in the Pérussis Altarpiece, 1480, which he encountered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (he lived in the city from 1990 to 1992, while studying for his MFA at the School of Visual Arts). Peering out through prison bars, subsumed within an adopted culture's Judeo-Christian iconography, he meets the viewer's gaze stoically, a visual echo of the faces of doomed Tuol Sleng internees.

Lê's ties to the Pacific Northwest, although not widely known, were tacitly acknowledged in the exhibition. His first home in the US was in the farming town of Banks, Oregon, where his family lived briefly before relocating to Los Angeles. Nearly three decades later, in 1996, gallerist Elizabeth Leach met the twentysomething artist in Seattle, where he was visiting friends, and was so taken with his ideas and photo-weavings that she signed him on the spot. Hers was the first commercial gallery to represent him. He went on to have nine solo shows in Portland between 1996 and 2023, dying of a stroke a year later at the age of only fifty-six. With Leach's encouragement in the early 2000s, he began to think of the gallery as a creative incubator for developing experimental and conceptual work. Several of those works were included in the survey. In a readymade titled The Infrastructure of Nationalism, 2009, he festooned a bicycle with Vietnamese flags—a common presentation for selling patriotic souvenirs in Southeast Asia—reimagining the colorful decorations as a commentary on the ubiquity of pro-government symbols. The Last of the Alchemists, 2013, a four-and-a-half-foot-long lacquer box adorned with silver leaf, contained over 160 feet of unexposed photographic paper. The box is sealed, the material never to be touched by the light of day.

Created as he transitioned from film to digital photography, it functions as a reliquary for the lapsed alchemy of the darkroom. More tomb than container, the work's elegiac tenor permeated the exhibition, which coincided with the first anniversary of Lê's untimely death and the fiftieth anniversary of the Vietnam War's conclusion. The unexposed, unprocessed film seemed an apt metaphor for the unfinished work of a life and career cut short.

Alta

LEE STARNES

The Diaspora Returns

Born in Vietnam and raised in California, a cohort of artists have come back to the land of their birth. There, they're making bold, often political work—and hoping not to run afoul of government censors.

BY JOE FYFE | PUBLISHED: JUN 24, 2024

For a recent show at Emasi Nam Long, a gallery in Ho Chi Minh City, the curator installed an overhead track on which a small spotlight moved back and forth as it traversed the space, like how police in helicopters search for suspected criminals at

night, or how the crews of U.S. “Huey” helicopters, for a short time, used spotlights to seek out the Vietcong in darkness during the American War.

The curator, Hanoi-based Vân Đỗ, wrote that “the focus has shifted from the production of new works. Instead, there is growing interest in efforts to record, revisit, write and rewrite history.” For example, *Forefinger* (2021), by Trần Tuấn, is a cassock-size sculpture of the trigger digit of a hand, covered with retrieved and blank dog tags. Like many of his peers, Tuấn is an activist concerned with promoting art to a wider community. His artist’s statement refers to his father and uncles, who cut off their forefingers to avoid conscription during the war.

The catalog for the exhibition, titled *White Noise*, states that Tuấn’s works are often inserted into public spaces and are prompted by his desire to open dialogues on topics ranging from history to present affairs. The verb *insert* points to the renegade character of placement that often is a necessity for public art.

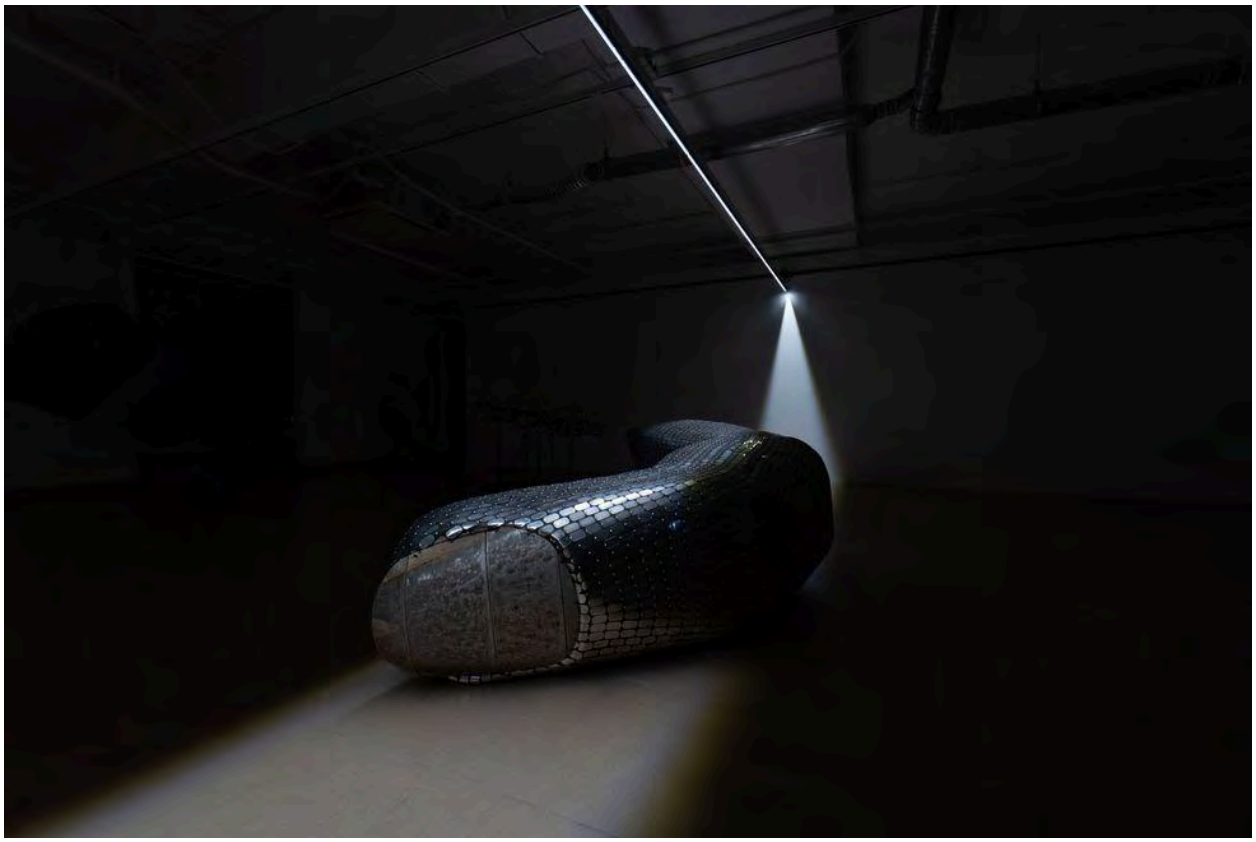
Vietnam is where I first witnessed one of the major themes of this new century: the minds and hearts of a rising populace can be satiated and controlled if one pins them under a continuously toppling wall of consumer goods. Transparency of government workings, free flow of information, freedom of expression, and access to challenging works of aesthetic complexity are all things the Vietnamese government has a history of suppressing (much like China and a number of Southeast Asian countries).

There have always been hurdles to being an artist here, but as Vietnam’s relationship with the United States has shifted from hostility to economic interdependence, the dominating Communist Party has dropped the pretense of tolerating art that poses questions that should not be asked. Among the generation of artists, writers, and gallerists who are now midcareer and who have attained international stature are several Californian diasporans. These individuals have developed a radicalized practice through their exposure to the pedagogy of the Golden State’s art schools.

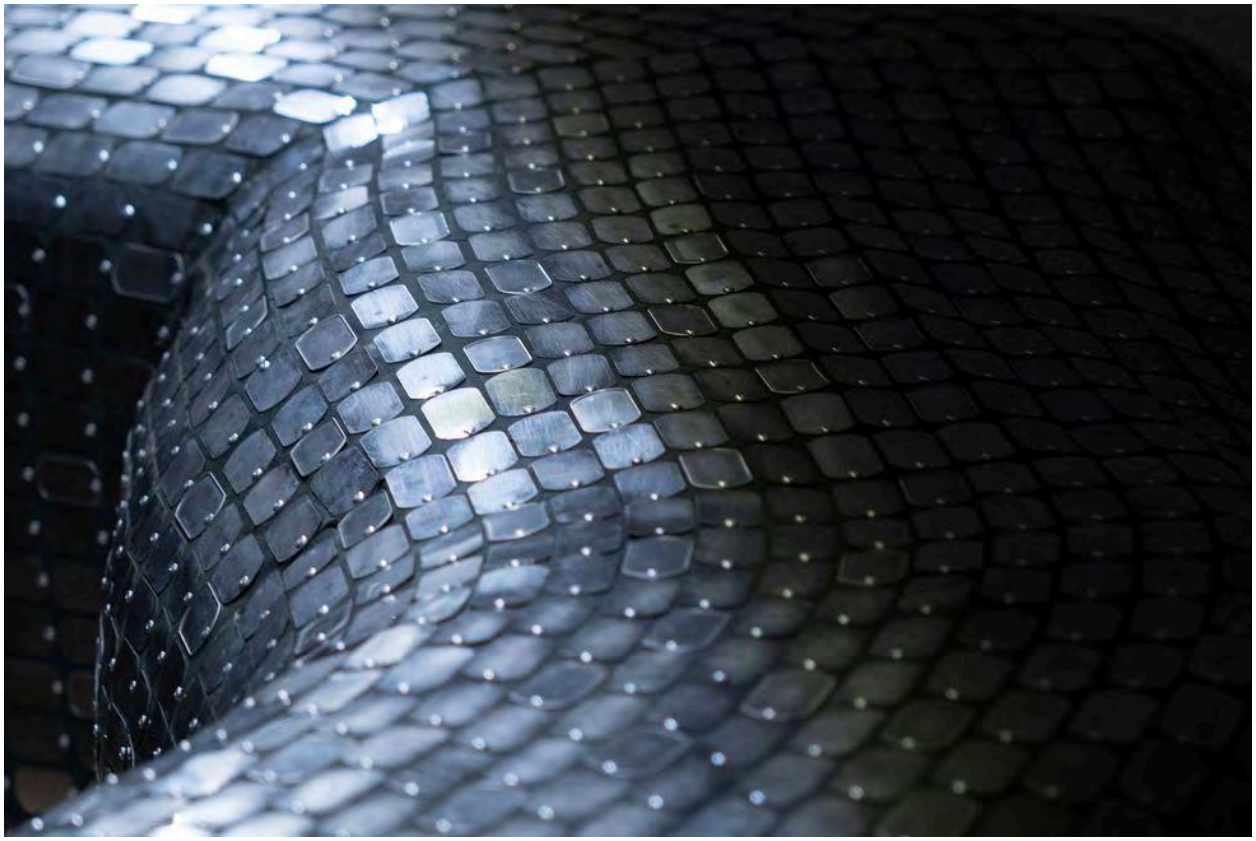
I’m here on my sixth visit since 2002. In 2006 and ’07, I lived in Vietnam and in Cambodia as a Fulbright Fellow in journalism. At that time, I participated in what was meant to be an artist-organized exhibition, *Saigon Open City*, an ambitious kind of regional biennial formed in the absence of any government cultural infrastructure. It failed when it became apparent that

the Ministry of Culture was never going to allow it to fully open. Since then, artists have pushed on despite varying degrees of harassment. The German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin once expressed that history is written by the victors and should be written by the vanquished. But here in Vietnam—ultimately victorious, as the citizenry will attest, over the French, the Americans, and the Chinese—they have vanquished their own artists. And yet it is the artists who persist in making works that are a form of service, writing the suppressed history of Vietnam and exposing its present corruption.

The patriotism of the Vietnamese people that many of us are old enough to remember from the 1960s remains in its artists.



Trân Tuân's *Forefinger* (2021) represents a trigger finger severed to avoid conscription. Below: Detail of dog tags, which cover the digit.



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HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS

I visit Richard Streitmatter-Tran where he lives with his young family in the far reaches of District 7, about a half hour from downtown Ho Chi Minh City. The route there passes through a two-lane, truck-choked industrial corridor that serves the enormous shipping container port on the Saigon River. It leads eventually onto wider streets bordered by very recently built high-end malls, apartment buildings, golf courses, and parks and, beyond those, to his suburban neighborhood.

Streitmatter-Tran, like many of his artist colleagues of his generation, was born in Vietnam but raised elsewhere. He attended Massachusetts College of Art and Design and has a U.S. passport. In addition to making art, he has run alternative art spaces—most notably, Dia Projects, which began in 2010 and for a number of years mounted exhibits in a building on the still intermittently elegant Đồng Khởi Street in downtown Saigon. Streitmatter-Tran now operates

Dia Projects out of his studio. He tells me that unlike in earlier times, contemporary Vietnamese art is being collected by a rising moneyed class within the country, and exhibition spaces are being privately funded.

For a seven-year period—starting in 2005—every application to exhibit his work in the country was rejected. Talking about current censorship, he says that officialdom is still sensitive to political and ecological themes in artworks but has lightened up on sexual and religious imagery. "But one has to be aware.... The censors aren't stupid."

Many of the most prominent artists of the emerging generation are women who appeared with the contemporary art historian Pamela Nguyen Corey in July 2022 on the online series *The New Social Environment*, produced by the art publication the *Brooklyn Rail*. (The *Rail* was cofounded and continues to be published by Phong Bui, who was born in 1964 in Huế, Vietnam.)

I catch up with Corey in the burgeoning District 2, an expat-dominated bedroom community. She is the author of *The City in Time: Contemporary Art and Urban Form in Vietnam and Cambodia*, a recently published look at contemporary art of the region in relation to the city as signscape, an environment of messages and portents. She teaches, along with Streitmatter-Tran, at Fulbright University Vietnam. Corey is of Vietnamese and American heritage. She did undergraduate work in studio art at UC Irvine before turning to history of art and visual studies at Cornell. I ask her about the influence of Southern California's art departments on some of the most prominent diasporan artists, and she notes that at the time she was at Irvine, a good portion of the faculty had recently graduated from California Institute of the Arts and were very political.

I arrange to see Dinh Q. Lê, whom I met during my Fulbright fellowship and when he was helping organize *Saigon Open City*. He had left Hà Tiên while still a boy, after the border incursions by Cambodia. I remember Lê telling me how he gripped his mother's hand as they were led through water to a small boat. His mother dealt in jewelry, and all their worldly possessions were in a bag in her other hand. During my visit, I note Lê's undiminished energy and curiosity. But tragically and without warning, he would die of a stroke a few months after I meet with him.

When Lê was 10, he and his family arrived in Simi Valley, and after high school, he attended UC Santa Barbara. There he studied with the artist Ann Hamilton, who was in the forefront of installation art using traditional household crafts, like stitching and embroidery, as metaphorical and analogical tools, and with Richard Ross, a photographer who saw his work as a method for social action and documentary. Lê, who considered himself "essentially a collagist," said that the Dada works available at the university's library—including those of the German post–World War I protest artists Hannah Hoch and John Heartfield—were of foundational importance to him.

Today, Lê is revered as an important international artist. At New York's Asia Society, in the mid-2000s, he showed an extensive patchwork of vintage photographs sourced from a Saigon used bookshop (one I recalled visiting when it was still in existence on Đồng Khởi) as well as acclaimed early work: an extensive series titled *From Vietnam to Hollywood*, in which he used a straw mat–weaving method, taught to him by an aunt, to combine images from American films about the war in Vietnam with documentary photography from that period or, in other examples, images of Cambodian victims of the Khmer Rouge interlaced with details of Angkor Wat. At the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010, he showed a once-working helicopter built from odds and ends by two Vietnamese farmers, accompanied by a film that intercut scenes from movies and news footage of the American War, dominated as it was by choppers, with testaments from survivors of it. Among other layers of irony, this homemade version made oblique reference to the Arthur Young–designed Bell-47D1 helicopter that is famously displayed in midair in the permanent collection of the museum's design department.

Lê was the cofounder and chair of Sán Art, an independent arts organization. It has a history of offering residencies and curatorial training and maintains a library stocked with criticism and theory, much of it brought from abroad in artists' personal luggage to skirt censorship. Lê explained that while some private organizations try to avoid censors, Sán Art has always sought approval from the Ministry of Culture before each exhibition. He said the strategy is one where the idea is to get the censors "used to the art."

Sán Art is located in an office building in District 4, just south of the city center, in a raw space with a ceiling height of about 14 feet. Inside, *The Disoriented Garden… A Breath of Dream*, by Trương Công Tùng, is on display. Situated in semidarkness, the installation is a

Gesamtkunstwerk that has a film element, a music soundtrack, a collection of ceramic pottery, tubes, flowing water, a shallow trench dug into the cement flooring, a narrow carpet of beading slumped over an assemblage of plants and machinery, soil, and stone, with a series of lacquer paintings by the artist hung on the gallery walls. Many of these materials are reused as the venues for Tùng's artworks change; his themes are based on the culture and ecologies of Vietnam's Central Highlands, home to more than 30 ethnic groups. The region sustained damage from carpet bombing and defoliation during the American War and, later, suffered exploitative agricultural schemes. Images in the hour-long filmed component include scurrying insects before a full moon, accompanied by flute music. A figure outfitted as a vagabond character passes through the film at moments, symbolizing the many disenfranchised survivors of the war who continue to populate the Central Highlands. The accompanying literature states that Tùng sees the artist as a vessel "through which voiceless beings express themselves." It is a soothing, alluring, mysterious installation that exemplifies the combination of poetic and political characteristics often found in contemporary Vietnamese art.

LEE STARNES

Dinh Q. Lê attended UC Santa Barbara before returning to Vietnam. He led an influential arts organization and exhibited his work internationally.

THE RETURNING DIASPORA

Another artist who migrated to California by boat during the diaspora is Tuan Andrew Nguyen. He left at age three and was first in Texas, then joined the Vietnamese expat community in Long Beach before moving to Irvine, where his family lived with two others in a two-bedroom apartment.

Nguyen returned to Vietnam in 2005 after majoring in fine arts at UC Irvine and later completing his MFA at CalArts. At Irvine, he was influenced by Daniel Martinez, a social provocateur across mediums, and Andrea Bowers, a painter and activist. At CalArts, he studied under Michael Asher, whose post-studio classes were famous for their umpteen-hours-long critiques that would pull apart all material and associational supports, and under Sam Durant, perhaps best known for a group of sculptures reproducing 30 monuments to those killed during multiple so-called Indian Wars—Indigenous peoples and white settlers—located around the United States and all conforming to the same obelisk shape as the Washington Monument. A year after his return to Ho Chi Minh City, Nguyen described the situation in a statement accompanying his project *Proposals for a Vietnamese Landscape*:

> ***Vietnam is a paradox in its political operation and its economic progression. Theoretically, government censorship reigns supreme over the landscape. But even that's at odds with the reality. Trends that are becoming popular with Vietnamese youth culture, like hip-hop, are deemed as western influences and warned against, sometimes outwardly censored, by the government. All the while, advertising agencies pay big money to exploit and use these same trends to sell consumer goods in their marketing campaigns.***

Last August, he had a well-received exhibition at the New Museum in New York City. Nguyen is recognized for his work with the Propeller Group (helicopters again) artist collective and for his films, collaborative paintings, and sculptural objects, many of which, like those of his teacher Durant, use the concept of the monument. *Enemy's Enemy: Monument to a Monument* (2012), for example, is a Louisville Slugger baseball bat carved into the image of Buddhist monk Thích

Quảng Đức, who immolated himself in 1963 in protest of the Vietnamese government's repression of his faith.

Nguyen is represented in Vietnam by Quỳnh Pham, director of Galerie Quynh in Ho Chi Minh City. Pham returned to Vietnam in 1997, having left Da Nang as a child, fleeing on a boat by way of Vung Tau and eventually being rescued by an American ship. She feared water for a long time afterward, she says. Her father was a South Vietnamese fighter pilot whom she only met much later in life; he had, apparently, another family elsewhere. She was initially in a refugee camp with her other family members, then spent time in Guam and Camp Pendleton before settling in Chula Vista.

While in high school, she came across *The Arrest of Christ*, a Northern Renaissance painting credited to the Workshop of Hieronymus Bosch, at the San Diego Museum of Art. She was moved, began to study art, and became an assistant to the school's art teacher. She studied art history at UC San Diego, volunteered at the Quint Gallery in La Jolla, excelled as an intern at the Smithsonian, then returned west to work as the only nonwhite staffer in the development department at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in La Jolla. There, she says, she had so little money, she "bucked the caste system at the museum" and went fishing at lunchtime with the gardener to get something to eat.

After Pham came back to Vietnam, she began writing for *Asian Art News* and curating exhibitions. Soon, with aid from her husband, she wrote a cogent business plan, secured backers, and opened her own gallery. She still represents several of the painters she met upon returning, including Tran Van Thao, one of the Group of 10 artists, known for being the first abstract painters in Vietnam.

Phạm's experience with art institutions in the United States prepared her for "doing everyone's job" at her own gallery. Her business functions as a for-profit entity while also operating as a promotional and educational extension. She's moved the gallery several times, and the current location is the most ambitious yet, with four floors of galleries, offices, and temperature-regulated storage and a shaft that runs through the building with a winch for moving large sculptures.

LEE STARNES

Tuan Andrew Nguyen with a kinetic sculpture in his Ho Chi Minh City studio. He moved back to Vietnam in 2005 and is represented by Galerie Quynh.

LEE STARNES

Tran Luong, who has long been in the vanguard of Vietnamese artists, serves as the director of the Art Patronage & Development organization in Hanoi.

PATRIOT GAMES

I had not been to Hanoi since 2007, and the city doesn't appear to have changed much except for the traffic pattern. Lines of cars and motorbikes that previously encircled legendary Hoàn Kiếm Lake, a symbol of national pride and of the former imperial seat, have been redirected to the perimeters to accommodate tourism. Many surrounding tree-lined streets seem to have benefited from the rerouting.

I've come expressly to see Tran Luong, whom I met on my first visit 22 years ago. Since his beginnings in the meteoric group of painters known as the Gang of Five, he has always been in the forefront of postwar Vietnamese art. In many ways, his career is a pursuit of the social ideal of being an artist: "keeping a distance from object art," he says, while drawing on the principles of kung fu, "making sure there is an accent on craftsmanship."

As a child, Tran was sent to the country, as most children in Hanoi were, during the American bombings. While traveling abroad during the mid-1990s, he was exposed to pop art and abstract expressionism, finding the idea of revolution in Jackson Pollock.

Tran stages creative actions to reach people who—owing to poverty or simply being uninformed—would never think of entering an art gallery. These creative actions include *Moving Forwards and Backwards* (2009), in which he invited people to brush their teeth in an outdoor space, first performed in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, near the Tonlé Sap River, and *Welts* (2007–), in which he asks audience members to take his red scarf and hit his body with as much aggressiveness as they please. In one interview, he said that though there was pain involved, "I feel very happy. Not really *happy*, but I feel this kind of high, like taking drugs. Because I can feel like the real part of a million people, not just only me anymore." Closely connected to the Goethe-Institut in Hanoi, Tran learned curation, "bringing the idea of making institutions form political ideals," and cofounded Nhá Sán Studio, the first nonprofit experimental art space in Vietnam.

As in Ho Chi Minh City, independent arts organizations in Hanoi have begun to receive patronage from the private sector. Tran is the director of Art Patronage & Development, which is supported by UpGen Vietnam, a facilitator space for businesses that provides the group with a studio, learning center, and gallery.

In the APD gallery space is a reprised exhibition from two decades ago, *Green Red & Yellow*. The show explores Vietnam's march into economic gain (green), its contradictory Communist program that stops real development of a modern society (red), and the idea of the individual creative element (yellow)—of softness, the free mind, LGBTQ identity, natural roots—that has been left out of the equation. Tran tells me that "20 years later, we are dealing with the same issues; the radical content is still new." The show was originally held at the Goethe-Institut Hanoi, with 16 artists, and received thousands of visitors in two weeks.

Among the artists I have known, Tran has the most original, most poetic vision. Years ago, I described him in *BOMB* magazine as "Whitmanesque…the way he unites his personal experiences with nature and national identity." Soon, Mousse, the important European art

publisher, will issue a book on him, and a retrospective of his work will travel to multiple countries.

Tran tells me that he is “not just an artist but an organizer of people; my center is the border between art and society.” Like other contemporary Vietnamese artists, in Ho Chi Minh City as well as here in Hanoi and elsewhere, he is affected by the huge gaps between the rich and poor, his country’s consumerism and corruption, and the ongoing struggle for freedom. But, he says, “I still love living here. I get up and I still have energy.”•

Correction: The print version of this story incorrectly stated that Richard Streitmatter-Trần was banned from exhibiting in Vietnam in response to one of his artworks dealing with ecological harm; his applications to exhibitions were rejected without feedback. We also erred in stating that he went six years without a show in Vietnam; he went seven years without a show in the country.

ARTFORUM

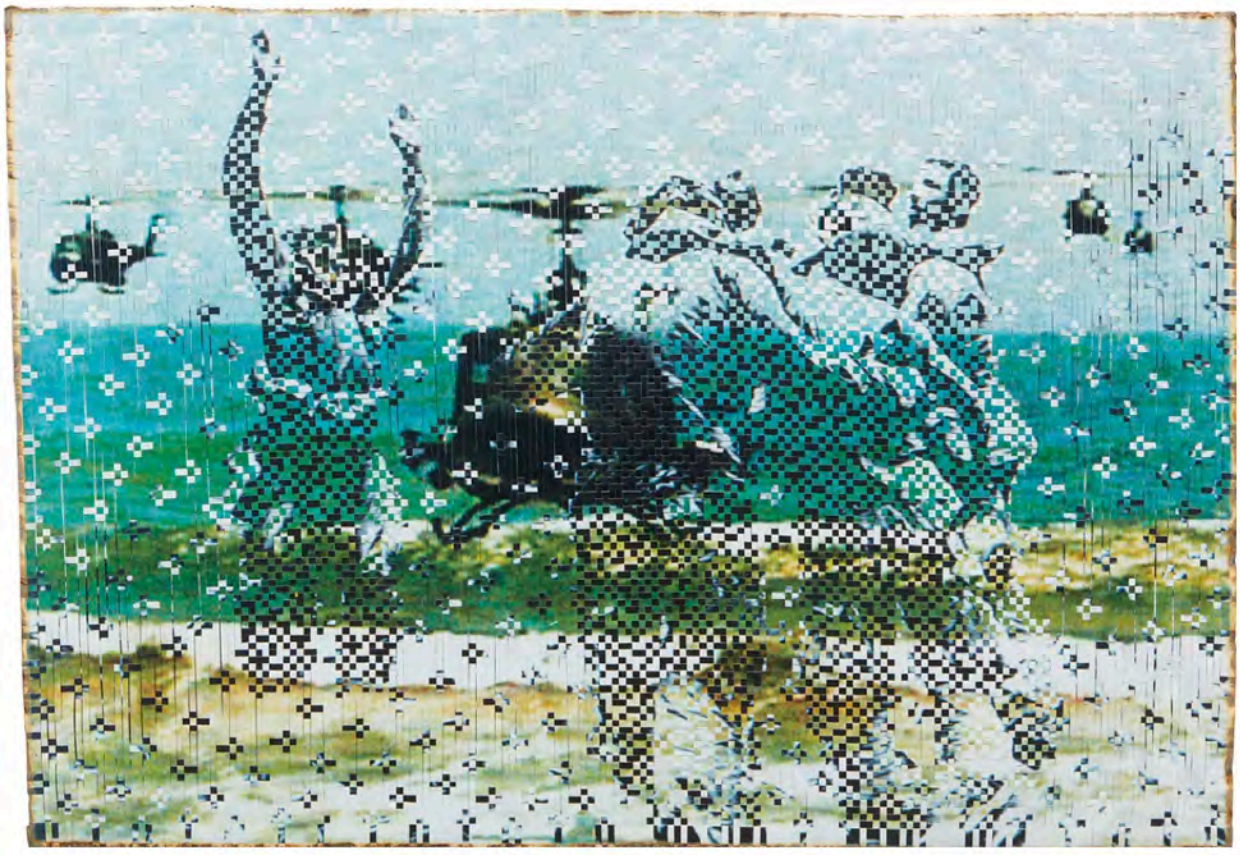
DINH Q. LÊ (1968–2024)

By Hung Duong

Dinh Q. Lê at STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore, 2018. Photo: Toni Cuhadi.

MY FIRST AND, SADLY, last interview with Dinh Q. Lê transpired in his studio in 2022, though we had known each other for years. The summer humidity was welling against the windowpanes as Dinh reclined in his wooden chair, enjoying a rare moment of respite in his creative domain. With his distinctive voice—slightly high-pitched, like a scratchy record—he told me about his childhood in Kiên Giang, Vietnam, his fateful voyage to American shores in 1978, his tumultuous education in California, and then his homecoming to Saigon in 1997. Gradually, his life unfurled in front of me, chapter by chapter, pixel by pixel, a photographic tapestry of memory, dedication, faith, and vision.

Dinh's early life was colored by history. He recounted to me his experiences in the refugee camps in Thailand as a young teenage boy, how each family was allotted only a tiny square mat on which they ate, slept, quarreled, and made love. During those sweltering, sleepless nights, pressed tightly against other heaving bodies, Dinh would stare at the mosquito net above his head and let his imaginings of America run wild. Despite being an unwilling participant in the catastrophic theater of the Vietnam War, he was excluded from the discourse around it upon landing in America, as the US scrambled to salvage its postwar reputation with biased narratives. As a student in Walter Capps's popular course at the University of California, Santa Barbara, "The Vietnam War and American Religion," Dinh openly complained that the course curriculum was prejudiced against the Vietnamese experience in its emphasis on the testimonies and experiences of US veterans. In 1989, he directed his frustration into an early series of posters that he plastered across the university campus. In these mostly black-and-white broadsides, journalistic American images of the war appear alongside statistics about casualties on the Vietnam side.



Dinh Q. Lê, *Persistence of Memory #10*, 2000–2001, C-print, linen tape, 45 × 63″. From the series “Persistence of Memory,” 2000–2001.

Dinh was determined to stake a claim to the histories of the Vietnam War through his art. Uninterested in picking ideological sides, he was solely invested in unpacking the complex experiences of unnamed people who suffered through the war. This desire propelled him to return to Saigon in the late ’90s, to retrace his roots and uncover accounts that had been buried by Vietnam and overlooked in the US. This homecoming resulted in a number of storytelling projects, beginning with *Damaged Gene*, 1998, in which Dinh transformed his research on the horrendous repercussions of Agent Orange in Vietnam into a cabinet of grotesqueries, from cheerful figurines of conjoined twins to double-collared student uniforms and other articles of children’s clothing printed with logos of corporations that would eventually be sued by the Vietnamese government for their involvement in chemical warfare.

I can still vividly recall the experience of installing an iteration of this series for the 2022 exhibition “Illuminated Curiosities” at the Nguyen Art Foundation in Ho Chi Minh City. As I unpacked each doll, ironed each uniform, and cradled each pacifier in my palms before placing them behind Plexiglas, I was on the verge of tears. My mind became flustered with questions about the fates of Agent Orange survivors and how they would describe their experiences of the war. Such was the power of Dinh’s haunting works: The objects’ combination of innocence and eeriness introduced me to another perspective on a community that I’d grown up hearing about constantly, yet that remained on the periphery of my historical consciousness. Dinh’s storytelling was political but not politicized: He interspersed harsh realities with a generous dose of poetics and sensitivity toward marginalized communities—people whose lives were quickly swept under the rug after the war ended.

> **Dinh's storytelling was political but not politicized: He interspersed harsh realities with a generous dose of poetics and sensitivity toward marginalized communities.**

At the core of Dinh's work was photography and its shape-shifting magic. Dinh was widely known for his practice of photo-weaving, inspired by Vietnamese grass mats, for which he cut found and archival images into strips and wove them into larger compositions. In the early series "Persistence of Memory," 2000–2001, he combined scenes from Hollywood films depicting the war, such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), with documentary images, while the recent "Cambodia Reamker" series, 2021–24, interweaves images of murals from the Cambodian Royal Palace in Phnom Penh with portraits of people imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge. However, Dinh's multimedia assemblages were also heavily influenced by his profound understanding and intricate use of photography as a material and medium. For the installation *Crossing the Farther Shore*, 2014, Dinh sewed together hundreds of found photographs depicting life in South Vietnam before the war that had been abandoned by families when they migrated after 1975. The result—a group of lacy, fabric-like sheets that he suspended in the gallery to form monumental cubes—re-created the mosquito nets from his refugee-camp memories while simultaneously lampooning the Minimalist movement, which he deemed an escapist reaction by American artists during the height of the conflict. Floating like pixelated specters, these quilted objects reminded us not only of the untold stories of Vietnamese boat people but also of the fictionalizing capacity of the photographs.

Dinh Q. Lê, *Crossing the Farther Shore* (detail), 2014, seven parts, found photographs, thread, linen tape, dimensions variable.

When I delivered a talk about this series at the National Gallery Singapore in 2023, I was also tasked with giving a brief tour of the works, which were then on display as part of the survey exhibition "Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia." As the guests navigated around the cubes, leaning in closer to observe the faces and decipher the scribbled notes behind the photographs, I snapped a photo and sent it to Dinh. "I am initiating people into your temple, *anh oi*," I joked, using the Vietnamese term for older brother. He laughed, commenting that I was his high priestess. We continued chatting as the works murmured their tales into the guests' attentive ears.

To many outside Vietnam, Dinh Q. Lê was simply a magnificent artist whose works struck a critical chord amid the narratives of the Vietnam War. But to us in Saigon, particularly the artists, writers, and art workers who became aware of

unresolved political conflict in Vietnam thanks to his art, Dinh was a mentor, a trailblazer, a visionary, and a great friend. As a cofounder of Sàn Art, a platform that has invigorated contemporary art in Vietnam and Southeast Asia since 2007, Dinh remained steadfast in his commitment to nurturing young Vietnamese artists through exhibitions, residencies, and educational workshops. His wish was for Sàn Art to become not only a reflective space for local artists but a bridge connecting them to the arena of global art. “The world needs to know about them,” he exclaimed. Ever generous with his time and rigorous in his feedback, Dinh has paved the way for many now-famous Vietnamese artists. Words cannot describe our collective gratitude.

Two Xerox posters by Dinh Q. Lê, 1989.

In my last memory of Dinh, some three months before his untimely passing, he appears not as an artist but as a makeshift dealer—Sàn Art had a booth at the art fair S.E.A. Focus 2024, in Singapore, and was presenting a group of novice artists

from Vietnam. Watching Dinh excitedly explain these previously unknown artists and their works to collectors, curators, and institution directors—even though he complained later to me that his voice was gone after the vernissage!—I could not help but feel an affectionate well of admiration for this dedicated man. One of my greatest regrets in life was that we did not have lunch in Singapore. Alas, "what if" questions are cheap.

When he came back to Vietnam more than twenty years ago, Dinh made a promise to uplift Vietnam and its artists, and he was faithful to that promise until the end. The last image that he posted on his Facebook profile was of his barely finished studio, looking out to the ocean in his hometown in the Mekong Delta. The sky was vast and the water an unblemished navy blue. The ocean, which brought him to foreign shores decades ago, now carries him to his final station. Wherever you are, Anh Dinh, may peace be with you. Here is to your next adventure!

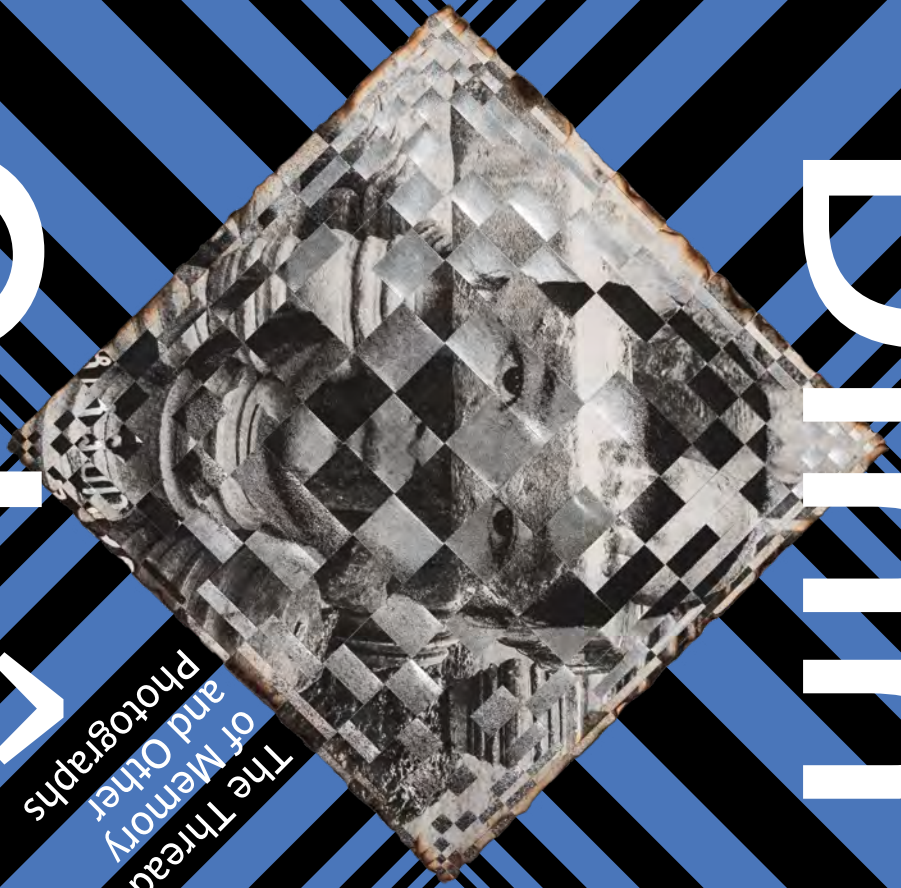
Hung Duong is a writer and translator based in Vietnam.

VISITOR GUIDE
→ FROM FEB. 8 — NOV. 20, 2022

MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY
JACQUES CHIRAC

Dinh Q. Lê

The Thread or Memory and Other Photographs



The Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière gallery

The Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière gallery, inaugurated in 2021, houses temporary exhibitions each year, with a new perspective on the history of non-Western arts. It is in this regard that support has been given to the exhibition *Dinh Q. Lê: The Thread of Memory and Other Photographs*, by the "Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière Fund for Knowledge and Promotion of African and Oceanian Civilisations".

Ramayana #12

Introduction

Dinh Q. Lê, born in 1968 at Hà Tiên in Vietnam, has built up a rich, complex oeuvre since the 1990s through different techniques in which photography plays a big role. This exhibition looks back at the career of this leading artist whose work has been seldom seen in France up to now.

For Dinh Q. Lê, an image is matter to be explored and transformed. These selected works retrace the main themes over his twenty years of artistic practice. Photography, video and drawings combine new, subtle ways of telling stories of geopolitics twined around lived experience, history twined around personal tales.

Dinh Q. Lê spent his childhood in Vietnam but had to flee his country in 1978 to take refuge in the US. At the end of the 1990s, he chooses to come back to Vietnam and he opens the biggest contemporary art centre of the country : Sàn Art. He now has an international career.

Curator : Christine Barthe, Head of Photographic Collections Heritage Unit, Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac

In partnership with the artist Dinh Q. Lê

A portrait of a socially minded artist: four questions for Christine Barthe, exhibition curator.

Dinh Q. Lê's work is not exhibited much in France. How have you designed the exhibition pathway to present his work?

The idea is to offer a retrospective. This retrospective isn't exhaustive, but we display around twenty works that give a good impression of the oeuvre he's produced and the way he's worked since the 2000s. Above all, I wanted to show his work in more depth compared to the exhibition 'Perspective and Infinite Connections' presented at the museum in 2020.

What role does photography play in his work?

Photography plays a big role. At the same time, he's never taken shots himself since he first studied art. He uses photography to make something else. He deconstructs existing photographs and gives them new meaning. Photography is more like a resource to him, matter to be transformed.

Where does this photo-weaving technique come from? What does it represent to him?

It's something he developed early on in his career. He doesn't only use this technique, but it often features and that's quite peculiar to him. It's a really simple technique, the same one his aunt would use to weave mats. For him, it's a way of combining two different registers of images

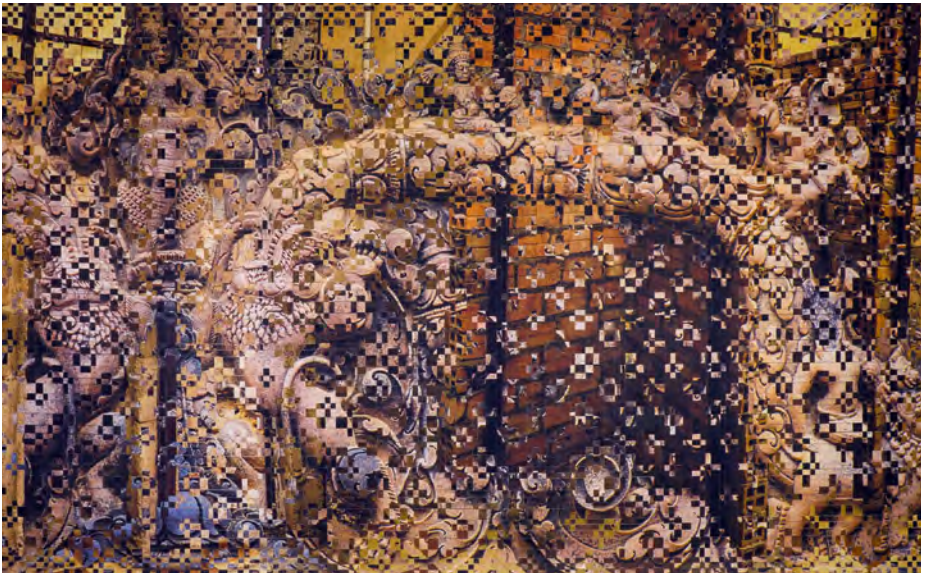
He uses portraits and news images. Some well-known images, including those of the Vietnam War, are weaved with posters or Hollywood film scenes. This builds up a surprising artistic subject based on a principle that's actually quite simple. It produces a highly pictorial result, one that's very meaningful but a little ambiguous as there are always at least two ways of reading the image.

Splendor and Darkness (STPI) #26 2

Splendor and Darkness (STPI) #4 3

Dinh Q. Lê tells some of his story through that of his country, including the story of the Vietnam War. Is his work a way of giving a voice to those deprived of one?

This issue of finding expression, of giving people a voice, is very important in his oeuvre in general. Several of his works relate to this issue, like his work *The Farmers and the Helicopters*. They explore how we can avoid speaking in other people's place, how to give a voice back to people – a Vietnamese voice he knew was a minority when he was a student in the US. He expresses that well in regard to representations of the Vietnam War – it's always the Americans we give a voice to. Beyond the issue of portrayals of the Vietnam War, he was really concerned about giving a voice back to people who rarely speak up. That's what we find in *Light and Belief: Sketches of Life from the Vietnam War*, one of the major works displayed in the exhibition, based on a collection of drawings by socially minded artists on the war front and on accounts he collected by interviewing these different artists. They touch on striking subjects that are rarely evoked.



WANT TO KNOW MORE?

/ Take a guided tour with a guide (1 hour, all ages from 12 years, in french only)
/ Discover the special issue of the magazine "Gradhiva" dedicated to the exhibition (publication to be published in may 2022, 20€, in sale at the Bookshop of the museum)
/ Meet the artist Dinh Q. Lê and Christine Barthe, curator of the exhibition, on the 10 February at 6.30 pm, at the Jacques Kerchache reading room (museum's hall ; free entry subject to available places)
/ Listen to the talk "L'objectif anticolonial : Photographie et nationalisme vietnamiens, 1865–1930", with Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn (Konstfack / KTH École royale polytechnique, Stockholm) ; Marie-Agathe Simonetti (University of Wisconsin–Madison) Édouard de Saint-Ours (University of St Andrews / Université Le Havre–Normandie), on 4 May, at 5pm, at the Jacques Kerchache reading room (free entry subject to available places)
/ Consult a selection of books in the Jacques Kerchache reading room

OPENING TIMES

/ Tuesday to Sunday, 10.30am to 7pm, late night opening on Thursdays until 10pm (admission for members from 9.30am, except Sundays)
/ Closed on Mondays (except during school holidays)
/ Free entry each first Sundays

This exhibition was produced with the support of Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière

RENSEIGNEMENTS

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/ Entrance Université: 218 rue de l'Université
/ Entrance Bassins : 206 rue de l'Université
/ Entrance Alma : Passage de l'Alma
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ARTASIAPACIFIC

SHOWS JUN 09, 2022

Dinh Q. Lê's "The Thread of Memory and Other Photographs"

BY JULIA TANSKI

DINH Q. LE, Ramayana #11, cut and woven photographic prints mounted on strips of linen, 165 cm x 220 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy 10 Chancery Lane Gallery.

Upon seeing Dinh Q. Lê's work, one's instinctive reaction is often to move closer. Lê's meticulous photo-weaving process, inspired by Vietnamese grass mat weaving, creates intricate collages of found images that tie identities, histories, and memories engrossed in conflict and displacement. His retrospective at Musée du quai Branly in Paris allows for a wide-angle vision of his socio-historically-charged, layered photographs, installations, and videos, dating from 2004 to today. Current geo-political crises can be mirrored in these works, with oppression and power-induced strife affecting communities across the globe.

Installation view of **DINH Q. LE**'s "The Thread of Memory and Other Photographs," at Musee du quai Branly, Paris, 2022. (Center) Adrift in Darkness, 2017, digital print on Awagami bamboo paper, laser-cut and weaved around cane structure, dimensions variable. Photo by Leo Delafontaine. Image courtesy of the artist and Musee du quai Branly.

This is the second time Lê has been exhibited at the Musée. The first time was as part of a group show on photography in 2020, where his mosquito-net-like installation, Crossing The Farther Shore (2014) was shown. Another woven photo-installation was at the center of this solo exhibition. Adrift in Darkness (2017) features three, hanging, black-and-white boulders, created with tiny portraits of the recent refugee exodus from Africa and the Middle East woven compactly together with rattan.

Lê and his family were forced to leave Vietnam in 1978, living in refugee camps in Thailand before moving to the United States. "[Adrift] takes reference from the images of people packed so tightly on a rickety old boat [. . .] As one who did the same to escape the harsh Vietnamese communist regime at the time, issues of this mass exodus and the fear and rejection of Europeans have been on my mind lately," Lê explains. Paradoxically, in this sea of abandonment, the rocks float.

DINH Q. LE, Untitled 9, 2004, Fuji Professional Color Paper, 85 × 170 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy 10 Chancery Lane Gallery.

This play on the elements is also present in the series “From Vietnam to Hollywood” (2003–), with works such as Untitled 9 (2004), where stills of American war films and images of Vietnamese people during the Vietnam War are interwoven against a background of orange fire. The weaving’s contrast of color and black-and-white heightens its disorienting effect, alluding to the chaos of war. Lê’s vision, derived from his exposure to the American imaginary and personal experience, juxtaposes fictitious and propagandistic depictions of war with its realities, becoming a unique testimonial of this period and its tremors in the present day.

Part of another series, “Cambodia Reamker #11” (2021) uses the same weaving technique but with former prisoners at Tuol Sleng, the S-21 extermination center, as its main subject. Brutal realities of Tuol Sleng are fused with the Khmer Reamker relief at the Royal Palace of Phnom Penh and Angkor Wat. Depicting the extreme oppression a culture is capable of, the series forces broader questions of humanity as a whole.

DINH Q. LE, Light and Belief: Sketches of Life from the Vietnam War, 2012, 70 drawings, pencil, watercolour, ink and oil on paper, dimensions variable. Installation view at “Dinh Q. Le: The Thread of Memory and Other Photographs,” Musee du quai Branly, Paris, 2022. Photo by Leo Delafontaine. Image courtesy of the artist and Musee du quai Branly.

Nearby, the video-installation Light and Belief: Sketches of Life from the Vietnam War (2012) brings together drawings by artists who were sent alongside North Vietnamese soldiers to document the war effort during the Vietnam War, and a documentary filmed by Lê of the artists sharing their experiences as artist-soldiers. Their stories, which include junctures of joy amidst the turmoil, add to the cacophony of perspectives that Lê’s works offer, further complicating generalized ideas of individual experiences in conflict.

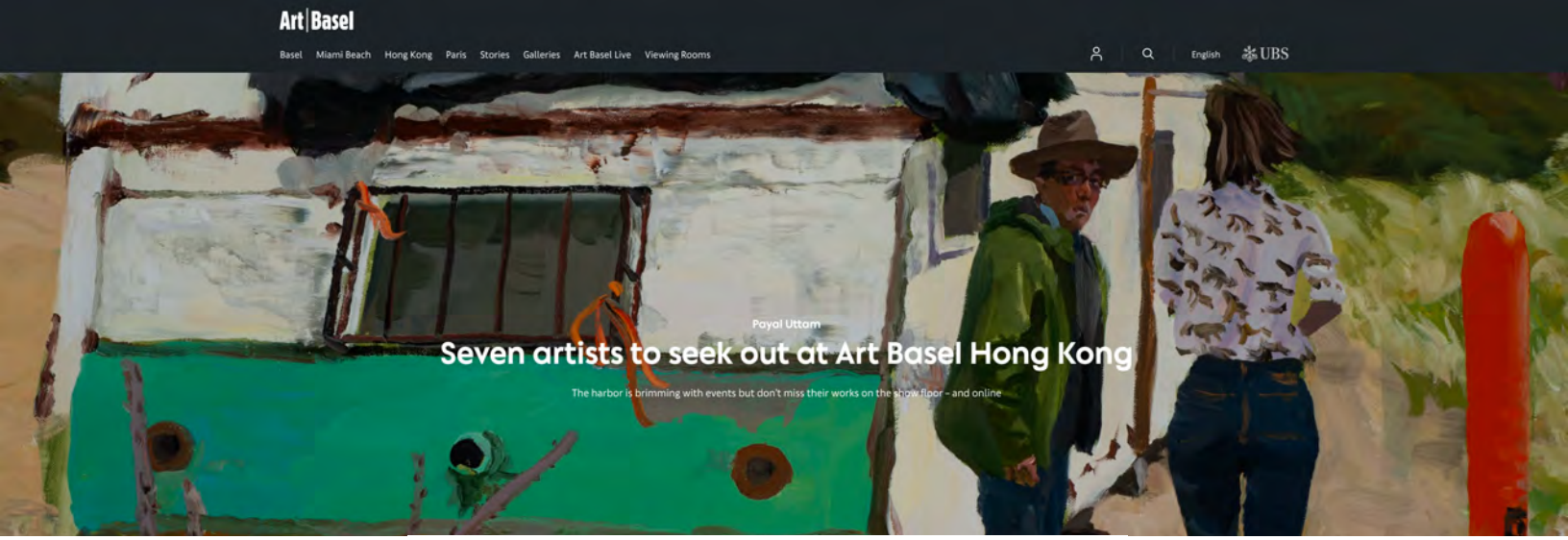
DINH Q. LE, South China Sea Pishkun, 2009, 3D animation still, digital print on color photographic paper, 127 × 220cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy 10 Chancery Lane Gallery.

South China Sea Pishkun (2009), visible diagonally from Light and Belief, is another video work. It combines footage of a peaceful sea with synthetic images of helicopters crashing into the water, recalling Operation Frequent Wind, the mass evacuation of Americans, their allies, and locals in South Vietnam via helicopters in 1975 during the Fall of Saigon. Pishkun is an Indigenous American term referring to a hunting method where bison are urged to jump over a cliff en masse. Here, the helicopters are similarly nosediving to their demise in the sea.

Below the exhibition space are the museum's collections of South and Southeast Asian art, including sculptures and weavings from the ancient Khmer and Cham cultures. The dialogue created between these antique pieces and Lê's works is poignant, enabling the viewer to constantly refocus, redirect, and recharge their understanding of the exhibition with broader historical contextualization.

That his photography-based works could be experienced in different ways—as sculptures, videos, and tapestries—is indicative of Lê's use of photography. He uses it less as a means unto itself and more as a resource, "a matter to be transformed." Zooming in and out, the audience put themselves into the position of the artist, occupying a space between the United States and Vietnam, between the imaginary and reality, constantly meditating between varying perspectives of history.

Dinh Q. Lê's "The Thread of Memory and Other Photographs" is on view at Musée du quai Branly, Paris, until November 20, 2022.



Dinh Q. Lê, Khmer Reamker #12 , 2021. Courtesy of 10 Chancery Lane, Hong Kong, and STPI, Singapore.

Dinh Q. Lê
10 Chancery Lane, Hong Kong, and **STPI, Singapore**

As a child, the Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê learned how to weave grass mats from his aunt, a tradition he has transposed to his contemporary art practice. Casting a critical eye on the role of the media and photography in constructing biased narratives of the Vietnam War, he shreds historic photographs and interlaces the pieces, so that they become vivid tapestries that tell a different story. Hong Kong's 10 Chancery Lane will exhibit one of his largest photo-weavings to date, *Khmer Reamker* #12 (2021), which reworks a mug shot of a teenage girl who was tortured and killed by the Khmer Rouge regime in one of its most notorious prisons. Instead of portraying her simply as a victim, he seeks to bestow a sense of dignity on her and her country.

Dinh Q. Lê: The Thread of Memory and Other Photographs

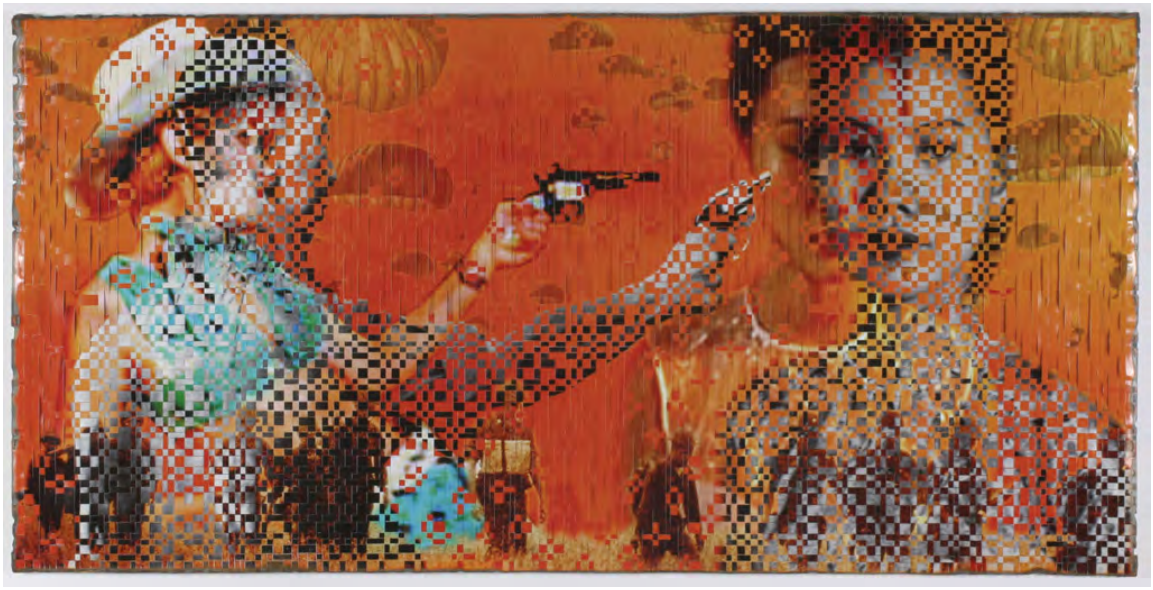
Dinh Q. Le, Untitled 9, 2004, Fujifilm Professional Color Paper, 85 × 170 cm. © the artist. Image courtesy of the artist and 10 Char

The first retrospective of Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê in France, “The thread of memory and other photographs” is a window into the lasting impact of war on Vietnamese society and how its remnants have informed the artist’s practice.

TEXT: Caroline Ha Thuc
IMAGES: Courtesy of various

Focusing on the artist’s deconstruction and questioning of the role of photography in the building of a collective memory, the musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris presents the first retrospective of Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê in France. This is an opportunity to understand how much the impact of the Vietnam War is still haunting today’s Vietnamese society and how it has informed Lê’s practice.

We all know the mythical helicopter assault from the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*, magnified by Wagner’s music, *Ride of The Valkyries*, that often epitomises the Vietnam War in the popular imagination. We all know other famous Hollywood movies featuring American soldiers caught between their duty and a growing feeling that the war they are waging is absurd. Yet what about the feelings of Vietnamese people? In these movies, they are usually represented as an anonymous crowd of running aunt-like figures, only characterised by their iconic conical hats. For Lê, who grew up in the United States after fleeing Vietnam with his family in 1978, there was, from the start, an urgency to excavate this neglected side of the story. As a student, he designed some large posters representing images of the war with provocative questions and statistics such as the number of children who became orphans during the war.



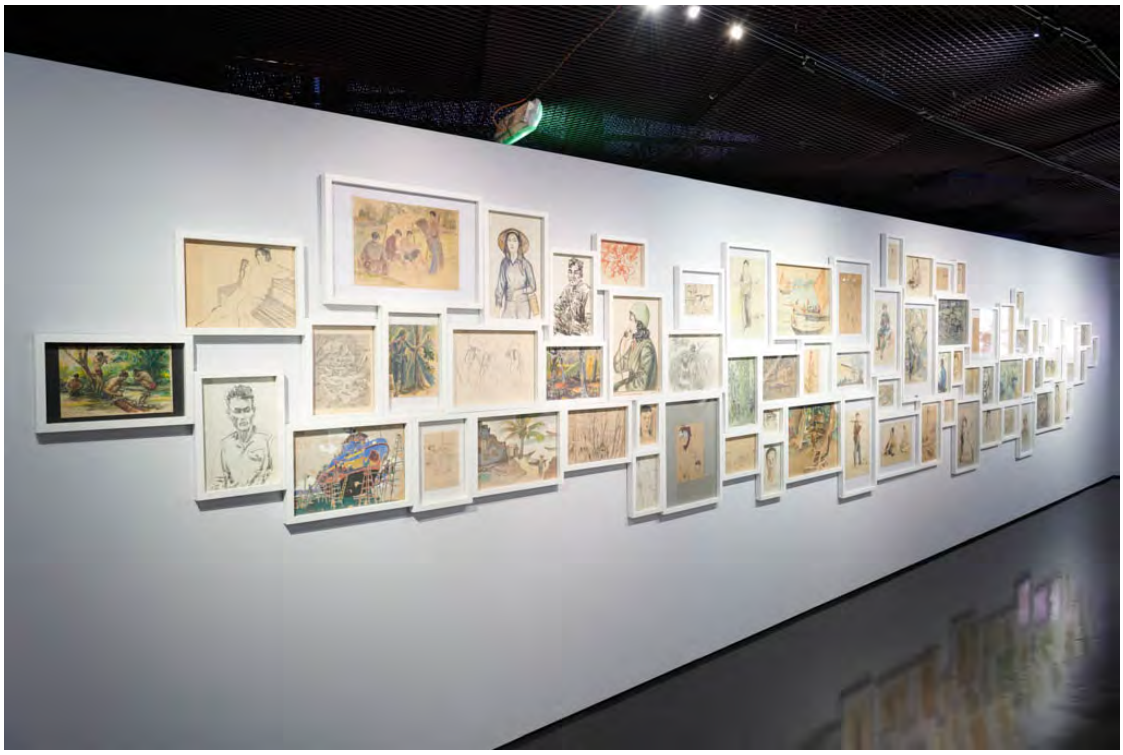
Dinh Q. Le, Untitled 9, 2004, Fujifilm Professional Color Paper, 85 × 170 cm. © the artist. Image courtesy of the artist and 10 Chancery Lane Gallery.

“Dinh Q. Lê: The thread of memory and other photographs”, installation view at musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris, 8 February – 20 November 2022. Photo by Léo Delafontaine. Image courtesy of the artist and musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.

“The thread of memory and other photographs” opens with the artist’s early series, “Untitled” (2004), which responds to this feeling of urgency. Inspired by a traditional technique that the artist learnt from his aunt who used to weave grass mats, Lê combined well-known images from Western media dealing with the Vietnam War and posters or Hollywood film scenes. The glamorous and colourful images are shredded then interwoven with black and white realistic depictions of the war, blurring our references and feelings. Against an orange background

covered with parachutes and shadows of soldiers, the outlines of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan shooting a Viet Cong suspect in the head are, for instance, mixed up with pieces of a portrait of a young Vietnamese, whose direct gaze seems to take on viewers. The edges of these compositions are burnt: for the artist, this is a way to seal the stripes together, both literally and metaphorically.

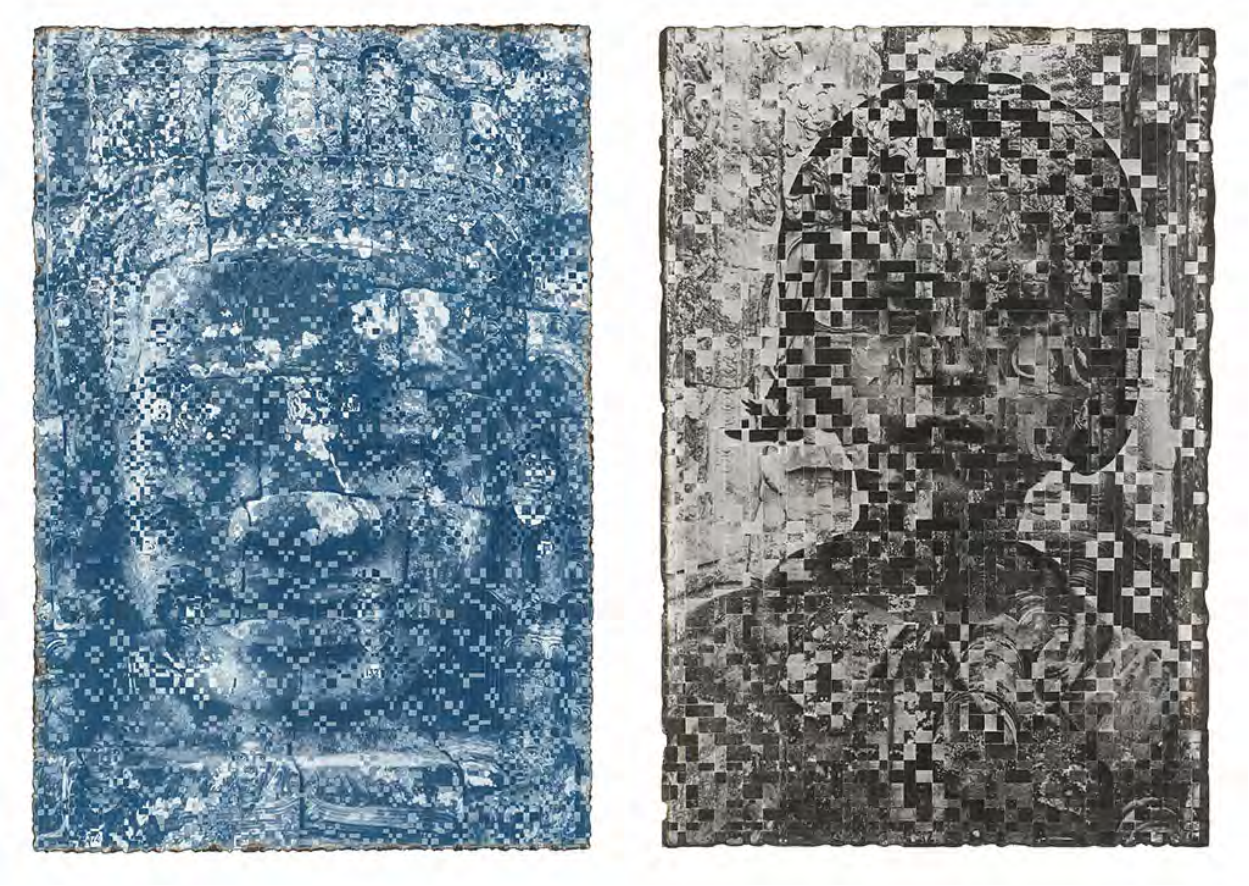
Dinh Q. Le, Light and Belief: Sketches of Life from the Vietnam War (detail), 2012, 70 drawings, pencil, watercolour, ink and oil on paper, dimensions variable. Images courtesy of the artist and 10 Chancery Lane Gallery.



Dinh Q. Le, Light and Belief: Sketches of Life from the Vietnam War, 2012, 70 drawings, pencil, watercolour, ink and oil on paper, dimensions variable; installation view in “Dinh Q. Lê: The thread of memory and other photographs” at musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris, 8 February – 20 November 2022. Photo by Léo Delafontaine. Image courtesy of the artist and musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.

In today’s context of post-colonial discourses, the necessity to rewrite history from a plurality of perspectives might seem a commonplace idea but two decades ago it was still a fundamental

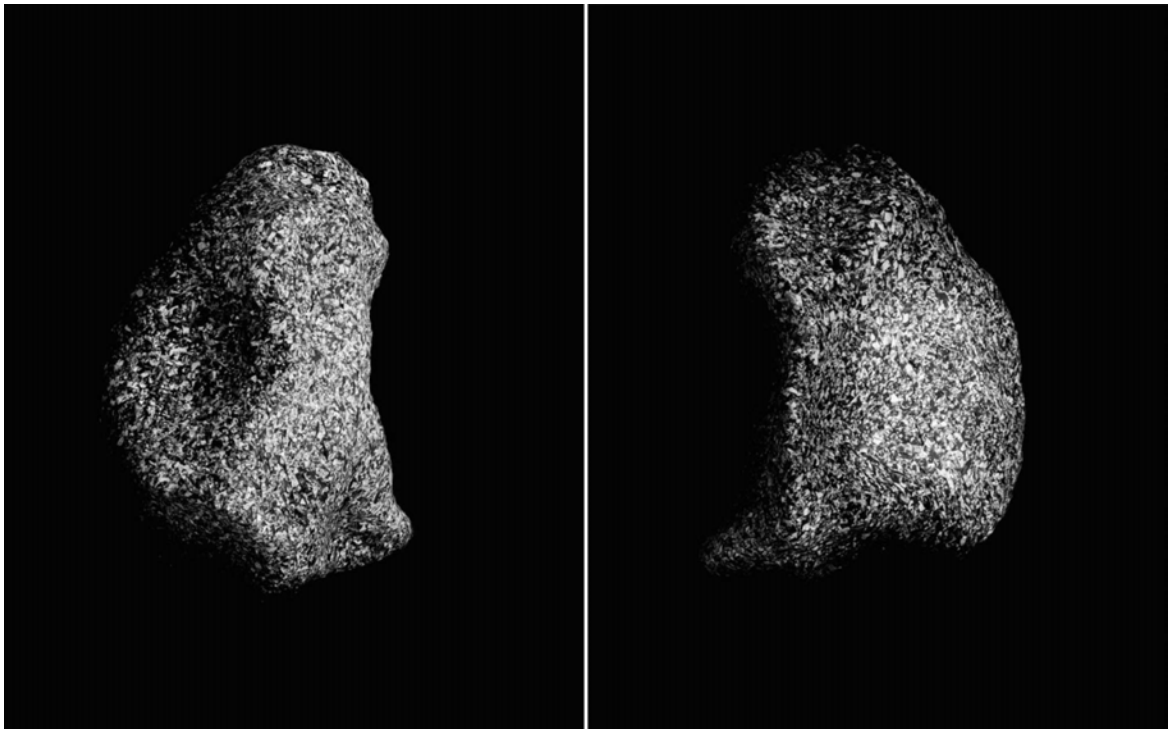
claim. The great interest of this chronological exhibition is also to follow the evolution of Lê's practice, as he delves into this topic: immediately after this series, a large space is dedicated to the series "Light and Belief: Sketches of Life from the Vietnam War" (2012) that Lê exhibited at documenta 13. When the artist decided to move back to Vietnam in the 1990s, he realised that the history of the South has been erased by the North during the war, and he measured the deep divide that still opposes these two parts of the country. More than just confronting the American vision of the war with a Vietnamese perspective, he also felt he had to explore the complexity of this part of history from the inside, through various testimonies and memories. This installation consists of drawings made by Vietnamese artists who were sent to the front during the war. Lê has been collecting them for years as part of his endeavour to gather some fragmented pieces of memory from this period of the past that has mostly disappeared with the conflicts. These sketches are remarkably serene and do not directly address the war. Rather, we see soldiers having a break, relaxing, enjoying life. This perspective is truly refreshing and sheds light on the human dimension of the war. In parallel, Lê has interviewed some of the artists who share their personal experiences and visions of art. Artists, at that time, were perceived as warriors, and could be heroes too. Here, we discover moving stories that question our preconceptions of art when it develops at the service of an ideology, densifying our understanding of this multifaceted period of history.



(Left) Dinh Q. Le, Splendor & Darkness (STPI) #26, 2017, cyanotype on Stonehenge paper, cut, weaved and burnt, with acid-free double-sided tape and linen tape, 207.5 x 139.5 cm, unique; (Right) Dinh Q. Le, Splendor & Darkness (STPI) #2, 2017, foiling and screen print on Stonehenge paper, cut, weaved and burnt, with acid-free double-sided tape and linen tape, 101.5 x 69 cm, unique. Images courtesy of the artist and STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery.

Dinh Q. Le, Splender & Darkness (STPI) #32, 2017, foiling and screen-print on Stonehenge paper, cut, weaved, and burned, 221 x 350 cm, unique; installation view in “Dinh Q. Lê: The thread of memory and other photographs” at musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris, 8 February – 20 November 2022. Photo by Léo Delafontaine. Image courtesy of the artist and musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.

Another part of the exhibition deals with the artist’s exploration of Cambodia’s history. As a child, Lê was living near the border of Cambodia, and the invasion of Vietnam by the Khmer Rouge had a direct impact on his life. The provocative series “Splendor and Darkness” (2017) features portraits of the Khmer Rouge victims shot at Tuol Sleng—better known as S21 in Phnom Penh—intimately interwoven with images from Angkor Wat. On the one hand the horror of the genocide, on the other hand the golden age of Cambodian culture. Today, S21 is a museum: implicitly, Lê questions these different sites of memory and points again to the constructed dimension of the past through collective imagery. The artist plays here with different formats and colours for his compositions, leaving sometimes the photographic bands hanging freely from the artworks, as if they were non-finished tapestries.



Dinh Q. Le, Adrift in Darkness, 2017, digital print on Awagami bamboo paper, laser cut and weaved onto cane, laser-cut and weaved around cane structure, dimensions variable. Images courtesy of the artist and STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery.

Dinh Q. Le, Adrift in Darkness, 2017, digital print on Awagami bamboo paper, laser cut and weaved onto cane, laser-cut and weaved around cane structure, dimensions variable; installation view in “Dinh Q. Lê: The thread of memory

and other photographs" at musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris, 8 February – 20 November 2022. Photo by Léo Delafontaine. Image courtesy of the artist and musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.

At the back of the exhibition, curator Christine Barthe has included a chronological frieze, linking the artist's biography with important dates of the Vietnam War. It also features famous media photographs that have crystallised the conflict, such as the naked "napalm girl" fleeing from her bombed village or the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk in Saigon, a good way to embed Lê's practice within this specific context. According to the artist, for many Vietnamese people, war is like an elephant in the room: they need to deal with it and create their own voice before they can move forward. This investigation and identity quest have represented a long journey for the artist who has never been allowed to exhibit his artworks in Vietnam, because of censorship. While there are still gaps in knowledge, and after 40 years, Lê has nevertheless moved forward in his artistic practice. The curator's choice to inscribe his practice within the history of Vietnam and its region might thus limit our understanding of his work. *Adrift in Darkness* (2017), a sculptural installation dealing with the current issue of migration, fortunately opens up this perspective. Installed in the middle of the space, these three floating, rock-like volumes made with tiny and interwoven images of migrants taken from the media, surprise us with their elusive nature: heavy and dense like the topic they address, they are in fact as light and fragile as the life of those migrants who risk their lives at sea. Perhaps another metaphor of our collective memory, always on the verge of disappearing yet resilient and tenacious.

Dinh Q. Lê: The thread of memory and other photographs
8 February – 20 November 2022
musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris

→ SOCIAL MAGAZINE

War perspective from Le Quang Dinh's "Memory knitting yarn"

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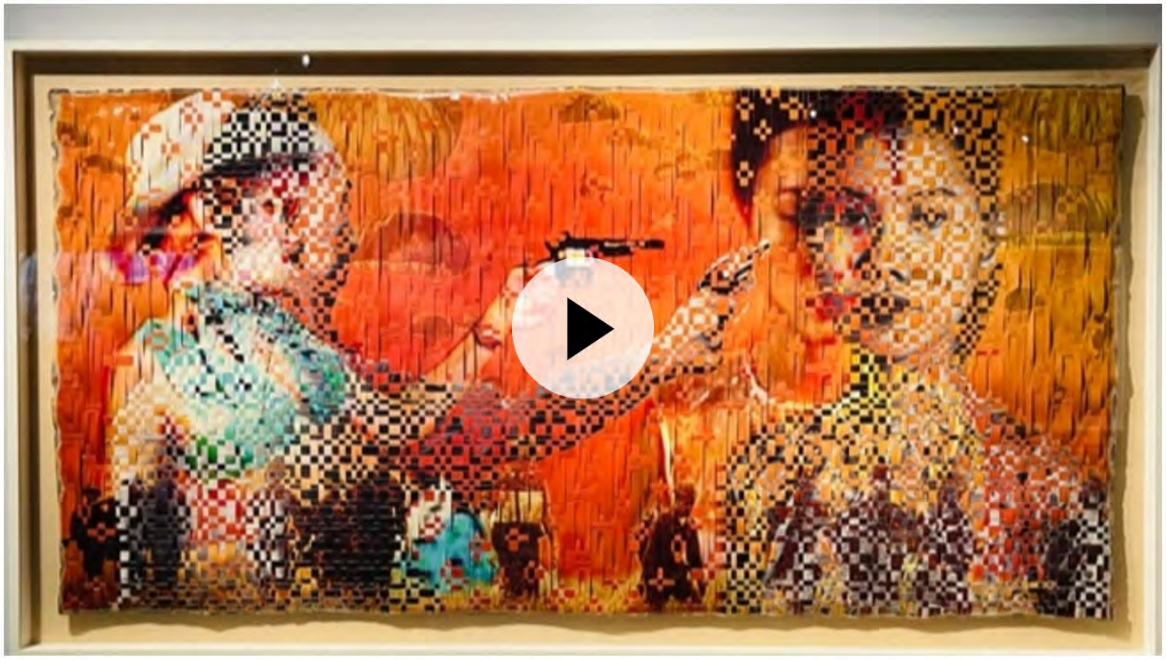

Knitting work "From Vietnam to Hollywood" by contemporary artist Le Quang Dinh, at the exhibition "Knitting yarns of memory", Quai Branly museum, Paris, France, February 8, 2022. © Thuy Duong/Vietnamese RFI

Chi Phuong 14 minutes

From February 8 to November 20, 2022, the Quai Branly museum in Paris introduces to French audiences a collection of knitting paintings marking the 20th anniversary of Le Quang Dinh's career. Through knitting paintings, videos or drawings, the artist brings viewers into the world of mixed memories, mixed true and false during the war.

Under the dim light of the bright side and the dark side, the intertwined traces in Le Quang Dinh's works clearly show each shape and block, making the knitting paintings become 3-dimensional space paintings. Based on different viewing angles and different light directions, viewers can see different things in the picture. “ In one corner, I see an elephant, and from the other side, I see a baby, it's interesting! ” , commented an audience member visiting the exhibition.

With about 20 large and small works of different sizes, the exhibition "Knitting yarn of memory - Le Quang Dinh" displays typical works marking his career, including works related to the Vietnam war, the genocide. The Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the migration crisis in Europe. These are themes that are intertwined between the geopolitical context and the artist's experience, between personal stories and history.

Born in Ha Tien in 1968, in the midst of the war, Le Quang Dinh and his family emigrated, living in exile in the US since childhood. Since the 1990s, he has started a creative career, creating many works with his own mark - photo weaving and gradually attracting the attention of the international community. This is Le Quang Dinh's first solo exhibition in France.

Knitting and how memory works

In 2020, two works by Le Quang Dinh were displayed at the Quai Branly museum in the exhibition À qui appartient le regard , along with the works of 26 other artists from around the world. At that time, the name Le Quang Dinh attracted the attention of many viewers. Therefore, the museum wishes to introduce to French audiences other important works of art by the artist more fully through this exhibition. The Covid-19 pandemic has made almost all preparations, from the selection of exhibits to the layout of the exhibition, done remotely, within two years.

According to Ms. Christine Barthe, exhibition curator of Quai Branly museum, "Memory knitting yarn" is not only to highlight the creative art by using pictures. She added:

In the works of Le Quang Dinh, we clearly see their connection to questions about memory, in addition to the use of each thread, and the knitting of them that we see in each work. It's like using memory threads to say, there are memories that are dropped somewhere, we don't know what we're looking for, and then we find them again in another, knitted thread... I think These works impress viewers because they are easy to understand, bringing them into the world of knitting. And the idea of knitting pictures together to make another picture, it's like how memories work, thoughts work, where they're mixed with other things over a long period of time without us realizing it. out."

The perspective of war in Le Quang Dinh's Memory Knitting Yarn © Chi Phuong

“ The past is complicated and so is war”

Le Quang Dinh, not an artist and little known as a photographer, because he is neither a painter nor an author of gallery photographs, but he is simply an artist with unique creativity. unique. Paintings and photos are a source of creativity, a kind of material that he transforms, by cutting them, then integrating and interweaving to create a new work, like memory threads stacked on top of each other, make for a more complete story. Talking about the process of creating paintings Le Quang Dinh said:

The Vietnam War is complicated, and depending on which side you stand on, you will have a different perspective. For my part, after more than 20 years of working on war-related topics, I have begun to learn to accept rather than find answers to war. To create my works, I use these facts to show how we remember and how we can accept the truth. The past is very complicated and so is war, there are pieces of memory that have faded.

I do not wish to reconstruct what our memories hold, but rather how to interpret those memories. And the process is very simple. I make a selection from the pictures I have, layering the pictures on top of each other. With two different pictures, the first one I cut vertically and the other horizontally, then I knit them together. When an image is cut into small, separate strands, they become abstract and we can't tell what it is.

During this process, I had to memorize each strand that I cut, in which photo, in what position, each thread had a different color. It is a process that requires intense concentration, to the point of losing both the concept of time and space. I remember one time I was working non-stop, and by the time I got up, it was already 4am.

Stepping into the exhibition space of more than 50 square meters, viewers seem to step into the author's war memories, not only by the art of using darkness to highlight the knitting pictures of memory but also by the sound of machines. Helicopter in his ear, and then he fell into the water, one by one, one by one. The work, titled South China Sea Pishkun, is a 3D animated film inspired by the true story of helicopters trying to escape from South Vietnam after the victory of the North Vietnamese army in 1975. Some helicopters fell into the sea because of lack of fuel, others were shot down.

Change the stereotypes that memories create

Perhaps for those who have read about Le Quang Dinh or heard about the theme of the exhibition, the fact that a video of a helicopter crashed is not surprising, because its image is associated with war. Sharing with RFI about this work, the artist who is passionate about three-dimensional creations laughed and said: " Actually, the image of a helicopter is not necessarily about war. I brought this work to another exhibition and I was surprised to see the children standing in front of the screen counting down planes. For children, their brains are usually free of prejudices and ready to absorb new things, my work about helicopters is like a video game to them."

Talking about prejudice, that seems to be what Le Quang Dinh wants to change in people's minds about war, especially the Vietnam War. While living and studying in the US, Le Quang Dinh noticed that the way Americans looked at the war through movies or wartime photographers was different from the view from Vietnam. " For example, in the US, they say it's the Vietnam War, and in Vietnam, it's the war against the US."

The past is so confusing

The artist said that once, when he visited his mother in California, he accidentally saw a helicopter spraying fire retardant due to a forest fire, the sky was all orange. An image that reminded him of the Vietnam War, which actually got this piece of memory from a Hollywood movie. At the exhibition in Paris, Le Quang Dinh first brought viewers into the collection From Vietnam to Hollywood, 2003-2004. He explained that the collection was his memories mixed up with the ones Hollywood made up, the real and the fake. Causing us to accidentally mistake it for one, but it's not really.

In the opening work of the collection, the artist combines one photo from the Vietnam War and another from a Hollywood movie. The two images intertwine, creating a blurred effect, causing the viewer to perceive the overall image in "organized disturbance". Le Quang Dinh wants to emphasize the ambiguity in the associations of memory and the multi-dimensional ambiguity of a photograph.

War is not only about death

During a visit to the museum with Le Quang Dinh, an audience member commented that " the works talk about different periods of the war but do not show its brutality", but mainly portraits, other stories. Sharing with RFI Vietnamese, the artist explained:

“ The purpose of this exhibition is not to talk about the war, but the process. Talking about war does not mean death, violence or pain. That's not what I want to tell through my works. Rather, I want the viewer to feel how we see what happened. As for war, death, or destruction and suffering, which we all know, I don't think I have to tell people more about it, but instead, I want to tell stories that are hidden behind. It's more complicated and much more interesting, but understanding that story can be even more painful, because war is not simple, its consequences are complex."

The exhibition presents other collections such as Light and Belief : Sketches of Life from the Vietnam War, 2012 (Light and Belief: Sketches of life during the Vietnam War) which includes more than 100 sketches that have been drawn from the Vietnam War. completed or unfinished by Vietnamese artists on the northern front lines. Along with the paintings are the testimonies of the artists telling about wartime memories in a 30-minute video. This is probably the space that takes up the most light of the exhibition, the place where Le Quang Dinh collects and keeps his works as historical evidence, and also the place where the artist gives the light to fellow artists. their anonymous careers, giving them speech and artistic recognition.

The Splendor and Darkness Collection, 2017 (Glory and Shadow) features portraits of victims of the Khmer Rouge genocide interspersed with splendid images of Angkor. Growing up on the border with Cambodia, Le Quang Dinh was a direct victim when Pol Pot's troops attacked Vietnam, forcing his family to flee to Thailand, before coming to the US. This memory is still deeply embedded in the artist's mind. After first returning to Vietnam in 1993, Le Quang Dinh returns to Vietnam more often and it's like a pilgrimage to the past with lost memories.

The art of soothing the soul

In a conversation with art commentator Moira Roth in 2001 (quoted by the European Journal of International Migration), he said that every time he returns from the US he brings a handful of earth and throws it into the stream. of the Mekong River. He hoped that would help appease the spirits of the soldiers still lingering around. So do your works revolve around the theme of war, as a way to soothe your own soul?

“ At that time, I was just a child. The Vietnam War ended when I was 5 years old. I think I've seen things a 5 year old shouldn't be looking at. When I was 10 years old, Cambodia and Khmer Rouge attacked my village. A 10-year-old like me shouldn't have seen such scenes. At that time, I didn't understand what was going on, I felt like I was losing control. I think my writings are a way for me to educate myself, and explain why all the wars happen, with Vietnam, with Cambodia. Why did Cambodia want to invade Vietnam, why did the Americans come to Vietnam, then Russia and China too. Perhaps making art helps me somewhat understand why I have such out of control emotions. And so far, I think I got it .”

Le Quang Dinh's works have been exhibited in many parts of the world, in the United States, Australia, Europe and Asia, especially in Japan. During his return to Vietnam, he founded San Art, one of the important centers of artistic activity in Vietnam.

Ethnologist Catherine Choron-Baix, research at the Université de Poitiers, commented in the article Le vrai voyage. L'art de Dinh Q. Le entre exil et retour , that Le Quang Dinh is a typical immigrant artist in establishing a foothold in the international art market by recreating his roots. Many people like him have used his fame to create momentum to change the original society.

Le Quang Dinh never loses the red thread that runs through his own critical discourse of history, but what seems to be taking shape in his transformation is his approach to realities. different from the rest of the world and maybe even globally encompassing.

OREGON ARTSWATCH
OREGON'S ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

ARTSWATCH FOCUS

Seeing Double

Double-exposure photographs by Mike Vos, Dinh Q. Lê and Gary Burnley speak to our polarized times and expand our consciousness

AUGUST 30, 2021 // ARTSWATCH FOCUS, PHOTOGRAPHY, VISUAL ART // BRIAN LIBBY

It all started with a waterfall I knew I'd seen before. Only this waterfall seemed to be coming through a window.

The picture, a double-exposure by Portland photographer Mike Vos, I'd found on his website after receiving a press release from Blue Sky Gallery about Vos and artist Kelda Van Patten being selected for residencies at the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology. Included in the press-release email was a thumbnail image one of Vos's double-exposure photographs from his ongoing *Dead Cities* project. The image is a double exposure combining a shot of Snoqualmie Falls in Washington with a shot of a square window amidst a wall of lapped wood siding with a few stray bullet holes.

Snoqualmie Falls in a window, from Mike Vos's "Dead Cities" project.

Of course this is the waterfall made famous by film director David Lynch in the opening credits to his landmark 1990-92 TV series *Twin Peaks* and its 18-episode sequel from 2017, *Twin Peaks: The Return*. I knew it well, not just as a Lynch fan and past interviewer, but also because nine years ago I'd made Snoqualmie Falls the subject of one of my own short films.

Yet even without those personal or pop-cultural hooks, Vos's image was arresting, with its frame within a frame and its juxtaposition of clean-lined (if weathered) building and unruly falling

water. Yet the transparency of the window and the falling water also somehow felt related. It seemed like a statement, a manifesto even: that, as Lynch continually explores, time and memory are transitory and mysterious.
Quite an impact for a photographer who wasn't even showing this month in Portland.
Once I started thinking about Vos's photos, however, I began to notice other artists exhibiting this fall who also combine images and explore overlapping ideas: the photo weavings of Dinh Q. Lê, *Monuments and Memorials* at Elizabeth Leach Gallery; and Gary Burnley's *The Known World* at Blue Sky Gallery (both showing through October 2).

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Imagining A World Without Us

Vos's untitled photographs are part of an ongoing series called the Dead Cities Project. Its first chapter, *Someday This Will All Be Gone*, debuted at Pushdot Studio in February 2020, but the exhibition was cut short due to the pandemic. The next chapter and exhibit is scheduled for 2022.
In all cases, Vos is imagining a world devoid of people, where their ruins are slowly retaken by nature. "It's not intended to be this sci-fi dystopian world," he explained. "It's more, 'Let's give the earth a chance to heal.'" Double-exposure photography was a way to show a kind of before and after. "In galleries, people would say, 'That's an interesting abandoned factory,' but they wouldn't take away the narrative. I started to think, 'How do I tell this story without having to explain the context constantly, and convey the story in the image itself without words?' This concept of wildlife returning was easier to convey when I was superimposing mountains and trees over the tops of abandoned buildings. People started to respond a lot more strongly to it, and to see there was a larger idea. It seemed like I struck a nerve with that."

Mike Vos's double-exposed Satsop nuclear cooling tower, as if swallowed up by time.

Vos grew up skateboarding and surfing in Santa Barbara before moving to Portland in 2004. Particularly as a skater, he grew accustomed to seeking out abandoned locations to ride. Fellow skaters have often given him ideas of not just where to skate but also where to take photos. But Vos's biggest inspiration comes from Alan Weisman's 2007 book *The World Without Us*, which encourages us to see a process of human decline that has already begun. Vos even had a dialogue with the author after sending Weisman his work.

"He said, 'You don't have to imagine a world that's crumbling. It already is," Vos explained. "You just have to go find it. It looks like you already are.' He's right. almost every major city has large, abandoned places."

All of which made one of Vos's other most arresting images, featuring a massive, nearly 500-foot-tall cooling tower from the Satsop nuclear power plant near Elma, Washington, a natural. In the double-exposure image, the trees seem to be saying that even a structure this large can be swallowed up in time.

The Satsop plant never opened for business. Drowning in debt, the project was mothballed on the eve of its completion. Vos is certainly not the first to photograph this mammoth building. One cooling tower provided the backdrop for the 2014 movie *Transformers 4: Age of Extinction*; another tower appeared in 2017's *Transformers 5: The Last Knight*. But the symbolism of its backstory was irresistible.

"We as humans have built these places that we think are too big to fail. Something as ambitious and gigantic as this, they probably thought it would provide so many jobs, so much power, that there's no way it was not going to work," Vos explained. "For it to not even open is surreal in a way, but also a little bit telling. We can't even think about our civilization failing."

Weaving Time and Memory

While Vos is relatively new to photography, artist Dinh Q. Lê has been exploring a different kind of double-image making for well over two decades. And while their approaches and motivations differ, each one's work makes me appreciate the other.
Lê was born in 1968 in Hà Tiên, a Vietnamese town near the Cambodia border. At the age of 10, with the Cambodian-Vietnamese War raging, his family emigrated to America by boat, but two of Lê six siblings were lost along the way. The artist received art degrees from the University of California, Santa Barbara (perhaps even crossing paths with Vos) and later the School of Visual Arts in New York; in the latter's MFA program, Lê first began the technique of cutting and weaving together photographs.

Details above, center, and below from Dinh Q. Lê's woven-images series "Monuments and Memorials." Images courtesy Elizabeth Leach Gallery.


DO NOT TOUCH!

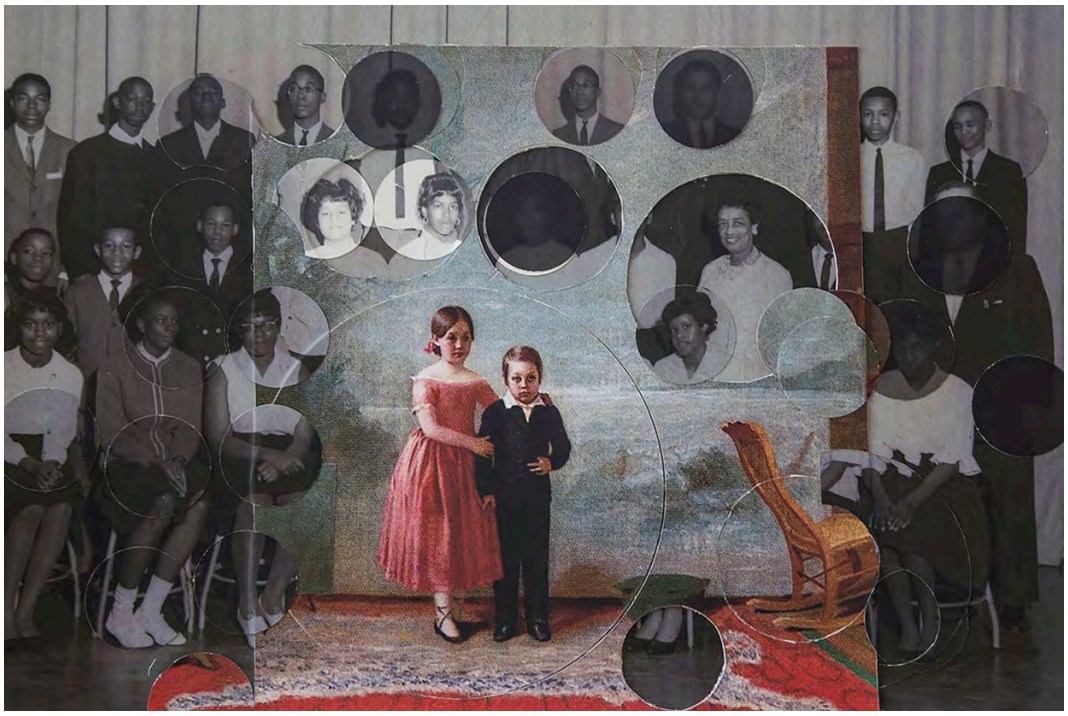
“He started doing the weavings because it was a way for him to take these multiple narratives and weave them together: his different personal experiences,” said Elizabeth Leach Gallery director Daniel Peabody. “But also his aunt had taught him grass-mat weaving. But it’s not necessarily a traditional weave structure. He’s making choices about which images to bring forward. You see different kinds of loops to make sure different details come to the fore. It creates this incredible texture. We always present them framed, but I get the privilege of handling them unframed. And they are like fabric. They have this fluidness to them.”

The multiple narratives Peabody mentions in *Monuments and Memorials* start with images of Angkor Wat, which Le actually photographed years ago and returned to during the pandemic, while Vietnam (where he now lives again) was under quarantine. “He’s this American citizen who lives back in Vietnam now. He’s been watching from afar the reckoning we’ve had with monuments and memorials, and what’s being glorified and what’s being taken away. In Cambodia, Angkor Wat is even on the flag,” Peabody said.

Woven in and out of those images are what at first appear as differently shaded geometric abstractions: solid bands of color that begin to destabilize and erode the pretty pictures of Angkor Wat monuments. Yet these portions of the photo weavings actually depict portions of the walls and floors at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh. “He talked about how during the rainy season, Angkor Wat’s volcanic stone goes into a more yellow, golden, orange color, and that that’s related to the color of the walls at the Tuol Sleng museum, as well as the bricks,” the gallery director added. “The brown and yellow are the two colors of the checkerboard floor, because it was an old high school that they had converted to a prison.”

If some of these squares are showing light on masonry at different times today, it makes the work about the passage of time in different ways: through the course of one day and over years or centuries. “It’s about time,” Peabody agreed, “and it’s about memory.”

Changing the Conversation



Gary Burnley, untitled photo collage, 2017. Courtesy Elizabeth Houston Gallery.

After setting out to write about Vos and Le, when I encountered the work of Gary Burnley it became clear that while the topic here is double-exposure, there's something about the rule of three.

Burnley is a collage artist, but his work is principally a marriage of two visual languages: classical paintings and historic photography, principally of Black citizens.

"The discipline of portraiture has historically been a grasping at social status and economic power, giving permanence to the idealized visions of beauty it describes. But Burnley imbues the medium with a doubly disruptive capacity, juxtaposing and overlapping imagery from different periods and sources, and softening their discrepancies with circular cutouts," Chicago photographer and writer Robyn Day explained in an essay for New York's Elizabeth Houston Gallery about Burnley's work, accompanying an exhibit there opening in February of this year. "Reframing an Ingres, Courbet, or Coypel, he populates their canvases with those who have been left outside the art historical canon, centering the lives of Black women, men, and children at the core of cultural dialogue."

Gary Burnley, "Mabel," 2016. Courtesy Elizabeth Houston Gallery.

Burnley, whose solo show at Blue Sky Gallery comes after being named in a Top 50 selection at the local Photolucida festival in 2020, was born in 1950 in St. Louis, Missouri. After earning fine-art bachelor's and master's degrees from Washington University and Yale University, he's

been a working artist since the late 1970s. But Burnley's artwork was particularly shaped in part by his experience returning to his hometown in the late 1980s as one of six artists chosen to be part of a design team for St. Louis's new light rail system, the MetroLink, which opened in 1993. "In travelling the city scouting station locations and routes, a flood of memories from my youth would come to me in the evening," Burnley explained by email. "After the project was complete, my studio work took a more intimate and personal turn. I began working with the bits and pieces of the memories that had returned. I have been working with collage in one form or another since, almost 20 years."

Gary Burnley, "Aunt Hagar's Children #3," 2020. Courtesy Elizabeth Houston Gallery.

His recent photo-collages come after years exploring historic stereographic cards and artwork, which helped him conceive a kind of otherworldly language marrying Black portraiture and classical imagery, all underscored by the notion of how people recognize images and their connotations differently. Burnley said he was after "an unpredictable, magical, real but not real, there-but-not-there quality. Instead of using two versions of the same image to produce a 3-D effect, I began combining contrasting images to produce another kind of hybrid image."
The Blue Sky exhibit's title may be *The Known World*, but the work, Burnley added, "is as much about exploring worlds I don't fully understand. I intended the title to imply a geographic metaphor. Black Americans learn to navigate the boundaries of worlds with both clear and not so clear borders. Identity is a key component in Western history's understanding of representation. Black Americans grow to accept the duality in our experience, the hidden ghosts

of contradiction lurking in how we are seen and how we view ourselves. My interest in collage, in physically joining images and portions of images, is ironically to see myself, my identity as one, complete and whole."

Gary Burnley's "Watson and the Shark 2020" incorporates images from John Singleton Copley's 1778 painting "Watson and the Shark," in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Courtesy Elizabeth Houston Gallery.

Breaking Through

Abandoned buildings dissolving into the encroaching natural world; the idealistic, awe-inspiring landmarks that societies build versus the brutal subjugation they carry out; humble photo-portraits from a marginalized community cut into beautiful historic paintings commissioned by history's most affluent power-holders: What do Vos, Lê and Burnley's artworks have in common, besides juxtaposing two types of imagery?

For starters, they seem united by the violence implied in the imagery: the bullet hole in the window, the torture of political prisoners, the exclusionary mistreatment of Black Americans. Yet all three artists find a kind of earned beauty, perhaps in part by exposing types of darkness to the light.

Of all things, I'm reminded of something that movie director Gus Van Sant told me in an interview for the *Christian Science Monitor* many years ago, on the occasion of his 2002 film *Gerry*. Though it starred two familiar Hollywood actors, Oscar winners Matt Damon and Casey Affleck, *Gerry* was the first of three straight films in which Van Sant explored long takes that were the antithesis of blockbusters, throwing hundreds of shots in succession at its audience. The director recalled the advice a film professor back at the Rhode Island School of Design had given him: "Cutting is a violence."

In that way, perhaps the juxtaposition of two basic images or image types in these double-exposures, photo weavings and collages is not just about the combined effect or the riffing of one image off another, but the transition itself, which can be violent but can also lead us to some kind of greater truth.

In recent years we've seen Portland and America at their best and worst, with unprecedented threats and disruptions to daily life and storms of misinformation threatening to drown out the real story. But these times also bring opportunities for breakthrough. Each artist is talented enough alone to merit our entire gaze. Yet taken together, the work has a collective, propulsive momentum: a waterfall that crashes through the bullet-ridden window.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ArtSeen

The Asia Society Triennial

By David Carrier, Yung-Wen (Mag) Yao, and Paul Gladston

The exhibitions *We Do Not Dream Alone*, the inaugural Asia Society Triennial, and *Dreaming Together* at the New-York Historical Society bring together works by over 40 artists selected from the collections of both institutions in a thoughtful and very welcome showcasing of the work of Asian and Asian-diasporic artists still underrepresented in mainstream Euro-American contexts. When we read about this ambitious two-part project—the first collaboration between the Asia Society Museum and the New-York Historical Society—we thought that perspectives from multiple reviewers were needed. At this moment, when the movement of people and even artworks is difficult, the mere existence of this two-museum show is a major accomplishment. We are immensely thankful to our colleagues at both institutions for providing essential support for our review of the first part, which had to be organized remotely.

Walk straight west from the Asia Society on New York's Upper East Side, go across Central Park, and then uptown seven blocks on the Upper West Side, and you get to the New-York Historical Society. This isn't a long walk, but though close geographically, these are very different institutions. The Asia Society's collection includes both contemporary and traditional art by artists of Asian identity, and it regularly organizes shows of Asian and Asian-diasporic, including Asian American, art. The New-York Historical Society holds a distinguished collection of American art and artifacts. *Dreaming Together* is an important opportunity for the New-York Historical Society to showcase works by artists of Asian identity in New York.

Starting with the Venice Biennale, first held in 1895, and continuing more recently with countless international surveys of contemporary art worldwide, including major biennales and triennales across the Asia-Pacific region such as those of Shanghai, Gwangju, Taiwan, Busan, and Sydney, large-scale international exhibitions have become an enduring and important art world ritual. Announced themes of "urban and natural environments," "protest and rebellion," "individuals and identities," and "borders and crossings" at the New-York Historical Society show strike familiar notes. But what's distinctive about *We Do Not Dream Alone* and *Dreaming Together* is their shared and timely concern with anti-Asian xenophobia as well as wider issues of disadvantage and exclusion raised by the Black Lives Matter movement. Appropriately, the titles of the exhibitions are derived from a passage in the Japanese-born Yoko Ono's book *Grapefruit* (1964): "A dream you dream alone may be a dream, but a dream two people dream together is a reality." There are further titular resonances with the group known as the "Dreamers": migrants to the USA protected by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals act, and by association the contested idea of the "American Dream."

At the New-York Historical Society, standout juxtapositions include the proximity of Huang Yan's *Chinese Shan-Shui (landscape)—Tattoo* (1999), showing a body seemingly tattooed with a representation of a traditional Chinese landscape painting, and Thomas Cole's 19th-century luminist epic, "The Course of Empire" (1833-1836), reflective of contemporaneous fears that America's Eden-like pastoralism would eventually be overrun (as perhaps it now is) by the decadence of empire. Resonant between the two is a shared trans-cultural desire to arrive at a harmonious reciprocity between humanity and nature. Equally notable, not least because of their sheer, presumably ironical, scale, are hanging scrolls by Dinh Q. Lê featuring distorted images of the World Trade Center in flames on 9/11 (2016), the significance of which also riffs on Cole's paintings.

Dinh Q. Lê, *Scrolls 1 and 4 from WTC from Four Perspectives*, 2016. Two C-print scrolls (exhibition prints, 2020). Asia Society, New York. Exhibition prints courtesy of the artist © Dinh Q. Lê. Photo: Perry Hu © Dinh Q. Lê.

At the Asia Society Museum, Xu Bing and Sun Xun's individual responses to the American Declaration of Independence will almost certainly be an epiphany for many viewers. Both make references to the under-discussed impact of Chinese thinking on ideas developed by the US's "founding fathers" during the 18th century. Xu Bing's *Silkworm Book: The Analects of Confucius* (2019), a work using threads woven by silkworms as an intervention with a printed copy of the Chinese classic text the *Analects*, and Sun Xun's *July Coming Soon* (2019), an interpolation of Americana into the format of a traditional literati-Confucian landscape, also resonate with Daoist ideas of a spontaneous reciprocity between culture and nature as well as the hubris of over-rationalizing human intervention.

Ghiora Aharoni's *Thank God for Making Me a Woman, III* (2019) features an assemblage comprising Islamic religious jewelry and a muslin robe worn traditionally by men in India, with the eponymous phrase hand-embroidered on its interior in a mash-up of Hindi, Urdu, Hebrew, and Arabic; it is spectrally emblematic of the shifting cultural cross-currents running through these exhibitions. Similar entanglements also pervade Australia-based artist Nasim Nasr's video *33 Beads (unworried) #1* (2018), which deconstructs, while paradoxically highlighting,

the differing/intersecting cultural significance of beads used in conjunction with prayer, contemplation, or distraction from worry.

The Asia Society show's sheer diversity and the quality of individual works is certainly impressive, though audiences less familiar with Asian art may have gained greater insights from a sharper focus on specific themes common to works by a smaller group of artists. The New-York Historical Society's strategy of juxtaposition points successfully to durable similarities as well as differences between the visual cultures of Asia and Euro-America while also drawing attention to pressing present-day concerns with social justice. Questions also remain, however, as to just how accessible the particular cultural contexts and significances of the "Asian" works included in *Dream Together* have been made to visitors, and indeed, to what extent a unifying trans-institutional attention to current political struggles, no matter how important and pressing, serves to overwrite those contexts and significances.

Exhibitions representative of particular cultural identities face an inescapable dilemma. Cultural identities can no longer be considered as "pure" or "isolated;" they are more open and fluid than ever before, intersecting with each other through the intense global connectedness of everyday life. This is highlighted by contemporary art where diverse cultural elements give shape to distinct lived realities while conspicuously informing creativity in a now globalized context. An emphasis on cultural distinctiveness may make for clarity but may also downplay the complexity of less definable trans-cultural resonances. Attempts to reconcile the two are hugely problematic and, indeed, politically loaded. It would be invidious to find too much fault with *We Do Not Dream Alone* and *Dreaming Together* for their entanglement in that dilemma. It is with respect to these intractable tensions—as well as others between clarity and complexity of messaging—running through both exhibitions that their most telling significance lies. As Yoko Ono suggests, the idea that no one is dreaming entirely alone is grounded in the reality of intersections between differing individuals and cultures.

Contributors

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taught philosophy in Pittsburgh and art history in Cleveland. He is writing a book about Maria Bussmann.
Yung-Wen (Mag) Yao

Yung-Wen (Mag) Yao is an Assistant Professor in Critical Theory and Cultural Studies at TaTung University, Taipei, Taiwan. Her research focuses on relationships between contemporary art and Chinese soft power.

Paul Gladston is the inaugural Judith Neilson Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of South Wales, Sydney. He has written extensively about contemporary art in/from the People's Republic of China and the Asia-Pacific region with specific regard to the concerns of critical theory.

https://brooklynrail.org/2021/02/artseen/Asia-Society-Triennial

ARTnews

ARTnews in Brief: Bangkok Art Biennale Names Partial Art List for 2020 Edition—and More from November 12, 2019

BY ***The Editors of ARTnews*** POSTED **11/11/19 5:28 PM**

Tuesday, November 12, 2019
Bangkok Art Biennale Reveals Partial Artist List

The **Bangkok Art Biennale** has named 16 international artists who will participate in its second edition, which will open in the Thai capital on October 10, 2020. The first group announced includes Anish Kapoor, Dinh Q. Lê, Leandro Erlich, Julia Fullerton-Batten, Thanet Aowsinsiri, and Lu Yang. The presentation's theme will be "Escape Routes," with a focus on environmental, social, and political issues. The artists "will offer art practice as mind escapism where meditation, contemplation, ritualism, healing, and performance become the essence of hope and optimism," Apinan Poshyanada, artistic director of the exhibition, said in a statement. The biennale's curatorial team includes Sook-Kyung Lee, senior curator of international art at the Tate Modern in London; Wutigorn Kongka, assistant professor in the departments of architecture and fine art at King's Mongkut Institute of Technology Ladkrabang in Bangkok; and Ong Puay Khim, former deputy director of curatorial programs at the NTU Centre for

How a Landmark Show by LGBTQ Artists in Thailand Is Sowing the Seeds of Tolerance Across the Region

news.artnet.com/exhibitions/lgbt-exhibition-bangkok-thailand-1715448

November 26, 2019

Sunil Gupta, *The New Pre-Raphaelites #5* (2007). Collection of Sunpride Foundation. Image courtesy of artist.

The Bangkok Art and Culture Center in Thailand has opened a historic exhibition of LGBTQ-themed art. On view through March 2020, the show is the largest-ever survey of regional contemporary art that engages with the history of the LGBTQ community in Southeast Asia.

Curated by a team led by Chatvichai Promadhattavedi, the exhibition emphasizes shifting social frameworks and challenges to established norms, while promoting tolerance and conversations that are sometimes taboo in the region. It presents works by more than 50 artists from Thailand, India, and China, many of whom identify as LGBTQ.

“For the wider region, our neighbors in Southeast Asia will see that Bangkok is doing a

major art exhibition on the LGBT theme, signifying its acceptance," Promadhattavedi tells Artnet News. "Hopefully, our neighbors might then consider it safe for them to venture into it, too."

Thailand is considered to have a higher level of tolerance for the LGBTQ community than many other Asian countries. Yet while Bangkok is recognized as a generally gay-friendly city, exclusionary practices and discrimination are not uncommon.

The curator hopes that governments will recognize that the tourism, banking, and finance industries could be boosted by the projection of a "reasonable and tolerant" international image. Since the exhibition opened on November 23, it has received nearly 6,000 visitors, including those coming from schools.

Cindy Aquino, *Bond* (2013). Collection of the artist, image courtesy of artist.

The exhibition, titled "Spectrosynthesis II—Exposure of Tolerance: LGBTQ in Southeast Asia," is making its second stop on a tour that began at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Taipei in 2017. It is sponsored by the Sunpride Foundation, an organization dedicated to promoting the creative history of the LGBTQ community.

"I look forward to seeing how the exhibition will encourage greater discussion and foster

"I look forward to seeing how the exhibition will encourage greater discussion and foster a more equitable world for the LGBTQ community and their allies," the foundation's executive director, Patrick Sun, said in a statement.

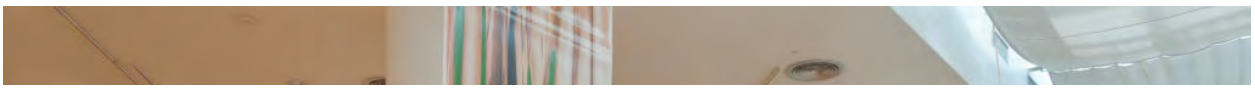
The show includes new commissions from artists such as Balbir Krishan, David Medalla, Arin Rungjang, Anne Samat, and Chov Theanly, which are on view alongside works by Danh Vō, Ren Hang, and Dinh Q. Lê.

One of the works on view, by the Thai artist Jakkai Siributr, features three large-scale textile works patterned with geometric motifs that play on the pink triangles used by the Nazi party to identify and shame "homosexuals." The symbols in Siributr's *Quilt Project* (2019) have since been reclaimed by the gay community as a symbol of pride.

Meanwhile, Arin Rungjang, who represented Thailand in the 2013 Venice Biennale, is presenting a new video installation inspired by his childhood fascination with a transsexual acquaintance.

See installation views of the exhibition below.

Installation view of "Spectrosynthesis II—Exposure of Tolerance: LGBTQ in Southeast Asia," on view at the Bangkok Art and Culture Center in Thailand through March 1, 2020. Image courtesy of Bangkok Art and Culture Center and Sunpride Foundation.



Installation view of “Spectrosynthesis II—Exposure of Tolerance: LGBTQ in Southeast Asia,” on view at the Bangkok Art and Culture Center in Thailand through March 1, 2020. Image courtesy of Bangkok Art and Culture Center and Sunpride Foundation.

Installation view of “Spectrosynthesis II—Exposure of Tolerance: LGBTQ in Southeast Asia,” on view at the Bangkok Art and Culture Center in Thailand through March 1, 2020. Image courtesy of Bangkok Art and Culture Center and Sunpride Foundation.

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“Spectrosynthesis II—Exposure of Tolerance: LGBTQ in Southeast Asia” is on view at the Bangkok Art and Culture Center in Thailand through March 1, 2020.

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Komkrit Tepthian, *Giant Twins* part of the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018, at the Wat Arun temple in Bangkok. Photo: Jewel Samad/AFP/Getty Images.

Contemporary art may not the first thing most people associate with Bangkok, but Thailand's capital city is hoping the inaugural Bangkok Art Biennale will change all that.

Although the three-month event was announced at the Venice Biennale in 2017, this sprawling affair has a few key differences from the so-called "Art-World Olympics." Most importantly, admission is free (tickets to the Venice Biennale will run you about $28), and the art is peppered across more than 20 locations around the city, including the landmark East Asiatic Building, the temples of Wat Pho, Wat Arun, and Wat Prayoon, and inside a shopping mall.

Yayoi Kusama's installation at Bangkok Art Biennale 2018. Photo: Jewel Samad/AFP/Getty Images.

The citywide art extravaganza is composed of more than 200 works made by 75 international artists from 33 countries, and around half of the artists are Thai. The biennial managed to nab art stars like Elmgreen & Dragset, Marina Abramović, and Yayoi Kusama as participants, and it counts the Guggenheim's Asian Art Curator Alexandra Munroe and artist Rirkrit Tiravanija as advisers.

If the marquee artists help get people through the doors, organizers also hope the event will bolster local artists and the country's contemporary art scene. In a statement, artistic director Dr. Apinan Poshyananda said the Bangkok biennale's emphasis on local artists will offer visitors a different perspective on contemporary art: "Looking into the contemporary art in the West, I feel it is so stagnant and jaded. This can only be a response from the plaguing presence of uncertainty, terrorism, Brexit, the economy, and fear. Come to Bangkok and go beyond bliss."

The Bangkok Art Biennale runs through February 9, 2019. See pictures from the inaugural event below.

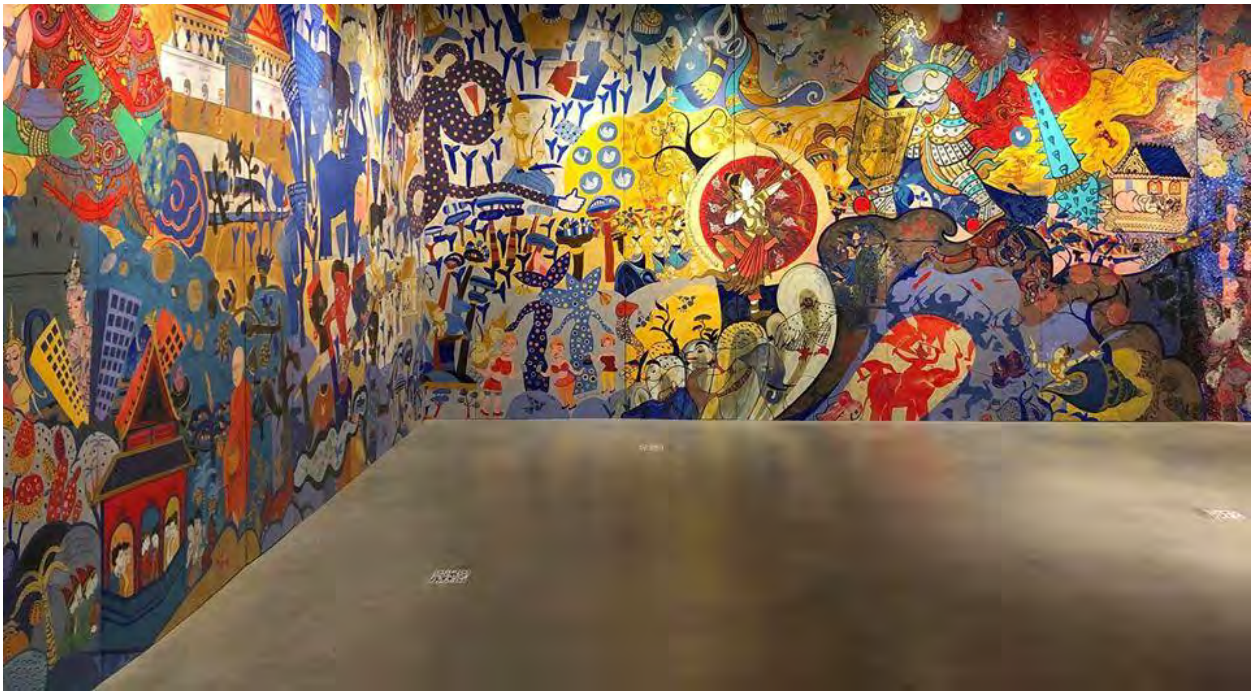
Nino Sarabutra's 'What Will We Leave Behind,' part of the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018, at the Wat Prayurawongsawas Waraviharn temple in Bangkok . Photo: Jewel Sawad/AFP/Getty Images.

Aurèle Ricard, *Malong* (2018). Courtesy of the Bangkok Art Biennale.

Choi Jeong Hwa, *Basket Tower* (2018) at the Bangkok Art and Culture Center. Courtesy of the Bangkok Art Biennale.

Marina Abramovic, “Method.” Courtesy of the Marina Abramovic Institute, Benaki Museum. Photo: Pano.

Huang Yong Ping, *Zuo You He Che* (2005–06). Photo courtesy of the Bangkok Art Biennial.



Hooptam Lao-Thai, *The Adventure of Sinxay* (2018). Courtesy of the Bangkok Art Biennale.

Alex Face & Souled Out Studios,*MEMORY HOUSE* (2018) detail. At the Bank of Thailand Learning Center. Courtesy of the Bangkok Art Biennale.

Elmgreen & Dragset, *Zero* (2018) at the East Asiatic Building. Courtesy of the artist and Bangkok Art Biennale.

Pannaphan Yodmanee, *Sedimentations of Migration* (2018) at various locations. Courtesy of the Bangkok Art Biennale.

Lee Bul, *Diluvium* (2018) at the East Asiatic Building. Courtesy of the Bangkok Art Biennale.

Stills from Kawita Vatanajyankur, *The Spinning Wheel*, *Untangled*, and *Dye* (2018) at the Peninsula Bangkok. Courtesy of the Bangkok Art Biennale.

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Caroline Goldstein

Editorial Assistant

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

Southeast Asia Stakes Its Claim in the Art World

By JASON FARAGO SEPT. 27, 2017

Until recently — the 1990s, let's say — an American critic keeping tabs on new art would concentrate on New York's museums and galleries; cast an occasional, often dismissive eye on Western Europe; and perhaps try to visit Los Angeles now and again. No longer. By the '90s the idea of a single avant-garde was dead and buried, and in its place arose a pluralist art ecosystem that spans the planet. It makes larger intellectual demands than ever, and requires us to accept that we'll never see everything or understand it completely. In the new global art world, even we New Yorkers are provincials.

Perhaps nowhere benefited as much from this shift to a pluralist art world as Asia, where the 1990s saw an explosion of biennials and triennials. The Gwangju Biennale, Asia's most important such exhibition, began in 1995 in South Korea, and

was soon followed by large-scale shows in Shanghai, Taipei, Fukuoka, Yokohama, Singapore, Jakarta, and a half dozen other Asian megacities — all of which introduced Asian audiences to foreign art and pushed their own region's figures to the international forefront. In these exhibitions, as well as in the new museums and art schools that arose around them, traditional styles of painting, drawing, pottery or calligraphy fell by the wayside, and installation, video and performance served as lingua franca.

The art in "After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History," at the Asia Society on Park Avenue, is the fruit of this global shift. The work here comes from Indonesia, Myanmar (or Burma) and Vietnam, though with just seven artists and one collective, it's small enough to avoid the curse of the "regional show" and doesn't force any unity on a diverse lineup. Not every work here is a masterpiece, but all of them plumb the roiling past and fractured present of places that, with a combined population of nearly 400 million, we have no excuse to be clueless about.

The most internationally prominent artist here is Dinh Q. Le, who immigrated to the United States as a child and returned to Vietnam in 1993. His enlightening project "Light and Belief" (2012) unites 70 ink drawings and watercolors, which the artist collected from elder figures at work during the Vietnam War, with a long, lightly animated video in which Mr. Le interviews these older artists about the social role of art before the biennial age.

"Uncle Ho highly regarded the arts," says one of these older painters, referring to the party leader Ho Chi Minh. "The artist must also be a warrior," another recalls. Mr. Le's video forces a reconsideration of the proficient but academic works on paper he has collected: a woman in a conical straw hat, say, or a soldier disguised amid dappled trees. "Light and Belief" also, rather brilliantly, reintroduces ignored chapters of Vietnamese art — which looks regressive to us now, but was resolutely "modern" in the art schools established by the French colonial regime — to global institutions that have little understanding of them.

The war locally termed the "Resistance War Against America" also informs the regretful art of the Vietnamese collective known as the Propeller Group. In a two channel video, "The Guerrillas of Cu Chi" (2012), we see a 1963 propaganda film set at the Cu Chi tunnels, the underground passageways outside Ho Chi Minh City used by the Vietcong. (The soldiers there, an enthusiastic narrator declaims, "were never afraid of hardships and always found ways to kill Americans.") Across the gallery is a second, slow-motion video, shot at the tunnels today; the grounds above have been converted into a shooting range for tourists, and gleeful Americans spend $1 to fire AK-47s while their friends capture the fun on their phones.

"The Dream," another work by the Propeller Group, consists of a half-complete Honda Dream motorcycle, of the kind used to skip through Hanoi's wild traffic. But its wheels, engine, seat, and even pedals are missing; the body stands denuded, an uncanny object more sculpture than vehicle. The parts were snatched, we see in an

accompanying video, by thieves in just a single night. As in China, nominally communist Vietnam has embraced brakes-off turbocapitalism, and the old dream of society has been picked clean.

The Burmese artists here have an even more direct engagement with local political circumstances. Htein Lin, a dissident from Yangon, turned to art not while visiting some international exhibition — Myanmar is among the poorest countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and was essentially closed to foreign influence until the 2010s — but rather during a six-year spell in prison. His ghostly installation, "A Show of Hands," features hundreds of white plaster casts of raised right hands, each one an index of a political prisoner like himself. What makes the work more than an easy ode to people power is the associated video, in which we watch Mr. Htein Lin cast the hands of monks, journalists, poets, and youth activists, each of whom recounts their past run-ins with the military dictatorship with surprising lightness.

F.X. Harsono, perhaps the most prominent artist in contemporary Indonesia, is represented here by both earlier sculptural installations that took direct aim at the Suharto regime, as well as a more recent video. "The Voices Are Controlled by the Powers," from 1994, consists of more than a hundred carefully arrayed wooden masks, but they've been chopped in half; their mouths are cut off and piled in the center. From the title on, it's about as direct a protest against free speech as you can make without just hoisting a placard.

"Writing in the Rain," a performance filmed in 2011, shows Mr. Harsono writing his name in Chinese characters on a pane of glass, only for his calligraphy to be wiped away by streams of water; as the downpour continues he keeps it up, and the ink spills to the floor. (The artist is ethnically Chinese, a minority in Indonesia.) To a western critic like me, the gesture reads as an obvious reboot of Marcel Broodthaers's noted 1969 film "La Pluie," in which he hopelessly attempts to write poetry in a rainstorm, but where that Belgian provocateur proposed an art unfixed from clear meaning, Mr. Harsono's political gesture could not be clearer, or more locally focused.

It isn't wrong to criticize art as blunt as this, in which symbols function not as elements in a complex, imaginative system, but in strict one-to-one correspondence with political or social ills. Yet what works in New York may not work in Jakarta, and while we now have to evaluate art at a global scale, we also have to study the particular circumstances in which "global" contemporary art took root in local cases. In these three countries, an outward-facing practice of "contemporary art" marched in step with local reform movements, engaged with free speech, economic fairness and multiparty democracy. If some artists in this show seem to be speaking a bit too literally, that may be because influencing local audiences was a more urgent calling than winning the approbation of far-off western institutions.

And part of reckoning with a global art world is expanding one's tolerance for

things we don't understand. It means more looking, more reading, and more sympathy too — sympathy for art that may not resemble what we most like, and of which our mastery can only be fragmentary. If, as the Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei has asserted, contemporary art is a kind of freedom, then our need to appreciate this art has only increased now that Indonesia and Myanmar, as well as Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines, are taking an antidemocratic turn. That may be a more important vocation than hunting in vain for a single avant-garde in a world as large as ours**.**

After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History
Through Jan. 21 at Asia Society; asiasociety.org

INTERNATIONAL ARTS

The Artist Dinh Q. Le Expands His Gaze to Worlds Beyond Vietnam

By AMY QIN OCT. 1, 2015

TOKYO — The video opens on a Japanese man in a World War II-era uniform, lying in the grass. Later he runs through a forest with a rifle strapped to his back, then crawls on his elbows among tall reeds, stalking an imaginary enemy. He sings love ballads at a karaoke bar and shows off his collection of military uniforms to no one in particular. Dressed as a bartender, he talks about Japan's role in World War II, about the Vietnam War and his interest in battlefield re-enactments.

"We Japanese lost the war," he says to the camera. "That's a simple fact. But why did we? Why did we start that war? No one has discussed this for 70 years. War is evil. That's about it. But why?"

The video, by the artist Dinh Q. Le, is titled "Everything Is a Re-Enactment." Yet throughout its 26 minutes, a viewer is also questioning: Is this real or staged? Why is the man always alone?

The uncertainty is intentional. The mutability of history, memory and human experience has been a recurring theme of Mr. Le's work. The artist, 47, has often brought this preoccupation to explorations of the war in Vietnam, where he was born. "Everything Is a Re-Enactment," one of two new works being presented in a solo exhibition, "Dinh Q. Le: Memory for Tomorrow," at the Mori Art Museum in

Tokyo, represents an expansion of his gaze to regions beyond Vietnam and the United States.

The show, which runs through Oct. 12, is Mr. Le's first large-scale exhibition in Asia. It is also the first time that the Mori, which focuses on midcareer Asian artists, has put the spotlight on a Southeast Asian artist, and is only its second major show since it reopened in April after extensive renovation.

"Before this exhibition, I was kind of concerned that some people might be offended by this new piece," said Natsumi Araki, a curator at the Mori who organized the exhibition, "because it looks a little right-wingish with its focus on this guy in a military uniform. But people have shown a lot of interest in the piece. It gives us a lot of clues in terms of discussing our past from different angles."

With its overall emphasis on wartime memory and reflection, the exhibition comes at a particularly apt time in Japan. For several months countries around the world have been marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, sometimes, as in China and South Korea, criticizing Japan for what they see as the government's refusal to fully come to terms with its history of aggression.

While the Japanese government has expressed remorse for what Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called the "immeasurable damage and suffering" inflicted during the war, Mr. Abe has also appointed right-wing revisionists to some government posts and has paid visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, where Class A war criminals are memorialized along with millions of other war dead.

Mr. Le himself has visited the shrine, out of curiosity about the growing right-wing movement in Japan, since 2009, when he was doing a residency in Tokyo. It was during a visit last year that he came across a group of men dressed as World War II soldiers.

His eye was drawn to one of the younger men, who seemed to be lagging behind the group. That is how he met the subject of his video, a 40-year-old bartender named Nakaura Yoichi.

"Here is somebody who is very curious about Japan's World War II history but

has found it difficult to find places where people are willing to talk about it openly and in a balanced way," Mr. Le said in an interview. "The shrine is one of the only communities where he can have this conversation. Unfortunately, it's all from a very problematic perspective."

Problematic perspectives abound in the show. The opening piece, "The Farmers and the Helicopters," is perhaps the most notable of the 25 works presented here. In this three-channel video from 2006, the image of the helicopter as a symbol of military strength is undercut as Mr. Le juxtaposes parts of Hollywood movies, news footage and interviews with Vietnamese who, understandably, have different views of an aircraft that often terrorized them from above. Installed alongside the projection is a helicopter built from scratch by a young Vietnamese mechanic, who is interviewed in the video, and a friend.

Reviewing a show by Mr. Le at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010, Holland Cotter of The New York Times called the video "remarkable" for "its visually tight and ideologically porous weave of fact and fiction, memory and illusion, with the elements of each pair in constant, volatile interchange."

Elsewhere at the Mori, the artist uses editing to challenge other war-related stereotypes. In "From Father to Son: A Rite of Passage" (2007), he splices together scenes from the 1979 film "Apocalypse Now," starring Martin Sheen, and the 1986 film "Platoon," starring Charlie Sheen, so that father and son, both of whom play American soldiers in Vietnam, appear to be speaking to each other.

Mr. Le said he first envisioned a piece about the relationship of fathers, sons and war in the late 1980s, during a course he took about the Vietnam War while studying for his undergraduate degree at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His family had fled to Southern California from war-torn Vietnam in the 1970s, and he was troubled by what he saw as the one-sided, America-centric history of the conflict that was being taught.

"Many of my classmates had fathers or relatives who participated in the Vietnam War, so the class was extremely emotional," he said. And while not hearing any Vietnamese views presented disturbed him, he said he "came to understand that this was the generation that was trying to understand and be closer to their fathers."

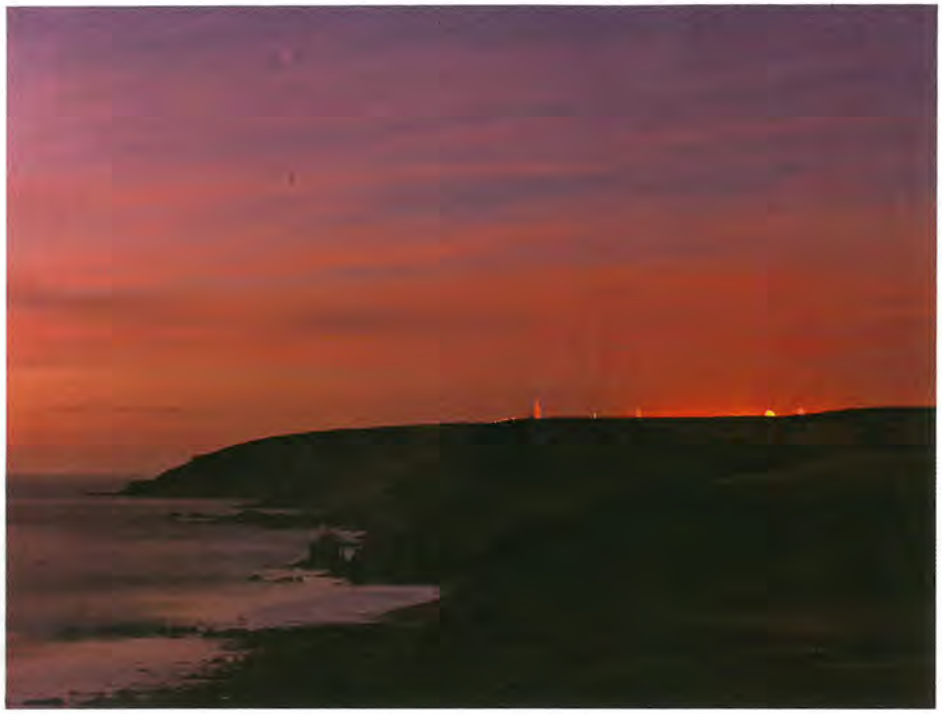
These days, having spent so much of his life trying to understand the past, Mr. Le is preparing to set aside the subject of war to address another matter of conflict: the scramble for natural resources and island territories. Inspired by what he called a “drama of absurdity, greed and human suffering” in the mid-19th century, he is planning a video installation dealing with what happened when a global craze for guano, a natural fertilizer made from bird droppings, led the United States to take possession of a cluster of islands off the coast of Peru. (The three-part installation is to be presented for the first time in January at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England.)

Yet even with this new subject, he has discovered how the past reverberates in the present.

“It’s kind of similar to what China is doing in the South China Sea,” said the artist, who spent several weeks in Peru in August. “The U.S. wanted guano, and the Chinese want control of the energy resources and waterways. It’s just history repeating itself.”

A version of this article appears in print on October 2, 2015, in The International New York Times.

From left: **Trevor Paglen**, ***NSA/GCHQ Surveillance Base, Bude, Cornwall, UK*, 2014**, ink-jet print, 36 × 48". **Ming Wong**, ***Windows on the World (Part 1)*, 2014**, production still from the video component of a mixed media installation. Photo: Glenn Eugen Ellingsen.



FRANKFURT

"TREVOR PAGLEN: THE OCTOPUS"

FRANKFURTER KUNSTVEREIN · June 20–August 30 · Curated by Franziska Nori · "What you see is what you see," Frank Stella famously pronounced, but nothing could be further from the truth for Trevor Paglen, for whom what is seen is just the beginning. The New York–based artist's lush, technologically enhanced imagery reveals what is hidden—secret satellites suddenly appear like bright stars, classified military bases emerge as shining Babylons, drones manifest as tiny black blots in the sky—and yet such visualizations do not stop at some tautological objectivity. Rather, they mark a vast world of covert information beyond our reach. This exhibition presents twenty-five projects, including *Autonomy Cube*, 2014, which provides a zone of private, anonymized Internet access; documentation of Paglen's investigations; and a contest for the best photographs of "landscapes of surveillance" in Germany, from American NSA bases to embassies, inviting the public to join Paglen's never-ending hunt.
—*Michelle Kuo*

BEIJING

"MING WONG: NEXT YEAR"

ULLENS CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART · June 11–August 9 · Curated by Venus Lau · A native Singaporean currently based in Berlin, Ming Wong playfully reimagines cinema classics through a transcultural lens, populating the films of such directors as Wong Kar-wai, Ingmar Bergman, and Roman Polanski with "impostors"—usually the artist himself, or hired actors—and inverting the films' titles. Part homage, part satire, Wong's re-creations transform race, gender, and nationality into fluid categories of identification. In *Life of Imitation*, 2009, for example—the artist's contribution to the Fifty-Third Venice Biennale—three male actors of Chinese, Malay, and Indian descent, respectively, reenact an infamous scene from a Douglas Sirk melodrama in which a mixed-race daughter proclaims to her black mother, "I'm white. White!" For his first Beijing solo exhibition, the artist will fuse Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1971), and Cantonese opera in two video and installation works commissioned by UCCA.
—*Fiona He*

TOKYO

"DINH Q. LÊ: MEMORY FOR TOMORROW"

MORI ART MUSEUM · July 25–October 12 · Curated by Araki Natsumi To escape the cross-border incursions of the Khmer Rouge, Dinh Q. Lê's family fled Vietnam for the US in 1978, when the artist was a boy. Lê has returned to his native country—he now lives in Ho Chi Minh City—and much of his work engages themes of place and memory, cross-cultural experience, history, and conflict. "Memory for Tomorrow," the first major solo exhibition by a Southeast Asian artist at the Mori, features more than twenty works made since the late '90s. These include several photo-tapestries—Lê's contemporary spin on traditional Vietnamese grass mat weaving—digital prints; and multimedia installations, including *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, 2006, a three-channel video accompanied by a helicopter made entirely of scrap metal. The exhibition will also showcase a new video work commissioned by the Mori—a profile of a nightclub manager in southern Japan who spends his weekends reenacting the Vietnam War.
—*Weng Choy Lee*

BRISBANE

"ROBERT MACPHERSON: THE PAINTER'S REACH"

QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY | GALLERY OF MODERN ART · July 25–October 18 · Curated by Ingrid Periz · Since the 1970s, Brisbane-based artist Robert MacPherson has produced a diverse set of works that critically engage the materiality of painting, often employing a vernacular of the quotidian: Objects such as road signs, paintbrushes, shoes, and office stationery proliferate throughout his oeuvre. Over the years, critics and curators have cast MacPherson as an exemplar of Minimalism, abstraction, the archival impulse, and Conceptualism, but the meaning of his works has remained elusive. Perhaps answers will be found in "The Painter's Reach," MacPherson's first major museum survey in his hometown, an outing that will consist of more than sixty works, from acrylic paintings on canvas and Masonite to the artist's trademark assemblages in his "Frog Poem" series, 1982–. The catalogue will feature essays by Angela Goddard, curator Ingrid Periz, and Trevor Smith (who organized MacPherson's monumental exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth back in 2001).
—*Charles Green*

Dinh Q. Lê

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUBEN LUONG

Weaving photographs, stockpiling relics and sifting through Vietnam's troubled past in Lê's home and studio near Ho Chi Minh City—a messy, modernist haven for the pursuit of his intense yet subtle practice

Dinh Q. Lê in his studio near Ho Chi Minh City weaving strips of glossy Fuji photographic paper for his new project.

Dinh Q. Lê's four-story home-studio is a 25-minute drive from the center of Ho Chi Minh City. It also happens to be a five-minute walk from the home of his aunt—the same aunt who taught Lê the grass-mat weaving techniques that he still uses today in his woven photographs. The area used to be controlled by communist forces at night, before the end of the American-Vietnam War in 1975, and was one of the most dangerous areas in which to live. Fifteen years ago, it was wetlands and rice fields, but a boom in construction has led to new residential areas trickling in from wealthier neighboring districts. Lê purchased two lots in the area nine years ago and worked with an architect to design the basic structure of his home. The other buildings on his street are colorful and have open balconies; the front facade of Lê's home is streamlined and minimalist, with clean, vertical window panels and a limestone-tiled exterior.

It rained heavily the night before I arrived, flooding the front gate and leaving the morning hot and muggy, typical of the rainy season in July. Entering the narrow outdoor foyer, we are flanked by exotic planters and ancient statues of deities, which seem to follow us as we walk into the garage. Buddha statues, in particular, inhabit every corner. To my right is a kneeling stone pair, carefully draped with regal Chinese scrolls. But the remainder of the garage is an extensive hodgepodge of stockpiled boxes and strewn supplies. Buried beneath the clutter are antique side tables, ornate urns and other unexpected treasures.

Lê's studio is located in an adjoining room, the door to which is obscured by the heap of paraphernalia. But before we take a closer look at his workspace, Lê is eager to show me his vast collection of antiques upstairs. As we climb, he warns me that it's a bit chaotic everywhere. He's been busy getting his current works ready before he leaves to celebrate his mother's 80th birthday in California, where he and his family moved in 1978. Lê, ten years old at the time, has always been at a crossroads, given his American upbringing and his Vietnamese heritage, prompting the elaborate photo weavings combining evocative Vietnamese and Western war images that he produced as a graduate student at the School of Visual Arts in New York.

Identity, memory and history are concepts that continue to permeate Lê's works and installations, but perhaps with a greater urgency since his homecoming to Vietnam in 1996. Of six siblings, he is the only one currently residing here. Meanwhile, he's been collecting as many Vietnamese artifacts as possible, perhaps to better reconcile with his past. What began as a simple endeavor to find everyday furniture for his home soon became a borderline hoarding and antique-collecting habit, turning Lê into the artist-historian hybrid he is today.

At the top of the stairs, we arrive at the central parlor that connects Lê's sleek kitchen to his living-room space. Hanging there is a framed photo weaving from his famous series "From Vietnam to Hollywood" (2003–05). In the series, Lê juxtaposes images by photojournalists with those from Hollywood movies about the American-Vietnam War, confronting and challenging very different depictions of the conflict.

Leaving the parlor, we pass through French doors and enter the spacious living room, where Lê likes to read and research. It is a museum of Vietnamese relics—a rooftop centerpiece from a demolished Vietnamese-Chinese pagoda rests on a side table near the entrance, while two dark-wood curio cabinets displaying an elegant menagerie of more than 200 ancient ceramics line the left wall. Lê speaks

with particular reverence of the deceptively contemporary-looking pieces created during the Ly dynasty that flourished in the 11th and 12th centuries. He reveals that he spends hours scouring an antique shop on Le Cong Kieu Street in the city center for these bygone treasures. Then, crossing to the other side of the room, he tells me the story behind the three wooden Buddha statues standing against the wall, which were buried after the Funan kingdom of southern Vietnam was ransacked by the northern Champa kingdom 1,500 to 2,000 years ago, adding earnestly that he loves to work surrounded by beautiful objects.

Lê's ability to trace the memory and history of each object indicates a narrative ingenuity, which is reflected in his installations. Stacks of books and papers are sprawled out on one end of the long antique table, including three piles of faded black-and-white photographs from before the American-Vietnam War. When Lê moved back to the land of his birth, he searched in vain for his own family photos, but later purchased eight boxes of stray ones. He used 1,500 of these to create a huge hanging quilt, *Mot Coi Di Ve* (1998). On the back of each lost photograph appears a quote from Vietnam's famous literary work, Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kiếue*, or from interviews with Vietnamese-Americans about the war, or from letters written by soldiers and their wives. More recently, photos from these same boxes were used in *Erasure* (2011), a multimedia installation in which the images were scattered throughout a bleak re-creation of a shipwreck.

Some of Lê's other antique finds indicate that his works are increasingly documentary in nature. For *Light and Belief* (2012), he helped produce a film featuring interviews with Vietnamese artists sent into battle. To accompany the film, he exhibited charcoal and watercolor sketches by these artist-soldiers. He delicately lays out the drawings for me, which are protected between layers of dilapidated Vietnamese newspapers from the 1990s. There are poignant scenes of militia activities in caves and youthful portraits of Vietnamese soldiers—the drawings will be displayed again at the 2013 Carnegie International, in Pittsburgh, beginning in October. Both *Erasure* and *Light and Belief* are testaments to Lê's commitment to preserving firsthand knowledge of the war. He explains that most Vietnamese are too fatigued to study it, preferring to move on, while the current government's strict control of information often distorts the truth to fit its version of past events.

These are ideas and issues that Lê consistently ponders whenever he's photo weaving in his downstairs studio, a plain, concrete-tiled room with a low platform built for these projects. Weaving can be a long process, depending on the complexity of the work. He has no assistants—he says that he is allergic to managing people—so his studio is very quiet, allowing him to meditate on future projects. He works in the evenings, from half past eight to three o'clock, or sometimes four o'clock, in the morning. The neighbors used to think he was crazy when they heard him closing his rickety automatic shutter gate so late at night.

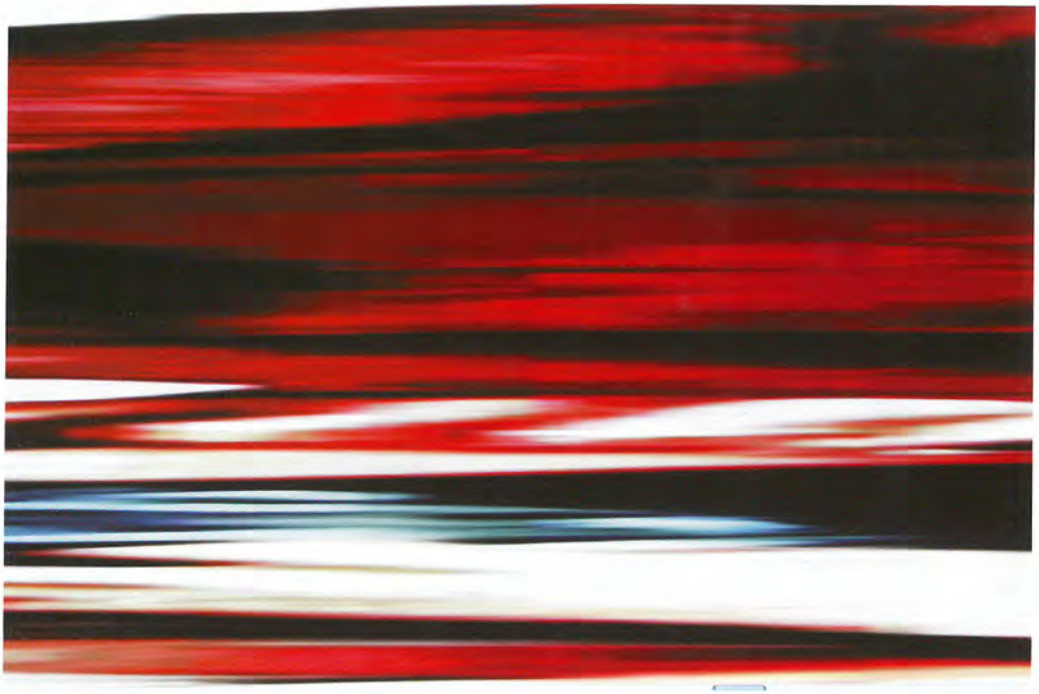
In his studio, Lê is in the process of weaving glossy photographic paper to test the effect for his current project. He throws down a woven mat directly in front of fastened black-and-white strips of paper, plops down and pulls the strips through roller-coasters of

(Opposite page, top)
History books, a collection of lost photographs and art supplies in Lê's living room.

(Opposite page, middle)
Lê's antique collection includes over 200 ancient ceramics.

(Opposite page, bottom)
Ancient statues of deities rest on the floor in Lê's studio.

(This page, top and bottom)
Lê presents old watercolor and charcoal portrait sketches from artist-soldiers in the American-Vietnam War.



(Top)
Computer detail of Lê's stretched version of US Army photographer Ronald L. Haeberle's iconic photograph of Vietnamese women and children before the My Lai Massacre of 1968.

(Bottom)
Rolls of large-scale Fuji photographic paper for Lê's latest project.

loops by hand and then tapes them in place. For this new project, Lê is creating a series that involves different treatments of four iconic war images direct-printed on large-scale Fuji photo paper. He spent the previous evening selecting the final images—including Malcolm Browne's famous photograph of a Vietnamese Buddhist monk immolating himself in the street in 1963—which he will transfer to a USB drive for processing at a local print shop.

Later, we look at the four images on his computer. The first of the treatments, Lê explains, is to weave the photos with RGB strips, breaking down their physical structures and rendering the basic colors of the images. The second treatment is to stretch the proportions and component colors of each of the four photos using Adobe Photoshop, afterward printing them on 50-meter rolls of photo paper that will cascade and oscillate from the ceiling. Lastly, he wants to expose rolls of light-sensitive photographic paper to the actual site of at least one of the original photographs. The paper will capture the light of the area and eventually turn black, but nevertheless manifest the physical memory of the original image at its exact location in Vietnam. These works are destined for an exhibition at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland, Oregon, at the end of September.

Lê's project is so cerebral that he almost struggles to articulate it. But it's precisely this kind of research and conceptual thinking, derived in part from his artistic education in the United States, that he wants to promote among young artists in Vietnam who have not had such opportunities and struggle with self-censorship.

In 2007, he co-founded Sàn Art gallery in Ho Chi Minh City to support budding local artists. The gallery later rolled out a residency program that recruits three young artists every six months to help them develop exhibitions. Lê mentions that one of the current resident artists has made an appointment to meet him here at his home this same week, in order to help flesh out an art proposal. These days, young artists are lucky to get mentorship from an artist of Lê's standing. Visiting his home-studio, they'll find inspiration in his words, and also, perhaps, from the many Buddhas at his side.

See our website for Arabic and Chinese versions of this article.
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The New York Times

October 10, 2013

Global Extravaganza, but on a Human Scale

By ROBERTA SMITH

PITTSBURGH — The 2013 Carnegie International is a welcome shock to the system of one of the art world's more entrenched rituals. This lean, seemingly modest, thought-out exhibition takes the big global survey of contemporary art off steroids.

With only 35 artists and collectives from 19 countries, the latest Carnegie says no to the visual overload and indigestible sprawl frequent to these exhibitions. It also avoids the looming, big-budget showstoppers — aptly called festivalism by the critic Peter Schjeldahl — for which they are known. Actually, the Carnegie all but leaves festivalism at the door: "Tip," the immense, shambling, cheerfully derivative barrier of wood, fabric, cement and spray paint by the British sculptor Phyllida Barlow, just outside the museum's main entrance, is probably the show's biggest single art object. Inside, almost nothing on view dwarfs the body, addles the brain or short-circuits the senses. It's just art. Did I mention that half of the artists are women?

The 2013 Carnegie has been organized by Daniel Baumann, the director of the Adolf Wölfli Foundation at the Kunstmuseum in Bern, Switzerland, and Dan Byers and Tina Kukielski, two Carnegie curators. It may contribute to its deviation from convention that the curators have little experience with big surveys and don't belong to the international curatorial cartel that circles the planet.

Their selections often evince a gratifying affinity for color, form, beauty and pleasure, and a lack of interest in finger-wagging didacticism. They have appended to their show an impressive newly installed display of Modern and contemporary works from the museum's permanent collection that highlights acquisitions from the previous Carnegie Internationals (and includes a boxy, tilted, very red and much stronger piece by Ms. Barlow).

The show itself accounts for much of the tangled strands of today's art, with emerging artists under 35 in the slight majority, and somewhat older ones adding ballast. There is space for occasional mini-retrospectives, including a sizable gallery filled with nearly 35 years of text pieces, photo works and bright, diminutive riffs on Russian Constructivism by the mercurial Conceptualist Mladen Stilinovic. A group of 19 increasingly robust paintings by Nicole Eisenman traces the evolution of her incisive reinterpretations of early Modernist figuration

and mingles with new plaster sculptures. For example, “Prince of Swords,” a large male figure with hands blackened by an overused smartphone sits on a plinth usually occupied by plaster casts in the museum’s collection.

A cache of 57 undulant visionary landscapes by the American Joseph Yoakum (1890-1972) and 10 finely textured, scroll-like drawings of phantoms by the Chinese Guo Fengyi (1942-2010) — both formidable outsider artists — are included as if it were no big deal. The distinction was rendered moot by the extraordinary insider-outsider pileup of “The Encyclopedic Palace” at the Venice Biennale. Yoakum may qualify as the greatest artist in this Carnegie simply because his art has stood the test of time the longest.

Outstanding among the less familiar artists are two Iranians. In the 1960s and ’70s, especially, Kamran Shirdel (born in 1939) made effortlessly structural, quietly subversive films, intended as propaganda, that were often banned by both the regime of the Shah, which commissioned them, and that of its Ayatollah successors. Rokni Haerizadeh, 40 years younger, lives in exile in Dubai and has an unerring gift — shaped by Persian painting and perhaps by Goya and Art Spiegelman — for reworking found photographs into disturbing, if often beautiful, animations. His subjects here include the 2009 Iranian demonstrations and Britain’s latest royal wedding.

Less expected is “The Playground Project,” a show-within-the-show organized by the Swiss writer and urban planner Gabriela Burkhalter. Its dense history of postwar playground design — possibly better as a book — culminates in a wonderful assortment of art from the Carnegie’s annual art camp for children. This summer’s used teaching plans devised by the artists Ei Arakawa and Henning Bohl, who also contribute a playground-focused video. Though the Carnegie has no stated theme, the excellent catalog places emphasis on play as essential to art and life; “The Playground Project” gives liberating experiential form to its thesis.

This Carnegie International exposes the supposedly great divide between object-oriented or, as some would have it, market-driven art, and activist, socially involved art and suggests that they are not nearly as mutually exclusive as often supposed. To one side are the audacious computer-generated abstract canvases of Wade Guyton and the equally innovative handmade plaster and casein tabletlike abstractions of Sadie Benning, as well as the richly colored sculptures of Vincent Fecteau, which negotiate a new literally convoluted truce between the organic and the geometric.

On the other are Mr. Arakawa and Mr. Bohl’s art-camp collaboration and the especially inspiring social activism of Transformazium, a three-woman collective that relocated to Braddock, just outside Pittsburgh, from Brooklyn six years ago, determined to make a difference. Their latest effort, part of the Carnegie show, is a permanent art-lending service in the library of this recovering town, stocked with works donated by the other artists in the

Carnegie, local residents and Transformazium friends across the country.

But the exhibition repeatedly illuminates the ground where form and activism overlap. In addition to the films and animations of Mr. Shirdel and Mr. Haerizadeh, this area includes Zoe Strauss's small, remarkably lively color photographs of local residents in Homestead, another struggling Pittsburgh-area town. Also here are Zanele Muholi's imposing black-and-white photo portraits of South African lesbians and transgendered people, and the striking welded steel assemblages of Pedro Reyes, from Mexico, which turn out to be amazing percussive instruments, even as you realize that they're made from deactivated guns. Henry Taylor's implacable paintings of African-Americans and Sarah Lucas's stuffed-pantyhose sculptures of brazen women are confrontational in both medium and message.

This exhibition attests to the health of object-making of all kinds and also to art-oriented activism, as in the Arakawa/Bohl art classes and Transformazium project — suggesting that play is the crucial, underlying connection. But it points up the hazards, if not laziness, of curatorial intervention and appropriation of other artists' art. Paulina Olowska has put on view some puppets from a once-flourishing Pittsburgh puppet theater; their intensity makes her photo-based paintings look wan. Gabriel Sierra paints the museum's Hall of Architecture deep purple to little effect, other than evoking the Brooklyn Museum's installation missteps. And Pierre Leguillon strews 30 pots by the great ceramic artist George E. Ohr (1857-1918) around a Hirst-like vitrine, along with Ohr's zany promotional photographs. This is not art, it's art abuse, especially painful since Ohr is as great as Yoakum, whose wall of drawings is adjacent.

The exception is a display of 100 pencil and ink drawings made by North Vietnamese artists during the Vietnam War that the Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Le is presenting, accompanied by his poignant documentary about some who are still living. They speak for themselves on film, as do the quick, deft ink or pencil renderings of soldiers and civilians on the wall, which fuse Eastern and Western traditions with personal expression, functioning as document, artifact and art.

The 2013 Carnegie International remains on view through March 16 at the Carnegie Museum of Art, 4400 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh; (412) 622-3131, carnegieinternational.org.

ARTFORUM
SUMMER 2012 INTERNATIONAL

On the Town

Gallery View/**Culture Shift:**
Artist Dinh Q. Lê responds to a city in transition

BY BRUCE ADAMS

Those familiar with the art of Dinh Q. Lê might think *Saigon Diary*—the artist's twelve-channel mixed-media installation now on view at the UB Anderson Gallery—represents a radical departure. Lê is best known for his photographic-based work in which he literally weaves together diverse images relating to his native country, Vietnam. These large-scale photo-weavings look like complex geometric patchworks interlacing Eastern and Western cultural perceptions. Yet, while UB's premiere of Lê's trash-based sculptural assemblages and accompanying video documentation differs dramatically in method and appearance from his earlier work, the artist hasn't really left the weaving business. Now Lê metaphorically interweaves various concepts, influences, media, and styles into an installation so conceptually layered it demands some preliminary orientation to help unravel the threads.

Photos by Biff Henrich.

1
Mirror
Submitted by James DuBenion of Buffalo

2
Frozen
Submitted by Arzu Turaman of NYC

3
Buffalo's Monument to McKinley
Submitted by Kate Ebling of Cheektowaga

4
Sunny Dome
Submitted by Adam Yetter of Blasdell

5
Bridge to Reflection
(cropped to fit layout)
Submitted by Zachary Liaros of Clarence

6
The Lighthouse
Submitted by Sister Barbara Whelan of Depew

7
Knox Farm
(cropped to fit layout)
Submitted by Margaret Craig of East Aurora

Lê and his family emigrated from Vietnam to the United States to escape the Vietnam War when the artist was a young boy. He became an American citizen studying art in the United States, all the while maintaining an emotional connection to his homeland. His most noted work revolves around this cultural duality. Fifteen years ago, Lê relocated back to Ho Chi Minh City—which most residents still call Saigon. What he found was a city in the throes of a radical transition from an agrarian socialist economy to Western-influenced capitalism, complete with the mounting waste and debris associated with consumerism. This spawned a new occupation in the old city, that of the "recycling women" who peddle bicycle carts around Saigon's twelve districts collecting recyclable materials for a living.

This is where *Saigon Diary* begins. Collaborating with three of his relatives, Lê documents a day in the life of twelve recycling women, one for each of Saigon's districts. The resulting video-documentaries play on monitors distributed throughout the gallery. Lê and his collaborators repurchased some of the materials the recycling women collected and sold, and used them to create sculptures that are arranged in the gallery near their corresponding documentary monitors. Though the assemblages are made largely of cast-off Vietnamese products, they consciously and unconsciously reflect a number of well-established Modernist art traditions. Drawing from sources as disparate as minimalism and political art, with generous dollops of Dan Flavin light sculpture and Robert Rauschenberg Neo-Dadaist assemblage thrown in for good measure, Lê and associates transform a wide assortment of junk into metaphoric signifiers reflecting the social concerns facing Vietnam today.

One deliberate art reference, for instance, grew out of a discussion with one of Lê's collaborators, Minh Hao Ngo, who admired a picture of Piet Mondrian's well-known final unfinished painting, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Lê and Ngo discussed the nature of the makeshift shantytown homes common in poorer parts of the city and how their builders improvise walls and partitions using scavenged materials. Lê knows a good metaphor when he sees one, and the upshot is a standout work titled *Shanty Town Composition*. It's a suspended flat rectangular assemblage composed of a variety of materials including corrugated sheet metal, fans, cots, and beverage containers (apparently Lê's go-to material). All of this is organized into a surprisingly delicate, almost lacy, vertical and horizontal geometric arrangement reminiscent of Mondrian's work. There's a nice correlation between Mondrian's abstract rumination on the layout and bustle of New York City streets and Lê's reference to shantytown innovation. A side note: the work was designed to hang against white gallery walls, but here it's suspended in the center of the Anderson's second floor glass atrium, so outside trees merge visually with Lê's airy assemblage—adding a layer of complexity or distraction, depending on your point of view.

Much of what's known about Lê's thinking comes from detailed wall-mounted accounts that accompany each work. He and curator Sandra Firmin leave little up to interpretation, choosing instead to guide visitors through the content and process of each work. Gallerygoers preferring the pure

The Maladies of a Floating City

experience of encountering art without having its meaning explained might want to avoid the wall text. I wouldn't, though. The dichotomy of much contemporary art is that to fully appreciate it, the pleasure of parsing out its meaning must at least partly be surrendered to some sort of guided access.

A good example of this dependence on a back story is illustrated in *Revolutionary Fervor*, created in collaboration with Quang Quan Le. The work is comprised of bound bundles of Vietnamese newspapers, some stacked on the floor next to a lawn chair, others piled on the chair itself. A refillable drink bottle is attached to the back of the chair next to a glowing florescent light tube. On its own, this might be mistaken for a work by pioneer shaman-activist, artist Joseph Beuys, but the accompanying text tells us that in Vietnam, newspapers signify government control of the media, and the lawn chair represents the armchair politics that replaced revolutionary fervor among the weary inhabitants.

In the accompanying video, a neatly dressed woman—these entrepreneurs aren't homeless or visibly indigent—heaps materials onto her bicycle cart. All the recycling women wear the traditional conical *nón lá* hat as they gather the discarded byproduct of a new age. The industrious women sort through heaps of recyclable materials, in the process leading viewers through winding side streets and alleys revealing seldom-seen aspects of traditional Vietnamese life—now at risk of being overtaken by Western ways.

Speaking eloquently of a different type of risk, *The Maladies of a Floating City* is a flat rectangular plane, hovering above the floor and festooned with colorful plastic beverage bottles. It represents a raft, symbolic of the regular flooding of the Mekong Delta in a city endangered by rising sea levels. (The neatly arranged empty medical boxes below the floating portion speak to the rising cost of medicine.) The complex assemblage is simultaneously over-laden, yet doggedly buoyant. *The High-rise of the Future* is another apt metaphor for Saigon, representing the BITEXCO Financial Tower as a vertical roll of corrugated metal towering above a hefty-looking rock, a minimalist homage to the mighty and the humble. Other works in the show address the rise of Christmas in a largely non-Christian culture as a holiday of consumption, alcoholism, and obesity; the influx of youth-enticing electronics; and the global economic slowdown that hinders Vietnam's forward momentum.

Video documentation of recycling is shown with junk assemblages.

Much of the work in *Saigon Diary* feels a bit didactic and constrained by its own elaborate framework. These limitations are largely offset though by the modernist-like earnestness Lê and his collaborators bring to the work. And when was the last time you saw unaffected sincerity in Western contemporary art?

Bruce Adams is an educator, artist, writer, and *Spree*'s art critic.

Photo by Biff Henrich.

The Buffalo News
Gusto

Quick change

Artist captures the rapid rebirth of Ho Chi Minh City

By COLIN DABKOWSKI

Published: September 16, 2011

In the 15 years since artist Dinh Q. Lê moved back to his native Vietnam, its capital, Ho Chi Minh City, has undergone a rapid transformation.

As people flock into the city from the rural areas, skyscrapers are rising rapidly and development is accelerating. A superhighway, just 3 years old, now cuts a snaking line through the formerly insular metropolis.

And, as in other growing countries across Asia, a new class of worker has arisen. The "recycling women," as they've been called, make their living by purchasing or otherwise collecting recyclable bottles and cans from the city's more affluent residents and then selling it to turn a small profit.

A dozen such workers contributed to a new exhibition by Lê that opens Saturday in the University at Buffalo's Anderson Gallery. "Saigon Diary," which features videos of the recyling women and sculptures created from the material they've collected, is the artist's snapshot of a city in transition.

For the project, which was three years in the making, Lê enlisted the services of the women, each of whom represented one of Ho Chi Minh City's 12 main districts. After purchasing recyclable material from the workers, he and a trio of non-artists collaborated on a series of sculptures that comment in some way on an issue of particular concern to the city's residents and make their own critique of the city's ever-growing culture of consumption.

Lê, who arrived in Buffalo on Tuesday to help install his work in the gallery, is best known for his woven photographs that deal with the emotional legacy of the Vietnam War. This work has been collected by the Museum of Modern Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, among many others, as well as exhibited during the 2003 Venice Biennale.

After witnessing the rapid transition of the city he called home, Lê said, he felt it was time to shift his attention to the present.

The show is unique as much for its use of the recycling women as for the way the

work was plotted out and constructed. Instead of directing the entire process himself, Lê asked three of his relatives — none of whom is an artist and each of whom had different ideas about their home city — to help him conceive and construct the work.

"One is a housewife, one is an electrical engineer, and one is a high school teacher," Lê said. "I was interested in their knowledge of the city, what they think of the city."

In a process that involved long discussions about contemporary art and the issues that preoccupy Ho Chi Minh City residents today, the four collaborators came up with a series of wildly varied sculptural constructions.

One, which resembles a raft, was inspired by articles about the sinking city's continual problems with flooding. Another, which was inspired by Piet Mondrian's famous painting "Broadway Boogie Woogie," is an attempt to re-create the creatively pieced-together walls of Ho Chi Minh City's slums.

A Christmas tree, made from old Heineken cans, water bottles and oil containers, serves as a commentary on encroaching Western traditions — a key concern of Le's.

He characterized the work as a critique of his beloved city's rapid turn toward consumerism and excess, a transition he said has resulted in increased diabetes among Vietnamese and problems like drunk driving and other behaviors associated with the Western-style consumerism.

Even so, he called the exhibition an "endearing portrait of the city."

"The city is changing so fast that I think I can only [catch] a glimpse of it," he said.•

PREVIEW

WHO: "Dinh Q. Le: Saigon Diary"

WHEN: Saturday through Dec. 31

WHERE: University at Buffalo's Anderson Gallery, 1 Martha Jackson Place

TICKETS: Free

INFO: 829-3754 or www.ubartgalleries.org

cdabkowski@buffnews.com

The New York Times

August 12, 2010

Vietnamese Voices Against a Whir of War

By HOLLAND COTTER

Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times
"Projects 93: Dinh Q. Le" at the Museum of Modern Art includes a helicopter built from scratch, right, and a three-channel video by Mr. Le.

In slumberous mid-August thousands of visitors fidget and drift through the Museum of Modern Art, finding almost everything worth photographing and almost nothing worth more than a point-and-shoot glance. But in one gallery — basically a wide glorified corridor — people tend to stop, focus, even settle down in front of a three-channel video by the Vietnamese-American artist Dinh Q. Le projected across a long wall.

Titled "The Farmers and the Helicopters," the video is partly and spectacularly about the Vietnam War. We first see a panning shot of forests and rice paddies in aerial view. Then helicopters arrive, swarming, landing, lifting off, buzzing and shuddering through the sky, spewing men and rockets, crashing explosively, then rising to buzz some more. Classic shock and awe.

Interspersed with these noisy scenes are recent interviews with Vietnamese people. A former Vietcong soldier recalls how, more than 40 years ago, he shot at an American chopper to make it go away, and it did. A woman describes her first sight of an American helicopter around the same time. She was so disconcerted as it hovered over her that she could only look up at the pilot and smile.

A younger man, a self-taught mechanic named Tran Quoc Hai, speaks of his lifelong infatuation with such flying machines. He says that after studying old examples in Vietnam war museums and doing some Internet research he teamed up with a farmer friend and built a helicopter from

scratch, for commercial use, but also to serve as a positive symbol of his country in the contemporary world.

As it happens, we can see this symbol firsthand; it's installed in a gallery next to where the video is playing. And the two pieces constitute Mr. Le's solo show, part of MoMA's Projects series. Mr. Le was born in 1968 in South Vietnam, near the Cambodian border. The war that the Vietnamese call the American war was at full bore, though he has few personal memories of it. He does have memories, traumatic ones, of Khmer Rouge soldiers invading his hometown a decade later, at which point his family fled to Thailand and on to the United States.

They ended up in Southern California, where Mr. Le studied art, eventually earning an M.F.A. in New York City. In 1993 he returned to Vietnam for the first time and soon decided to stay. He now lives in Ho Chi Minh City, though, like many artists with thriving careers, he travels a lot.

In the 1990s Mr. Le became known internationally for ingeniously formatted photographic work that addressed his bicultural history. To create that work he gathered various kinds of pictures — family snapshots, outtakes from 1960s news documentaries, stills from Hollywood war films — and reprinted them all at the same size. He then cut the prints into thin strips and, using a traditional Vietnamese technique for making grass mats, wove the strips into composite images, in which real and fictional, personal and political, Vietnamese and American overlapped and coexisted.

As time went on, and postwar Vietnam became a tourist destination, he wove in corporate logos and references to Southeast Asian pop culture. The art that resulted was the product of sharp, complex critical thinking, about an Asian war whose history had been written almost exclusively by the West, about an Asian culture with which the West was for a time intimately and violently engaged, but about which it knew almost nothing.

Obviously there was fuel for a polemic here. For the most part Mr. Le steered clear of that, offering instead a distanced view of a cultural history that he had been born into, but, as an immigrant living away from it, had absorbed secondhand and primarily from an American perspective.

The MoMA exhibition, organized by Klaus Biesenbach and Cara Starke, is an extension and expansion of the photographic montage. The medium has changed, but the weaving continues. The video, with its rhythmically alternating images of past and present, is very much a woven thing. So, in its clunky, jerry-built way, is Mr. Tran's life-size helicopter.

Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Dinh Q. Le's video at MoMA, "The Farmers and the Helicopters," intersperses noisy war scenes with recent interviews with Vietnamese people.

Assembled from recycled scraps — a car seat, some tractor wheels, an engine salvaged from a Russian truck — it doesn't look sleekly sky-worthy, especially if compared to the Bell-47D1 helicopter that has long been a fixture of MoMA's design department. But it works, sort of. In an early test flight it lifted six feet off the ground. Its performance has improved since, but, more significantly, Mr. Tran's project has gained wide popular notice in Vietnam, where it is viewed as emblematic of the country's effort to move beyond the devastating war and forge something constructive from its heritage.

Many Westerners have yet to see Vietnam in this changed light. For them it is still a place defined by a war. And that war, though fought on Southeast Asian soil, remains very much a Western event: our war, our drama, our tragedy, our history, which may be one reason that MoMA audiences are so enthralled by the video.

Mr. Le is well aware of this proprietary attitude and takes steps in his video — on which he collaborated with two Vietnamese artists, Phu-Nam Thuc Ha and Tuan Andrew Nguyen — to shake it up. When first seeing the work's war scenes, we assume we're watching authentic documentary footage. Some of it is, indeed, authentic; but much is lifted from commercial films set during the Vietnam War.

Awareness of the discrepancy can be unsettling. Even when we know we're dealing with two different species of filmed reality, we may not be able, in practice, to distinguish examples of one kind from the other. So we're just left with doubt. And suddenly it's hard to know how to react to anything we're seeing.

In a video interview an older women describes how, during an air attack decades earlier, she tried to camouflage herself by tying branches to her body. Her comment is immediately followed by a surveillance-style view of someone hiding in tall grass that is churned up by propeller wind. Is this an illustrative clip from a documentary or from a movie?

And what's the reality quotient in a quick, blurry shot, taken from above, of a man who makes little beseeching bows as he holds up a child, like an offering, to an ascending helicopter? It would be comforting to take this heartbreaking vignette for a cinematic invention, though it probably isn't.

Uncertainty is the right attitude to bring to the study and writing of history. And it is, on the whole, the one Mr. Le brings to his art, and notably to his remarkable video, with its visually tight and ideologically porous weave of fact and fiction, memory and illusion, with the elements of each pair in constant, volatile interchange.

And certainty, in some measure, has its place too. In the guise of positive thinking, it has served Mr. Tran and his collaborator in a D.I.Y. helicopter enterprise well. That the first product of their labor is now on display in New York may be taken as proof. And that it is specifically at MoMA is the result of further certainty: the museum is sure enough of the strength and value of Mr. Le's art to have acquired the contents of his current show — gripping images, overhauled histories, Vietnamese voices — for its permanent collection.

"Projects 93: Dinh Q. Le" is on view through Jan. 24 at the Museum of Modern Art; moma.org.

Article link: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/13/arts/design/13dinh.html?ref=arts

August 2, 2010

THE NEW YORKER

ART
MUSEUM AND LIBRARIES

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
"Projects 93: Dinh Q. Lê."

Taking the U.S. Army helicopter as its lodestone, this fascinating project examines an iconic emblem of the "American War," as it is known in the artist's native Vietnam. A helicopter built from scrap metal by two men, a farmer and a self-taught mechanic, inevitably echoes the 1945 Bell-47D1 model, installed above the escalator to the museum's atrium. But a haunting three-channel video, projected roomsize, sends thoughts in a different direction. The piece features interviews with Vietnamese citizens who remember helicopters as harbingers of death, a former Viet Cong soldier who recalls, not without relish, a very close call with airborne American soldiers, and an engineer who sees rotorcraft technology as indispensable to the developing world. These varied points of view may suggest an objective perspective on the machine, but Lê interlaces the footage with harrowing scenes from documentary and feature films, suggesting that the legacy of war is not easily overcome.

Through Jan. 24. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

ARTFORUM
JANUARY 2010 INTERNATIONAL

FUKUOKA, JAPAN

4th Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale

FUKUOKA ASIAN ART MUSEUM

Invoking community but largely devoid of the "community-oriented" art that has lately become ubiquitous, i.e., interactive and relational art, this fourth installment of the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale instead sought to explore the notions of *kyosei*, coexistence/symbiosis, and *saisei*, revival/reconstruction—expressed in English with the telling title "Live and Let Live: Creators of Tomorrow." Much of the work highlighted a subjective autonomy and self-expression that is often perceived as being at odds with ideas of community, perhaps closer in spirit to Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's celebrated notion of a "radical and plural democracy." Yet even within the particularities of individual expression, there was frequently a direct and often eloquent display of social conscience and a pointed critique of power.

Higa Toyomitsu's *Akai-Goya* (The Red Bitter Gourd), 1970–72, powerful black-and-white photographs from his hometown of Okinawa—images of protests against the American military presence, off-duty soldiers in Ray-Bans, Japanese prostitutes, and the ramshackle towns on the island—conveys an unabashed sense of indignity and anger that's still palpable today. In a more guarded vein, Shahzia Sikander's video *Bending the Barrels*, 2008, features footage of a Pakistani military marching band, often decked out in full regalia and playing with evident gusto. Sikander's images slyly reveal—even without the help of the heavy-handed text placed over them—the threadbare symbolism of the military spectacle.

Perhaps the finest work along these lines is Dinh Q. Lê's six-and-a-half-minute, digitally created video *South China Sea Pishkun*, 2009, depicting helicopters plummeting one by one into the ocean. Referencing the account of how the American military was forced to ditch its own helicopters as it fled South Vietnam at the end of the war, Lê both excavates a little-known drama and creates some hauntingly beautiful imagery.

The inverse side of production, and as necessary to the continued functioning of capitalism, destruction was also the subject of a formidable

Dinh Q. Lê, *South China Sea Pishkun*, 2009, still from an animated video in 3-D, 6 minutes 30 seconds. From 4th Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale.

video installation by Bangladeshi artists Yasmine Kabir and Ronni Ahmmed. Shot in the otherworldly ship-breaking yards of Chittagong, *The Last Rites*, 2008, depicts teams of humans, tiny against the hulking metal carcasses of oil tankers and cargo ships that they painstakingly tear apart. Literally working themselves to death as they breathe in asbestos and other toxins while earning barely enough to buy food, the workers are, like the machinery, victims of planned obsolescence. The horrific antihumanism of the global economy lays itself bare.

The inclusion of Cai Guo-Qiang seemed surprising—can one think of a more state-sanctioned or spectacle-devoted artist?—but his work, particularly the video documentation of his Beijing Olympics opening fireworks (notoriously revealed as digitally enhanced for TV audiences) offered an exemplary counterpoint to Korean Kim Seongyoun's *Fireworks*, 2005. Her video, which overlays footage of a fireworks display in Pusan with images shot in the slums across the river, effectively collapses the distance between the spectacular image of national celebration and the abject reality it attempts to obscure.

Two works, both utilizing the strategy of the *dérive*, attempted to chart possible "escape paths" from within the urban matrix. Yet whereas Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba's *Breathing Is Free: 12,756.3*, 2007–, three monitors showing the artist jogging in various patterns (carefully plotted on a GPS) in various cities (he formed a water hyacinth in Ho Chi Minh City), ultimately goes nowhere, Atul Bhalla's *Yamuna Walk*, 2007, with its 161 photographs documenting a five-day journey through Delhi following the course of the Yamuna River, has a buoyancy, simplicity, and poetry that speak of another idea of community: one in which subjects are self-determining.

—*Charles LaBelle*

ART PAPERS
SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2009

DINH Q. LÊ
PORTLAND, OR

Near the entrance of Dinh Q. Lê's *Signs and Signals From the Periphery* stands a crudely constructed fountain fashioned from a PVC spigot that gushes water into a blue plastic bucket, where it is recirculated by a pump [Elizabeth Leach Gallery; May 7–June 27, 2009]. Like the nine other works in the exhibition, which include found objects, re-creations, and photographs, *The Fountain—for BN*, 2009, documents the ad hoc assemblages erected by Vietnamese street merchants to signal availability of grey market wares. In *Bicycle Repair Signals*, 2009, a grid of sixteen photographs, tires hang like wreaths off telephone poles, bound together or wrapped in colorful ribbon. In *Porn Here*, 2009, a triptych of photographs shows DVDs wedged between chunks of concrete to signify porn. In *I am Large. I Contain Multitudes (1)*, 2009, a bicycle purchased from a Vietnamese street vendor showcases an array of rearview mirrors affixed to an improvised shelf system. Signs of wear, rust, and the visibly handmade nature of the merchant's bicycle contrast with the shiny machined surfaces of the small mirrors. Lê translates these vernacular signifiers from daily life into the vocabulary of the white cube, while maintaining their status as coded objects whose origins are far removed from the gallery context.

Dedicated to Bruce Nauman—presumably in reference to *Self-Portrait as Fountain*, 1966, Nauman's own homage to Duchamp's infamous urinal—*The Fountain* bears ties to both contemporary Vietnam and the legacy of Western conceptual art. While the confrontational noise and movement of water flowing through the fountain most immediately serve as a proxy for the bustle of contemporary Vietnamese street life, the object can also be understood as a stand-in for the artist himself. Throughout his career, Lê has continually returned to explorations of his own identity as a Vietnamese artist who immigrated to the United States with his family at the age of eleven to escape political unrest. He spent the remainder of his childhood in the US. where he also studied art, before returning to live in Ho Chi Minh City over fifteen years later. While Nauman used his own body to transform Duchamp's porcelain urinal into a performative act, Lê transforms the iconic fountain back into an object—and a functioning one at that. Perhaps more importantly, it is an object specific to twenty-first century Vietnamese culture.

These "signs and signals" indicate a nation in transition, a developing nation struggling to reconcile socialist ideology with an emergent free market. The hastily constructed assemblages are temporary, as easily assembled as they are disassembled, while the three merchant bikes on view—literally markets on wheels—embody the transient nature of these grey market entities.

A tension exists between the original value system from which these objects emerged and their performance as signs from "the periphery" in the very different value system of the gallery. Lê's appropriation transforms these cheaply manufactured goods into luxury commodities. While Lê does not overemphasize the implications of this transaction between the Vietnamese streets and the well-established American art economy, he certainly does not make any attempts at reconciliation. Instead, he plays in the margins between the street and the white cube, exterior and interior, illegitimate and legitimate, function and sculpture. As such, Lê not only brings issues of contemporary Vietnamese identity to the forefront, he also uses these objects and documents to study the process of translation between cultures, economies, and environments, and the mechanisms by which meaning is formed through collective understanding.

—Katherine Bovee

ARTFORUM

Dinh Q. Lê

ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY
417 N.W. 9th Avenue
May 7–June 15

Making its international debut at this gallery, "Signs and Signals from the Periphery" is Vietnamese and American artist Dinh Q. Lê's most recent body of objects and photographs. Lê reimmigrated to Vietnam almost a decade ago, immersing himself in the distant home he knew mostly through family stories. Lê first captured international attention in the 1990s with disturbingly hallucinogenic hand-plaited photo-weavings that synthesize Vietnamese political history and popular American visions of the Vietnam War, like Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 *Apocalypse Now*. Lê also created garish plaster multiples of mutated children in his "Damaged Gene" series, 1998, and sold these tchotchkes in a Vietnamese market stall—souvenirs of the human cost of war.

Dinh Q. Lê, *Gasoline 4 Sale Signals*, 2009, sixteen color photographs, overall 8 x 14'

"Signs and Signals" penetrates deeper into Vietnamese culture through the idiosyncratic present tense, exploring Vietnam's vital gray-market economy in the form of its most interesting objects—exquisitely funky thingamabobs created by Ho Chi Min City merchants in order to market their goods and services. These textless material signifiers aren't re-creations; Lê has purchased and imported each artifact directly from the streets of his hometown. Serial photographs of similar objects in their original contexts surround and further illuminate the emotional and material significance of the objects. Brightly painted Mylar-wrapped bicycle tires, strapped to street signs or wrangled into freestanding pyramids, advertise bicycle-repair shops; dangling iridescent DVDs signal the availability of pornography; and paper funnels thrust into the tops of bricks advertise gasoline. These deeply engaging artifacts suggest outsider art and contemporary sculpture while questioning the viewer's ability to see outside his or her own cultural framework. Lê's new works are indices of an arguably third-world culture confronting first-world conventions, artistic and otherwise.

— *Stephanie Snyder*

May 22-28, 2009
The Oregonian

MIKE DAVIS/THE OREGONIAN

"Signs and Signals from the Periphery" by Dinh Q. Le at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery

An artist's identity secure

By D.K. ROW
THE OREGONIAN

At last, the circle is complete for Dinh Q. Le, the internationally acclaimed artist whose latest show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery marks both a departure and arrival for this utterly fascinating Vietnamese American.

Taking residence within the walls of the Leach gallery is a bit of Vietnam's street life: bikes decorated with flags; bike tires bent into charmingly tortured shapes; low-fi water pumps, and more. "Khong co chi."

Indeed. The show's a "welcome" departure in the sense that the artist has now fully emerged from some of the themes of conflicted identity that first achieved notice more than 15 years ago. It's an arrival in the sense that Le's new work is a firmer handshake, so to speak, with conceptualism, a metaphorical meeting that dovetails with the artist's increasing commodiousness with his home country, Vietnam.

This exhibit's a watershed moment for other reasons, too: Le's career has moved beyond well-known status. Next year, Le will have an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. That Le chose to debut this new work in Portland declares a continued affection and commitment to our humble village, where the artist has shown for most of his career.

In a way, Portland's been a constant variable in a life defined by personal flux, of living in-between cultures and seeking defining transformations to resolve them.

Le's family escaped the Khmer Rouge near the border of Cambodia when Le was 10, eventually settling in the U.S. Quiet, middle-class comfort followed chaos: Le grew up in Simi Valley, pursued undergraduate studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, followed by graduate work at New York's School of Visual Arts.

But embedded within the inspirational immigrant narrative was a kind of anguish that informed Le's earliest art: Who was Le? Where did he belong?

He didn't know. And his art exploited this internal clash and the larger tensions of identity politics.

In his early photo weavings, Le stripped different photographic stills from famous films that depicted Asians (often negatively), and then spliced them together into dreamy, pointillist-style collages. The photo-weavings had a raw, youthful angst about them, but they were powerful and authentic in their feeling.

Through the years Le's work has become less dramatic but more convincing, in part because he's undergone a self-realization of his own. Though an American citizen, he moved back to Vietnam some years ago, a place that simply feels more comfortable to him. It's where he belongs, he says.

Please turn to **Page 38**

Which is where we find Le in this show, a collection of photo collages of Vietnam and several installation works that are re-creations of Vietnamese street life. A bicycle adorned with tiny mirrors, for example. A plastic bucket with a pump siphoning water noisily. A single tire whose diameter is crossed by a lone fluorescent light.

These re-creations are non-interpretive: The bikes, buckets and tires are as they would be in a quasi-Third World that fascinates, not confuses, the artist: They're objects of mysterious, often abstract sublimity.

But they are also practical signifiers in a narrative about the subversive dexterity required of life in resource-poor Vietnam. The tires, which are configured in numerous inventive ways, are signs for a tire repair shop; the stomping pump could be a made-to-order Bruce Nauman — so much so that Le has even included the artist in the title — but it's really a sign that lets passers-by know that a water pump is handily nearby in infrastructure-poor Vietnam.

Looking back, Le's previous works were riper, more earnest pieces that also operated as a kind of emotional armor from the rest of the world. Now, the artist is rooted firmly in the world.

There's a tradeoff here. These works indeed have a more demanding conceptual framework; they're also less dynamic on an emotional level. Drama has turned into éclat. Le's completed the crucial transition from emerging artist to established midcareer auteur, a transition fueled by the resolution of an enduring question: Who am I?

I've followed Le's career so closely in the pages of this newspaper because, I, personally, have felt his conflict.

Until the next rendezvous, Dinh Q. Le.

Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 417 N.W. Ninth Ave. Hours: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Closes May 30.

ARTFORUM
JANUARY 2009 INTERNATIONAL

2008 Gwangju Biennale
Singapore Biennale 2008
3rd Yokohama Triennale

VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Philip Tinari

THIS PAST FALL, with the consecutive openings of six "Asian biennials," the deliquescent 1990s and early-2000s trend toward establishing new large-scale exhibitions in increasingly far-flung locales bore fruit, such as it is. And as might have been anticipated, these shows were also attended by the repeatedly aired critiques that such efforts do little more than adapt a late-nineteenth-century model of display to newly ascendant societies; and, further, serve as highbrow smoke screens cynically deployed in the service of nationalist political regimes, neoliberal economic interests, or narrow municipal agendas. But to make either of these points in the present context is to pick up a debate that has, in fact, faded in the years since the first Gwangju Biennale of 1995. Back then, recall, questions about globalization, and about the place of "Asia" (always a problematic concept in and of itself) in this new order, plagued the intelligentsia. Just a short time earlier, economist Ezra Vogel had paternalistically anointed South Korea one of the "four little dragons" driving the region's economic growth and political progress. Somewhere along the line, though, the "little dragons" (the others were Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore) became the "Asian tigers," and the terms of the debate shifted away from what 2008 Gwangju Biennale artistic director Okwui Enwezor calls "the anxiety of the periphery."

In the intervening years, biennials and triennials in the region proliferated rapidly, spurred on by ever-more-confident metropoles and their rivalries. Taipei got one in 1998, Shanghai in 2000, Yokohama in 2001, Guangzhou in 2002, Singapore in 2006. This year, these shows joined Sydney and Gwangju as points on what organizers called the "Art Compass"—an emerging-market redux of the 2007 European "Grand Tour." But even before this latest grand gesture of art tourism, there was something shared and celebratory about this group of exhibitions. The 1998 Taipei Biennial, for example, launched with a weirdly poetic statement from its ubiquitous artistic director, Fumio Nanjo, perhaps the genre's key practitioner: "Asia is aglow today. Asia destructs, constructs, and transforms."

It was against this backdrop that Enwezor set to work on this year's Gwangju Biennale, engaging as a kind of starting point the May 18, 1980, citizens' uprising against South Korea's military dictator Chun Doo-hwan. The biennial in fact was instituted to commemorate this event, which initiated a trend toward democratization and civil society. Enwezor is fascinated by the uprising: In it, he finds a story of civil unrest and democratic progress with nationalist and anticolonial implications that countervail what he sees as the "tendentious display of historical narcissism" characterizing the West's ongoing nostalgia for the Paris Spring of 1968. He writes:

> Paris tends to be focused almost exclusively in the past, while Gwangju is caught up in a ritual of annual passion over the meaning and symbolism of May 18. At the same time, representations of the two tend to associate with two distinct historical legacies: the modernist avant-garde on the one hand and the peasant and anti-colonial resistance on the other. Yet, whatever the distinct differences between Paris and Gwangju, or the modes in which they are commemorated, what is indisputable is how they each set in motion a fervent belief in the politics of spectacle.

And how better to respond to spectacle than through a deadpan homage to the semantics of the global corporatocracy? Enwezor titled his biennial, which closed in November, "Annual Report: A Year in Exhibitions" and structured it as a series of distinct interventions united only by an unstated set of aesthetic considerations, subsumed within a simple temporal framework. The largest of three subsections of "Annual Report," titled "On the Road," comprised restagings of thirty-six exhibitions—ecumenically drawn from venues around the world, institutional and commercial alike—that had taken place during the period preceding the biennial's opening. This core unit of "twice-born" exhibitions (the term, from the Sanskrit *dvi-ja*, is that of biennial cocurator Ranjit Hoskote) was punctuated by forty-eight "Insertions" of single artists and collectives, and spread beyond the main five-gallery Biennale Hall into the nearby Gwangju Museum of Art and the far-off Uijae Museum of Korean Art.

Somewhere along the line, the "little dragons" became the "Asian tigers," and the terms of the biennial debate shifted away from what 2008 Gwangju Biennale artistic director Okwui Enwezor calls "the anxiety of the periphery."

The success of the exhibition came to rest on a curatorial bricolage (a favorite Enwezor term) of flow and juxtaposition. Thankfully, he is a master of this modality. In

Opposite page: Office/information center for the exhibition "Bokdukbang Project" (one of five "position papers" from the 2008 Gwangju Biennale), curated by Sung Hyen Park, Daein market, Gwangju, 2008. Left: Daniel Faust, *Yukon Liquor*, 2001, color photograph, 31 x 22". From the series "Alaska," 2001–2009. From the 2008 Gwangju Biennale. Right: Claire Tancons's exhibition-as-procession, "Spring," Gwangju, 2008. (Work pictured: Marlon Griffith, *Runaway/Reaction*, 2008, mixed-media performance.) From the 2008 Gwangju Biennale.

one narrow corridor, for example, two Insertions—Area Park's early-'90s black-and-white photographs of South Korea's pro-democracy protesters and of the demilitarized zone, and Daniel Faust's ironic, William Eggleston-ish meditations on the working class and built environment in Alaska—hung across from each other, both groups of photos evincing, in very different ways, a Robert Frank–like sense of the artist as observer of his own nation. Upstairs, a pared-down version of Taryn Simon's *American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, a series of images of little-seen centers of power (such as the art collection at CIA headquarters and the contraband room at John F. Kennedy Airport) shown in March 2007 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, took its place next to Hans Haacke's January outing at Paula Cooper, also in New York. (Haacke's iconic *Sol Goldman and Alex DiLorenzo Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* was displayed on the wall separating the two artists, in what appeared to be a formal nod to the evolution of American-style institutional critique as well as a poignant acknowledgment that American-style democracy and capitalism remain deeply flawed.) Praneet Soi's painted miniatures of war-on-terror atrocities inhabited a downstairs gallery at the Uijae Museum, whose permanent collection (included in "On the Road") houses work by Uijae Huh Baikryun (1891–1977): One of Korea's last acknowledged masters of another traditionalist pictorial tradition, the ink-and-wash mode known as literati painting, Uijae was an early advocate of the South Korean farmers' movement, which can be seen as a precursor to May 18, and strongly resonates with the political address of Soi's miniatures. Yes, there were also veterans of other recent biennials—Steve McQueen's *Gravesend* and Thomas Demand's *Yellowcake*, both on view in Venice in 2007, to name two—and no shortage of rotely repackaged New York and London gallery shows (Gerard Byrne from Lisson, Isaac Julien from Metro Pictures, etc.). But in the end, Enwezor's curatorial position of anti-thematization paradoxically allowed linkages and variances to articulate themselves with the subtlety usually sought, and less often achieved, in thematic shows.

A group of distinctly curated "position papers" elaborated parallel, perhaps ancillary points consistent with the biennial's overall agenda. Patrick Flores's "Turns in Tropics: Artist-Curator" offered a comparative meditation on four examples of this hybrid figure and on their influence on the Malaysian, Philippine, Indonesian, and Thai scenes of the '70s and '80s. The show-within-a-show functioned both as historical object lesson—Apinan Poshyananda, now an elder-statesman intellectual, was making video spoofs with a VHS camera in Bangkok in 1987?—and scholarly thesis, advancing a claim consistent with Enwezor's highlighting of the bricolage of the periphery. In keeping with the logic of juxtaposition, an "Insertion" of darkness, mazes, and mirrors by Ken Lum, himself an artist-curator, filled out this gallery at the Gwangju Museum of Art. Claire Tancons's "position paper," "Spring," a dramatic, Caribbean-inspired procession around the traffic island at the epicenter of the May 18 protests, was among the biennial's highlights, and struck me as the perfect instantiation of what Enwezor claimed to seek in "the link [the biennial] makes to the uprising by using the spectacle of street protests as a symbol for establishing an open structure of cultural interaction." One could simply never conceive of such a procession—a whimsical riff on an earlier student protest, this one featuring contributions by various artists and culminating in the burning of MAP Office's bamboo-and-rice-paper floats—happening in Beijing or Shanghai. And yet the state here was fully on board. The next morning, Enwezor's thumbnail visage smiled out at me from the front page of the government-run *Korea Times*.

GWANGJU'S NATIONALIST and regionalist agenda, and Enwezor and company's meditation on that agenda, seem almost baroque in their complexity compared with Singapore's unabashedly transparent conflation of art and real estate (a marriage officiated by authoritarian technocracy and bankrolled by speculative capital). If ever there was a curator who knew how to work this liminal zone, it is Fumio Nanjo. Now the director of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, Nanjo—who maintains a consultancy offering "a wide range of services in [the] art field"—is the Prometheus of the Asian biennial: Taipei, 1998; Yokohama, 2001; Singapore, 2006. Singapore, which loves nothing so much as stability, decided to retain him for a second go as artistic director. In return, they got things like a spreadsheet providing the exacting viewer with each artist's year of birth, residence, and preferred "genre." This year the biennial's theme was simply "Wonder," following on 2006's "Belief." In the two-page essay at the front of a giveaway guidebook that is the exhibition's only publication, Nanjo writes, "To experience wonder is to open one's mind." He goes on to cite the dictionary definition of "wonder," and concludes with the statement: "Art is now becoming a part of people's lives." The audio guide is brought to you by Bloomberg, and the all-venue pass includes a discounted ride on the Singapore Flyer Ferris wheel. You get the picture.

Upon arriving in Singapore, I met a group of Malaysian curators and artists at an outdoor bar in the Tanglin Camp complex, a former military base that had been the main site of the 2006 biennial. It was now home to a Ben & Jerry's, wine bars and fusion restaurants, and furniture stores, none of which had been there two years before. Perhaps this illumination of the stakes of the previous edition colored my trek among SB2008's venues the following day. By the harbor, on the Central Promontory Site ("with 360 hectares of prime land for development," per

This page, left: **Chaw Ei Thein, Aung Ko, and Richard Streitmatter-Tran, *September Sweetness* (detail), 2008,** 5½ tons of sugar, 82 11/16 x 82 11/16 x 102 3/4". From the Singapore Biennale 2008. Right: **Dinh Q. Lê, *The Farmers and the Helicopters* (detail), 2006,** mixed media, video. Installation view, South Beach Development, Singapore. From the Singapore Biennale 2008. Opposite page, from left: **Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Morakot (Emerald)*, 2007,** still from a color video, 11 minutes 50 seconds. From the Singapore Biennial 2008. **Jonathan Meese, *DR.NO-METABOLISM IN MOOMINGYM like SOLDIER-FLASH-BLUE de MING (BABYKINGKONG IS BACK IN FANTOMAS-GYM, thanks ... 1912-2012), 2008,** mixed media. Installation view, Shinko Pier Exhibition Hall, Yokohama. From the 3rd Yokohama Triennale. Photo: Keizo Kioku.

the guidebook), a Shigeru Ban pavilion made from shipping containers housed a few unrelated marquee works: Hans Op de Beeck, the Kabakovs, Anthony McCall. The core site was the recently vacated city hall, which was newly encaged by chain-link barriers in anticipation of the Singapore Grand Prix a week later. The staid Brit-colonial civic building is not a horrible exhibition venue. Video installations occupied courtrooms, while downstairs, a boutique invite-only art fair called Showcase Singapore scattered twenty-some galleries into a maze of former clerks' offices. But the works given the most prominent locations were astoundingly bad: In the central atrium, a layered acrylic abstraction by Singaporean painter Jane Lee; in the former barristers' cafeteria, a grouping of fiberglass maggots by Pham Ngoc Duong and fetus-shaped gourds in formaldehyde by Han Jong-Gun; in another main hall, Wit Pimkanchanapong's *Singapore*, a Google Earth floor map of the city, on which viewers could mark their favorite places with Post-its. It all felt like a high-rent exercise in vaguely premised, gesturally biennial-esque art.

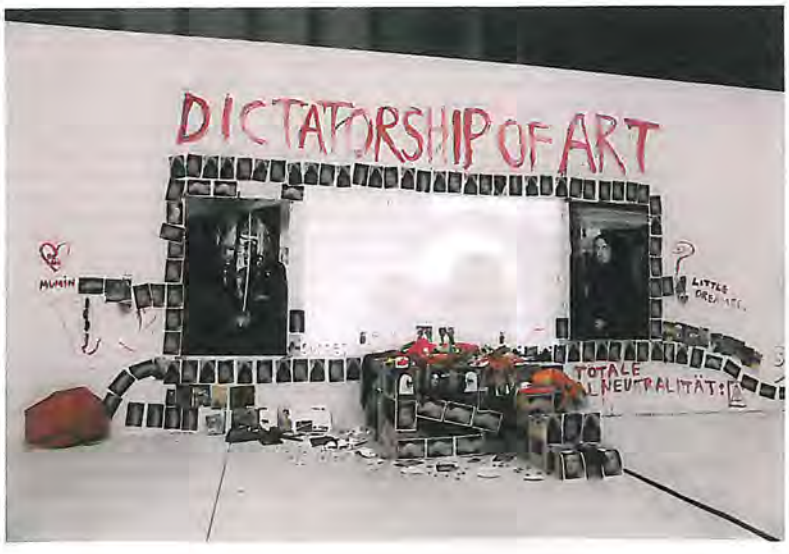
However, to the credit of Nanjo and his team, which also included Matthew Ngui and Joselina Cruz, the curatorial tentacles of this biennial extended far beyond the standard international fare. Nanjo's position as a man about Asia has allowed him to build a network that draws in works like the short films of Kyrgyz artist Aktan Abdykalykov. And there were some successful works, particularly in the South Beach Development, a cluster of '30s Deco army barracks just blocks from downtown. Heman Chong served up a room of wall paintings made from office-supply stickers, and Dinh Q. Lê presented *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, 2006, a sculptural and video meditation on Vietnamese peasants who try to build their own Huey. Working with Myanmar artists Chaw Ei Thein and Aung Ko, Richard Streitmatter-Tran constructed a pagoda in the Burmese Buddhist vernacular, made entirely of sugar. This was perhaps the most compelling interpretation of Nanjo's easy theme: sculptural space at once referencing traditional architecture, white-cube Minimalism, and visceral sensation. By the third day of SB2008, the pagoda was covered in flies.

IT IS TEMPTING to read the Yokohama Triennale as an unarticulated hybrid of Gwangju-style cultural localism and Singapore-style speculative boosterism. Yokohama shares some of Gwangju's self-consciousness about its perceived peripherality, even though (or perhaps because) it is Japan's historic port of entry and lies just thirty minutes from downtown Tokyo by subway. And like the Singapore Biennale, this triennial has been a vehicle for converting sites like the nineteenth-century Red Brick Warehouse, on the waterfront, into pleasant places to eat, drink, and shop. There is even a Ferris wheel. The municipal authorities are sophisticated enough, or at least technocratic enough, to hand the artistic reins over to (Western or Western-validated) specialists. And so the all-star curatorial team paired three of the busiest curators in Europe (Daniel Birnbaum, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Beatrix Ruf) with Akiko Miyake of the Center for Contemporary Art Kitakyushu and Hu Fang of Vitamin Creative Space, the latter a savvy gallery in Guangzhou that has a proven genius for parlaying widespread skepticism about the rote commercialism of most Chinese art into curatorial authority and financial gain.

These five were handed a theme, "Time Crevasse," by artistic director Tsutomu Mizusawa. "Art shakes up our everyday perceptions. . . . It can horrify us, give us courage, console us, or provide us with what we need to face life," Mizusawa noted in a brief text reminiscent of Nanjo's that was the only elaboration of the exhibition concept anywhere in sight. But scant narration does not necessarily equate with aesthetic failure, and the crevasse proved capable of engulfing A-listers and up-and-comers alike. The show centered on the Shinko Pier exhibition space, with an agile system of plywood walls designed by Ryue Nishizawa duly deconstructing the white cube. The selection of seventy-two artists would feel familiar to anyone who knows the curators—a perfect equilibrium of the long-canonized (Marina Abramović, Yoko Ono, Matthew Barney, Douglas Gordon, Paul McCarthy, Joan Jonas, Rirkrit Tiravanija), the recently canonized (Mark Leckey, Tino Sehgal, Paul Chan, Jonathan Meese, Miranda July, Cao Fei, Terence Koh, Jérôme Bel), and the hopefully soon-to-be-canonized (Mario García Torres, Shilpa Gupta, Pak Sheung Chuen, Pedro Reyes). This being Japan, there is a significant conceptual and performance-based history with which to engage, and a second-floor film archive in the Red Brick Warehouse presented a stunning selection of works from the Fluxus moment and its aftermath, with pieces like Atsuko Tanaka's *Round on Sand*, 1968, and the collective Hi Red Center's *Shelter Plan*, 1967. This was echoed in a substantial program of new performances realized in the few days surrounding the opening—works by Jonas, Meese, and Aki Sasamoto among them.

And yet in the end, Yokohama appeared an almost archetypal instantiation of the international exhibition format, impeccably designed and unrelentingly cool, with no particular political or curatorial agenda anywhere in sight. Perhaps Obrist was saving the agendas for his Frieze-week Manifesto Marathon happening later that month. Or perhaps this utter subsumption of local into transnational, of site into space, marks the twilight of the "Asian biennial," which may prove, to twist another Obrist biennial title, a genre that never should have been named. □

PHILIP TINARI IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF *ARTFORUM*.



Los Angeles Times

Dinh Q. Lê at Shoshana Wayne Gallery

By Christopher Knight, Times Art Critic
October 3, 2008

Gene Ogami / Shoshana Wayne Gallery
FACING FORWARD: A detail of Dinh Q. Lê's "Portrait #2," currently on view at Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica.

The 12 powerful new photographic collages by **Dinh Q. Lê** in his fifth solo show at the Shoshana Wayne Gallery advance the trajectory of the artist's work. They add a layer of complexity missing from most of the earlier collages I've seen.

Lê emigrated from Vietnam to the U.S. with his family in 1979 (he was 11), and later he did graduate art study in New York; now he lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City. His binational personal history has underpinned earlier series of pictures, which showed such things as documentary images of the Vietnam War cut into strips and physically woven together with strips of stills taken from Hollywood movies about

the conflict.

The new work layers recent history into the mix, including 9/11 and the Iraq war, and for the first time his weaving technique seems more than merely a clever Conceptual art maneuver. The effect is heartbreaking.

"The Locust" shows Muslim men and women in head scarves walking diagonally toward the viewer, while a soldier escorting shackled prisoners seen from behind walks away. Between them in the upper registers of the large work -- it's roughly 4 feet high and 8 feet wide -- a phalanx of military fighter jets bears down at us. The scene is reddened with the swirling colors of a fireball.

Lê's weaving technique makes the details of an obvious holocaust difficult to see. You strain to make out faces, detect postures that might be revealing and determine precisely what is happening, where. But only the most general contours of the conflagration can be understood.

As a metaphor for the chaos and disorientation that characterize the fog of war, it's remarkably successful. It also favors tactile physicality -- the human connection afforded by evidence of the handmade -- over disembodied imagery.

The blips of color created by the weave are an obvious reference to pixels, which are the dominant mode of pictorial communication in our electronic universe. But the handwrought weaving is pre-technological, while its allusion to textiles recalls the introduction of heavy industry. The hand, the machine and the computer fuse.

A similar sequence of layers informs the imagery. Television pictures render the heavy machinery of fighter planes, which the artist likens in his title to a plague of locusts. When they swarm, migratory grasshoppers cause unimaginable devastation to crops. Lê's collages portray individual human ruin on a global scale, making it seem simultaneously immediate and remote.

In "The Relic of Our Time," a soldier with a gun faces off against a jet. A figure at the right clutches a flag, another at the left holds up its hands to frame a face, which is abstracted as if it were a rudimentary, prehistoric stone head.

Within the flaming background, the principal colors of the collage are red, white and blue. As in all the works, the woven strips have been fused around the four edges of the picture, like something seared in an inferno.

A group of 5-foot-tall portrait heads dispenses with color, relying instead on black, white and silvery grays. The individual male and female heads are merged with solarized landscapes, yielding haunted faces both metallic and hard. They are also ghostly and ethereal -- a slippery and disturbing visual contradiction that is another testament to Lê's evolving skill.

Josh Dorman, *Dangerous Intersection*, 2008, ink, acrylic, antique maps, and paper on panel, 42" x 34". Mary Ryan.

chaos. But it has a grandeur of vision, as though Piranesi had discovered Google. Perhaps that's why Dorfman paints on maps. —*Alex Taylor*

Dinh Q. Lê

PPOW

Forty-year-old Vietnamese-American artist Dinh Q. Lê has spent the larger part of his career fixated on the Vietnam (or, as the Vietnamese call it, the American) War. The artist is best known for his craftlike technique of weaving digital photographs to create layered narratives set in an eerie postwar landscape.

Lê's past work fused Hollywood film stills with famous photojournalistic images of the war, but these newest tableaux omit Western sources entirely. Black-and-white portraits of Cambodians captured by the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime are intertwined with color photographs of that country's notorious high-school-cum-prison, S-21, as are pictures of Buddhist sculptures. Lê's technique renders the victims and the Buddhas heavily pixelated, flickering in the abandoned prison like errant images on a staticky TV.

The theme is personal—Lê's family fled Vietnam for Thailand during the war and immigrated to the United States in 1979—but it is unclear what the artist hopes to achieve in these obsessive depictions. The works are handsome and the portraits themselves are moving, but Lê seems to be engaging more in a formal exercise than a philosophical one.

A four-channel video, *The Penal Colony* (2008), installed in an adjacent gallery, tackles a similar topic. It is an immersive, slow-moving panorama of a derelict Vietnamese political prison. Lê was inspired by the detainee situation at Guantánamo Bay, and stark as the work may be, the prison—stripped of any indication of its place or time—carries a contemporary resonance that the woven tableaux do not. —*Rachel Wolff*

Dinh Q. Lê, *Untitled (from the Hill of Poisonous Trees Series)*, 2008, C-print and linen tape, 47¼" x 78¾". PPOW.

Marjorie Welish

Björn Ressle

Marjorie Welish's show "Painting as Diagram" was the latest installment in her ongoing investigation of the medium as a discipline, and she presented it with compelling assurance. The New York–based artist, critic, and poet has once more taken the language of nonobjective abstraction in hand to demonstrate—within the context of three fine series of new work—the conjunction between the acts of reading a painting and of seeing it. She uses simple shapes and primary colors to reproduce the way we decode based on a given context and its apparent rules.

One series, "Blueprint" (2008) is dominated by turquoise, a departure from the artist's usual palette of primaries plus black and white. This swimming-pool hue softens the edge of Welish's highly intellectual project, refreshing it without diminishing its complexity. Evoking architectural plans as well as a schema fueled by repetition and variations, Welish continues to underscore the many possible permutations even of a restricted vocabulary.

Marjorie Welish, *Indecidability of the Sign: Red, Yellow, Blue 18* (diptych), 2007, acrylic on board, 18" x 28". Björn Ressle.

The two other series in the show were "Indecidability of the Sign: Frame" (2007) and "Indecidability of the Sign: Red, Yellow, Blue" (2007) referring to two iconic modernist emblems. These were more characteristic of Welish's enterprise. All three series, in acrylic and ink on board or paper, are relatively small in scale, and many of the paintings in them were hung as diptychs or triptychs.

But the real news is that Welish has become less argumentative and more persuasive—which is not to say less rigorous. She offers the viewer not only challenging ideas about the nature of painting, but greater visual inducement to stay and read her signage. Logic has been given a makeover. Aided by luminous surfaces, adept brushwork, and clear colors, these compositions were more striking and more satisfying than her previous ones. Although Welish has never shown an interest in providing eye candy, this show was definitely glamorous. —*Lilly Wei*

THE NEW YORKER

May 26, 2008

DINH Q. LÊ

Since we can only imagine the conditions at Guantánamo Bay, Lê brings us inside earlier detention camps in Southeast Asia. A political prison in Vietnam (Lê's birthplace), built by the French and later used by the U.S., is the subject of a four-channel video that slowly pans through crumbling, abandoned cells. Much more effective are the big, intricately woven photographs that are his trademark, here incorporating images taken in Tuol Sleng, the notorious high school turned Khmer Rouge prison, which is now a genocide museum. Lê interlaces black-and-white portraits of men and women who died in the prison with images of its now scrubbed interiors, so that the horrific past seeps into the placid present. Through May 31. (P.P.O.W., 555 W. 25th St. 212-647-1044.)

Artist weaves Vietnam memories, Hollywood icons into work

By CARRIE WOOD
Staff Writer

Vietnam native Dinh Q. Lê, who at age 10 escaped his country when it was invaded by the Cambodian Khmer Rouge regime, wants to tell his country's story.

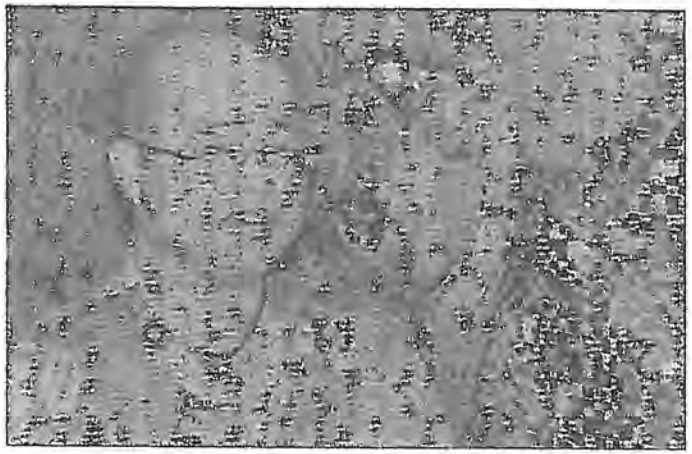
While a student at the University of California at Santa Barbara, he took a class about the Vietnam War.

"I was really frustrated because every week we had American vets come in and talk about their experiences in the Vietnam War," Lê said. "There was no Vietnamese talking about their experiences, so I became very angry."

This incited him to contribute to the Vietnamese dialogue.

Offering a different perspective of Vietnam, his exhibit, A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê, will be on display at the Bellevue Arts Museum through Dec. 1.

His work includes 19 woven photographic works, two white-on-white embroideries and two multi-channel video works.



Craig Groshart / Reporter

Dinh Q. Lê's work includes 19 woven photographic works, two white-on-white embroideries and two multi-channel video works

They mark the outcome of a 20-year introspective journey in which Lê has sought to negotiate his cultural background within the prevailing cultural values of the West.

Much of his work explores what he remembers about the Vietnam War, which killed nearly 60,000 American soldiers and 3 million Vietnamese.

"A lot of people, when you ask them about the Vietnam War, the movie Apocalypse Now comes to mind," Lê said. "I feel like my memory of the war is kind of merging between facts and fiction into this tapestry of memories that are not quite fact or fiction — it's somewhere in between."

Using images from Hollywood, he weaves strips of photographs together to portray this merge.

A Hollywood bunny coalesces with a young Vietnamese woman from a found photograph, and a young Vietnamese man representing a different generation can be seen beneath the image of actor Martin Sheen, Apocalypse Now star.

The weave, a technique he learned as a child watching his aunt weave grass mats, symbolizes the interweaving between cultures and identities as a Vietnamese living in America.

However, the war wasn't all about the bloodshed that Hollywood films portray, he said.

"We try to go on with life during the war. We have happy moments, we do take vacation — it wasn't all about war for us."

Using 1,500 black-and-white photographs he bought at secondhand stores when he visited Vietnam in the '90s, Lê created a large hanging quilt of photographs, threaded together with linen tape.

In one photograph, a smiling father holds his son on his knee. Another is an image of a happy bride, reaching across a table where guests are dining. Some of the photographs are flipped to reveal text, one which was written by a soldier to his girlfriend.

When his family left Vietnam, they left behind personal belongings, including photographs.

"Over the years, even now, I still go look. But along the way I started collecting these photographs. They represent my family life before," he said.

Lê moved back to Vietnam 10 years ago. A four-channel video presentation is based on the experience of his return.

In it, a group of clam diggers are walking out into the ocean.

"I was having seafood at a shack and at a certain time, all these people started to walk out into the ocean," he said. "It was so surreal to me because it reminded me of when my family walked into the ocean, got on a boat and left Vietnam."

The video projection of the clam pickers is juxtaposed with interviews of young Vietnamese-Americans who came back to their country.

"We have to learn to be Vietnamese again and it's a very difficult, conflicting position for us."

Now, he said he feels comfortable, "but there are still days where certain things drive me crazy."

Carrie Wood can be reached at carrie.wood@bellevuereporter.com or 425-453-4290.

Invisible roots

Artist Dinh Q. Lê creates photo-weavings in his quest for cultural identity as a Vietnamese refugee who returned

By BRIAN LIBBY
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Some artists take years, even an entire career, to develop a signature style.

For others, one brief epiphany provides an ongoing blueprint.

Then there's Dinh Q. Lê. Along his multidecade journey from Vietnam to America and back, he seems to have done both.

Lê's outstanding show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, "From Father to Son: A Rite of Passage," revalidates his inclusion in the prestigious Venice Bienniale four years ago.

The epiphany took time.

Lê, whose work is familiar to Portlanders because he's been represented locally by Leach for the past 10 years, was born in 1968 in Ha-Tien, a small village near Vietnam's border with Cambodia. His family remained there after the fall of Saigon in 1975. When he was 11, following his father's death and Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, the family immigrated to the United States and settled in suburban Los Angeles.

There, Lê made the bumpy transition to American teen. In college, perhaps seeking structure, he initially studied engineering. Later he switched to art.

"I wanted a way to explore who I am, especially my being Vietnamese in relation to the West," he explained recently at the gallery while overseeing final installations for his show.

Weaving time and place

Lê's career-shaping epiphany arrived, finally, while he was studying photography at New York's School of Visual Arts.

"I kept coming back to the idea (that) I'd grown up watching my aunt weaving mats," he recalled. "From there, everything just sort of fell into place."

Although his career has included sculpture and video as well as collage, Lê's process of weaving strips of photographs into elaborate collages quickly became his artistic trademark. Not only do the textured grooves, slits and patterns of his weavings add a beautiful textural quality, they also unite a host of cultural and political symbols, folklore, religious iconography and other imagery.

A recurring presence in Lê's photo weavings and video installations has been images from famous Hollywood Vietnam War movies populated by the likes of Marlon Brando and Tom Cruise. His current show takes its name, "From Father to Son: A Rite of Passage," from a new split-screen video work that juxtaposes images of Charlie Sheen in "Platoon" with images of his father, Martin Sheen, in "Apocalypse Now."

It's a clever, elementary enough idea to be a hit on YouTube (or, in the Leach gallery's case, a catchy Artforum magazine ad). But the installation is more than gimmickry. In collaboration with editors, Lê weaves the celluloid narratives of these two familiar Hollywood classics as intricately as in his collages, creating an evocative meditation on how warfare senselessly transcends generations.

"A loud place"

The double-Sheen installation notwithstanding, Lê's show indicates a transformation away from viewing Vietnam through the prism of its relationship with the United States and the war. He moved back to Vietnam full time 10 years ago, and his work increasingly depicts a society mindful of its past but yearning to embrace a different future, with or without communism.

Lê's new weavings are denser than ever, with a dizzying assortment of vibrant colors, people and objects.

"Asia is a loud place," he said. "As the culture's changing so rapidly, everything is competing for your attention."

Replacing war imagery are purple flowers, part of traditional Vietnamese mourning; commercial emblems and packages from Coca-Cola to Skittles to Heineken, denoting the rise of capitalism in Vietnam; religious figures; and earnest Communist propaganda.

Reappropriating mass media and products has its roots in Warhol. But Lê also cites the influence of Dadaism, the European cultural movement that rose as a reaction to the barbarity of World War I and included artists such as Germany's John Heartfield, who helped pioneer the use of photomontages to satirize the Nazi party. Lê's canvases are similarly bold, political and provocative.

Like Chuck Close's portraits, Lê's weavings are epic-sized pictures comprised of many small individual pieces and forms. But unlike Close, a painter, Lê in a sense creates by subtracting. Each weave-mark adds a small square, and their collective patchwork presence both fuses and ruptures the surface of the collage's different images. In one mesmerizing untitled work from Lê's 2003 "From Vietnam to Hollywood" series, the artist wove a collection of black-and-white family photos in symbolic bloodshed by interlacing a red pattern into the tapestry of snapshots.

Losing the hyphen

Living back in Vietnam, Lê faces a conservative Communist government suspicious of his efforts, even in something as seemingly innocuous as a nonprofit gallery.

"They're afraid of anything political," he said. "My work is political in a pro-Vietnam way, but they still don't want it."

Ever the survivor, Lê even finds encouragement in the Communist government's arcane ways.

"Actually, they validated my work for me," he said with a laugh. "Because to them, it mattered. They're terrified they're going to lose their power, but they also benefit from the greater openness of allowing work like mine and other artists'."

Meanwhile, Vietnam has become Lê's country again, not just host to a transplanted Vietnamese-American. As Bruce Guenther, the Portland Art Museum's chief curator, quipped in a recent public talk with Lê, the hyphen is now gone.

"It was tough assimilating back," Lê said of returning to Vietnam. "But there were invisible roots holding me there."

Just as Lê has moved on from the young artist who saw his homeland through media re-creations of the war, so, too, has Vietnam come to define itself by a broad range of cultural and historical influences. The works comprising "From Father to Son" are indeed a rite of passage — not just of one generation to another, but of an artist's experiences over the course of a career.

Brian Libby writes frequently about visual arts for The Oregonian.

From Father to Son: A Rite of Passage

Artist: Dinh Q. Lê
Where: Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 417 N.W. 9th Ave.
Hours: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays
Closes: June 23

"Asia is a loud place. As the culture's changing so rapidly, everything is competing for your attention."
– Dinh Q. Lê

ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY

ABOVE | Like the works of Chuck Close and the pointillist painters, Dinh Q. Lê's works derive a large impact from the combined force of many small marks. This untitled 2007 piece, of woven C-print and linen tape, is almost 4 feet high by 6 feet wide.

RIGHT | Lê's work often reflects on Hollywood images of the Vietnam War. This video installation juxtaposes clips of Charlie Sheen (left) in "Platoon" with images of his father, Martin Sheen, in "Apocalypse Now."

Art | There and back again: Dinh Q. Lê's journey home to Vietnam | 6

the disasters of war

By Avery F. Gordon

AGAINST THE COMMON GOOD[1]

The United States is at war, as it has been for most of its history. In the war on terror and on Iraq, photographs have attracted unusual public attention and controversy. Newspapers openly report that military regulations forbid taking or distributing images of returning dead U.S. soldiers, a preemptive control measure that has backfired badly. Independent news agencies question the reliability of embedded journalists and have confirmed both the staging of fake war victories (e.g., the "spontaneous" toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in central Baghdad) and the erasure of actual war carnage such as the destruction of Fallujah. And, most noteworthy, the public distribution of the amateur photographs of torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib prison now defines the moral corruption of the war and the subsequent occupation. Abu Ghraib has received considerable attention, exemplified in Susan Sontag's last published essay, which angrily denounced the photographs, their having been taken at all, and the Bush administration that authorized them and then treated their exposure as nothing more than a "public relations disaster."[2]

The question of war and war photography thus looms large today. To provide a brief remark on photography and haunting, I turn not to Sontag's essay on Abu Ghraib, but to her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Sontag returns to the subject of photography, earlier considered in *On Photography*, but in this book focuses on the role that photographs play in war. Decisively influenced by her wartime trips to Sarajevo, *Regarding* is more directly concerned with the political function of war photographs, or what she calls "shock" or "atrocity" photographs. She asks, Do images of war's atrocity inhibit or encourage war, or do they numb reactions altogether?[3] What are the social and political results of viewing pictures of the disasters of war?

Detail, 18, Untitled (eleven photographs), 2004. Courtesy of the artist

PERSISTENT VESTIGES: DRAWING FROM THE AMERICAN-VIETNAM WAR
+
VIETNAM: DESTINATION FOR THE NEW MILLENIUM— THE ART OF DINH Q. LÊ

NEW YORK

Two recent New York exhibitions revisited the Vietnam War and explored its resonance in our own time. The simultaneous presentation of *Persistent Vestiges: Drawing from the American-Vietnam War* [The Drawing Center; November 5, 2005—February 11, 2006] and the solo exhibition *Vietnam: Destination for the New Millenium—The Art of Dinh Q. Lê* [Asia Society; September 13, 2005—January 15, 2006] spoke to the timeliness of their shared project. Both institutions noted that 2005 marked the tenth anniversary of the normalization of relations between the U.S. and Vietnam. Yet the inescapable shadow of the ongoing war in Iraq and references to Vietnam's struggle for a viable future lent a sense of immediacy to these meditations on global violence.

Both shows examined the past, present, and future of Vietnam from multiple perspectives, although the group exhibition format of *Persistent Vestiges* lent itself more easily to this emphasis on shifting viewpoints. Mixing nationalities, genders, and generations, it featured drawings, photographs, and photomontages dating from the 1960s to the present. Works by American artists Martha Rosler and Nancy Spero were juxtaposed with drawings by Nguyen Cong Do, Nguyen Thu, Nguyen Van Da, Quang Tho, Truong Hieu and Vu Giang Huong, six artists who were sent to fight and document the war with the North Vietnamese army, and photo-based works by the young American-Vietnamese artists Binh Danh and Dinh Q. Lê.

Persistent Vestiges owed much of its eye-opening impact to its juxtaposition of iconic anti-war images by Spero and Rosler with impressionistic landscapes and vignettes of army life by draftsmen working for the North Vietnamese government. Activists, the Americans sought to shatter U.S. complacency with graphic scenes of destruction. Spero's monumental wall piece *Search and Destroy*, 2005, reprised the imagery of her *War Series*,1966-1970, as monstrous, insect-like helicopters rain destruction upon contorted human figures. In contrast, serenity permeated the work of the North Vietnamese artists who adapted Chinese, Vietnamese, and French pictorial traditions to create harmonious scenes of industrious soldiers sewing uniforms, making hand grenades, and filling mines with explosives. Handling and subject were often jarringly disjointed, as in the small gouache by "combat artist" Truong Hieu. This watery landscape featured a rhythmic pattern of brushy tree trunks and a calligraphic rendering of receding figures that belied its traumatic title: *Herbicide and Napalm Bombing*, 1971.

The younger Vietnamese-American artists investigated the possibilities and limitations of representing the past. Haunting chlorophyll prints by Binh Danh, who was born in Vietnam and raised in California, were among the most compelling pieces. Employing an innovative technique, Danh harnessed the natural process of photosynthesis to print found negatives of Vietnamese men, women, and children on large plant leaves, and encased the delicate leaves in protective resin. With their forgotten faces embedded in the textures of nature, the pictures evoked both the transience and persistence of memory. Similar themes informed works by Dinh Q. Lê at The Drawing Center and Asia Society. Selections from Lê's best-known pieces, large-scale photo-weavings created from 1998 to 2004, appeared at both venues. Working with images of Vietnam and its people culled from Hollywood films and archival sources, Lê created c-prints of photomontages which he then sliced into strips and wove together using a traditional technique learned from his grandmother. The result was a tapestry of discordant and intermingled representations of Vietnam, none of which was fully legible.

As the title *Vietnam: Destination for the New Millenium* suggests, Lê's solo exhibition of ten works at Asia Society addressed Vietnam's present and future. Lê moved back to Vietnam ten years ago. In the installation *Mot Coi Di Ve [Spending One's Life Trying to Find One's Way Home]*, 2005, he used white thread to string together a loosely spaced checkerboard of small, faded photographs and scraps of paper with handwritten snippets. Suspended from the ceiling in the middle of a gallery, this memory quilt brushed the floor, creating a semi-permeable barrier. *Damaged Gene*, 1998, and *Lotus Land*, 2000, both commented on Vietnam's high rate of birth defect—presumably due to chemical weapons used during the war—through playful, brightly colored sculptures of conjoined twins and children with several arms or legs, as well as fanciful clothing designed to accommodate such physical malformations. Three large 2004 photographs gave the exhibition its title. Combining images of tourist sites with ironic texts, this series underscored the tensions between past and future that course through the current government's campaign to reposition Vietnam as a vacation destination. One image featured an idyllic seascape, where puffy white clouds hover over a gentle wave rolling toward a pristine beach. It read: "Come back to My Lai for its beaches." These exhibitions remind us that although the war is over, its tragic legacy endures.

—Laura Auricchio

the village VOICE

After the Fall: Artists recall the immediacy and the aftershocks of war
by Leslie Camhi, December 9,2005

'Persistent Vestiges: Drawing From the American-Vietnam War'
The Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street
Through February 11, 2006

Binh Danh's *Found Portrait*, 2005
photo: Cathy Carver

Years ago, I was walking through Chinatown with a friend who had seen combat in two wars, when apropos of nothing—perhaps my noting how the elderly Chinese women shouldered their large bundles so adroitly—he hoisted an imaginary burden and explained, quite matter-of-factly, that that was how they'd taught him to carry the wounded from battle.
So the memory of war erupts, waking us with a start from the warmth of a spring day and the illusion of peace that surrounds us, like the shell-shocked soldier in *Mrs. Dalloway* who hears the rumblings of the front in a postwar morning in the middle of London.

"Persistent Vestiges: Drawing From the American-Vietnam War," now at the Drawing Center, includes work by artists dealing either with the immediacy of the conflict in Vietnam or with its harrowing aftershocks, which 30 years later still reverberate.

The show carries particular resonance in a nation at war and a New York art world largely lulled into quiescence by a combination of economic boom times and political impotence. It also suggests that the Drawing Center's forced removal from the cultural complex once planned for ground zero was perhaps a blessing. Committee members who opposed its presence there had accused this most scholarly of downtown institutions of displaying "unpatriotic" art.

What would they make of the provocative sketches, on view through December 21 at the Center's Drawing Room (across the street from the main gallery), made by North Vietnamese artists, celebrating their compatriots' communal spirit of resistance to American bombings?

Far from the front, in her New York loft, painter Nancy Spero worked hard to conjure the war's violence, developing her signature vocabulary of predatory helicopters; hydra-headed, penile explosions; and open-mouthed victims in her "War Series" drawings (1966–70). (Her eloquent new mural *Search and Destroy* covers two full walls of the main gallery.) But North Vietnamese artists like Vu Giang Huong, who traveled the Ho Chi Minh Trail, couldn't bear to depict scenes of B-52–inflicted devastation; instead of the wounded and dying, they drew lady soldiers cheerfully cleaning their rifles or workers stuffing mines with explosives. As one noted, "I can't draw when I am crying."

More broadly, the Drawing Center's juxtaposition of art created as agitprop or in the heat of conflict with more reflective, contemporary works brings home the point that only with time do we grasp the fuller significance of traumatic events, as the passions and perspectives they inspire change and ripen. Whatever intense emotions ground zero inspires today, we cannot legislate its meaning for future generations.

Martha Rosler's brilliant series of photomontages "Bringing the War Home" (1967–1972), originally created for anti-war flyers and underground newspapers, uses spreads of luxurious domestic interiors from *House Beautiful*, slyly inserting into them pictures from *Life* and other publications that show the horrors unfolding simultaneously in Southeast Asia. In an art collector's tastefully appointed living room, a Giacometti sculpture (its emaciated form itself an echo of World War II atrocities) strides past a picture window where the view is of streets strewn with tanks, rubble, and corpses.

Rosler's collages, following the lead of political surrealists such as John Heartfield and Hannah Hoch, were an activist's call to arms. Dinh Q. Le, who fled Vietnam at age nine for the United States and now lives in Ho Chi Minh City, makes photoweavings, plaiting together strips of images related to the war that marked his childhood. His most affecting works here use mug shots of inmates from Tuol Sleng prison in Cambodia, where some 17,000 "enemies of the state" (including children) were murdered under Khmer Rouge rule from 1975 to 1979. These are woven into large photographs of stone carvings from the 12th-century temple of Angkor Wat. The Khmer Rouge represented a traumatic break in Cambodian history; Le's art attempts to knit together the distant and recent past, to placate the gods of memory.

The New York Times has reported lately that the Cambodian government has leased the killing fields where these prisoners' remains are buried to a Japanese consortium, which will run them for profit as a tourist site. The prisoners' wandering spirits, a neighboring villager said, have in any case long since departed. The youngest artist here, Binh Danh, who was born in Vietnam after the war and currently lives in California, resurrects these phantoms, printing their pictures on tropical foliage in a moving and poetic testimony to the ephemeral nature of remembrance and to the land itself, the ultimate repository for the lost souls of history.

PROFILE

VIETNAM MEMORIES

By Quan M. Duong

Three decades after the end of the Vietnam War, that event is so far removed from the consciousness of those too young to have lived through it that it has attained an almost mythical status, accessible only through forgotten news clips and faded photographs. For artist Dinh Q. Lê, however, memories of Vietnam's past continue to resonate. Lê, who is well known for his photo-based montages that utilize a Vietnamese grass-weaving technique, was born in 1968 in Ha-Tien, a South Vietnamese seaport village near the Cambodian border. Lê and his family survived the Khmer Rouge's invasion of Vietnam and immigrated to Los Angeles in 1979.

Much of this personal history informs his work, which reflects on the instability of memory and the contradicting histories created by his two homelands: Lê's photo-weavings, conceptual works and installations compel the viewer to investigate and even safeguard the past histories of these two countries.

For many in the US, prevailing conceptions of Southeast Asia are strongly shaped by popular Hollywood war films such as *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*. "Hollywood and the US media are constantly trying to displace and destroy our memories about the Vietnam War to replace it with their version, I must keep fighting to keep the meanings of these memories alive,"[1] explains Lê, referring to the Vietnamese victims whose personal accounts are often overlooked by Western interpretations of the war. His works are not meant to be critical of any political ideology. Rather, they underscore the human condition above all else. His recent series "From Vietnam to Hollywood" is comprised of ten works in which digitally enhanced color film stills are intertwined with black-and-white found images taken during the war. In *The Characters* (2002), the glaring presence of Martin Sheen and Marlon Brando from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* is juxtaposed with quiet portraits of Vietnamese civilians whose faces fade in and out of the weaving. In *Russian Roulette* (2002), gut-wrenching imagery (from Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*) of an American prisoner of war being forced to play Russian roulette parallels the powerful iconic photograph of General Loan executing a Viet Cong soldier during the Tet Offensive.

What we see in his photo-weavings is not the cinematic glamour of heroism, but the horrific nature of war and human conflict. Interestingly, the more subtle black-and-white images of the real Vietnam provide a poignant counterpoint to the larger-than-life Hollywood color depictions.

The devastation of war extends beyond the battlefield, as conveyed in Lê's *Damaged Gene* project installed in a public kiosk in Ho Chi Minh City in 1998. He created and sold Siamese-twin figurines and children's clothing for conjoined twins imprinted with the names Monsanto and Dow Chemical, two of the companies

■ Dinh Q. Lê — *The Characters* (2002) C-print and linen tape, 33.25 x 68 inches.
All images courtesy PPOW Gallery.

that created Agent Orange. The wide-eyed and innocent expressions of the "disfigured" dolls lessen the austerity of the subject, yet provide a reminder of those afflicted by the defoliant. Presently, Lê is raising money to set up more kiosks whose profits will go to support medical facilities that treat children with dioxin-related diseases. Lê admits that *Damaged Gene* was the "scariest" art project he had undertaken due to its political agenda.

Constructing satellites for military purposes is a classified activity undisclosed by the Vietnamese government. Fortunately, under the country's policy of *Doi Moi*, or economic restructuring to a "socialist 'free' market," Lê is able to use artistic license to create his latest installation regarding satellites. *A Higher Plane*, Lê's work in progress, is an installation that consists of several low-orbiting satellite replicas presented in a dark room. Mirror-tiled walls and spotlights on the flying objects result in an astronomical depiction of satellites in outer space. As Vietnam joins the global economy, the need for communication satellites is constrained by lack of resources, technological infrastructure and expertise. "Still, these machines represent our highest hope and dream at this moment," explains Lê.

Lê's personal hope is that one day he will find some of the family photographs he was forced to abandon when he and his family fled Ha-Tien. Threading together 1,500 photographs he collected at second-hand shops while searching for his own, he created a "quilt" of images that is not only a surrogate family album, but also an album of Vietnam itself. The inscriptions on the backs of these images are taken from *The Tale of Kieu*, a Vietnamese epic poem about a prostitute, from Vietnamese stories from the diaspora who return home and from letters written by soldiers to their families. Called *Mot Coi Di Ve* (2000), this photo-tapestry translates as "Spending one's life trying to find one's way home." For Dinh Q. Lê, weaving personal memories into the fabric of cultural history is both a journey forward and a return home.

1. Moira Roth, "From Vietnam to Hollywood," in *Dinh Q. Lê*. Marquand Books in association with Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 2003, p. 20.

Dinh Q. Lê's work will be exhibited in two venues in New York City. Asia Society will present his photo-based works in September 2005 and The Drawing Center will show his war drawings in October 2005.

Clockwise from Top ■ Dinh Q. Lê — *Personal Memories* (2003) C-print and linen tape, 33.5 x 67.5 inches. ■ Dinh Q. Lê — *Mot Coi Di Ve* (2000) Black-and-white and color photographs, thread, linen tape, 10 x 20 feet. ■ Dinh Q. Lê — Plastic figurine from the *Damaged Gene* project (1998).

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2005

Images of Vietnamese in the Generation Since the War

By KEN JOHNSON

Over the past decade, Dinh Q. Le, whose works are on view in a small exhibition at the Asia Society, has grappled with a subject of large social and political import: the Vietnam War — or, as it is known in Vietnam, where Mr. Le was born in 1968, the American War.

Despite its rather grand title, "Vietnam: Destination for the New Millennium — The Art of Dinh Q. Le," the show is not broad enough to indicate whether Mr. Le's actual accomplishments live up to his intentions. Glimpses of several different projects reveal less of the intellectual or spiritual depth you would think the subject requires than a kind of conceptual cleverness that is characteristic of artists trained, as Mr. Le was, in American postgraduate studio-art programs. Yet in his best works, an affecting emotional urgency comes through.

Vietnam

Asia Society

Mr. Le came to the United States with his family when he was 11 and eventually received a master of fine arts degree from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. Later he began spending more time back in Vietnam, and he now makes his home in Ho Chi Minh City.

In New York, Mr. Le first became known for large photographic works made by weaving together strips from different photographs. Three recent examples on view here blend stills from the movie "Apocalypse Now," enlargements of found studio portraits of Vietnamese people, and pictures taken by photojournalists during the war. The finished works look like pixilated multiple exposures and are hard to read visually. What is distinctly intelligible is the weaving of different cultural strands as a metaphor about the mind's struggle to integrate different representations of reality.

Though smart and good-looking, these works mainly reflect Western academic ideas about the mass media. That is not to say that they don't lend themselves to a sympathetic viewer's thoughtful exegesis, but on their own, they are less than deeply revelatory. It is too predictable to juxtapose, as one does, the image of the sexy dancing girl in the cowboy costume from "Apocalypse Now" and the image of Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Vietcong prisoner in the famous photograph by Eddie Adams.

Three bitterly sarcastic photographic works in the form of tourist posters are more directly provocative. Cheerful lettering above a beautiful ocean view reads, "Come to My Lai" — the site of the infamous massacre by American soldiers — "for its beaches." The text over an image of bicyclists at a stoplight says: "Come to Vietnam. We promise we won't spit on you." These works address a subject of mind-boggling historical irony: the transformation of Vietnam from a land of war and death to a tropical tourist paradise. But the faux posters offer little insight into that development.

A more substantial effort is the "Damaged Gene" project from 1998, in which Mr. Le addressed the high rate of birth defects, including an unusually high number of Siamese twins, among Vietnamese people; it is believed to be linked to the widespread use of defoliants and other chemicals by the United States military forces.

For this project, Mr. Le produced small baby dolls with conspicuous physical deformities and sold them in a booth in a public marketplace in Vietnam. He also created infant clothing with double neck holes for two-headed children.

After learning that Siamese twins were revered as magical beings in some underdeveloped areas, Mr. Le went on to create near-life-size painted sculptures of Siamese twin children, displayed on or among lotus blossoms like traditional deities. They resemble statues you might find in an old temple garden, though each, you will notice, has the label of a major American chemical company inconspicuously affixed to it. The understated combination of benign traditionalism and contemporary horror makes these some of Mr. Le's most powerful works.

Courtesy Asia Society

"Damaged Gene" addresses Vietnam's high incidence of birth defects.

Also effective is a large floor-to-ceiling curtain made of hundreds of old snapshots and studio portraits of Vietnamese people. This piece came about when Mr. Le found such pictures being sold by the kilo in secondhand stores. He was hoping to discover photographs of his own family; then he began to think about all the unknown people in the pictures and created the large curtain by threading prints together at the corners.

On the backs of many of the prints Mr. Le wrote texts in Vietnamese, which quote from published letters, oral histories and a 19th-century poem. But if you can't read Vietnamese, you may suppose that the words reflect what is on the minds of the people who once owned the pictures. Looking at this work as a whole, you can't help thinking about the countless people who were ground up by the remorseless machinery of history.

In an interview published in the catalog with Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Society's museum and the organizer of the exhibition, Mr. Le says that he feels he is done with making art about the Vietnam War and that he is now more interested in addressing the future of his country. The biggest and most recent work in the show does this quite literally.

In a mirrored room hang two full-size representations of small satellites, each with mirrored surfaces, a revolving dish covered with mirror fragments like a disco ball, and a discreet red label that says, "Made in Vietnam." These were inspired by Vietnamese government plans to launch communications satellites in the near future. The glitzy surfaces suggest a desire not only to enter the space age but also to participate in global consumerist economies.

The satellites prompt thoughts about the future of Vietnam, but they do so as simple signs pointing toward certain topics rather than as resonant metaphors. As for Mr. Le's future, dealing with his own susceptibility to overly literal or obvious ideas will be one of his challenges as an artist.

"Vietnam: Destination for the New Millennium — The Art of Dinh Q. Le" continues at the Asia Society, 725 Park Avenue, at 70th Street, (212) 288-6400, through Jan. 15.

The New Yorker
October 3, 2005
- Vince Aletti

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
SAIGON SERENADE

Dinh Q. Lê was ten when his family fled Vietnam, in 1978. A decade ago, he moved back, and the work in his new Asia Society show, "Vietnam: Destination for the New Millennium," was produced in Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon. In between, he lived in the United States (mostly in Los Angeles, but also in Williamsburg before it was hip), where, in the early nineteen-nineties, he began

exhibiting large photographs that were woven in the densely patterned style of Vietnamese grass mats. This technique allows Lê to intercut disparate images that resolve and dissolve like phantoms. The current show includes only three of these pieces—all filtering the brutal reality of the Vietnam War through Hollywood's version of that conflict—but their virtuoso mix of montage and mosaic is dazzling. Fibreglass garden sculpture and plastic toys of children deformed by Agent Orange are insidiously charming, but, like the big postcard that invites viewers to "Come back to My Lai for its beaches," they're uncharacteristically facile. A huge, loosely stitched patchwork of abandoned family snapshots suspended from the ceiling is more soulful: Lê discovers a key to Vietnam's human history in the lost and found.

—Vince Aletti

Dinh Q. Le and Shoshana Wayne Gallery

"Lotus Land," a work by Dinh Q. Le in his solo show at the Asia Society.

HOLLAND COTTER

40 Years Later, America Is Studying War Once More

Americans, heavy sleepers that they are, are waking up to the news that 2005 is looking a lot like 1965. The art world has been snoozing along with everyone else, which is not to say the 1960's haven't been on its mind. Far-out little objects abound, the equivalents of macramé and tie-dye but with a noncountercultural art school pedigree. That flower power grew from toxic fields in Vietnam hasn't had much mention. That was 40 years ago. Ancient history. Bad dream.

But there's a faint glow of historical consciousness-raising on the horizon. That is surely the description for "Persistent Vestiges: Drawings From the American-Vietnam War," which opens at the Drawing Center in SoHo on Nov. 5. The show will focus on a pair of America's major political artists, Nancy Spero (born in 1926) and Martha Rosler (born in 1945). Both produced sustained, scathing but very different visual responses to the Vietnam War, and that work appears in depth here.

They will be joined by six North Vietnamese artists who made documentary drawings on the front lines during the war. And a younger artist with an international reputation, Dinh Q. Le, brings the show into the present. Born in South Vietnam in 1968, he came to the United States in 1978 and now lives and works in a tourist-friendly Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon).

Mr. Le will also have a solo show at the Asia Society in Manhattan, opening on Tuesday. He is best known for the pictures collectively titled "From Vietnam to Hollywood" (2000) and installations in which he considers how the war he experienced as a child continues to blight the present, specifically pointing to the birth defects that some studies suggest resulted from the wartime use of Agent Orange.

The impact of that war is graphically detailed in pictures by the veteran Magnum photographer Philip Jones Griffiths in a career survey at Denise Bibro Fine Art Gallery in Chelsea through Oct. 1. For half a century, Mr. Griffith has been placing himself squarely in harm's way for the express purpose, it would seem, of stripping military violence of any trace of sugarcoating that politicians apply to it. His photographic account of a lacerating war that simultaneously devastated Southeast Asia and deeply divided the United States amounts to one of the great tragic portraits of its time and is required viewing in ours.

Which brings us to the current war. At least a few younger artists are paying attention to it, among them the New York-based painter Steve Mumford, who made four trips to Iraq in 2003 and 2004 as an embedded artist with American troops. There he recorded what he saw in a steady stream of watercolors, which he posted on the Internet as "Baghdad Journal."

A show of Mr. Mumford's paintings makes its debut at the Meadows Museum of Fine Arts in Dallas starting Oct. 6. (A handful of them were also included in "Greater New York 2005.") Technically, I guess, they are reportage. But they might also be regarded as examples of history painting. That venerable genre was overtaken by photography more than a century ago, but, expansively redefined, it is still being practiced by some of the best artists we have. It is an art of actuality and imagination, of witness and disbelief. It's a morning art, an art for a wide-awake year.

Art Asia Pacific
no. 38 fall 2003

Weaving History: An interview with Dinh Q. Lê

By David Spalding

Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. – Walter Benjamin

Dinh Q. Lê was born in 1968 near the Cambodian border in Ha-Tien, Vietnam, during the Vietnam-American War. In 1979, as fighting erupted between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese, Lê and his family fled their homeland, eventually relocating to the Los Angeles area. This uprooting would have a profound effect on the artist. As he struggled to rectify the textbook depictions of recent Southeast Asian history with his own memories and experiences, Lê became acutely aware of the power wielded by those who decide the fate of the past. In the early 90s, while still a graduate student at New York's School of Visual Arts, Lê earned critical acclaim for his dazzling photo-weavings. Using patterns he had learned as a boy by watching his aunt weave grass mats, the artist began fusing images from Italian Renaissance paintings with photographic self-portraits. These early works evoke the complexity of cultural crossover, capturing a hybrid identity caught between two worlds. Around the same time, the artist made his first trip back to Vietnam and Cambodia, searching for the missing pieces of his history. The journey marked the beginning of a personal and artistic transformation.

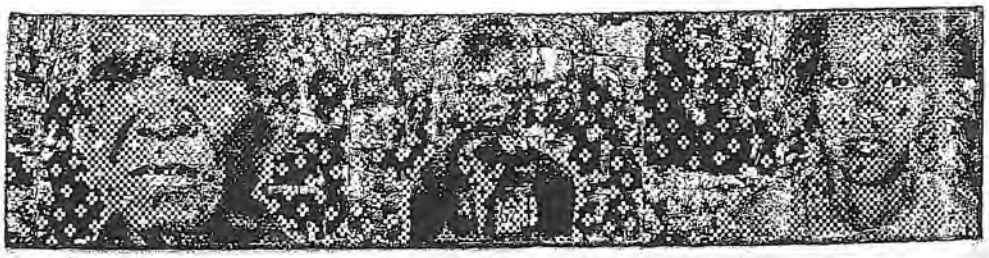
After spending several years dividing his time between the US and Vietnam, Lê now lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City. Much of his artwork, which ranges from photo-weavings, installations and embroidered images to sculpture, video and site-specific interventions, is linked by an ongoing impulse to excavate the buried pieces of Southeast Asia's past. Consistently challenging received histories, Lê exposes our blind spots and expands our collective field of vision. In doing so, he offers new ways for us to envision the future.

Last year, I met with Lê at his home, where we discussed his photo-weaving technique, his use of the haunting images of prisoners at the infamous Cambodian prison of Tuol Sleng, and his decision to return to Vietnam. Since then, Lê's work has been selected for inclusion in the 50th Venice Biennale.

David Spalding: For many of us, Vietnam's complex history has been reduced to a handful of images—part Hollywood, part photojournalism—depicting the Vietnam-American War. Your installation *Mat Coi Di Ve*, (1999), a hanging curtain made of found photographs embellished with text, challenges this narrow view. How does this project relate to your personal history?

Dinh Q. Lê: I was born in Ha-Tien, South Vietnam, and lived there until I was about 11. The Vietnam War was over by then, but in 1977 and 1978, military conflicts between Cambodia and Vietnam were taking place. At that time Vietnam was a pretty harsh communist country, too. So between the Khmer Rouge invading my hometown and living here under a communist regime, my family decided to escape to Thailand by boat. We literally escaped at night, and we weren't able to bring our family photo albums or anything else. I think we ended up in the States with five photographs of our former lives, so I grew up with this feeling that I had no history. Living in the States as a newly arrived immigrant, you start your history when you arrive.

When I first returned to Vietnam, I always went to antique shops and junk shops, looking for my family photographs. I was hoping that whatever photographs we had in the family would somehow end up in somebody's junk shop and that I might find them. Unfortunately, I never did. But along the way, I realized that, in a way, all these photographs were of my family. They were telling my family story. The people in these photographs look the way my family once did. I began wondering: what happened to the owners of these photographs? Like my family, did they escape the country and leave



Dinh Q. Lê, *Untitled #5*, 1998. C-print and linen. Courtesy of P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York.

everything behind? Did they survive the war? That's the inspiration for the work. It's not about war; it's about the daily lives that we had to abandon. The initial idea was to create a complete quilt, but I found that I wanted to leave openings, because it's not a complete story. As more images are found, I can add to it. The title is also the title of a famous song. It means "spending one's life trying to return home." The song ties in with what I was looking for: I was trying to find a way home.

DS: When Pol Pot seized control of Cambodia he set the calendars back to year zero. Perhaps there's a parallel between this and the erasure of immigrant histories, as if immigrants coming to the US find themselves at year zero—though not with the same kind of force.

DQL: But it's the same way of thinking. I remember the first time I came back to Vietnam, to Ha-Tien, which is where my family came from. My uncle took me to our family burial ground and it was such an amazing experience. Five or six generations of my family are buried there, and suddenly it was as if I was literally taking root. In the States, I just didn't feel it, and then I stood on this place and thought My god, I'm part of a tradition, I have a history and it goes back for a long time. That's a big part of why I decided to move back to Vietnam.

DS: In "Monument and Memory in the Postmodern Age," Andreas Huyssen suggests that memorials should leave some kind of openness for new stories and new associations, rather than creating a rigid, complete picture of past events – what he calls "frozen memory." Throughout your work, you've found such inventive ways to prevent history from freezing over. In the *Texture of Memory*, (2000-2001), the images of prisoners at Tuol Sleng are embroidered in white thread on white fabric. These ghostly faces will become more visible as viewers touch them, the oils from their hands darkening the thread. How did this project originate?

DQL: I read an article in the newspaper about four or five years ago about Cambodian women suffering from hysterical blindness, and it just sat in my head. It slowly came to me, this idea of Braille, and the idea of these women sitting there, rebuilding memory, stitch by stitch, as a way to reclaim a lost history. The *Texture of Memory* was named after James E. Young's book of the same title. He talks about memorials throughout Europe and America and concludes that the memorials that are interactive are the ones that become successful. That's why The Texture of Memory has an interactive component, so that people can participate and become part of it.

DS: So for you the photographic image is never exactly frozen, it's always part of a larger story, a point of departure?

DQL: I think that people are mistaken to think that the photograph is fixed. You can always mutate or change it. With just the stroke of a pen, you can put a different caption under any photograph and tell a completely different story. So I don't see an image as a frozen thing—you can do anything to it. You can shred it up and weave it, if you want to!

DS: You began weaving photographs together as an undergraduate at UC Santa Barbara. What motivated you to develop this technique?

DQL: I started making the photo-weavings because I wanted to talk about a kind of interweaving of identities. I was this Vietnamese guy that ended up in the States, and I was going to college and learning about western history, western art, and western thinking, so I was trying to locate myself in relation to all this. I was 19 or 20 years old when I began making the photo-weavings. The early work is very personal, made by a very confused person who was trying to figure out who he was in relation to America. My aunt was a grass mat weaver, and when I was young she taught me how to weave. At a certain point I figured that I could literally weave photographs together. With a double exposure everything's so seamless, but with the weaving the two images that are combined are physically forced to merge. It's not seamless, and I like that much more.

DS: You've made several different projects related to Cambodian history and the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, including *The Quality of Mercy*, *The Headless Buddha*, *The Texture of Memory*, and *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness*. After being away for so long, what prompted you to visit Cambodia? What is it about Cambodia that continues to inspire you?

DQL: In 1994 I did a workshop for Southeast Asian kids at the Bronx Museum in New York, and many of them were Cambodian American. Some of the parents also attended the workshop, and we started talking about my work and their experiences in Cambodia. One woman asked me to incorporate more images of the Buddha in my work, because Buddhism helped her to cope with what happened to her in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. I started to think back about my own experience when the Khmer Rouge invaded my hometown, and the horror that they created. I had avoided thinking about any of that for years. A couple months after that workshop, I quit my job and went back to Ha-Tien, my hometown. That really created a strong awakening of all these memories of the Khmer Rouge invasion.

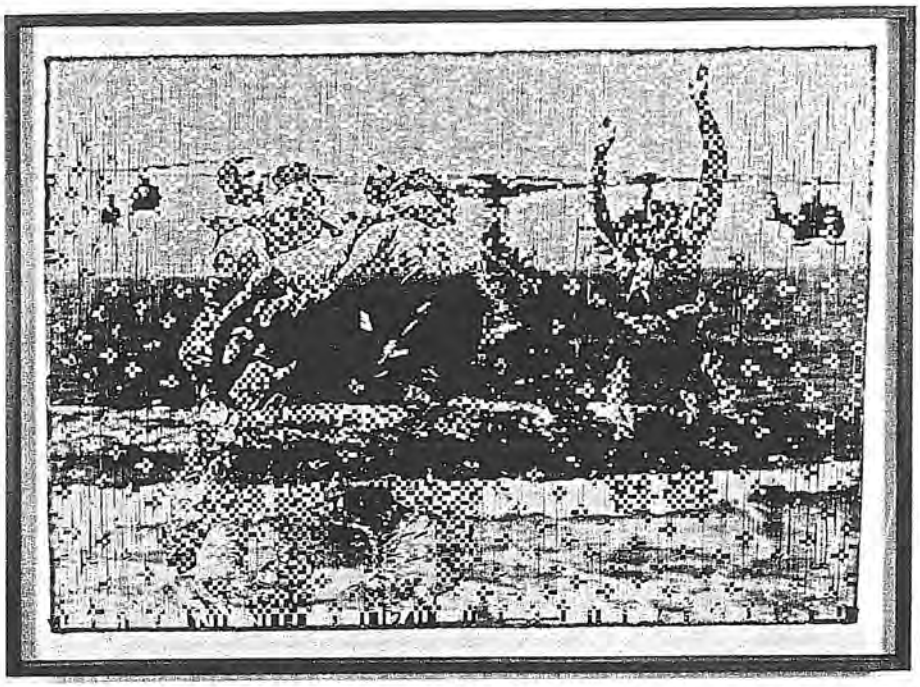
One of the big questions for me after all these memories awoke was "How could a group of people be capable of such horror?" I went there and I was shocked. You know, one day you're at this horrific place where they killed 20,000 people—they tortured them and then they killed them— and then the next day you go to Siem Reap and visit these unbelievably beautiful temples. This contradiction is a huge thing for me. I keep going back to try to understand, to try to come to terms with how a culture that's capable of such beauty can also be capable of such horror.

DS: Your series *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness*, (1998–2000), begins to break down these contradictions, drawing parallels between the Khmer Rouge and the ancient Angkor empire, literally weaving the faces of Cambodian prisoners into the reliefs of Angkor Wat.

DQL: When Pol Pot took the country over and herded people out into the countryside, I think he imagined that Angkor Wat would become this glorious empire because of

Weaving History: An interview with Dinh Q. Lê

continued



agriculture. He didn't realize that the ancient Angkor Empire conquered many other countries: Thailand, Burma, South Vietnam and Laos. The looting of these countries built Cambodia into an empire at that time. But the temples also act as monuments to victory, because every time a king would come into his own, he would build a monument to himself. That's why I thought the images of the victims from Tuol Sleng would fit well with the images of the carvings on the temples. Inserting images of the dead into those monuments subverts them in a way, turning them into memorials, reminding us that for every monument that was built in Cambodia there are victims.

DS: Since their discovery in 1979, the photos taken at Tuol Sleng prison have been reproduced, circulated and displayed as art objects. What risks are involved in working with these images?

DQL: We can talk about [the] show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York [Photographs from S-21: 1975 – 1979], for example. I think the show was poorly organized and didn't provide any context for the photographs. The images hadn't been mediated, so we're talking about prison photographs, not artworks. Prison photos had been blown up and displaced in an art context, and it was confusing. I think if they are 'contextualized' well, then those images are very powerful. Within my work, I've mediated the original image. And, in some ways, I feel like I'm keeping these people alive by using them in my work. Sometimes I worry about using them so many times, but I keep finding more stories to tell. They're such tough images to work with: if you fail a little bit, then it's a horrific thing, but if you can carry it off, then it can become something else, something amazing. •

David Spalding is a San Francisco-based critic who currently teaches contemporary art and critical theory at the California College of Arts and Crafts and Mills College.

Dinh Q. Lê, *Persistence of Memory #10*, 2000-01. Courtesy of P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York.

Oregon

Dinh Q. Lê at Elizabeth Leach Gallery

Dinh Q. Lê, *The Last Words*, 2002, C-print, linen tape, 33-1/4" x 67-1/2", at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland.

Like characters in a recurring nightmare, figures float in and out of the large photographic compositions that make up *Waking Dreams*, Dinh Q. Lê's latest exhibit at Elizabeth Leach Gallery. For several years now, Lê, a native of Vietnam whose family fled to the United States in the late '70s, has explored the legacy of loss caused by the war in Vietnam and its repercussions. His last exhibit at the gallery, *Persistence of Memory*, combined pumped-up color stills from movies like *Deerhunter*, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Platoon* with black and white media representations of the war's Vietnamese victims. These he sliced and plaited together in the traditional pattern for weaving grass mats he learned from his aunt, releasing ghosts of real people from the rubble of Hollywood hype.

While the work in the current exhibition is made with the same plaiting technique, Lê now uses digital means to compose complex grids or large montages for raw material. The results are more fluid and less concerned with obvious binary oppositions. The movie stars in their famous roles are still there, as is one of the most famous of the media shots—Eddie Adams's photo of South Vietnamese General Nguyen Ngoc Loan's point-blank street execution of Viet Cong suspect Bay Lop. Lê has added to the mix '60s-era photos of unknown sitters he came across in secondhand stores in Vietnam. He began searching these shops hoping to find family photographs left behind by relatives when they were driven from their home. Before long, Lê realized that all of the photographs he found were, in a sense, his, for they all must have belonged to people similarly forced to "abandon memories."

As photographs are triggers of memory, *Waking Dreams* can be read as an effort to keep the horrific specters of war at bay by imposing a rational order. *Immolation in Color* has, as background, a catalog of small, colorized stills from the war films. *Russian Roulette* uses sequential frames of the *Deerhunter* character, Stevie, putting a gun to his head as a base grid for the larger image of Adams's street execution—fiction and fact choreographed in completely different time signatures. *Memory in Red* is a large double-portrait that features a Vietnamese woman in black and white on the left. At a distance, her features coalesce, but, up close, they dissolve into a patchwork of smaller images—jungle foliage, battle scenes, groupings of villagers, army grunts, a Buddhist monk self-immolating, piles and piles of dead bodies. On the right, the startled eyes of a fiery red Captain Willard, the character played by Martin Sheen in *Apocalypse Now*, emerge. Gradually, the delicate pattern of the weave unites the two portraits, sprinkling the background with flower-like drops of blood.

Ultimately, of course, any rational effort to sort out memory fails, as Lê seems to suggest in the dreamlike friezes of *Hao and Catherine*, *The Last Words* and *New View*. Here figures shift scale, morph identities and, as in dreams, evaporate just before you can grasp them. *Characters* suggests that we are all actors playing a role, our memories overtaken by the representations themselves. Clear dichotomies or hierarchies of representation no longer matter, inasmuch as attempts to concoct palatable narratives that will lay the ghosts to rest rarely succeed. For, the past, as Faulkner wrote, is never dead. It is not even past.

—Pat Boas

VISUAL ARTS

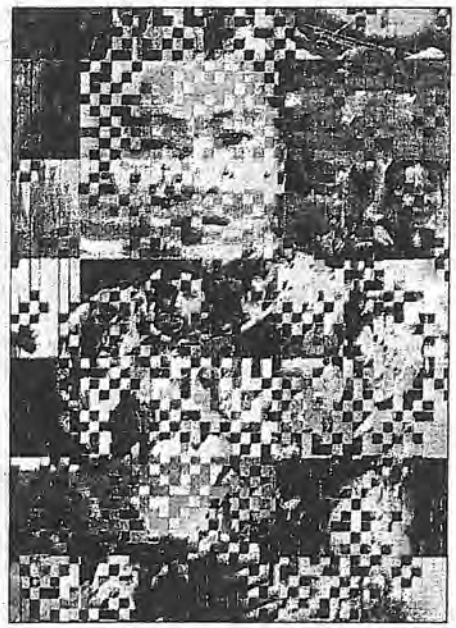
Weaving new memories

The internationally acclaimed artist rethreads old images into a new perspective on the Vietnam War

By D.K. ROW
THE OREGONIAN

In the daily images of missiles and bombs striping a darkened Baghdad sky, Dinh Q. Lê sees vivid flashes of his childhood during the Vietnam War. Although the two conflicts are as different as George W. Bush and John F. Kennedy, the bursting fireballs and crumbling palaces remind the 34-year-old artist with painful clarity what it is to be a civilian snared in international turmoil.

"I think, most of all, of the people and civilians of Iraq," Lê says. "The civilians always end up as the forgotten ones. Watching CNN, it's unbelievable. You don't see any Iraqi civilians."



"Immolation in Color" (detail) is one of Dinh Q. Lê's photo-weavings that question Hollywood's presentation of the Vietnamese using images from such provocative films as "The Deerhunter" and "Apocalypse Now."

The faces of those enmeshed in war haunt the Lê show at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery. The war storming through Iraq has heightened the potency of the show by the internationally acclaimed artist, who was just selected to appear in the 2003 Venice Biennale.

Lê's works are photographic tapestries in which he weaves ribbons of paper into visually mesmerizing artwork that intertwines illusion and traditional craft. Inspired by the traditional Vietnamese mats his aunt used to weave, Lê combines strips from different provocative photographic sources to make a labyrinthine, holographic image reminiscent of a double-exposed picture.

Instead of splicing strands of grass together into functional objects, Lê fashions haunting faces of the Vietnam that Americans never knew. His vaguely Art Deco-style geometric patterns are spliced together from three disparate sources:

◆ Blown-up stills from famous Hollywood movies such as "The Deer Hunter," "Apocalypse Now," "Platoon" and "Indochine."

◆ Newspaper and media pictures like Eddie Adams' prize-winning photograph of Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong soldier.

◆ Old portraits of Vietnamese people found in Saigon's secondhand stores by Lê.

Some works upend cinematic and media-based imagery, while others poignantly reveal those Lê calls the forgotten people of the Vietnam War.

For example, in "Memory in Red" Lê weaves multiple black-and-white pho-

Please see **LÊ,** Page G6

Lê : Artist moves back 'home'

Continued from Page G1

tographs of American soldiers in combat during the Vietnam War with two larger portraits of unknown Vietnamese civilians, their spectral, pointillist-style faces slowly expanding across the picture plane like a pool of water. In "The Characters," Lê integrates a constellation of famous movie stars — Martin Sheen and Marlon Brando from "Apocalypse Now" and Catherine Deneuve from "Indochine," for example — with black-and-white photos of Vietnamese. The countless floating, almost bobbing heads form a busy collage that is both historical truth and cinematic fiction.

Lê merges the different sources into single pictures to counter the one-dimensional cultural perspective of the Vietnamese presented by the Western media and Hollywood movies.

The multilayered images broaden the filter most Americans have had of the Vietnam War, which usually has been through the viewpoint of American soldiers who fought there. Lê — now an American citizen — wants to share his perspective as a native of the battle-scarred country. At 11, Lê, his mother and seven siblings fled to America (Lê's father died before they escaped), leaving their home village of Ho-Tien near the Cambodian border. His family eventually settled in Simi Valley, Calif., not far from where he would later attend college at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

ART/review

Works by Dinh Q. Lê

Where: Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 207 S.W. Pine St.

Hours: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays

Closes: April 26

Those years growing up in California would transform a refugee who spoke little English into a celebrated artist with art dealers on both American coasts. But the shift came with an emotional price. Lê endured tough years because of the bald, bold depictions of the war by countless movies, both good and bad, as well as images from newspapers and television news.

"The Deer Hunter," for example — which figures prominently in many of Lê's works — warped many of his schoolmates' ideas of his country and people, Lê says. In the acclaimed 1978 film directed by Michael Cimino, the Vietnamese are portrayed as sadists who force American soldiers to play Russian roulette. Other teenagers who had seen the film ridiculed and picked on Lê. Linking him to the fictitious Vietnamese portrayed in the movie, they often taunted him by mimicking a Vietnamese accent and placing a cocked finger to the temple of their heads.

"My friends and I had never heard of Russian roulette until 'The Deerhunter'!" Lê says.

The emotional anxiety and insecurity from those years propelled Lê into an obsession with cultural politics. His early works — which could have been inspired by the title of Paul Gauguin's famous painting "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" — were provocative meditations on ethnic identity. In these works, Lê spliced together pictures of himself with images of Jesus, literally weaving a place for himself in Western iconography. "Where do I fit into this (Western) history?" Lê reiterated to the Village Voice in a 1991 interview about his art.

In the decade since, Lê has broadened the focus of his work to include the Vietnamese people who — like the frequent movie interpretation — remain to most Americans little more than "shadowy people or peasants." In recent years, Lê's work has taken on a freer, grander scale, eschewing the portentousness of his previous imagery, which also incorporated Buddhist and Catholic effigies. There's a richer variety of photographic sources in the Leach show, woven intricately and humorously, with meanings that are no less evocative than before. The identity-confused young man has grown into a sensitive artist armed with a solid, deep sense of his place in the world.

MARV BONDAROWICZ/THE OREGONIAN

Dinh Q. Lê's photo weavings splice together movie and media images with photos of Vietnamese people. That's Marlon Brando's blurry visage in "The Characters" in the background.

The texture and emotional maturity of the new work corresponds to a recent decision Lê made. In 1998, after several extended visits to Vietnam, he decided to leave the Los Angeles area, where his mother still lives, to move permanently to Saigon. While he retains his U.S. citizenship, Vietnam, he says "was home. Even though it had been years since I left. I was trying to figure out where I fit in. In the end I realized I wasn't meant to stay in America forever — I was meant to go home."

Part of what drew him back peers out of his work in those enigmatic photographs of unknown Vietnamese. The faces reflect Lê's family's forced departure from his homeland decades ago. In talking about his childhood experiences, Lê often mentions that he and his family left with nothing. Haunted by what might have happened to his family's possessions, he has found himself looking in secondhand stores for their clothes, furniture and photographs. That search has mined the pictures of people he never knew — unknown people he has turned into floating ghosts in his elaborate photo-weavings. Did they, too, flee for America? Did they die or did they survive the war?

"What happened to these people," he wonders, that also parted them from their past and landed "their pictures ... in these (my) stories?"

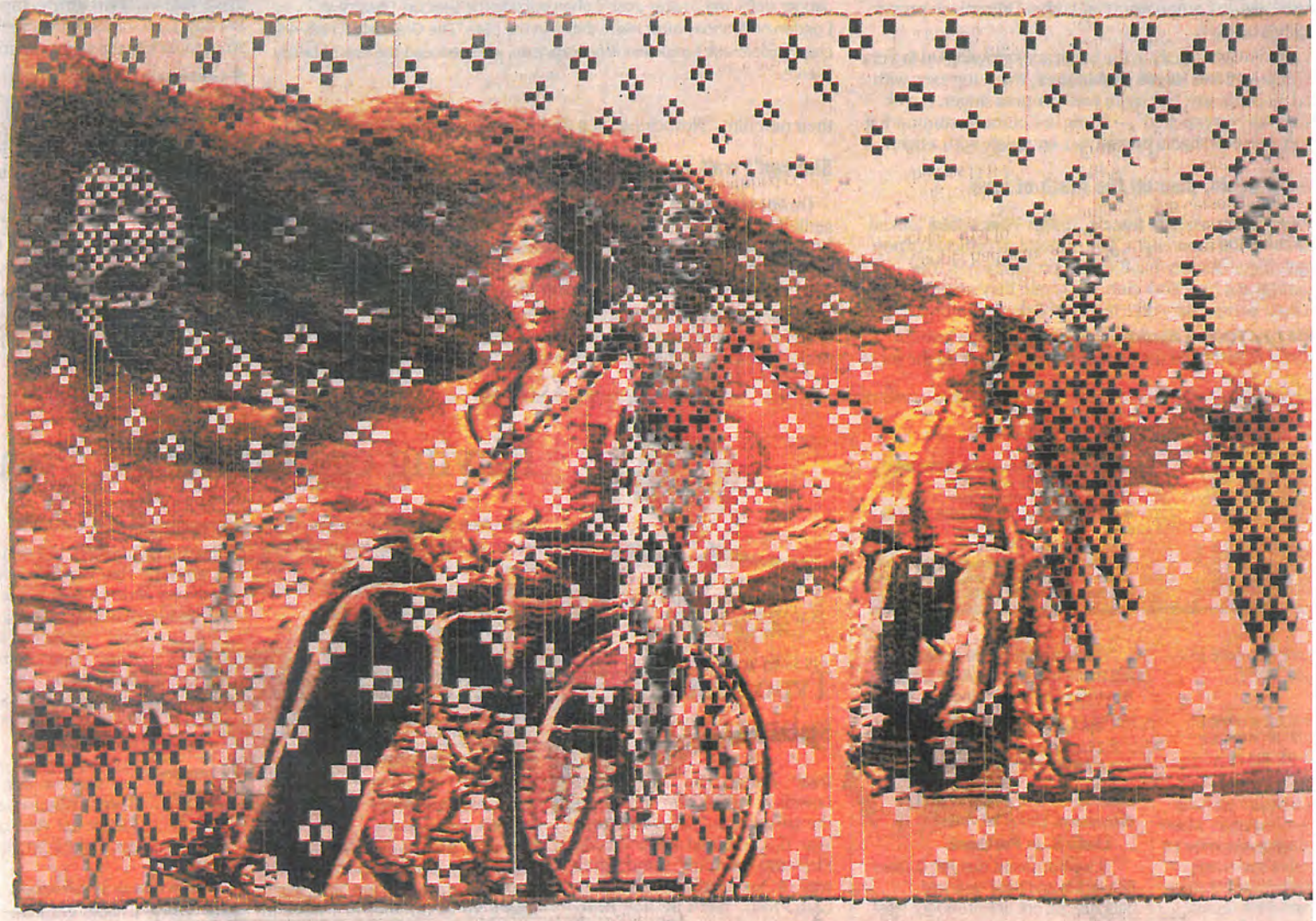
He probably will never know. But they are now plaited into the artist's artistic vocabulary of winding images and woven histories — as well as his personal biography that interlaces the America that welcomed him and his native Vietnam.

"Those photographs are my family," he says.

FIRST THURSDAY

WEAVING A HISTORY

Fact and fiction cast an ambivalent spell in Dinh Q. Le's photo-weavings



By D.K. ROW
THE OREGONIAN

For artist Dinh Q. Le, the past is everything.

He remembers growing up in a small Vietnamese village called Ho-Tien near the Cambodian border with his mother, father and seven siblings. He remembers his father dying before his family could flee their war-ravaged country for the United States 22 years ago.

And, though it seems minor, he also remembers watching his aunt delicately weave tiny mats out of strips of grass, an art form he has now mastered in his own way with equal delicacy. But instead of folding over slivers of grass into densely woven flaps, Le's version of mat weaving involves cutting up photographs of crumbling stone Buddhist temples, horrific scenes of the Vietnam War and mug shots of both dead and living Vietnamese.

The results of this elaborate "photo-weaving" process are pointillist-style collages that resemble double-exposed images more than any traditional photograph. But despite their sleight-of-hand illusions, the panoramic collages are more than clever gimmicks intended to beguile the eyes. Literally packed with history, they're also metaphors of the artist's ambivalent cultural roots from living in two very different worlds: his adopted country of America and his native Vietnam.

This struggle to "locate himself" has earned the 32-year-

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Borrowing from movies and photojournalism, Dinh Q. Le weaves a history of both fact and fiction.

PREVIEW

Works by Dinh Q. Le

Where: Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 207 S.W. Pine St.

Hours: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays

Closes: Sept. 2

AUGUST 2000

Le: Images blur fiction, fact on war

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old artist gallery representation in New York, Los Angeles and Portland, as well as numerous exhibits at other venues around the country. In a treat for Portland, Le will premiere his latest "photo-weavings" tonight at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery during the First Thursday gallery walk.

Called the "Persistence of Memory," the show is a slight departure from Le's past work and certainly his earliest, during which the artist wove together photographs of Jesus Christ with pictures of himself in a provocative — and some might say sacrilegious — critique of identity politics.

Stripping giant color stills from some of the most famous movies about the Vietnam War — "Platoon," "Born on the Fourth of July," "Apocalypse Now" and "The Deerhunter" — and weaving them with black-and-white photo reportage of the war, including Nick Ut's "Children Fleeing an American Napalm Strike," Le's new weavings are constructions of both fact and fiction, or, more precisely, of history and Hollywood.

In referencing both movies and actual photo reportage, Le has taken a step beyond showing how we filter history in an increasingly nonhistorically oriented culture. Literally blurring the line between fact and fiction, Le offers a fractured mirror of how he believes the history of the war has been fused with more resonant, cinematically based fictions.

"I'm not disputing the portrayal of the war in those films," says Le, who grew up in the Los Angeles area and attended the University of California at Santa Barbara and then the School of Visual Arts in New York for graduate school. "I'm using them to show how our memory of the war has been replaced by images produced by Hollywood to the point where they are neither fact or fiction anymore, but a hybrid of the two."

Le weaves, for example, a color still from Oliver Stone's "Born on the Fourth of July" in which paraplegics Willem Dafoe and Tom Cruise duke it out for spiritual salvation in the barren desert, with Ut's photo of hysterical Vietnamese children and impassive soldiers running from an exploding napalm bomb. The result is a picture more evocative than it is fulfilling, which may be the point.

What's left of each picture is the half-developed geometry of dotted figures that refutes the verisimilitude of photography's one-eyed perspective. In Le's large-scale woven collages, which are burned around the edges to replicate their having survived some kind of physical ordeal, history and cinema merge into an appropriately paradoxical visual puzzle for the millennial age: a fuzzy, manufactured dream of reality.

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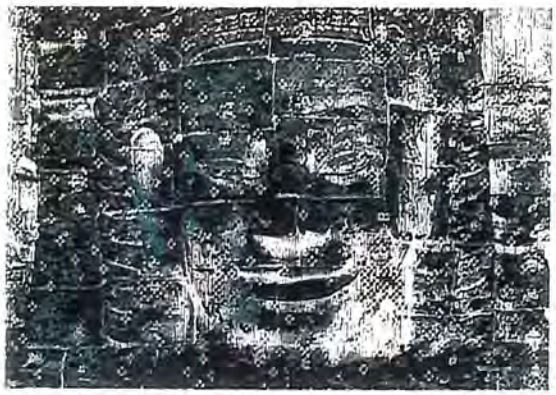

Dinh Q. Lê: *Untitled (Cambodia Series #7)*, 1998, C-print and linen tape, 41 by 59 inches; at Shoshana Wayne.

Dinh Q. Lê at Shoshana Wayne

The novelty of Dinh Lê's stunning technique of weaving photographs together would have long worn off if the images he choses to use were not so potent in themselves, their significance heightened by this method of combination. Lê, who was born in Vietnam and now divides his time between Los Angeles and Ho Chi Minh City, learned grass-mat weaving by watching his aunt. He has previously applied the technique to sliced photographs of European paintings, of Buddhist and Christian icons and of his own nude body.

In the 10 large photo-weavings in this haunting show, Lê splices images of stone carvings from the Cambodian temples of Angkor Wat with stark frontal portraits of men, women and children later killed by the Khmer Rouge. (The photographs come from an archive compiled by the perpetrators themselves.) In one work from the Cambodia series (all are untitled, 1998), more than 25 small gray faces gaze out from an emerald-tinted head of the Buddha, as if the compassionate deity had absorbed them. In another, the raw stare of a solarized figure in gold shimmers within a tangle of legs, arms, heads and tails in a stone bas relief of a battle scene. Throughout, one image relinquishes itself to another. Faces and figures coalesce, then dissolve again into pure pattern in a continuous rhythm of revelation and concealment.

Dichotomies of all sorts converge in these works, which themselves marry the camera's fleeting moment and the long, patient labor of the hand. Made continuous are images of spiritual belief and physical existence, monuments and individuals, works of stone and bodies of flesh. Erosion threatens to subsume the Angkor temple carvings, and the equally erosive nature of memory would have the Khmer Rouge's victims fade away, too, into the past, reduced to numbers in history books. Lê binds their fate in excruciatingly beautiful images that implore us to retain what passes.

Though unsettling, Lê's installation *Lotusland* (1999), presented in a separate room, lacked the metaphorical pungency of the photo-weavings. Since the wartime use of the defoliant Agent Orange, Vietnam has experienced a surge in the birthrate of conjoined twins, most of whom die prematurely and become, according to some Buddhists, holy spirits. Lê's fiberglass doll-like renditions of such twins are painted in cloying pastels and wear beatific expressions of calm as they rest upon lily pads and lotus blossoms. With a heavy hand, Lê paints chemical company names like Monsanto and Dow as insignias on their ruffled rompers, so that this nursery of spirits reads as a perverse advertisement for the cruel errors of the past.

—Leah Ollman