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Troubled Turf: The Photographs of An-My Le

*From Vietnam to the U.S.-Mexico border,
an artist blurs the boundaries between photojournalism and fiction.*

by Nancy Princenthal (April 3, 2020)



An-My Le in her Brooklyn studio with embroidery thread for a new project, left, and photographs from her “Silent General” series at right, “Fragment VII: High school students protesting gun violence, Washington Square Park, New York” (2018); “Fragment VI: General Robert E. Lee and General P.G.T. Beauregard monuments, Homeland Security Storage, New Orleans” (2017). Credit: Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

If you step back far enough, there is no outside to war. Or so suggests An-My Le, whose harrowingly quiet, wide-angled photographs highlight battle re-enactors, active military personnel and sites of conflicts, both real and simulated. They are featured in “On Contested Terrain,” a revelatory career survey at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, through July 26. (While the museum is temporarily closed because of the coronavirus, a video tour and selected images are online at cmoa.org.)

Ms. Le’s photographic terrain spans the Vietnamese countryside, shown in intimate black-and-white images of the early 1990s, and, in recent color photos, a deceptively placid rural stretch of the Rio Grande, one side indistinguishable from the other, bathers midstream visible in the distance.

“This work is really very selfish,” Ms. Le said of her recent images in a conversation at the museum before the virus crisis. “I’ve been making it to relieve anxiety about what’s been going on in the past few years — division, chaos, racial tensions, all stuff I would not have felt so deeply five years ago. What makes America America? The wilderness, the vastness, our sense of history — you can’t just erase everything with a few years of craziness. So, landscape is a comfort.”

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And never, perhaps, more welcome than now. The border photos are part of a diverse series, “Silent General,” its title borrowed — and applied very broadly — from a late essay by Walt Whitman. The reference is to Ulysses Grant, commended by Whitman as a simple man who triumphed as a Union general, served ably as peacetime president and, in retirement, traveled the world: a figure, it would seem, of universal veneration. And yet the country remains bitterly divided over the war’s legacy: Witness a photograph by Ms. Le of two bronze memorials commemorating the Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard, that were recently removed from public display in New Orleans and crammed into a makeshift shed built by the Department of Homeland Security. Ms. Le shows them hapless and hulking, touched here and there with wayward sunlight. Their abjection is stated without fuss or any hint of vindictiveness.



An-My Le’s photograph of decommissioned Civil War statues taken down recently, for her series, “The Silent General, Fragment VI: General Robert E. Lee and General P.G.T. Beauregard Monuments, Homeland Security Storage, New Orleans, Louisiana” (2017). Credit: An-My Le and Marian Goodman Gallery

In her compact, tidy Brooklyn studio, Ms. Le, thoughtful and forthright, said she was drawn to Whitman’s reminiscences because they are journalistic yet lyrical, attentive to the landscape, brimming with human sympathy that transcends political schism and, not least, autobiographical. All are impulses she shares.

Born in Saigon in 1960, the artist left for Paris after the 1968 Tet offensive with her mother — who had a scholarship at the Sorbonne — and two brothers. They returned after the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973. But their absence didn’t spare Ms. Le intimate exposure at an early age to devastating nightly bombardment, nor to intractable social conflict.

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The American crusade against Communism was of course also a civil war, and Ms. Le's Francophile family reflected its divisions. She, her Buddhist father and her brothers were evacuated by the Americans in 1975. Her Roman Catholic mother followed several anxious months later; she'd been one of the last evacuees, lifted by helicopter from the roof of the American Embassy.

All wound up in Southern California and thrived there. Ms. Le completed graduate programs in biology at Stanford and was headed for medical school when she took a single, fateful course in photography. By 1986 she'd been hired, in Paris, as staff photographer for a guild dating to the Middle Ages that was once responsible for building churches and chateaus, and now tends to their restoration and documentation. Ms. Le embarked with them on a four-year tour of France — not for the last time, she was the only woman in the group — teaching herself to use a view camera and learning “about things that are well made.”



An-My Le wanted a different way of making images and so has taken up hand embroidery, reproducing stills from an old porn film set in wartime Vietnam. Credit: Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Several of the brooding black and white photographs are in the Carnegie show, organized by Dan Leers. (It will travel to the Milwaukee Museum of Art in the fall, and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in spring 2021.) Back in the States, she enrolled in the graduate art program at Yale, where fellow students included John Pilson, who became her husband; they now have two teenage children. Ms. Le didn't expect to see Vietnam again, but when relations with the United States resumed in 1994 she returned, eager to resolve differences between childhood recollections, popular culture she'd absorbed since (especially Hollywood movies), and living reality. In rural areas and cities alike, she sought the complexity she'd missed “by having a truncated perspective of the country when I was young.”

“I'm interested in topics that are larger than myself,” she added. “In things we can't control.” That doesn't mean she favors visual chaos. Tonally delicate, emotionally reticent but sharply detailed, her Vietnam photos, Mr. Leers said, show how “landscape brings history into the present.”

The old-fashioned, hood-and-bellows cameras Ms. Le uses give her a certain authority, while assuring subjects that she is an artist — not, more threateningly, a journalist. Her fellow photographer Mitch Epstein explains that such cumbersome cameras “lead to a way of working that is more introspective. It slows you down.” But, Mr. Epstein also observes, “There's a kind of adrenaline that kicks in with the kind of work that she's doing. It becomes performative.”

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An-My Le's "Small Wars: Stars and Stripes" (1999-2002), a series that injected her into the world of Vietnam War re-enactors in Virginia and North Carolina. The men accepted her in her role as enemy combatant. Credit: An-My Le and Marian Goodman Gallery

That was especially true with Ms. Le's next series, "Small Wars" (1999-2002), which features Vietnam War re-enactors in Virginia and North Carolina. Access depended on her participation, and so, for weekends over three summers, she signed on as an enemy combatant. Terrified at first, she found that the men embraced her for the authenticity she contributed, allowing her to explore a world of "male fantasy, full of psychosexual tensions — tough, creepy, weird."

Few of the participants had been in the military, and fewer in combat, and while violent words were sometimes directed at her in the heat of the action, the photos show quieter moments: men deep in the simmering woods, mopping a forehead, setting off blasts, and each trying — as was Ms. Le herself, she concedes — to "make sense of personal baggage." In doing so, she says, they replicated real-life economic differences: "The kids who had more money would play Americans because the American gear was more expensive."

Fudging lines between performing, directing and documenting, as well as between civilian and military, places Ms. Le in the company of such artists as Jeremy Deller, who in 2001 restaged a 1980s Yorkshire miners' strike, and Dread Scott, who last year directed a re-enactment of a historical slave rebellion in Louisiana. Omer Fast, Jeff Wall and Harun Farocki are also media artists who have considered the same blurry boundaries.



An-My Le's "29 Palms: Infantry Platoon, Machine Gunners" (2003-4). Credit: An-My Le and Marian Goodman Gallery

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With “29 Palms” (2003), named for a Marine training site in the California desert, Ms. Le deepened her exploration of these gray areas. The site was being used to simulate conditions in Afghanistan when Ms. Le arrived. She had hoped to embed with troops leaving for Iraq, but she was too late — a blessing in disguise.

“I’m not so masochistic as to look for actual violence,” she explained. “It’s important to have the mental and physical space to feel safe, and to be able to look at conflicts obliquely.” But again, she experienced a level of fear not apparent in the photos. Of three that show innocent-looking trails of smoke, she pointed out, “that’s live fire. Where I’m standing, the land is trembling.”

Yet the terror, she recalled, was not unconnected to a sense of the sublime. Beauty abounds: plastic fencing and barbed wire trace delicate patterns of light and shade; nighttime detonations read as spectral fireworks.



An-My Le’s “Events Ashore: Seaman on Bridge Rotation, USS Tortuga, South China Sea,” (2010).
Credit: An-My Le and Marian Goodman Gallery

Her next series, and her first in color, took Ms. Le around the world — echoes of the aging Grant — on naval vessels ranging from aircraft carriers to nuclear-powered subs. These images, of peacetime activities, owe as much to canonical painters as to the war photographers — Mathew Brady, Robert Capa, Tyler Hicks — who influenced her previous work. One crisp, wistful photo shows sailors at attention topside, an Indonesian harbor beyond washed in milky light and dotted with dozens of ships. It is, she says, with a deprecating laugh, her Canaletto.

With the “Silent General” series, Ms. Le returned to the conflicted terrain of her adopted homeland, newly determined to defy expectations, “at a time when I felt secure enough as an American,” she explained, as with an image of several white-cowboy-hatted men idling on horseback, a setting sun in the distance.

Ms. Le confirms an inevitable association to old Marlboro Man ads, but the subjects are Mexican. Such challenges are welcomed by the Carnegie director Eric Crosby. “Museums have to embrace politics because people bring their politics across the threshold,” he said.

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An-My Le's "The Silent General, Fragment II: Cattle Drive at Perdiz Creek Ranch (Reservoir), Marfa, Texas" (2019). Credit: An-My Le and Marian Goodman Gallery



"Silent General, Fragment II: High School Students, Fourth of July Celebration, New Orleans, Louisiana" (2017). Credit: An-My Le and Marian Goodman Gallery

And they are buffered by the poise of Ms. Le's compositions, which pay homage, in a photo of migrant farmworkers, to Jean-Francois Millet's sanctified "The Gleaners," and, in another, an amiably picnicking interracial group of Louisiana teenagers, to both Manet and Kerry James Marshall. Precise enough so that you can see the field workers' shoelaces and the asparagus stalks they're cutting, these photographs also give us the space to reflect on their historical reach.

With her attention to manual labor, Ms. Le comes full circle, to her work as guild photographer. In fact she has lately taken up handicraft herself, with hand-embroidered images reproducing stills from an old porn film set in wartime Vietnam. Much of the stitching is done in Vietnam; the most sexually explicit parts are embroidered in Brooklyn, partly by assistants, although Ms. Le does more now that she is shut in by virus restrictions. Elegant yet provocative, this work, for Ms. Le, is something of a retort to people who accuse her of fetishizing conflict, or of being too cozy with the military.

Without visible rancor, she points out that her history has long been other people's entertainment. If anyone has the license to embrace political contradiction, it is she. That she does so with such unflinching grace is a wonder.