

Forbes

By Documenting Vietnam War Reenactments, This Vietnamese-American Photographer Is Fighting For World Peace

by Jonathon Keats (July 14, 2020)



An-My Lê, *Rescue*, 1999-2002, From the series *Small Wars*. Gelatin silver print, 26 1/2 in. x 38 in. (67.31 x 96.52 cm). Image courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery ©2020 An-My Lê.

Growing up during the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese-American photographer An-My Lê saw her homeland assaulted and divided. Her point of view was complicated: For much of the war, she and her family took refuge in France, a nation that had previously colonized Vietnam. Returning after the Paris Peace Accords of 1973, she lived in Saigon for two years before North Vietnamese forces compelled her family to evacuate and emigrate to the United States.

Through all of this movement, both physical and psychic, conventional wartime categories of enemy and ally were forever scrambled. Lê's photography over the past three decades – which is the subject of a major retrospective at the Carnegie Museum of Art – is more than just a testament to these experiences. Through her nuanced documentation of amateur Vietnam War reenactments, US Marine Corps field exercises, and Hollywood dramatizations of historic battles, Lê deliberately suspends judgment, and suggests that the fog of war is a condition that necessarily persists long after the smoke has cleared.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

The origins of Lê's radical empathy can be traced not only to her complex coming-of-age on three continents, but also to one of her earliest bodies of work. In the summer of 1999, Lê met a group of men who reenacted Vietnamese battles on a hundred-acre private estate in the American South. They took their hobby seriously, researching details about uniforms and munitions. Lê was permitted to photograph their reenactments on the condition that she participate.

As the only person of Vietnamese origin, Lê was cast on both sides of their battles, sometimes playing the part of the Viet Cong, other times acting as a US soldier. The more immersed she became, the more she internalized these roles. If reenactments are typically performed to analyze the historical circumstances of armies in combat, Lê used them to better understand herself and her Vietnamese-American identity. For her, the war was personal. Reenactment was a reckoning with opposing allegiances, and in a sense therapeutic. In their apparent neutrality, the photographs that emerged in the series called *Small Wars* encourage viewers to see conflict as a condition in which people who are all fundamentally human are temporarily cast into violent opposition.

The work that followed explores this conviction beyond the borders of Vietnam. One especially notable series, *29 Palms* was shot during the US Invasion of Iraq in 2003. Lê was granted access to the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in San Bernardino County, where she documented training exercises that had American troops fight on both sides. Intended to prepare young women and men to dominate a foreign people in a far-away land, the exercises revealed their immaturity and confusion. Lê's images question the myth of American glory while also encouraging the viewer to see these fighters as people with human vulnerabilities.



An-My Lê. American, b. 1960. Night Operations VII, 2003-2004. From the series *29 Palms* gelatin silver print
26 1/2 in. x 38 in. (67.31 x 96.52 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. ©2020 An-My Lê.

According to Lê, the question posed by *29 Palms* "is not only are we militarily ready, but also are we politically, morally, and philosophically prepared?" Her exposure of incompetence on every level is intended to serve as "an impassioned plea for a much-needed consideration of the consequences of war."

M A R I A N G O O D M A N G A L L E R Y

Lê's photographs don't directly consider these consequences, but rather focus on causes. She takes a serious risk, which might have consequences she doesn't intend, by presenting fighters as pawns controlled by historical forces outside the frame of her pictures. Her desire to encourage empathy by presenting the innocence of her subjects is honorable but overly simplistic, ignoring their role as historical actors. The erasure of personal responsibility has been used in the past to excuse violence and bigotry, and could easily be used this way in the future.

However Lê's work also needs to be appreciated in a broader context. If conflict is powered by demonization of the other, then the humanizing effect of radical empathy can undermine the very basis for war. The success of Lê's anti-war gambit depends on psychological generosity toward others outweighing moral self-indulgence. At the very least, her photographs ask whether we can expand our view of humanity as she did in *Small Wars*. If so, then war games may just be the therapy we all need to advance into a fog of peace.