



artasiapacific

Complicated Truths: Interview with An-My Lê

by Cleo Roberts (February 24, 2020)



Portrait of AN-MY LÊ. Courtesy of John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

An-My Lê's intrepid sensibility is felt in her work. The Saigon-born photographer was raised in the United States following the break of the Vietnam war. She worked for the artisan organization Compagnons du Devoir in France in the mid-1980s, which influenced her to develop an overlapping interest in histories, geopolitical agendas, and the entanglement of national identity. She adopts seemingly photojournalist conventions by working with a long-view camera, yet, beyond her methodology there is little to link her practice with news reportage. Her intentions to extend the common purview and offer the possibility of counter-narratives are often achieved with capturing the other side of the zeitgeist. Stylized and dramatic images of the likes of army training camps and immigrant workers picking fruits are presented with cinematographic qualities. With this aesthetic citation, Lê probes the realities and myth complexities of photo making. Cleo Roberts met with the artist on the occasion of her first solo show at Marian Goodman Gallery in London, "Silent General," to discuss her methods, her thoughts on photojournalism, and the inspiration behind her works.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

The series Silent General (2015–) is a convergence of genres; the images of habitual life in the Southern US with allusions to the past taken during your extended road trip seem to straddle photojournalism, history, and war reportage, while portraying a veneer of gloss and beauty. Could you talk about the role of fact and fiction in your work?

We should start with the paradoxical ideas about photography and truth, journalism, and the issue that a photograph is an evidence of something. In film for example, if you talk about documentary films, or feature films, or fictional films, there is never any issue with which is which, but somehow for photography when people see a photograph, they think it is showing the truth. But we know that all photographs are fictional. This creates a kind of dichotomy, but I think artists such as myself like to take advantage of this misunderstanding. I do straddle that, but my pictures are not photojournalism. They do not attest to anything except perhaps of my interest in the world, and what I bring in terms of my baggage and personal biography to it.



AN-MY LÊ, *Fragment VIII: US Customs and Border Protection Officer, Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, Presidio, Texas* from *Silent General* series, 2019, pigment print, 143.5 × 101.6 cm. Copyright the artist.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris / London.



AN-MY LÊ, *Fragment IV: Family under the Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, Texas/Mexico Border*
from *Silent General* series, 2019, pigment print, 143.5 × 101.6 cm. Copyright the artist.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris / London.

This idea of the truth, in the current climate of fake news, is ever more contested. How does this contemporary reckoning of honest journalism and its role feed into your work?

On one hand, I'm interested in describing the real world, and creating moments with enough texture so that you might understand, for example, what it is like to be in *29 Palms* (2003–04) [a series chronicling US Marine Corps training camps in the Californian deserts], and be in the desert or be with the soldiers. However, I'm more interested in the mystery of what remains beyond what is being described in the photographs. The space between how the pictures are hung in the exhibition interests me in terms of what happens beyond the frames, or what is suggested as you go from photograph to photograph—and how you experience that gap is important. I hope there is a tension between the objectivity and subjectivity of the images. I don't think that in journalism you necessarily want that, as you would want something factual and straight forward.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



AN-MY LÊ, *Marine Palms*, 2003–04, silver gelatin print, 96.5 × 67.3 cm. Copyright the artist.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris / London.



AN-MY LÊ, *Infantry Officers' Brief*, 2003–04, silver gelatin print, 95.3 × 66 cm. Copyright the artist.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris / London.

NEW YORK PARIS LONDON

WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

When you talk about a gap, very purposely downstairs in the gallery, the Silent General series is organized into six fragments each comprised of a selection of photographs loosely from the same US states chronicling lifestyles and communities. This division suggests a gulf and also a whole—a sum to be divided—what is the logic behind this fragmentation?

The series happened very slowly, for me it's always serendipitous; due dates, requirements, and then finding new inspirations. The deadline for presenting a complete work at the 2017 Whitney Biennial was an impetus. I took inspiration from Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days* (1882); I read it and was blown away by the structure. It is probably the most autobiographical thing he has written; it is prose, but as he was a journalist, also very specific and almost visual or photographic, and at the same time very lyrical. He goes back in time, talking about the civil war, about when he had a stroke, and about growing up in Brooklyn and working for the newspaper *Brooklyn Eagle*. He talks about how important the American landscape is in relation to American democracy. There are many important themes—he never quite concludes to anything, but opens up discussions and questions with free-flowing thoughts. I love this idea, and took one of the titles "Silent General," a fragment of Whitman's, which gave me the conviction to try to structure my work in that sense.

I decided not to title the fragments because I thought more titling would perhaps lead the viewer to interpret them in a particular way. This was a strategy to allow me to bring together images, which jump back and forth, with some going back in time and some more current like the image of migrant workers harvesting asparagus in California.

Within this matrix of references, violence is prevalent in your works. For example, you began the Silent General following the 2015 Charleston mass shootings, and you also spent time recording re-enactments of the Vietnam war for Small Wars (1999–2002). How do you organize your research interests?

My projects are broad, with the freedom to explore anything. With *Silent General*, I realized that there is a war on the home-front. In the US we were talking about the return of nationalism, anti-Semitism, immigration, taking the constitution loosely, and of course the anti-abortion discussions. The dramatic events that occurred in the US since 2015 prompted me to respond. At the same time, I can't react to everything, so it is a mixture of trying to be there, and also finding a circuitous way to approach it and hopefully offer a different perspective. *Fragment VII: High School Students Protesting Gun Violence, Washington Square Park, New York* (2018), however, is very direct. I was there and my daughter was with the kids protesting. Whereas I was not present when the monuments of secessionists Robert E. Lee and PGT Beauregard were removed [following the Charleston shooting], but I found them in a shed at the Homeland Security Storage and recorded them for *Fragment VI: General Robert E. Lee and P.G.T Beauregard Monuments, Homelands Security Storage, New Orleans, Louisiana* (2017).



AN-MY LÊ, *Fragment VII: High School Students Protesting Gun Violence, Washington Square Park, New York* from *Silent General* series, 2018, pigment print, 143.5 × 101.6 cm. Copyright the artist.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris / London.

Within the field of conflict journalism there are debates about positionality and privilege. Do you consider your position as one of being complicit in the actions you are capturing, or are you a naïve bystander?

I have never been an embedded journalist; I don't think I'm complicit. My work has not been used as propaganda, but I do have a relationship with the subjects. I'm interested in them, have affection for some of them, and want to find out about them for myself. I don't think it is any different from Nan Goldin photographing her friends. The military evokes radical ideas—you have to be either for or against something, but I experienced something conflicting seeing the devastation of how Vietnam was torn into a mess and at the same time being saved. My father would have gone to the education camps for at least 12 years had we stayed in Vietnam. For me, this was a way for me to try and understand it. It was more interesting to walk the fine line and see what *29 Palms* was like, and what the training was right before they go into war. No one was talking about the consequences of war. I'm still trying to recover from what happened in Vietnam, and here we are starting another war.

You talk about seeking understanding, and there is a distinct sense of humanity in your images. In the process of your explorations, do you build empathy?

Yes, I think it is a great quality. Ultimately, I think that even when the institution fails there are still great individuals who can step up to save the day. I am more interested in bridging the issues than to actually tell you how to feel. I want to consider other possibilities, and so the work almost feels open; I don't take a stand.

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

You have a large solo survey exhibition “An-My Lê: On Contested Terrain” opening at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Museum of Art in March, are there other projects planned?

The US elections are in November so I will continue to work until then. I would like to see how the press covers American politics, whether it’s president Donald Trump’s impeachment, or whether it’s the way government is run, and then of course, the campaigning for the presidency.

An-My Lê’s “Silent General” is on view at Marian Goodman, London, until February 29, 2020.