

daylight

An-My Lê: The Landscape of Conflict

by Jon Feinstein (October 1, 2017)



Night Operations III, 2003-2004.
From the series 29 Palms © An-My Lê

Visualizing conflict can present a unique challenge to photographers. Historically, imagery associated with war has drawn complex associations, from Robert Capa's charged *Death of a Loyalist* to Nick Ott's *Napalm Girl* photograph, with critics like Susan Sontag signaling images' potential to manipulate how we process atrocity. But horrors can often occur under sunny skies, within beautiful landscapes, complicating their charge and how we understand them within the context of history. Since the early 1990s, photographer An-My Lê, who came to the United States in the early 1970s as a Vietnamese refugee, has been photographing war torn landscapes with a sensitivity to their innate beauty. Using a large format camera, Lê plays with the complexity of truth and narrative, making photographs that question how we process and understand current and past wars as they are mediated and taught. She applies this approach to a range of subjects, from near-documentary photographs of Vietnam War reenactments in the American South, to American Marines training to fight in Iraq, and, more recently, Mexican fisherman in Louisiana. I spoke with Lê to learn more about her origins as a photographer, her current practice and sense of seeing.

Jon Feinstein: How did you first get into photography?

An-My Lê: I discovered the medium by chance.

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I was finishing a Master's degree in Biology and applying to medical school. I had a non science credit to fulfill and had my eye on a drawing class but it was filled up so I signed up for a photography class. I immediately felt engaged and passionate in a way I had not been before. It was a different time then, before the cell phone. I certainly didn't own a camera until then so it was a radical discovery for me.

Feinstein: What was the first image that you made that you consider a "serious photograph?"

Lê: I think anyone can make one, two great photographs. It is the endeavor, the sustained effort and exploration of an idea or a subject that is more significant. I worked as a staff photographer for a guild of craftsmen in France for a number of years before graduate school. I mostly documented their architectural restoration sites and recorded techniques. I became interested in the craftsmen themselves and began photographing their workshops in France and Italy on my own. I consider that foray my first serious work.



Untitled (Early work) Italy, 1991 © An-My Lê

Feinstein: At what point did you decide, or feel confidently, that a photographic practice was something you could dedicate your life to?

Lê: For me it was a pretty dramatic "career" decision but it is not unlike what many children of immigrants experience. I had to decide very quickly. I was admitted to medical school the year I took that first photography course and could defer admission for a year only. I had some encouragement from my photography professor then and just went for broke and abandoned all plans for a career in medical science. I would say that my level of knowledge and experience of the medium was minimal. I was very naive but I always thought that doing something you really love matters so much. I felt it was my chance and I couldn't let it pass. My family and I came to this country as political refugees at the end of the Vietnam war. My parents were educators and began their life here with almost nothing. They see a path in the arts as a privilege and an indulgence that none of us could afford. I also come from a family of high achievers so "failing" (however you define that) has never been an option.



Untitled, Mekong Delta, 1995.
From the series Vietnam © An-My Lê

Feinstein: What motivated you to pursue an MFA?

Lê: I returned to NY in the late 80s after working for the Guild in France. As much as I loved that job, it was clear to me I didn't want to work as a commercial photographer. I wanted to continue developing my own projects and felt that I needed serious critical feedback. I also felt very isolated and wanted to be part of a community. The MFA provided all that.



Untitled, Mekong Delta, 1994.
From the series Vietnam © An-My Lê

Feinstein: For much of your career you worked exclusively in black and white. What prompted your move to color a few years back?

Lê: I love the way things are drawn in black and white but it was evident to me *Events Ashore* needed to be in color. It was at first a technical issue. I found the BW palette restrictive. I was frustrated not being able to distinguish colder from warmer grey. BW is about a removal of the information provided by color, which is interesting in itself. Only the essential is retained and this forces the imagination to go in

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overdrive to compensate. As I was exploring this huge global enterprise that is the US Navy, I wanted to describe my experience in details and overwhelm the viewer with information. Bringing color back was crucial. *29 Palms* is more allegorical even though I don't equate BW with the past. It is about history repeating itself. With *Events Ashore* I wanted to underscore the urgency of everything happening now in real time.



Thai and US Marines and Sailors, Gulf of Thailand, 2010.
From the series *Events Ashore* © An-My Lê

Feinstein: Does color change how you address the tension between the war impacted landscape and its popular representation?

Lê: Most art photographers understand and often benefit from or engage with the fact that their medium plays a role in journalism, as evidence, propaganda...this is something we know. But the ambitions of the grey areas of subjectivity and experimentations one finds in photography is what I relate too. Color brings my work dangerously close to photojournalism. I rely on the tension between the objective and subjective within a picture to complicate a photograph. I also depend on a carefully crafted sequence of images in a sort of "essay" form to explore a complicated subject.



Marine Corps Martial Arts Program, Bundase Training Camp, Ghana, 2010.
From the series *Events Ashore* © An-My Lê

Feinstein: I don't recall the exact quote, but the general idea is something that's stuck with me since. You gave a talk at Bard when I was there, around 2002 I believe, in which you talked about how the landscape, despite political trauma and war could still look beautiful, and that that idea played out in how you photographed the land. Can you elaborate on that idea?

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Lê: Michael Herr, who was a journalist in Vietnam during the war and wrote Dispatches as well as the script for Full Metal Jacket has said that war can be beautiful. I am interested in the landscape of war, the phenomenology of war. Within that context, I have introduced beauty only to create tension and to complicate.



Mortar Impact, 2003-2004.
From the series 29 Palms © An-My Lê

Feinstein: Your first series, when you returned to Vietnam, felt like it was grounded in some notion or lineage of documentary practice, whereas your work after that more clearly plays with subjectivity and the slipperiness of photographic truth. Would you agree?

Lê: In a way yes but I do think that those photographs of Vietnam are about giving shape to a certain notion of Vietnam that is my own. They are grounded in contemporary Vietnam of the late 90s but they are so much about a sort of edification of the idea of home, heritage for someone who had until then lived in exile for two decades.



Untitled, Sapa, 1995.
From the series Vietnam © An-My Lê

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Feinstein: My understanding of your work is that it's always been about grappling with truth and mythology. You have photographed reenactments and battle trainings - both staged scenarios - and your depiction of them adds an additional layer to that crafting of narrative. In our current climate of "alternative facts" and "fake news," do you see your work taking on a new reading?

Lê: Art is always made against the backdrop of politics. Artists think historically. They think about the history of art, the history of their medium, they think about their personal history. Politicians should do more of that. At the current moment it seems that the aesthetics and artistry within how each political party or ideology is presented is vigorously critiqued.

Let's go back to what I said earlier about artist as photographers mine the potential for subjectivity. I have made a virtue out of subjectivity. But you have to ask the question of how comfortable one really is with subjectivity? What really interests me in the current climate are the artifice, the nuts and bolts of propaganda, the crafting a message. We are at a moment of high aesthetic and have to contend with political conversations that are more like what goes on during an art critique. Is this great art? Do you like it? There is no such thing as facts. It is about subjectivity.



Rescue, 1999-2002.
From the series Small Wars © An-My Lê



Portrait Studio, USS Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf, 2009.
From the series Events Ashore © An-My Lê

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Feinstein: So much of your work has also been about access. I can't remember whether it was you or John Pilson who once joked about teaching an entire class where every assignment was just about "getting access" to something difficult to photograph. Can you tell me a bit about how this has played out throughout your career and in your various projects?

Lê: The labyrinthine pursuit of gaining access makes for great dinner party conversations but the access has always been a means to an end. I am also aware that seeing or experiencing something that is closely guarded does not unequivocally guarantee a resulting great photograph.

Of course one can make around the effort itself, the success or failure and what it symbolizes. I think John was referring to the teaching moment that is about expectations. I am always torn as I engage in one of those processes. As you get pushed back, you always ask yourself, how much do I really want to experience this? Does this have the potential to move my work forward? It's difficult not to develop expectations as you double your efforts but I think that's exactly what you need to do. For *Events Ashore* I did some historical research on Egypt and the Sinai and was obsessed with this surreal view of what seems like ships sailing behind sand dunes. They are actually crossing the Suez Canal is very narrow so from a certain perspective the water is not visible. I wanted a similar photograph with a US nuclear aircraft carrier. It was one of the more difficult event to coordinate. Once at the Canal, I was not given the freedom to move around shore to get the vantage point behind the sand dunes. It took me some time to get over my sense of failure and closely look at other great opportunities that really defied my expectations. I still find it difficult to mix the drive to gain access, the intensity of detailed plotting and planning an excursion with a chill attitude and a belief in chance and intuition; a certitude that opportunities will arise no matter what.



Suez Canal Transit, USS Dwight Eisenhower, Egypt, 2009" From the series "Events Ashore" © An-My Lê

Feinstein: Does your childhood experience as a refugee continue to influence your more recent work?

Lê: I feel that the early part of my life was dictated by American foreign policy. This idea of human lives being caught in a much larger web of uncontrollable events was impressed upon me so the notion of scale have always been important to me. My interest in human endeavor or culture within the larger context, within the landscape has been a continuing foundation for my work.

Feinstein: Could you see yourself making another series in Vietnam?

Lê: For *Prospect II*, the New Orleans contemporary art event that was created after Katrina, I wanted to connect the deltas of the Mississippi and Mekong because of the resettlement of many Vietnamese fishermen in the New Orleans area since the end of the war. I had started traveling to Vietnam to photograph these punctual training exercises the US and Vietnamese Navies were holding for the first time since 1975 so it was a natural extension to explore the delta of the Mekong. I am still working on this.

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November 10, Workers, Venice, Louisiana, 2016.
From the series "Silent General" © An-My Lê



Film Set ("Free State of Jones"), Battle of Corinth, Bush, Louisiana, 2015,
courtesy STX Entertainment. From the series "Silent General" © An-My Lê

Feinstein: You've been making work in Louisiana over the past few years – some of which was included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. Two images that stood out for me were one of shrouded Mexican workers working on land by the water, and another image of what appears to be a film set. Can you tell me a bit more about these images and your most recent work?

Lê: I had just finished *Events Ashore* and considering new ideas to transition into. I received an invitation from the film director Gary Ross to photograph the battle scenes on the set of his film "Free State of Jones". It is a big budget Hollywood production set during the Civil War and shot in Louisiana. I photograph the trench battles in 2015. Not too long after that I received a small commission to do something in the South. I chose to return to Louisiana. I became interested in the contested Confederate monuments in New Orleans and the controversy that led to their removal this year. The incursion into history through the film set and confederate monuments dovetailed with the presidential race. I was incensed by the inflammatory language, the slogans and simplification of ideas during the campaign. It seemed natural to use a third element, the unfolding of everyday life to connect everything together. An invitation to show new work at the Whitney Biennial gave me a deadline and made me consider the space I was allotted. What do I want to say in 5-7 photographs. I was inspired by Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days* and found the collection of fragments, a sort of prose poem, to work for me. This first fragment, "The Silent General", describes a web of linked projects, presences and individuals found within the Louisiana landscape. Each, in their own way, speak to experiences of a shared past in an unfolding present tense.



November 9, Graffiti, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2016.
From the series Silent General © An-My Lê

Feinstein: As I've been teaching a bit recently, the notion of an artist's trajectory has come up often, as well as the idea that the work of 'successful' artists has a sense of interconnectedness. Do you think about your work and practice this way? Does it matter?

Lê: I always take it one step at a time. I see each new project as a response to a certain dissatisfaction, to unanswered questions from the previous work. As we experience life, we change overtime and develop different concerns. Teaching, becoming a parent, losing a parent are some of the important markers that have influenced my work.