



The Ground Beneath Us: On the Photographs of An-My Lê

Her photos, whose subjects range from the Vietnamese countryside to the Rio Grande border, reveal hidden histories and elicit profound reconsiderations of the familiar.

by Alex Jen (May 5, 2022)



An-My Lê, *Untitled*, Mekong Delta, Việt Nam, 1995. (Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery)

Just off the main road, a blue pickup truck kicks up dust from behind a cluster of shrubs, momentarily perfectly camouflaged. The car is in Ojinaga, Mexico, and on its way to the banks of the Rio Grande, where people are standing around their parked cars and either looking across to the United States, waiting, or simply passing the time. Consider a different view. Twenty-three years earlier in But Thap, Vietnam, several men in straw hats carry bricks across a landscape of tripod tomato stands, dried-out berms, and crumbled edifices. Sunlight dapples piles of bricks and earth, and the moment is lucid and still.

Both locations are loaded, in the sense that their associations—the US-Mexico border in 2019, postwar Vietnam in 1996—are the sites of bitter generational political conflict. But the details that keep emerging eventually outlast our presumptions, and this is how looking at a photograph by An-My Lê unfolds: Dispassionate observation leads to profound reconsideration. For the past 30 years, Lê has been crafting a matter-of-fact oeuvre regarding American identity and its conflicting ideals. A large portion deals with war, not necessarily the battles themselves but rather the mental rehearsals, the aftermaths, the nostalgia. And while people populate her photos, curiously the eye is more often drawn to the expanse around them—the landscape, variously concentrated and distributed with light. Less concerned with “capturing the moment” than determining the proper distance and focus, Lê makes photographs that feel comprehensive, and give us a sense of how life is organized and unfolding in a particular place.

Since 2015, Lê has been making photographs as part of *Silent General*. This new body of work is divided into fragments and depicts such charged scenes from recent political history as families and border protection officers at the Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, the removal of the P.G.T. Beauregard statue in New Orleans in 2017, and high school student protests against gun violence in New York City's Washington Square Park in 2018. But the photographs, as always, are less about the events than the details that occur in them, which add up to a portrait of the country that is both ordinary and anxious. We see Beauregard from behind, a dusky light silhouetting him against a banner cut with wind slits, advertising "Celebration in the Oaks," New Orleans City Park's largest fundraiser. In several new works commissioned for Atlanta's High Museum of Art's "Picturing the South: 25 Years," Lê focuses on the grounds of the White House right before the 2020 elections. A photograph of work being done to the lawn's irrigation system shows a man prostrate gazing into a hole in the dirt, in front of a perfectly cultivated assortment of tall trees. Considered with photographs of farms in Central California, land scars of the Trans Pecos pipeline in Western Texas, and the silty banks of the Rio Grande, *Silent General* returns to the land, and the American desire to own, profit from, and dominate the ground and soil beneath us.

Selections from all of Lê's multiyear series were recently on view in "On Contested Terrain," a retrospective curated by Dan Leers that was interrupted by the pandemic but had been extended and finished its final leg at the Milwaukee Art Museum in March. Offering a chronological picture of Lê's work, the show laid out her education in observation, subtly revealing how landscapes, if you look closely, are laden with an unspoken history of human activity and aspiration.

Becoming a photographer, however, was never Lê's intention. She was applying to medical school for the second time, working as a research assistant at a biotech company and finishing her master's in biology at Stanford, when she decided to take an introduction to photography course. Taught by Laura Volkerding, a photographer with an architectural bent and a keen understanding of deep focus and the wide angle, the course gave Lê an introduction to the descriptive mystery of André Kertész and Eugène Atget. Her earliest photographs were made on the street.

"Sometimes I asked, sometimes I stole the picture and they'd run after me yelling.... I think [photography] was just a way to be daring, to go places I normally wouldn't go," Lê told me. But it was in a four-year stint that began in 1986, traveling through Europe as a photographer for the *Compagnons du Devoir*, a French guild of craftsmen dating back to the Middle Ages, that Lê really cut her teeth as an artist. Volkerding had met some members of the *Compagnons du Devoir* when she photographed the lost wax-casting process of Stanford's edition of *The Gates of Hell* by Auguste Rodin in 1981, and recommended Lê for a job. The requests were simple at first—photographing a sculpture, for example—but became more challenging as Lê was asked to document the historical evolution of objects like an apothecary cabinet or places like a stone vault. A photograph of the Milani Studio in Vicenza shows a block of stone sketched with its sculpture-to-be, an open window aligning perfectly with an excision at upper right. "They would say, 'I'm not seeing that curve in the stairs, will you do it again?' It was about seeing well and describing well. And I think that stayed with me," Lê said.



An-My Lê, *Fragment VIII: Cars along the Rio Grande, US-Mexico Border, Ojinaga, Mexico, from Silent General* 2019.
(Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery)

She returned to the United States in 1991 to begin her MFA at Yale, where she continued work in this architectural vein until she realized after a semester that she was in a rut. In critiques, she was encouraged to explore her identity and past, having left Vietnam as an 8-year-old after the 1968 Tet Offensive, returned, then left again via the American evacuation in 1975, eventually relocating to Huntington Beach, Calif., with her family as a teenager. While Lê had certainly considered making some work about Vietnam, trying to get home was problematic before the trade embargo was lifted and diplomatic relations were formalized in the mid-'90s during the Clinton administration. So she looked around in archives, finding mostly war photographs and ethnographic pictures from the French colonial period, and slipped copies of them into old chemistry glassware that she would set up and photograph, creating distorted still lifes inspired by Jan Groover's table dramas. Lê envisioned continuing this work in Vietnam, collecting objects and creating still lifes in situ.

"It was just very emotional to get there," Lê said. The landscape she saw in the archives, and later in visits to the northern countryside around Hanoi and the Mekong Delta beginning in 1994, were achingly familiar, and she began to materialize work that came to resemble lost memories. Her process was and remains straightforward: Mostly it consists of waiting and looking, allowing her large-format camera to take in the long exposure. In *Untitled, Mekong Delta* (1995), she places us steps away from a trellis growing with hundreds of bright, bowing, heart-shaped betel leaves. A girl squats on the ground, spreading out a scalloped arrangement of leaves. "My grandmother and her girlfriends were always chewing on betel leaves," Lê said. "She'd keep stacks of these beautiful fluorescent green leaves in her lacquered box, and when I finally saw how the plants were grown in a small garden, I wanted to make a picture." Hills, trees, and utility poles emerge out of thin fog in the backgrounds of *Việt Nam*; details build an atmosphere.

Lê's first photograph in the Vietnam series, also made in the Mekong Delta in 1994, is a teeming, bewildering visual moment. Geese flock up and over like a windshield wiper, a stream burrows through the grass, and there is light in the forest's clearing and on the culms of sprouting bamboo. And at the center, a family—mom, dad, two toddlers (carried), a girl, a boy. Lê returned to Vietnam over the next four years, making photographs that depicted the landscape after the war, but not in any dramatized or regretful sense. They are simply earnest.

Back in the States, Lê found her next subject in a group of young men committed to reenacting the Vietnam War in the backwoods of Virginia and North Carolina. This was the origin of *Small Wars*. Obsessed with the facts of the battles and yet simultaneously informed by myths about Vietnam and its people, these reenactors were less concerned about the war's controversy than its recency. They allowed Lê to photograph them, on the condition that she would also participate.



An-My Lê, *Lesson*, from *Small Wars*, 1999–2002.
(Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery)

Lê first tried photographing *Small Wars* with a handheld medium-format camera more suitable for action. But the smaller negatives lacked sharpness and depth, and she was worried that her photographs would not convey the intensity of war but seem flippant. Taking cues from Civil War photographers Matthew Brady and Timothy O'Sullivan, who would describe and sometimes alter battlefields after the fact, she returned to the large-format camera. Instead of trying to replicate the horror of war—in some way impossible, as the violence can be illogical and totalizing—Lê focused on ambiguities of collaboration and exploitation.

Small Wars thus became a study of sides; in examining reenactments of both American GIs and Viet Cong fighters, Lê questioned the war's ultimate guiding principle of us versus them. Her work evolved along these lines, exploring the equivocations of conflict, situations when pride and fear—or empathy—can override prescribed violence. In photographs like *Sniper I* (1999–2002), Lê stands coolly braced and on the offensive; whereas in *Lesson* (1999–2002) she teaches a Special Forces operator Vietnamese, surrounded by an uncomfortably peaceful and pastoral backdrop.

When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, Lê was stuck on the wait-list for photojournalists to join the front lines. She ended up getting access to the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms, Calif., instead. Verisimilitude was once again of import, not to reenact the past but to prepare for the future. As part of the training, buildings were sprayed with anti-Bush and pro-Saddam graffiti and US Marines or trainees were tasked with playing Iraqi police. It is numbing, the extent to which the enemy was embedded in the mind.

Security and Stabilization Operations II (2003–04) shows a swaddled man being escorted away, while a raucous crowd pays no attention to what appears to be a corpse on the ground. Photographs like Mechanized Assault and Night Operations VII (both 2003–04) pull back to present an atmosphere of destruction; the former shows a fanning progression of tanks and jeeps, formidable yet rendered ineffectual against the towering Sierra Nevada mountains, while the latter pictures a moment of total desert darkness, lit up only by the explosion of tracer rounds meeting their target. Rings of barbed wire catch light in the foreground and register at first like scratches in the photograph's deep black tones. The scene is devastating, though not more than the realization that such a photograph would not exist today, with drones allowing for a more discreet and instantaneous death.

Lê became a mother in 2002, right before beginning 29 Palms—the project that encompasses her photographs and videos from the Combat Center. She remembers looking at the young Marines, waiting to be deployed, and thinking about how they were the age of her students at Bard, where she began teaching in 1998. She remembers wondering what kind of country her son would grow up in. This turbulent period reminded her of growing up in Vietnam, at the whims of American invasion and withdrawal. While parenthood attuned Lê to a new sort of empathy, it didn't much change the outlook of her practice. The last photographs of 29 Palms were made when she was pregnant with her second child. "My assistant had to push me up into the Humvee, but I never told anyone I was pregnant," Lê said. "They didn't ask, but I'm not sure they would have let me go if I did." A few months after the birth of her daughter, she returned to the Combat Center to shoot Brief (2005), a culminating video portrait of a group of young, tired but attentive Marines. An invitation from Colonel Thomas Greenwood, whom she also photographed peering through binoculars into the desert, to board the USS Peleliu, led into her next project Events Ashore (2005–14). Three to four times a year, Lê boarded aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines and made photographs that gradually convey the U.S. Navy's activities literally around the world.



An-My Lê, Naval Hospital Ship, USNS Mercy, Qui Nhon, Vietnam, from Events Ashore, 2009.
(Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery)

Organized by Lisa Sutcliffe, the presentation of Events Ashore at the Milwaukee Art Museum opened with Offload, LCACs (Landing Craft Air Cushioned) and Tank, California (2006), a fairly plain photograph of two hovercrafts on the beach, joined by an aircraft carrier in the foggy distance, and a tank at the end of its tracks in the foreground. Quite concisely, the picture illustrates the total efficiency with which the Navy can capture both land and sea. This series also marks a switch to color, a decision made to better contrast the sea, sky, and shoreline. Three photographs near a corner—of earthquake relief in Haiti, a submarine patrol in the Arctic Seas near Russia, and damage control training aboard an aircraft carrier in

Senegal—are linked by an elegant compositional order, the verticality of a curved hull broken through the ice echoing sideways in the arc and spray of a heavy pressure hose. And yet, each dispersed location in *Events Ashore* is like a stitch in an invisible net covering the globe. A photograph of an enormous white naval hospital ship, emblazoned with red crosses and anchored against a placid sea and sky near Qui Nhon, Vietnam, is displayed in Milwaukee on a stand-alone cerulean wall. The image is from 2009, when American sailors returned to Vietnam for the first time since the war. Prepared for both humanitarianism and enforcement—which can be two sides of the same coin—the Navy, her images imply, is everywhere.

“None of my projects are very ambitious when I start—otherwise I don’t think I would begin them,” Lê said. “It’s often about an unanswered question.”

These days, Lê is at work finishing *Silent General*, and intends to make a fragment related to the immigrant Vietnamese population in New Orleans. She had photographed there in the mid-’90s and started seeing parallels between the Mississippi and Mekong deltas in 2011, while working on a commission for the contemporary art triennial *Prospect.2*. Due to constrained budgets and schedules, she feels the project was “a good start,” but was never fully realized. While photographing *Small Wars*, Lê also made a video of the reenactors’ downtime with her husband, John Pilson, which, she mentioned, she wants to revisit.

Lê says she photographs a lot less now. She used to come back with hundreds of sheets of film after a project, and the possibility of losing anything was stressful. But now, she says, she “pre-visualizes” her shots, creating a framed image in her mind before trying to bring it to life with the camera. Looking at a photograph by Lê is like looking alongside her; never one to be didactic, she prefers to let viewers discover details for themselves. Her restraint in the image and breadth in her subjects over the last three decades has made her a truly American photographer, though not in the clichés of that categorization. In some ways, her practice is what it has always been: looking, figuring out where to stand, and offering us that same view for consideration—and then some.