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An-My Lê Left Vietnam as a Child. She Returned as a Photographer.

At MoMA, her images of Vietnam, the American South and the California desert show the vanishing line between boot camp and theater, fiction and truth. They are tour-de-force beautiful.

by Holland Cotter (November 1, 2023)



An-My Lê, "Untitled, Ho Chi Minh City," from the series "Viet Nam," 1995. A group watches the eclipse of the sun.
Credit via An-My Lê and Marian Goodman Gallery

The initial photographs of the Hamas-Israeli war arrived, as if out of nowhere, like a kick to the chest. How could this mutual slaughter be happening, so suddenly, and on this scale? I thought of the American poet Walt Whitman's stuttering shocked reaction to America's Civil War. "The dead, the dead, the dead," he keened, "*Our* dead — South or North, ours all, all, all, all."

Another, later American poet and political activist, Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980), might have been less surprised by the present catastrophe and the images it's generating. "It is the history of the idea of war that is beneath our other histories," she coolly wrote in the late 1940s, early in the bitter long Cold War that followed World War II. War, with its guarantee of violence, she was saying, is always in progress somewhere, maybe everywhere, in one of three predictable stages: preparation, detonation, cleanup.

This long view of war as a perpetual reality, always nascent, always realized, is the major subject of the work of the American-Vietnamese photographer An-My Lê, whose lucid New York survey opens at the Museum of Modern Art this Sunday. And one of her specific points of reference is the American War in Vietnam, which she directly experienced.



Installation view, "Between Two Rivers" exhibition by An-My Lê at MoMA, with a series of re-enactments of a Vietcong camp taken in the American South.
Credit Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Born in Saigon in 1960, Lê (pronounced Ahn-Mee LAY) grew up there as the American military engagement with the North Vietnamese forces was intensifying. In 1968, with South Vietnamese cities subject to nightly shelling attacks, her family left for Paris. They returned in 1973, only to have to flee again two years later. Four days before the fall of Saigon, they were airlifted with other refugees to the United States.

They settled in California. Lê developed an interest in photography as an undergraduate at Stanford and pursued it at an M.F.A. program at Yale. Feeling afloat between cultures and alienated by the narrow war-zone image of Vietnam promoted by the American media and entertainment industry, in 1994, she visited Vietnam for the first time in almost 20 years and began photographing.

An early series she shot there — in black and white, using a large-format, wide-angle camera she would continue to favor — opens the MoMA show. Simply titled "Viet Nam," it includes a few close-ups of figures, notably a transfixingly beautiful half-length image of a schoolgirl field worker. (Lê has referred to this tender portrait as a self-portrait.) But mostly these are views of panoramic landscapes, several in the Mekong Delta, terrain once left ruined by combat and chemical ruin, but now the scene of farming and public recreation, and a far cry from the night-sweat jungles of "Apocalypse Now."



"Untitled, Nam Ha" from 1994 by An-My Lê at MoMA. A photograph of a Vietnamese schoolgirl in a rice field.
Credit. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Yet it's the American fantasy of Vietnam that lives on in her next series, "Small Wars." Begun in 1999, it was shot in rural North Carolina and Virginia in areas once associated with another American conflict, the Civil War. Here, on densely wooded turf, armed combatants gather, bivouac and do soldierly things: plot maneuvers, belly-crawl through brush, stalk elusive foes. In fact, these aren't active soldiers at all, but fans of re-enactment culture, staging, for sport, historic Vietnam War battles that they may or may not once have fought in. Lê herself got in on the action. As a condition for photographing the "battles," Lê was required to participate herself, taking the role of a Viet Cong sniper.

Finally, in the series that immediately followed, titled "29 Palms," images of the re-creation — and celebration — of battles past are replaced by shots of elaborate rehearsals for ones yet to come. In 2003, the artist began filming at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms, Calif., in the Mojave Desert, a training site during the Vietnam era and, after 9/11, used to prepare troops for new wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan.



An-My Lê, "Sniper II," from the series "Small Wars," 1999-2002. She captured the American fantasy of Vietnam in North Carolina and Virginia, where fans of re-enactment culture stage, for sport, historic Vietnam War battles. Credit via An-My Lê and Marian Goodman Gallery

In Lê's photographs we find the line between boot camp and theater, battle-prepping and playacting, almost comically blurred: for practice drills soldiers cast in the role of "prisoners" wear "Iraqi" robes; anti-American graffiti, some in fake Arabic, spills across prefab walls. Erased, too, as in all Lê's work is any divide between documentary and art. All of her pictures are packed with information. Many — one of sunlight dappling the figures of soldiers sitting under a netlike tent; another of flares streaking a nighttime sky — are tour-de-force beautiful.

And the most basic erasure implied by the collective images in these series is potentially the most powerful and troubling one: the vanishing of a line between fantasy and reality, fiction and truth. If actual history can be credibly re-enacted or pre-enacted, what's to prevent entirely new "histories" from being visually invented and inserted, through news channels and social media, into the global information and misinformation flow — a possibility worth keeping in mind as we try to ford the river of images pouring from Israel and Gaza.



An-My Lê, "Night Operations IV," from the series "29 Palms," a training session she took part in, 2003-2004.
Credit via An-My Lê and Marian Goodman Gallery



An-My Lê, "Security and Stabilization Operations, Graffiti I," from the series "29 Palms," 2003-2004.
She filmed at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in the Mojave Desert, used to prepare troops for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.
Credit...via An-My Lê and Marian Goodman Gallery

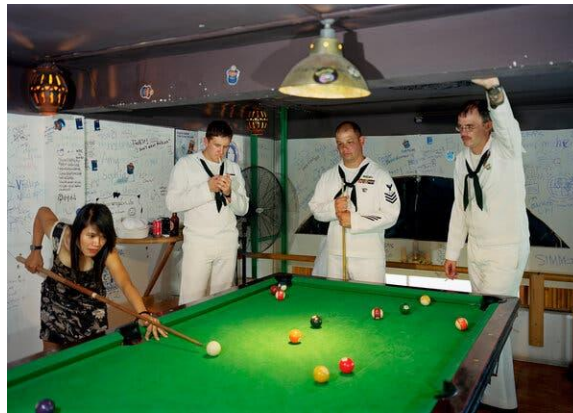
Each of these three black-and-white series is conceptually tight and geographically fixed, set in Vietnam, the American South, and the California desert respectively. Spirit of place, positive or otherwise, obviously means a lot to her, as do the mechanics of political conflict embedded in each location.

These concerns loosen up and broaden out in her two largest series so far, both in color here. In a sense, "Events Ashore" (2005-14), is also locationally uniform: the series was shot, over several years, on board U.S. Navy ships traveling to the Caribbean, Africa and Antarctica. And Lê's interest seems to be far less in where these ships land than in the reasons they travel at all. Most are on what might be considered good will missions — bringing medical aid, facilitating scientific research — yet all, in their immensity, function as advertisements of military might.

The second color project, "Silent General," still in progress, all but abandons Lê's customary tight-themed serial format: Here each picture is a stand-alone event. Begun in 2016, the year of the Trump election, the contents read like a fever chart of American social and political culture since. "There never was a war that was not inward," wrote yet another American poet, Marianne Moore, and we see that here, in what amounts to a photographic portrait of a nation wrestling itself to the ground over immigration, racial justice, gun control, reproductive rights and environmental emergency. No power in the world can do us more harm than we're doing to ourselves.



Left to right, from the series “Silent General,” photographs of “US Customs and Border Protection Officer, Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, Presidio, Texas” and “Mexico Customs and Border Protection Officer, Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, Ojinaga, Mexico,” from 2019.
Credit Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



“Sailors on Liberty from USS Preble, Bamboo 2 Bar, Da Nang, Vietnam,” from the series “Events Ashore,” 2011.
The series showed how Navy ships on good will missions still functioned as advertisements of military might.
Credit via An-My Lê and Marian Goodman Gallery

The human figure has more presence in “Silent General” than in most of Lê’s work. But it’s landscape, all but unpeopled, that she returns to in two projects that conclude the survey, which has been organized by Roxana Marcoci, MoMA’s acting chief curator of photography, and Caitlin Ryan, a curatorial assistant.

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An-My Lê, "Fourteen Views" (2023), a panorama of 14 wallpaper and wood panels showing France, Vietnam and the United States.
Credit Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Lê's photographs catch what's grand about its productive machinery, but also the leveling and scarring created by its relentless attack, in a "small war" that a despairing Whitman might well have lamented and that churns on ceaselessly across the globe everyday, no matter what the latest news.

An-My Lê: Between Two Rivers/Giữa hai dòng sông/Entre deux rivières

Nov. 5 through March 9, 2024, Museum of Modern Art.