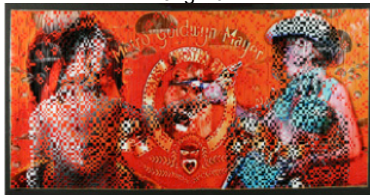


# carolee thea

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Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.



Dinh Q. Lê, *From Vietnam to Hollywood* (2006). C-Print, Linen Tape, 100cm x 170cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view of Projects 93: Dinh Q. Lê: Dinh Q. Lê in collaboration with Tran Quoc Hai, Le Van Danh, Phu-Nam Thuc Ha, and Tuan Andrew Nguyen. Still from "The Farmers and The Helicopters." 2006. Three-channel video (color, sound), 15 min., and helicopter. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist, Fund for the Twenty-First Century, and Committee on Media and Performance Art Funds. © 2010 Dinh Q. Lê. Courtesy the artist; P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York; Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica; and Elizabeth Leach Gallery. Photo: Jason Mandella.

## **ELEPHANTS AND HELICOPTERS: Dinh Q. Lê with Carolee Thea** THE BROOKLYN RAIL// IN CONVERSATION

**Helicopters played a significant military role during the Vietnam War and became a resonant symbol for the Vietnamese. Now at MoMA, Dinh Q. Lê, the Vietnamese American artist, is exhibiting a helicopter fashioned from scrap parts by two Vietnamese farmers. In a second room, a three-channel video focuses on various clips from documentaries made during the war and interviews with Vietnamese people relaying their childhood memories of helicopters and American blockbuster films.**

Carolee Thea (Rail): Your interviews with the farmer and other participants in the video, "The Farmers and The Helicopters" provide a multilayered insight into the country's complex associations. What was your impetus for this work?

Dinh Q. Lê: In 2006, I read an article in a Vietnamese newspaper about a farmer, a self-taught mechanic living in a remote farming community, who was building a life sized functional helicopter. When he began testing, the local government freaked out, disputed its safety, and seized it. A public outrage followed until engineers and scientists stepped up to help the farmers and assure its functional safety, and the government relented. I became interested because the farmers' motive was to put the helicopter to good use, for emergency evacuations, to fertilize the fields, etc. The transformation of a war machine into a peaceful, useful object is akin to a time in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam when wild elephants came into villages, trampling crops and killing people. Once captured and domesticated, these powerful beings were put to good use.

Rail: You were born in 1968 and lived in Hà Tiên, a village in South Vietnam. What was it like after the Americans pulled out in 1973?

Lê: The war dragged on between the north and south until 1975 when the south lost to the north. Vietnam became a repressive communist country and, as happened in China during the Cultural Revolution, sent poets and capitalists to remote and unlivable places called "The New Economic Zone". My father, once the headmaster of a school, and my mother, a dealer in gold and dollars, were considered capitalists. But as a few of my dad's former students had become high-ranking communists, they spared us banishment to the "New Economic Zone". We owned land in the countryside, so we built a house and hired people to farm our land and play the role of the farmer.

In 1977, the Khmer Rouge attacked the town where we lived. We moved to the farm but were bombarded again, and we ran for our lives. My cousins and neighbors were killed but my family escaped.

Rail: And to where did you flee?

Lê: Under the repressive Vietnamese government at the time and the invasion of our hometown by the Khmer Rouge, my parents decided it was better for us to leave Vietnam. One night, under fire, we escaped in a boat but my two older brothers and an older sister had been caught. They were imprisoned and later released. We landed in Thailand and for a year we were in a refugee camp in Songkhla. The internment would have continued, but for the U.N. high refugee commissioner who convened an emergency meeting of all the nations, forcing the United States to open their South East Asia immigrant quotas and allowing us to come to America.

Rail: You were then 10 years old and your family moved to California. Were you haunted by the war experience?



Dinh Q. Lê, "The Infrastructure of Nationalism" (2009). Found Objects. Courtesy of the artist.

Lê: I really tried to suppress the memories, but around that time films about the Vietnam War were released and my high school mates taunted me; "Did you see the Deer Hunter? Did you see Apocalypse Now? What do you think? Is it true? Is the Russian Roulette true?" Eventually, I ended up watching these films just to know what they were talking about.

Rail: Surely this must have been confusing to you. When did you begin to make art?

Lê: After high school, I studied computer science, because that is what you are supposed to do, but being quite bored, I took art classes and began making art.

Rail: I've seen your early work that included photographs woven into each other. What initially spurred your interest in that?

Lê: These early weavings were really about me trying to locate my place in America, in the West. During my lunch breaks at high school, as my English was very bad, I couldn't communicate with the others and so I went to the library and looked at beautiful Renaissance picture books. My aunt had taught me to weave mats as a child, so I ended up literally weaving myself into these Italian and Flemish paintings that I was so enamored with.

I moved to NYC after finishing my undergraduate studies and entered graduate school at SVA. Identity politics was a prime discussion and I fit perfectly into that niche. Bernice Steinbaum in SoHo showed my weavings in 1992 while I was in my first year. I graduated the following year.

Rail: How did this early success affect you?

Lê: Actually, I was very uncomfortable about exhibiting and talking about my work. I quit Bernice Steinbaum Gallery in 1992/93 and went to Boston for a short stint. I got a grant to visit Vietnam to research photographs taken by Vietnamese during the War, but the photographers who took these images were suspicious and refused to show me anything. At the time, Vietnamese overseas who came back were viewed with great suspicion. And then, although I felt that Vietnam was where I wanted to be, I had to return to America.

Rail: What was it like, being with your family in Vietnam?

Lê: I had a romantic notion that I was still a Vietnamese but I was too Americanized. I felt disconnected and lost but I kept returning again to Vietnam for up to three to six months over the following two years. Mostly I stayed with relatives who were nice and supportive, but to them, I was an alien.

Leo Steinberg's brilliance, humor, and generosity opened me up to a life of critical thinking. In his famous class on Michelangelo, the last one he taught at Hunter CUNY, he assigned an analysis of *Eve's Idle Hand*, from the Sistine Chapel ceiling's Temptation Panel, which appears in the 1976 *Art Journal*. He quotes and credits each of our interpretations there.

Rail: Were you able to speak Vietnamese?

Lê: Yes, badly. But I could read and write a bit.

Rail: How did you spend your time?

Lê: I just sat at sidewalk coffee shops trying to come to terms with myself.

RJG: What is the future of the biennial?

Rail: It's true that most creative people are always searching for meaning, their identity, and their mission.

Lê: I had to go back to California to make some money so I could return again to Vietnam. I lived there for three years (1994 - 96), very cheaply and totally focusing on my art. In California, Art Domantay spoke about my early works with the curator/director from LACPS, Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies. She offered me a chance to exhibit. I ended up receiving an amazing review in the L.A. Times. Then P.P.O.W. gallery in NYC and Shoshana Wayne in L.A. began to exhibit my work.

The exhibition was about my journey through Cambodia. Returning to my hometown, Hà Tiên, for the first time, brought back a lot of memories of the Khmer Rouge invasion that I have tried so hard to forget. So I decided to go to Cambodia to understand and to learn about the Khmer Rouge. I went to Phnom Penh, visited Tuol Sleng, a high school that had been converted into a prison/torture chamber where, of the 17,000 people who had been incarcerated, only about five survived. One, an artist, was spared because he could paint portraits of Pol Pot. I went on to Siem Reap and other cities.

While I was visiting those amazing 10th to 15th century temples in Siem Reap, I was unable to forget those images of the prisoners from Tuol Sleng. Everything I saw there was tainted by what I saw in Tuol Sleng. It was then that I decided to make a new photo weaving series, "Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness," which combined the portraits of the prisoners from Tuol Sleng with the wall carvings from these temples.

Rail: You know, there is an inherent violence in cutting photographs, like an excision, but the weaving reconnects past and present.

Lê: Yes, you're right.

Rail: And how did you acquire the photographs of the victims?

Lê: The museum there displays some of their photos and confessions. I took photographs of the museum display. I also got a hold of a Japanese photography magazine that has published some of the portraits.

Rail: I've heard about museums like this in other countries. However for you, this was Cambodian history, not about Vietnam.

Lê: Yes. I realized this and even though these horrible images were tattooed in my brain I was very uneasy about beginning the "Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness" series. I actually put the work on hold for almost two years. But in the end, I decided to make the work.

I also went on to make "The Headless Buddha," an installation that involved a light box and a replica Buddha head sitting on a museum pedestal facing the image of its headless body. When I was at the temple Angkor, there were a lot of headless Buddhas. I eventually found out that looters had cut off their heads because the full statue is too heavy to carry.

In Cambodia, the body still functions as a religious object and the heads became exoticized art objects from Asia. This work was shown in L.A. at LACPS, in the Gwangju Biennale in Korea and many other venues.

Lê: In 1998, my work returned again to the subject of my birth country to deal with Vietnamese issues. My public art project, "Damaged Genes" evolved from the silence that prevailed around the presence of deformed beggars roaming the streets. Victims of Agent Orange, they had all kinds of deformities; twisted limbs like strange roots, babies with huge heads, and a profusion of Siamese twins. At the time, the Vietnamese government never spoke about them, nor did the people in the streets. And the U.S. government refused to even acknowledge the issue.

Rail: Why?

Lê: Vietnam had become the second largest rice exporter in the world; thus to acknowledge that there were dioxins in the soil was damaging to the agriculture export effort. The American government refused to acknowledge the deformed as victims of Agent Orange, and the superstitious Vietnamese wouldn't talk about them for fear that they might give birth to one. All around, it was a taboo subject.

For "Damaged Genes" I rented a kiosk in the market to sell clothes I had designed for Siamese twins, Siamese figurines for the tourists and T-shirts with statistics about birth defects caused by Agent Orange, such as Monsanto and Dow Chemical.

At this time, I was also searching for my family photographs that we left behind when we escaped Vietnam in 1978. I would sit for hours looking at old photographs from second hand shops.

Unfortunately, I never found any of my family photographs. But along the way, I began to collect these old photos. They became my surrogate family photos. From these, I made "Mot Coi Di Ve" (Spending One's Life Trying to find One's Way Home), a 3 by 6 meter quilt. These photographs record happy moments and I wanted to show a different side of Vietnam.

Some of these found photographs were later also being incorporated into the "From Vietnam to Hollywood" photo weaving series. Found images from Vietnam, documentary images from books taken by Western photojournalists during the war, and stills from Hollywood movies *Apocalypse Now*, *Born On The 4th of July*, or *The Deer Hunter* were woven together. This project, "From Vietnam to Hollywood" was exhibited in Francesco Bonami's 2003 Venice Biennale.

Rail: It's a tapestry of fact and fiction.

Lê: Yes, as I lived through a part of the war, I was paying tribute. You know, I watched all the Hollywood movies and documentary films I could find. My personal memory, public memory, and Hollywood's fictional memory merged, but fictional images from Hollywood films dominated. Once, at my mom's house in the valley of southern California, the dry grass and brush ended up on fire in the surrounding hills. The sky was dark with an orangey glow, and a helicopter was dropping fire retardant. This reminded me of the Vietnam War but I personally really didn't have that kind of memory. It was an image from Hollywood films.

At this point, I started to become uneasy about my photo weavings I had been at it for so long and it was too popular and I needed to move on.

Rail: Your next work, a film, included ideas about the psychological transference of experience from father to son. What was your inspiration?

Lê: I had been watching Vietnam War movies over and over and I found interesting parallels between *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*. The films were 10 years apart, Martin Sheen stars in *Apocalypse Now*, and his son Charlie Sheen stars in *Platoon*. The fictional and nonfictional father to son relationship was compelling. In *Platoon*, the real son of Martin Sheen, Charlie, seemed somewhat to replicate his father's role; Charlie had to become a soldier to understand his father. Both faced disenchantment and posttraumatic stress.

Rail: *The Valley of Elah* is another film with this military father-son theme. Please talk about the helicopter animation piece that you showed this year at P.P.O.W., South China Sea Pishkun.

Lê: While I was researching for "The Farmers and the Helicopters" (currently at MoMA), I viewed many documentary films relating to helicopters that had been shot in Vietnam during the war. Some short clips showed helicopters crashing or being pushed off into the South China Sea in the last day of the Vietnam War. What happened was hundreds of helicopters took off in a panic into the South China Sea as the communist forces were marching into Saigon on April 30th, 1975. Many of them were able to land onto aircraft carriers, but there was not room for all and absurd as it might seem, they were pushed off into the sea. The documentary footage reminded me of a photograph by David Wojnarowicz of native American hunters outsmarting buffalo by pushing them into a panic over the cliff. This in fact relates to a Blackfeet American Indian term, "pishkin" which refers to this hunting tactic. Thus, the title of my work. This method of hunting fascinated me. During the war, of the 12,000 helicopters brought to Vietnam to give the U.S. army the military advantage, over 5,000 crashed or were shot down. In the end, they looked like helpless animals being thrown into the sea.

Rail: Wonderful parallel images of nature and culture, the elephants, the bison, and the helicopters. What will you do next?

Lê: I am currently working on a new commission for the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation in Sydney.

This new work will embrace the memory of refugees all over the world who have suffered the trauma of being at sea with the hope of being discovered and saved. It will also be a pertinent topic to discuss in regard to Australia's current controversy regarding boat people and border control.

