SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE

To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

NEWSLETTER # 139 MAY 2020

SACEI
www.sacei07.org

A COUNTRY STAYS ALIVE WHEN ITS CULTURE IS ALIVE. HOPE NEVER DIES IN THE INDOMITABLE VIETNAMESE MIND

- **SACEI Newsletter updates you on the latest news about Vietnamese-America.**
- **It serves as a LINK between SACEI members and those who are interested in the Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American culture.**

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Trouble Turf: The Photographs of An My Le

By Nancy Princenthal
April 3, 2020
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/arts/design/an-my-le.html

From war enactors to America's southern border, an artist blurs the boundaries between photojournalism and fiction.

If you step back far enough, there is no outside to war. Or so suggests An-My Le, whose harrowingly quiet, wide-angled photographs highlight battle re-enactors, active military personnel and sites of conflicts, both real and simulated. They are featured in "On Contested Terrain," a revelatory career survey at the *Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh*, through July 26. (While the museum is temporarily closed because of the coronavirus, a video tour and selected images are online at *cmoa.org.)*

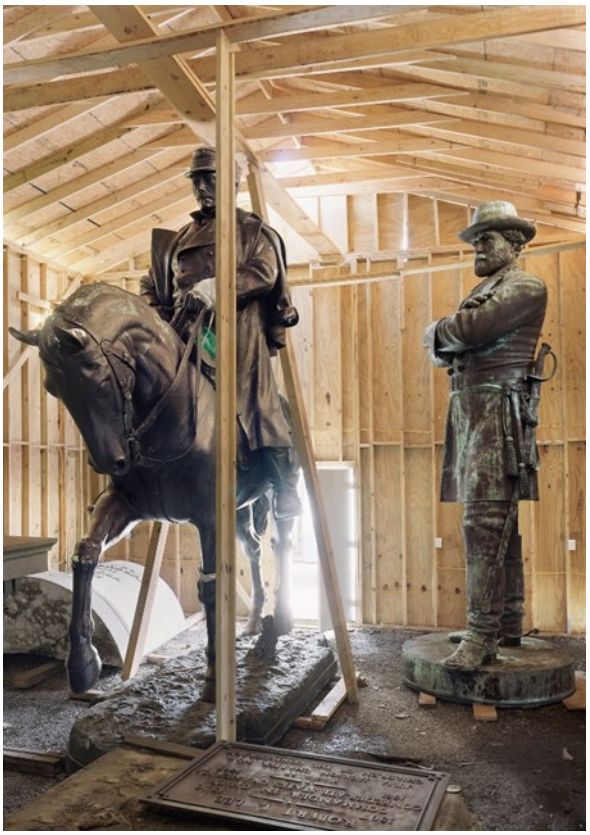
An-My Le in her Brooklyn studio with embroidery thread for a new project, left, and photographs from her "Silent General" series at right, "Fragment VII: High school students protesting gun violence, Washington Square Park, New York" (2018); "Fragment VI: General Robert E. Lee and General P.G.T. Beauregard monuments, Homeland Security Storage, New Orleans" (2017).Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York

Ms. Le's photographic terrain spans the Vietnamese countryside, shown in intimate black-and-white images of the early 1990s, and, in recent color photos, a deceptively placid rural stretch of the Rio Grande, one side indistinguishable from the other, bathers midstream visible in the distance.

Continue on next page

Trouble Turf... "This work is really very selfish," Ms. Le said of her recent images in a conversation at the museum before the virus crisis. "I've been making it to relieve anxiety about what's been going on in the past few years — division, chaos, racial tensions, all stuff I would not have felt so deeply five years ago. What makes America America? The wilderness, the vastness, our sense of history — you can't just erase everything with a few years of craziness. So, landscape is a comfort."

And never, perhaps, more welcome than now. The border photos are part of a diverse series, "Silent General," its title borrowed — and applied very broadly — from a late essay by Walt Whitman. The reference is to Ulysses Grant, commended by Whitman as a simple man who triumphed as a Union general, served ably as peacetime president and, in retirement, traveled the world: a figure, it would seem, of universal veneration. And yet the country remains bitterly divided over the war's legacy: Witness a photograph by Ms. Le of two bronze memorials commemorating the Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard, that were recently removed from public display in New Orleans and crammed into a makeshift shed built by the Department of Homeland Security. Ms. Le shows them hapless and hulking, touched here and there with wayward sunlight. Their abjection is stated without fuss or any hint of vindictiveness.



An-My Le's photograph of decommissioned Civil War statues taken down recently, for her series, "The Silent General, Fragment VI: General Robert E. Lee and General P.G.T. Beauregard Monuments, Homeland Security Storage, New Orleans, Louisiana" (2017). Credit...An-My Le and Marian Goodman Gallery

In her compact, tidy Brooklyn studio, Ms. Le, thoughtful and forthright, said she was drawn to Whitman's reminiscences because they are journalistic yet lyrical, attentive to the landscape, brimming with human sympathy that transcends political schism and, not least, autobiographical. All are impulses she shares.

Born in Saigon in 1960, the artist left for Paris after the 1968 Tet offensive with her mother — who had a scholarship at the Sorbonne — and two brothers. They returned after the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973. But their absence didn't spare Ms. Le intimate exposure at an early age to devastating nightly bombardment, nor to intractable social conflict.

The American crusade against Communism was of course also a civil war, and Ms. Le's Francophile family reflected its divisions. She, her Buddhist father and her brothers were evacuated by the Americans in 1975. Her Roman Catholic mother followed several anxious months later; she'd been one of the last evacuees, lifted by helicopter from the roof of the American Embassy.

All wound up in Southern California and thrived there. Ms. Le completed graduate programs in biology at Stanford and was headed for medical school when she took a single, fateful course in photography. By 1986 she'd been hired, in Paris, as staff photographer for a guild dating to the Middle Ages that was once responsible for building churches and chateaus, and now tends to their restoration and documentation. Ms. Le embarked with them on a four-year tour of France — not for the last time, she was the only woman in the group — teaching herself to use a view camera and learning "about things that are well made."

An-My Le wanted a different way of making images and so has taken up hand embroidery, reproducing stills from an old porn film set in wartime Vietnam. Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Several of the brooding black and white photographs are in the Carnegie show, organized by Dan Leers. (It will travel to the

Continue on next page

Trouble Turf...

Milwaukee Museum of Art in the fall, and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in spring 2021.) Back in the States, she enrolled in the graduate art program at Yale, where fellow students included John Pilson, who became her husband; they now have two teenage children.

Ms. Le didn't expect to see Vietnam again, but when relations with the United States resumed in 1994 she returned, eager to resolve differences between childhood recollections, popular culture she'd absorbed since (especially Hollywood movies), and living reality. In rural areas and cities alike, she sought the complexity she'd missed "by having a truncated perspective of the country when I was young." "I'm interested in topics that are larger than myself," she added. "In things we can't control." That doesn't mean she favors visual chaos. Tonally delicate, emotionally reticent but sharply detailed, her Vietnam photos, Mr. Leers said, show how "landscape brings history into the present."

An-My Le's "Small Wars: Stars and Stripes" (1999-2002), a series that injected her into the world of Vietnam War re-enactors in Virginia and North Carolina. The men accepted her in her role as enemy combatant.Credit...An-My Le and Marian Goodman Gallery

The old-fashioned, hood-and-bellows cameras Ms. Le uses give her a certain authority, while assuring subjects that she is an artist — not, more threateningly, a journalist. Her fellow photographer Mitch Epstein explains that such cumbersome cameras "lead to a way of working that is more introspective. It slows you down." But, Mr. Epstein also observes, "There's a kind of adrenaline that kicks in with the kind of work that she's doing. It becomes performative."

That was especially true with Ms. Le's next series, "Small Wars" (1999-2002), which features Vietnam War re-enactors in Virginia and North Carolina. Access depended on her participation, and so, for weekends over three summers, she signed on as an enemy combatant. Terrified at first, she found that the men embraced her for the authenticity she contributed, allowing her to explore a world of "male fantasy, full of psychosexual tensions — tough, creepy, weird."

An-My Le's "29 Palms: Infantry Platoon, Machine Gunners" (2003-4). Credit...An-My Le and Marian Goodman Gallery

Few of the participants had been in the military, and fewer in combat, and while violent words were sometimes directed at her in the heat of the action, the photos show quieter moments: men deep in the simmering woods, mopping a forehead, setting off blasts, and each trying — as was Ms. Le herself, she concedes — to "make sense of personal baggage." In doing so, she says, they replicated real-life economic differences: "The kids who had more money would play Americans because the American gear was more expensive."

Fudging lines between performing, directing and documenting, as well as between civilian and military, places Ms. Le in the company of such artists as Jeremy Deller, who in 2001 restaged a 1980s Yorkshire miners' strike, and Dread Scott, who last year directed a re-enactment of a historical slave rebellion in Louisiana. Omer Fast, Jeff Wall and Harun Farocki are also media artists who have considered the same blurry boundaries.

With "29 Palms" (2003), named for a Marine training site in the California desert, Ms. Le deepened her exploration of these gray areas. The site was being used to simulate conditions in Afghanistan when Ms. Le arrived. She had hoped to embed with troops

Continue on next page

Trouble Turf...

leaving for Iraq, but she was too late — a blessing in disguise.
"I'm not so masochistic as to look for actual violence," she explained. "It's important to have the mental and physical space to feel safe, and to be able to look at conflicts obliquely." But again, she experienced a level of fear not apparent in the photos. Of three that show innocent-looking trails of smoke, she pointed out, "that's live fire. Where I'm standing, the land is trembling."
Yet the terror, she recalled, was not unconnected to a sense of the sublime. Beauty abounds: plastic fencing and barbed wire trace delicate patterns of light and shade;
nighttime detonations read as spectral fireworks.

Her next series, and her first in color, took Ms. Le around the world — echoes of the aging Grant — on naval vessels ranging from aircraft carriers to nuclear-powered subs. These images, of peacetime activities, owe as much to canonical painters as to the war photographers — Mathew Brady, Robert Capa, Tyler Hicks — who influenced her previous work. One crisp, wistful photo shows sailors at attention topside, an Indonesian harbor beyond washed in milky light and dotted with dozens of ships. It is, she says, with a deprecating laugh, her Canaletto.
With the "Silent General" series, Ms. Le returned to the conflicted terrain of her adopted homeland, newly determined to defy expectations, "at a time when I felt secure enough as an American," she explained, as with an image of several white-cowboy-hatted men idling on horseback, a setting sun in the distance.
Ms. Le confirms an inevitable association to old Marlboro Man ads, but the subjects are Mexican. Such challenges are welcomed by the Carnegie director Eric Crosby. "Museums have to embrace politics because people bring their politics across the threshold," he said.

An-My Le's "Events Ashore: Seaman on Bridge Rotation, USS Tortuga, South China Sea," (2010).Credit...An-My Le and Marian Goodman Gallery

An-My Le's "The Silent General, Fragment II: Cattle Drive at Perdiz Creek Ranch (Reservoir), Marfa, Texas" (2019).
Credit...An-My Le and Marian Goodman Gallery

And they are buffered by the poise of Ms. Le's compositions, which pay homage, in a photo of migrant farmworkers, to Jean-Francois Millet's sanctified *"The Gleaners,"* and, in another, an amiably picnicking interracial group of Louisiana teenagers, to both Manet and Kerry James Marshall. Precise enough so that you can see the field workers' shoelaces and the asparagus stalks they're cutting, these photographs also give us the space to reflect on their historical reach.
With her attention to manual labor, Ms. Le comes full circle, to her work as guild photographer. In fact she has lately taken up handicraft herself, with hand-embroidered images reproducing stills from an old porn film set in wartime Vietnam. Much of the stitching is done in Vietnam; the most sexually explicit parts are embroidered in Brooklyn, partly by assistants, although Ms. Le does more now that she is shut in by virus restrictions. Elegant yet provocative, this work, for Ms. Le, is something of a retort to people who accuse her of fetishizing conflict, or of being too cozy with the military. Without visible rancor, she points out that her history has long been other people's entertainment. If anyone has the license to embrace political contradiction, it is she. That she does so with such unfailing grace is a wonder.

Continue on next page

Trouble Turf...

"Silent General, Fragment II: High School Students, Fourth of July Celebration, New Orleans, Louisiana" (2017). Credit...An-My Le and Marian Goodman Gallery

Ideology in Urban South Vietnam, 1950-1975

Tuan Hoang

Dissertation submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Notre Dame in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor in Philosophy by Tuan Hoang.

This dissertation addresses the subject of noncommunist political and cultural ideology in urban South Vietnam during 1954-1975. It contributes to the historiography of the Vietnam War, specifically on the long-neglected Republic of Vietnam (RVN) that has received greater attention in the last decade. The basic argument is that the postcolonial ideological vision of most urban South Vietnamese diverged greatly from that of the Vietnamese communist revolutionaries. This vision explains for the puzzling question on why the communist revolutionaries were far more effective in winning the minds and hearts of Vietnamese in countryside than in cities. At the same time, this vision was complicated by the uneasy relationship with the Americans.

The dissertation examines four aspects in particular. First is the construction of anticommunism: Although influenced by Cold War bipolarity, anticommunism in urban South Vietnam was shaped initially and primarily by earlier differences about modernity and post-colonialism. It was intensified through intra-Vietnamese experiences of the First Indochina War.

The second aspect is the promotion of individualism. Instead of the socialist person as advocated by communist revolutionaries, urban South Vietnamese promoted a *bourgeois petit* vision of the postcolonial person. Much of the sources for this promotion came from the West, especially France and the U.S. But it was left to urban South Vietnamese writers to interpret and promote what this person ought to be.

The third one concerns the development of nationalism. Urban South Vietnam continued to uphold the views of nationalism developed during late colonialism, such as the elevation of national heroes and the essentialization of Vietnamese civilization. Noncommunist South Vietnamese urbanites were influenced by ethnic nationalism, although they also developed the tendency to look towards other newly independent nations for nationalistic inspiration and ideas about their own postcolonial nation.

The last aspect has to do with the relationship with Americans: The views of urban South Vietnamese on the U.S. were generally positive during the early years of the RVN. But there was also wariness that burst into resentment and anti-Americanism after Washington Americanized the war in 1965. The dissertation looks into two very different urban groups in order to extract the variety of sources about anti-Americanism.

The Ideas That Won't Survive the Coronavirus

Viet Thanh Nguyen

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/opinion/coronavirus-america.html
April 10, 2020, 5:00 a.m. ET

Sometimes people ask me what it takes to be a writer. The only things you have to do, I tell them, are read constantly; write for thousands of hours; and have the masochistic ability to absorb a great deal of rejection and isolation. As it turns out, these qualities have prepared me well to deal with life in the time of the coronavirus.

Demetrius Freeman for The New York Times

The fact that I am almost enjoying this period of isolation — except for bouts of paranoia about imminent death and rage at the incompetence of our nation's leadership — makes me sharply aware of my privilege. It is only through my social media feeds that I can see the devastation wreaked on people who have lost their jobs and are worried about paying the rent. Horror stories are surfacing from doctors and nurses, people afflicted with Covid-19, and those who have lost loved ones to the disease.

Many of us are getting a glimpse of dystopia. Others are living it.

If anything good emerges out of this period, it might be an awakening to the pre-existing conditions of our body politic. We were not as healthy as we thought we were. The biological virus afflicting individuals is also a social virus. Its symptoms — inequality, callousness, selfishness and a profit motive that undervalues human life and overvalues commodities — were for too long masked by the hearty good cheer of American exceptionalism, the ruddiness of someone a few steps away from a heart attack.

Even if America as we know it survives the coronavirus, it can hardly emerge unscathed. If the illusion of invincibility is shredded for any patient who survives a near-fatal experience, then what might die after Covid-19 is the myth that we are the best country on earth, a belief common even among the poor, the marginal, the precariat, who must believe in their own Americanness if in nothing else.

Perhaps the sensation of imprisonment during quarantine might make us imagine what real imprisonment feels like. There are, of course, actual prisons where we have warehoused human beings who have no relief from the threat of the coronavirus. There are refugee camps and detention centers that are de facto prisons. There is the economic imprisonment of poverty and precariousness, where a missing paycheck can mean homelessness, where illness without health insurance can mean death.

But at the same time, prisons and camps have often served as places where new consciousnesses are born, where prisoners become radicalized, become activists and even revolutionaries. Is it too much to hope that the forced isolation of many Americans, and the forced labor of others, might compel radical acts of self-reflection, self-assessment and, eventually, solidarity?

Continue on next page

Won't Survive…

A crisis often induces fear and hatred. Already we are seeing a racist blowback against Asians and Asian-Americans for the "Chinese virus." But we have a choice: Will we accept a world of division and scarcity, where we must fight over insufficient resources and opportunities, or imagine a future when our society is measured by how well it takes care of the ill, the poor, the aged and the different?

As a writer, I know that such a choice exists in the middle of a story. It is the turning point. A hero — in this case, the American body politic, not to mention the president — is faced with a crucial decision that will reveal who he or she fundamentally is.

We are not yet at the halfway point of our drama. We have barely made it to the end of the first act, when we slowly awaken to the threat coming our way and realize we must take some kind of action. That action, for now, is simply doing what we must to fight off Covid-19 and survive as a country, weakened but alive.

The halfway point comes only when the hero meets a worthy opponent — not one who is weak or marginal or different, but someone or something that is truly monstrous. Covid-19, however terrible, is only a movie villain. Our real enemy does not come from the outside, but from within. Our real enemy is not the virus but our response to the virus — a response that has been degraded and deformed by the structural inequalities of our society.

America has a history of settler colonization and capitalism that ruthlessly exploited natural resources and people, typically the poor, the migratory, the black and the brown. That history manifests today in our impulse to hoard, knowing that we live in an economy of self-reliance and scarcity; in our dependence on the cheap labor of women and racial minorities; and in our lack of sufficient systems of health care, welfare, universal basic income and education to take care of the neediest among us.

What this crisis has revealed is that, while almost all of us can become vulnerable — even corporations and the wealthy — our government prioritizes the protection of the least vulnerable.

If this was a classic Hollywood narrative, the exceptionally American superhero, reluctant and wavering in the first act, would make the right choice at this turning point. The evil Covid-19 would be conquered, and order would be restored to a society that would look just as it did before the villain emerged.

But if our society looks the same after the defeat of Covid-19, it will be a Pyrrhic victory. We can expect a sequel, and not just one sequel, but many, until we reach the finale: climate catastrophe. If our fumbling of the coronavirus is a preview of how the United States will handle that disaster, then we are doomed.

But amid the bumbling, there are signs of hope and courage: laborers striking over their exploitation; people donating masks, money and time; medical workers and patients expressing outrage over our gutted health care system; a Navy captain sacrificing his career to protect his sailors; even strangers saying hello to other strangers on the street, which in my city, Los Angeles, constitutes a nearly radical act of solidarity.

I know I am not the only one thinking these thoughts. Perhaps this isolation will finally give people the chance to do what writers do: imagine, empathize, dream. To have the time and luxury to do these things is already to live on the edge of utopia, even if what writers often do from there is to imagine the dystopic. I write not only because it brings me pleasure, but also out of fear — fear that if I do not tell a new story, I cannot truly live.

Americans will eventually emerge from isolation and take stock of the fallen, both the people and the ideas that did not make it through the crisis. And then we will have to decide which story will let the survivors truly live.