

An-My Lê

**19 September –  
23 November 2014**



Left: *US Naval Hospital Ship Mercy, Vietnam* (detail), 2009.  
Above: *Manning the Rail, USS Tortuga, Java Sea* (detail), 2010.

From *Events Ashore* (2005-2014).  
Images courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.

### Key themes

Military  
Landscape  
Memory  
Analogue photography  
Photo-journalism  
Storytelling  
Myth

### Related artists

Roger Fenton  
Cecil Beaton  
Simon Norfolk  
Luc Delahaye  
Geert Van Kesteren  
Gerda Taro

### Further research

Watch an introduction to the exhibition at MK Gallery:  
<http://ow.ly/CxR5f>

MacArthur Fellowship 2012 interview: <http://ow.ly/CxTLS>

### About the Artist

Photographic artist An-My Lê was born in Saigon, Vietnam, in 1960. Her family was evacuated from Vietnam at the end of the war in 1975 and became political refugees in the United States. An-My Lê explores her own personal life through photographic work by focusing on her memories of war and the military.

### About the work

Using a large format analogue camera, An-My Lê produces subtle, often black and white, photographs that reference the style and methods of 19th Century war photographers. However, rather than documenting battles as they happen, An-My Lê's images show us the preparations, re-enactments and after-effects of conflict:

*"My engagement of the landscape and its scale is an attempt to give perspective to the military endeavour. A cool and distant look at the dramatic exercises far from the heat of the battle allows us to step back and consider the implications and consequences of war."* (An My Lê, 2014)

This mid-career survey presents work from the last twenty years, starting from the artist's first return visit to her homeland in *Việt Nam* (1994-1998), and ending with her most recent body of work *Events Ashore* (2005-2014) which depicts the US Navy on missions across the globe.

### About this Pack

This pack has been designed to provide background information about the An-My Lê exhibition at MK Gallery.

For more information about our schools programme, please contact:

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# Explore

This section contains information and questions to help students explore the exhibition



Left: *Small Wars, (explosion) (detail)*, 1999-2002

Above: *Small Wars, (rescue) (detail)*, 1999-2002.

From *Small Wars* (1999-2002).  
Images courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.

## In the Middle Gallery

### Việt Nam (1994-1998)

The earliest series of photographs in this exhibition are displayed along the far wall of the Middle Gallery. These small black and white images show us Vietnam through the eyes of An-My Lê when she returned to her homeland for the first time in 15 years.

The Vietnam War ended in 1975, but the images show us how the country was still being affected by the conflict nearly 20 years later, as citizens struggled to survive in widespread poverty and harsh conditions.

This 'layer' of war, that continues to affect human life long after the conflict has happened, is something An-My Lê tries to show by taking pictures of normal everyday scenes that might make us think of war. For example, an image of burning rubbish on a hillside might make us think of a building that has been bombed and kites flying in a square that could remind us of military aircraft.

Are there any other pictures in this series that make you think of war, conflict or the military?

What other stories being told through these pictures?

What is the mood of these photographs? Are they happy or sad? Do some of the photographs seem to have a different mood to the others?

### Small wars (1999-2002)

The second series of larger, black and white photographs in the Middle Gallery entitled *Small Wars*, was made when An-My Lê returned to the United States. At first glance, some of these images appear to show the real-life action of a war taking place. There are also images of jungle plants, an old aeroplane and a night-time explosion.

What do you think is happening in these pictures?

Who do you think the people are?

To create this series, An-My Lê worked with a group of American war re-enactors who specialised in recreating events from the Vietnam War. She went along with them on their trips into the forest, where they pretended to be soldiers and acted out moments from the war.

An-My Lê was interested to see whether the photographs would trick people into thinking they were looking documentation of a real war.

What clues are there that these photographs are not from the actual Vietnam War?



Left: Film still from *29 Palms*, 2005.  
Middle and above: Installation view of the Long Gallery showing works from *Events Ashore* (2005-2014), MK Gallery, 2014.

## In the Cube Gallery

### 29 Palms (2003-2004)

At the age of 15, An-My Lê was evacuated from Vietnam along with her family. The United States Military transported the evacuees to a base in California called 29 Palms, which is still used by the U.S Marine Corps today to prepare the soldiers for desert conditions in other countries. In 2003, An-My Lê returned to the base, just as the soldiers were preparing to leave to join the war in Iraq.

Alongside the *29 Palms* photographic series documenting the training exercises and environment of the base, Lê also created the two films on display in the Cube Gallery during her time there.

What do you notice about the films?

What are the main differences between the two films?

The films are silent, what sounds would you expect to hear?

Imagine yourself in the landscape, how would you feel if you were really there? How do you think the soldiers felt?

## In the Long Gallery

### Events Ashore (2005-2014)

The large, colourful photographs on display in the Long Gallery are a selection of images from An-My Lê's ambitious recent project, *Events Ashore*, which took almost 10 years to complete.

To create this series of photographs, An-My Lê travelled extensively with the US Navy as they worked across the globe. What different locations can you find in this room?

This series is the first time that An-My Lê has used colour photography. How do you think this changes the photographs?

The large scale of the images means that you can see more detail. Choose a picture you like and look at it closely; what hidden objects can you find?

Strange things seem to be happening in some of the pictures. Can you imagine what story might be being told?

# Create

In the classroom activity ideas



Left: *Patient Admissions, Naval Hospital Ship, USNS 'Mercy', Qui Nhon, Vietnam, 2009.*  
Above: *Offload, LCACs and Tank, California, 2006.* Image courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.

From *Events Ashore* (2005-2014).

## Landscape Photography Activity for Key Stages 1-2

### Materials

Sheets of sun print paper  
Interesting materials and objects (sticks, flowers, leaves, bubblewrap, tissue paper)  
Tub of water  
Lemon Juice  
Towel  
An outdoor area or a space with sunlight

Learn about the basics of photography, and create dramatic landscape scenes using sun-print paper.

1. In a dark space away from sunlight, take out the sheets of sun-print paper and arrange the materials onto the sheet.
2. Carefully transport the sheet into the sunlight. You might find it helpful to place a clear plastic or glass sheet over the top of the objects to hold them flat against the paper.
3. Leave the paper in the sun for three to five minutes, or until it turns a light shade of blue.
4. Put the paper into a tub or water for one minute. Add a few drops of lemon juice to the water to bring out a darker shade of blue.
5. Leave the prints to soak for 1 minute, then let them dry on a towel.

## Poetry Activity for students at Key Stage 3-4

*In his darkroom he is finally alone  
with spools of suffering set out in  
ordered rows.*

*The only light is red and softly  
glows,  
as though this were a church and  
he a priest preparing to intone a  
mass.*

*Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All  
flesh is grass.*

Extract from *War Photographer*,  
Carol Ann Duffy, 1985

Read the full poem:  
<http://ow.ly/CxTRo>

The poet Carol Ann Duffy wrote the well-known poem *War Photographer* to explore the challenges faced by war photographers whose job requires them to record terrible, horrific events without being able to directly help the people involved:

1. What do you think is the key theme of the *War Photographer* poem? How does Duffy want the reader to feel about the work that war photographers do?
2. Do you think the poem could relate to An-My Lê's work? In what way is her photographic practice different/similar to the work of a war photographer?
3. Duffy uses imagery in her poem to transport the viewer into the experiences of the war photographer and his photographs - can you identify key images within the poem?
4. Imagine you are An-My Lê, revisiting Vietnam after 15 years away. What emotions would you experience, seeing your home-land for the first time since the war? How would you describe what you see? What about the process of developing the photographs?
5. Write a poem using An-My Lê's photographs as inspiration.

Exhibition curated by Kate Bush,  
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