

## An-My Lê

19 September –  
23 November 2014

Born in Vietnam in 1960, Vietnamese-American artist An-My Lê's adolescence was marked by conflict. In Saigon, she grew up experiencing nightly mortar attacks and the daily presence of American soldiers. In 1975, the final year of the war, she and her family were among those airlifted to safety and they finally settled in the United States as political refugees.

An-My Lê graduated in biology from Stanford, before turning to photography, which she studied at Yale University. The recipient of many awards, including the prestigious MacArthur Genius Award (2012), she is widely recognised as one of the most significant photographers working in the world today.

This exhibition surveys four major series: peaceful scenes evocative of conflict, in *Việt Nam*, (1994–1998); fictional scenes staged by hobbyist war re-enactors in *Small Wars*, (1999-2002); a film showing the American military training for the Iraq war in *29 Palms*, (2003-2004); and the most comprehensive showing yet of *Events Ashore* (2005-2014), a magnum opus, ten years in the making, which depicts the US navy on missions across the globe. Also shown for the first time are drawings by An-My Lê inspired by images and texts engraved on replicas of zippo lighters owned by American troops in Vietnam.

Lê has consistently explored the myth and memory of war through photography and film. While her personal experience of conflict has shaped both her life and her artistic subject matter, Lê's work transcends that personal story. She avoids simple representations and simple judgements about the US military machine, and, like many great photographers maintains a certain distance from her subject in order to create nuanced pictures. 'My goal has been to... address issues of power and fragility. My intention is not to dictate a message. It is a call for perspective, not a call to action.'

**Exhibition curated by Kate Bush,**  
Head of Photography at Media Space/Science  
Museum and the National Media Museum

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## Việt Nam, (1994–1998)



Untitled, (*Mekong Delta*), 1994.  
Image courtesy of the artist and  
Murray Guy, New York.

In 1994, twenty years after the fall of Saigon, America restored relations with Vietnam and Lê was able to return to her homeland for the first time. Over the course of four years she rediscovered the country, especially rural Vietnam. She attempted to reconcile the landscape of her childhood imagination – filtered through the imagery of Hollywood Vietnam films - with what she observed. Her resulting images, beautifully cast in a gentle mid-grey scale, appear tranquil and timeless. And yet they are haunted with intimations of war. In the smoke of a farmer's bonfire, the swoop of a child's kite, the neat ranks of vegetable beds, it is hard not to see those indelible images of napalm explosions, aerial bombardments and mass graves lodged in collective memory.

## Small Wars, (1999–2002)



*Small Wars, (rescue)*, 1999–2002.  
Image courtesy of the artist and  
Murray Guy, New York.

It was in Vietnam that Lê realised how the landscape could serve as the vehicle through which to address her theme of war. She noted how defining terrain and geography were to the mythic image as well as the prosecution of the Vietnam War. She also became fascinated with America's on-going obsession with that conflict.

For four summers, beginning in 1999, she photographed the activities of groups of hobbyist war re-enactors, in the forests of North Carolina and Virginia. These men restaged the Vietnam War on American soil, each acting out, for whatever personal reason, their fantasies of battle. On occasion, Lê would be called upon to join in, and she would step out from behind her camera to play the role of a Vietcong sniper – the 'enemy' or a Kit Carson scout, the 'defector' (*Sniper II, Lesson*).

As in *Việt Nam*, Lê aimed to reach a photographic equivalent for a mental state. She wanted to represent how war is experienced not merely physically, but in the imagination; and how our understanding of war is impacted as much by myth and fantasy as well as reality.

At first glance here, you might think you are looking at real war photographs and film footage: the flares of fictional mortars and the pretend skirmishes of these carefully camouflaged soldiers are rendered authentic through a reportage style. And then you notice the deciduous forest setting of North Carolina, and its peaceful rolling grass - a million miles from Vietnam's dense rainforest.

## 29 Palms, (2003–2004)



Film still from *29 Palms*, 2005.  
2-channel DVD projection,  
35 mm transferred to DVD.  
Image courtesy of the artist and  
Murray Guy, New York.

If in *Small Wars*, something fictional is made to look real, then in *29 Palms*, Lê's next work, the reverse happens.

Shortly after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, she was granted access to 29 Palms, a US military base situated in the high desert of California. In this landscape, reminiscent of parts of Afghanistan and Iraq, she filmed and photographed the American military preparing its troops for what would become an eight-year conflict.

On one screen (*Brief*) her camera is almost painfully close to the tense faces of young recruits receiving their briefing; on the other (*Ops*), the camera has pulled right back to render troop movements and mortar attacks tiny in the large desert landscape. 'I was interested in the issue of scale. *Brief* and *Ops* work as perfect counterpoints to address the disparity between the idea of the military as a large organisation and its comprising troops - we have the bird eye's view of the commander concerned with strategy in relation to the close scrutiny of the marines as individuals', she explains.

Where *Small Wars* involved a group of men playing at being soldiers, made, through photography to appear real, in *29 Palms*, real military operations are made to look cinematic, as if we are watching a war movie.

And in some sense the military, with all their hours spent planning and practising for every conceivable danger, are not unlike actors rehearsing a script. Their repetitious training is there in part to reassure that they are unassailable, ready for combat. It is a ritual designed to combat fear and uncertainty.

## Events

### Ashore,

(2005-2014)



US Naval Hospital Ship Mercy, Vietnam, 2009. Image courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.

While making *29 Palms*, Lê was invited, informally, on board a battleship training off the coast of California in preparation for deployment to Iraq. This experience triggered what has become her most ambitious work to date.

Over some ten years An-My Lê has travelled the breadth of the world's oceans with the US navy to create *Events Ashore*, a series comprised of over 100 photographs. Where *Việt Nam* and *Small Wars* are set in a 'past' tense –in that they address the memory of events concluded - and where *29 Palms* was set in the 'future', in its focus on preparation for events to come, then Lê has described *Events Ashore* as 'unfolding in the present tense'. This idea relates to the long evolution of the work over a continuous period. A sense of her engagement in the present moment is expressed photographically in a significant move from black and white to colour.

In setting scenes of naval activity within landscapes of sublime scale, Lê adapts the tropes of Romantic painting to evoke a sense of human fallibility in the face of the infinite. These massive modern ships, intricately designed and operationally complex, are dwarfed in relation to the skies, oceans and geological expanses of the globe. That military urge to combat and dominate, to control the uncontrollable, is shown to be small, futile even, relative to the unimaginable vastness of the earth that contains us.

She has avoided the front line of combat yet her pictures are full of political realities – those 'events ashore' which define life at sea and determine the global operations of the US navy. A soldier stands watch over the oil terminals of the Arabian Gulf during the Iraq War; a humanitarian mission lands on a Haitian beach in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake. History comes full circle as American sailors arrive in Vietnam in 2011, on an exchange visit with Vietnam's People's Navy. Lê observes the culture of a modern US military which exerts influence across the world through benign interventions – educational, humanitarian - as much as direct action.

Lê works with the same type of camera - a large format view camera - as the great 19th century topographical and war photographers such as Roger Fenton and Timothy O'Sullivan. Like them, it enables her to achieve great clarity of detail, whilst also doing justice to the epic scale of her subject matter. A sense of watchful scrutiny permeates Lê's pictures, even when the scene in front of her is in reality loud and chaotic. This visual tone matches her carefully weighed view of her subject - never judgemental, despite her personal experience.