

“My attachment to the idea of landscape is a direct extension of a life in exile.” An-My Lê

Marian Goodman Gallery Paris is pleased to present the first exhibition of An-My Lê’s work in France. Born in Saigon in 1960, as a child, An-My Lê spent several years in Paris, a city where her parents had lived and were married in the late 1950s. In 1975, in the wake of the war, her family left Vietnam permanently and emigrated to the United States. In the mid-1980s, she worked in France as a photographer for the *Compagnons du Devoir*. Over the course of four years, she documented architectural restorations and inventoried historical monuments, just as Eugène Atget had done in his time. This seminal experience, along with the artist’s personal history, influenced her deeply humanist oeuvre. “I aspire to achieve a certain lyrical objectivity. It is more about patterns of behavior than the specificity of it, which perhaps allows for a larger understanding of history and culture.”

For her first solo exhibition in Paris, An-My Lê presents *The Silent General*, a collection of new color photographs, first unveiled a few weeks ago at the Whitney Biennale in New York (on view until June 11, 2017). She is also showing black-and-white images from earlier series, including *Viêt Nam*, *Small Wars*, and *29 Palms*.

An-My Lê’s latest project, *The Silent General*, takes its title from a fragment of Walt Whitman’s *Specimen Days* which is devoted to the American general and statesman Ulysses S. Grant. In this poetic autobiographical narrative, written in 1882, which blends personal history and national events, the author sets down his memories of the Civil War era (1861–65). The seven photographs made over the past two years in various places near or in New Orleans, Louisiana, are evocative of Whitman’s essay. The images are the result of the observation of different aspects of contemporary life in the South. However, in contrast to the photojournalist aesthetic always in close proximity to the subject, Lê keeps a distance, following the tradition of nineteenth-century landscape photography. Allusions to the past are woven into the scenery: the film set whose action unfolds against the backdrop of a famous Civil War battle, or a statue commemorating a Confederate army general. Other pictures represent archetypal motifs from American Southern history and heritage, such as a sugar cane field, churchgoers leaving the service, or anonymous laborers at work. *The Silent General* reveals just how much history continues to mark the territory and the people who inhabit it, and neatly encapsulates An-My Lê’s ambition: “Instead of seeking the real, I began to ground the imaginary. The landscape genre or the description of people’s activity in the landscape lent itself well to this way of thinking.”

*29 Palms* (2003–04) and *Small Wars* (1999–2002), together with *Viêt Nam* (1994–98),

retrospectively compose a trilogy. *29 Palms* follows the US Marine Corps training camp located in the high deserts of California. For months at a time, An-My Lê observed soldiers training before they were sent on a mission to Iraq or Afghanistan. Using an unwieldy large-format camera and 5x7 inch negatives, Lê mainly captured the soldiers in moments of rest or inactivity: she emphasized scale and the natural surroundings in which they interacted, adopting the approach taken by such early war reporters as Roger Fenton who, during the Crimean War (1853 -56) would only take “decent” pictures of the front lines – that is to say, free of any violence or direct combat. In so doing, Lê photographed a kind of fabricated situation or collective fiction. The expansive 29 Palms training grounds have been utilized by the US military since the 1960s but its eerie topographic and climatic similarities to regions of Iraq and Afghanistan approximate an uncanny theater of war for the conflicts in the Middle East. The photographer reveals the camp as a simulacrum, in the way that Jean Baudrillard defines it: “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.”

The series *Small Wars* similarly hinges on this ambiguity, and an uninformed viewer could be misled as to the nature of the images. For four consecutive summers, Lê “infiltrated” a group of individuals who, as a hobby, reenact, as accurately as possible, Vietnam War battles in Virginia and North Carolina. To gain better access to their “playground”, An-My Lê actively took part in their training sessions, agreeing to play various “enemy” roles, disguised as a member of the Viet Cong or a Vietnamese People’s Army soldier. Her photographs neither cast judgment on this pastime, nor on the people who engage in it; rather, they challenge our views of how a war may be commemorated. “Many people find the attitude of Vietnam War reenactors disturbing. And yet, by comparison, Hollywood’s obsession with films incessantly staging this war doesn’t seem to bother anybody. In my opinion, the fascination originates in the dialog between experience and chaos versus memory and fabrication which develops between these two worlds.” As in her other series, Lê is particularly attentive to the natural environment. “Working with the Vietnam war reenactors I became fascinated by the significance of the landscape in terms of strategic meaning. Every hilltop, bend in the road, group of trees, and open field became a possibility for an ambush, an escape route, a landing zone, or a campsite.”

The exhibition extends to Librairie Marian Goodman to include An-My Lê’s first photographic project devoted to Vietnam, carried out eighteen years after her exile and departure. The compositions are no longer located at the intersection of fiction and reality, but instead at the junction of two realities: the country’s own reality and that of An-My Lê’s memories. While the initial idea was to retrace her childhood and produce autobiographic still-lives, the project took on a life of its own, and evolved into a sensitive portrait of a land where she traveled between city and

countryside, and between North (Hanoi and the areas where her mother's family came from) and South (Hô Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon the state capital where she was born).

An-My Lê lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. A graduate of Stanford University, she also holds a Masters of Fine Arts from the Yale University School of Art. She is a professor of Photography at Bard College in New York where she has taught since 1999. She has had solo exhibitions at several museums in the United States, including the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2013; Dia: Beacon in 2006–07; and MoMA PS1 Contemporary Art Center in New York in 2002. From 2006 to 2008 her exhibition *Small Wars* was featured at a dozen museums around the United States and Great Britain, including the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, in Chicago. In France, her work was featured in the group exhibition *Topographies de la Guerre* at Le BAL in Paris in 2011.

An-My Lê is the recipient of numerous awards and grants: in 2012 she was awarded the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship; in 2010, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award; and in 2004 the John Gutmann Photography Fellowship. An-My Lê's photographs belong to the collections of such international institutions as the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, as well as the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.

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