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### Author

Klipa, Rachel

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## Review of *An-My Lê: On Contested Terrain*

Rachel Klipa

The first comprehensive survey of the photographer An-My Lê's work, *An-My Lê: On Contested Terrain* at the Carnegie Museum of Art, was a stunning and challenging experience. Lê's wide-angle photographs posed difficult questions about the American psyche, escapism, and artistic intervention. The photographs included groupings of images that spanned a thirty-five-year period: *Việt Nam* (1994–98), *Silent General* (2015–), *29 Palms* (2003–4), *Small Wars* (1999–2002), *Events Ashore* (2005–14), *Sculpture* (1986–2002), and *Trap Rock* (2005–7).<sup>1</sup> Viewing this exhibition in July 2020 became more poignant as the pandemic and unrest in the United States raged on.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition's works confronted the complexity and politicization of the American landscape and the people found within it.

Born in Vietnam, Lê and her family evacuated from Saigon in 1975, and she did not return to her homeland until 1994.<sup>3</sup> It could be said that her first trip back to Vietnam after twenty years marked the beginning of her artistic career.<sup>4</sup> *On Contested Terrain* opened at the entrance of the museum's Heinz Galleries with eleven black-and-white photographs from the series *Việt Nam*. "Using a large-format camera and shooting from an elevated perspective," Lê captured Hanoi, the Mekong Delta, and Ho Chi Minh City.<sup>5</sup> The Vietnam landscape presented a visual starting point that served as a source of comparison for the photographs that followed. The scenes seem to be innocuous, neutral depictions of a lush terrain, and the images of American landscapes in the series that follow seem to be similarly legible as documentary photographs. However, Lê purposely focused on the contradictions evident in the landscape: the foregrounding of thriving gardens against a background of crumbling ruins; the hard, geometric lines of



*Figure 1 An-My Lê, Fragment VIII: US Customs and Border Protection Officer, Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, Presidio, Texas, 2019. From the series Silent General, inkjet print 40 in. × 56.5 in. (101.60 × 143.51 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.*



*Figure 2 An-My Lê, Fragment VIII: Cars along the Rio Grande at the US-Mexico Border, Ojinaga, Mexico, 2019. From the series Silent General, inkjet print 40 in. × 56.5 in. (101.60 × 143.51 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.*

architecture in a foggy and wet environment; and the domination of Xerox, Hitachi, and Compaq advertisement billboards along waterways in an untitled work. While looking at these images, I was reminded of the industrial decay in the Rust Belt of the United States and the signs of consumerism that I see every day.

Already making the comparison between these images of Vietnam and the American landscape, I examined the next series in the Heinz Galleries, which featured scenes from across the United States. The largest series in the exhibition, *Silent General*, is named after Walt Whitman's tribute to Ulysses S. Grant, in *Specimen Days*.<sup>6</sup> Lê grouped the photographs in what she calls "fragments" as an homage to the "literary structure" of the book.<sup>7</sup> The fragments were photographed in color and focused on a spectrum of themes such as immigrant labor in California, the US-Mexico border in Texas (Figs. 1–2), student protests in New York City, and Confederate monuments in Louisiana (Fig. 3). Some of the most striking images are of the US-Mexico border, which were reminiscent of paintings by Thomas Cole (1801–1848) and J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), whose work was included by way of Lê's photograph of Turner's *Port Ruydael* restoration at the Yale Center for British Art. Lê's craft as a photographer draws on the history of photography and painting, in particular the magisterial gaze used to portray the concept of Manifest Destiny by early American painters such as Cole. Like Lê, Cole's works were highly crafted, and they connected the legacy of the United States to places such as ancient Rome by depicting tamed and romanticized landscapes full of classical architecture.

As mentioned earlier, the placement of images throughout *Silent General* was deliberate. For instance, *Fragment VIII: US Customs and Border Protection Officer, Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, Presidio, Texas* (Fig. 1) and *Fragment VIII: Mexico Customs and Border Protection Officer, Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, Ojinaga, Mexico* are two side-by-side portraits of Latina women who work on either side of the US-Mexico border. Flanking both portraits are images of a vast Texas landscape and the Rio Grande (Fig. 2). The photographs highlight the grandeur of Texas and its land, but then its neighboring images remind the viewer of how the landscape can be manipulated and patrolled to divide a nation or practice violence in the name of protecting borders or national interests. These types of juxtapositions continue throughout *Silent General* to emphasize the duality of a nation's conscience and actions. At what cost must the United States secure its southern border so that the Texas landscape maintains its aesthetic integrity?



Figure 3 *An-My Lê*, Fragment VI: General Robert E. Lee and P. G. T. Beauregard Monuments, Homeland Security Storage, New Orleans, 2017. From the series *Silent General*, inkjet print 40 in. × 56.5 in. (143.51 × 101.60 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.



Figure 4 An-My Lê, *Mechanized Assault*, 2003–2004, printed 2018. From the series *29 Palms*, gelatin silver print 26.5 in. × 38 in. (67.31 × 96.52 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

What kinds of people do Americans expect to see guarding the border? The assumption might be that it is white men who enact the rules at the border, but here we see it is Latina women on either side. What kind of conflict is embodied within these women who work in these positions?

The photographs in *Silent General* were not displayed chronologically. *Fragment VI: General Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard Monuments, Homeland Security Storage, New Orleans* (Fig. 3) shows two New Orleans monuments of Robert E. Lee and P. G. T. Beauregard in a makeshift shed after their removal in 2017. Elsewhere in this section are three additional images that show these former monuments as they existed in the public realm: one is displayed before seeing *Fragment VI: General Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard Monuments, Homeland Security Storage, New Orleans*, and the other two occur after. If the images had been in chronological order, it would not have had the same effect. Although the monuments were removed, the layout of the photographs in the exhibition make it feel as if the monuments still exist in the landscape. Even though monuments will be de-installed, the ideas they embody will continue to exist within the country. Strangely enough, the monuments seen in storage seem harmless when they are out of their context in the public realm.



*Figure 5 An-My Lê, Night Operations VII, 2003–2004. From the series 29 Palms, gelatin silver print 26.5 in. × 38 in. (67.31 × 96.52 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.*



*Figure 6 An-My Lê, Colonel Greenwood, 2003–2004. From the series 29 Palms, gelatin silver print 26.5 in. × 38 in. (67.31 × 96.52 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.*



*Figure 7 An-My Lê, Seaman on Bridge Rotation, USS Tortuga, South China Sea, 2010. From the series Events Ashore, inkjet print 26.5 in. × 38 in. (67.31 × 96.52 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.*

Lê's desire to organize images and document the United States' landscape, people, and culture without judgment or resolution becomes increasingly more prominent as the exhibition shifts its attention to the US military. Following *Silent General* is the series *29 Palms*, which refers to the nickname for the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in San Bernardino County, California. The black-and-white photographs of rolling tanks, falling bombs, and aiming howitzers appear to have been taken abroad during wartime (Figs. 4–6). Therefore, it was jarring to learn from the wall text that part of the California landscape resembling Afghanistan and Iraq was turned into a simulated war field.<sup>8</sup> To look at these images is to be displaced, as *29 Palms* elicits feelings of distress because, at first glance, it seemed that Lê embedded herself in the front lines of war with American soldiers—but she did not. What was jarring was not really how the twenty or so photographs were arranged or that the images captured anything particularly gruesome; rather, it was the performative nature of military training and the idea that the landscape can be so easily manipulated to mimic an actual war zone. My distress originated from the realization that photography can fool us into thinking we are witnessing the “truth” of an actual event.





Figure 8 *An-My Lê*, Ship Divers, USS New Hampshire, Arctic Seas, 2011. From the series *Events Ashore*, inkjet print 40 in. × 56.5 in. (101.60 × 143.51 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

War mimicry continues in the next series, titled *Small Wars*. Lê photographed Vietnam War reenactments performed by civilians (who had little to no military experience) in North Carolina and Virginia. Lê participated in the reenactments as a North Vietnamese soldier or as a Viet Cong rebel, and staged and directed scenes to re-create “authentic” moments from the Vietnam War. However, if there had been no wall text or labels, it would be impossible to know that the black-and-white photographs in *Small Wars* were not of its time—even the North Carolina and Virginia landscapes look very much like Vietnam in comparison with Lê’s *Việt Nam* series at the beginning of the exhibition, yet all the content of each image is a fabrication.

On *Contested Terrain* almost concluded with *Events Ashore*, for which Lê traveled to over twenty countries with the US Navy and glimpsed into the daily lives of sailors as they traversed the globe to prepare for potential conflict (Figs. 7–9). It was in this section that the US Naval Ship Hospital *Mercy* appears, floating along the horizon in Vietnam’s calm waters on a partly cloudy day. Positioned below the US *Mercy* was *Fresh Water Wash-Down of Super Structure Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf*, where sailors ardently scrub the side of a ship in bright red shirts with tangled green and yellow water hoses at their feet. *Events*



Figure 9 An-My Lê, *Manning the Rail, USS Tortuga, Java Sea, 2010*. From the series *Events Ashore*, inkjet print 40 in. × 56.5 in. (101.60 × 143.51 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

*Ashore* would have been a good place to end the exhibition. The concept of conflict moves from the notion of site-specificity toward more unknown and possibly unrecognizable conflicts as the navy sails “peacefully” at sea. Here, the curatorial team would have left the viewer with a more open-ended question about when the next conflict will begin or even end. The sea is vast. The mechanisms and people that incite conflict are on the move. It is just a matter of time when it will happen, who will be involved, and how it will be depicted.

However, two series followed *Events Ashore: Sculpture* (1986–2002, Fig. 10) and *Trap Rock* (2005–7) from when Lê was an MFA student at Stanford University and later when she became interested in the Hudson River Valley. These two groupings were not properly integrated into the larger exhibition due to their location outside a lesser-used entrance to the gallery. These images are far less arresting and seemed out of place and unnecessary in a tightly focused and overall strong exhibition. For instance, a small group of the photographs are from Lê’s summer in France in 1987 while working with the guild *Compagnons du Devoir et du Tour de France*. The images from this period capture the work at the guild, which was responsible for the preservation and restoration of French architectural heritage. Although an interesting experience, snapshots of a



Figure 10 An-My Lê, *Fonderia Marinelli, (David)*, Florence, Italy, 1991. From the series *Sculpture*, inkjet print 26.5 in. × 33 in. (67.31 × 83.82 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

guild member's studio with large, carved stone did not produce the same, jarring experience as the previous series and were not as meaningful to me in comparison with the other works presented.

Despite this stumble, *On Contested Terrain* was beautiful in its execution and overwhelming in its attempt to present content from the point of view of a balanced artistic perspective, especially at a time when the United States was ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, policy brutality, civil unrest, and the divisive Trump administration. Not a single image indicates whether a situation, place, or action is right or wrong, good or bad, true or false. There was a constant need to pause and reflect throughout the exhibition, as Lê's seemingly neutral stance clashed with the reality that was 2020. However, reflection also revealed that much had been made about notions of war and conflict from the start of the exhibition in the text panel for *Việt Nam* and throughout the rest of the wall text in the exhibition. Curiously enough, none of the photographs in the exhibition recorded actual war or real physical conflict. There is no violence or blood. The suggested conflict lies in the careful organization of photographs

depicting military training, war reenactments, sweeping landscapes, portraiture, and documentation of America in transitory or staged moments. It became clearer, walking through each section of the exhibition, that the real conflict was an inner one, deep within an American national consciousness that does not question the official narrative of our history, just as I failed (at first) to question the legitimacy of the war zone I thought was depicted in Lê's *29 Palms*. Moreover, consumerist culture has led to an onslaught of images through social media that are quickly consumed by people without any question of whether the images they see are "true." The use of technology also affects how people depict and view (through their phone's screen) their landscape and surroundings based on their consumption or specific experiences they have. Lê challenges this by requiring slow looking with her large-format photographs; however, even with her attempt to render imagery that is "objective," she too tricks the viewer with her knowledge of aesthetics, documentary photography, and the references to the history of photography itself. She poses the question: Is any photograph true? What are all the layers and perspectives that go into photography, whether it is well-crafted like hers or a quick photograph on a smartphone? People use photographs as evidence of memories or current events, but what kind of evidence can photographs provide when it is a medium that is readily available and can be easily manipulated? And just because a series of photographs comes from a "sanctioned" artist like Lê, does it make her work anymore truthful than something raw and quickly taken on the street? How do the roles of technology and the accessibility of photography shape our collective thinking and identity about the United States and what we know about the country itself?

\* \* \*

Rachel Klipa is a Pittsburgh-based arts administrator, curator, and writer.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *An-My Lê: On Contested Terrain* was exhibited from May 14, 2020, to January 18, 2021, at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and was organized by Dan Leers.

<sup>2</sup> From this point on, the exhibition title is shortened to *On Contested Terrain*.

<sup>3</sup> Lê's biography is used as an interpretive tool for her work, but she has stated that it is a "red herring," which is why it is not covered in great length for this

review. See Brian Scholis, “An-My Lê Seeks Complicated Beauty in Landscape Photography,” *Art in America*, March 3, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/an-my-le-interview-complicated-beauty-landscape-photography-1202679272/>.

<sup>4</sup> She returned to Vietnam three times from 1994 to 1998. See Scholis, “An-My Lê Seeks Complicated Beauty in Landscape Photography.”

<sup>5</sup> Quote from *Việt Nam* (1994–98) text panel, in the exhibition *An-My Lê: On Contested Terrain*, at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, PA, seen on July 1, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Quote from *Silent General* (2015–) text panel, in the exhibition *An-My Lê: On Contested Terrain*, at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, PA, seen on July 1, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> 29 Palms was also used as a training facility during the Vietnam War. From *29 Palms* (2003–4) introduction text panel, in the exhibition *On Contested Terrain*, at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, PA, seen on July 1, 2020.