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Dinh Q. Lê, “Survey 1998 - 2023”

by Jody Zellen

Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Los Angeles, California, Continuing through October 11, 2024



Dinh Q. Lê, “Headless Buddha,” 1998, Duratrans box and cement. Lightbox: 43 x 63 5”. Head: 16 x 10 x 10”

The Vietnamese American artist Dinh Q. Lê tragically passed away from a stroke in April 2024 at the age of 56 in Ho Chi Minh City. He was best known for his woven photographs that juxtapose historical, pop culture, and contemporary imagery of the Vietnam War. In these complex and visually compelling mixed media works, Lê explored subjects ranging from memory and myth to personal and cultural identities. Incorporating the tradition of grass-weaving, a skill he learned as a child from an aunt while still in Vietnam (his family left in 1978), he combined stills from Hollywood films about Vietnam with journalistic images. Although he continually shifted and delved deeper into different aspects of the past, both real and imagined, how the war, the country, and its people were remembered and represented in the West continued to be a prime motivation in his work.

Spanning his career, the exhibition begins with an early non-woven work “Headless Buddha” (1998), shot on location in a majestic temple. This backlit light box image is juxtaposed with a disembodied cement Buddha’s head resting on a pedestal, staring at its headless representation.

While this work is an anomaly, it sets the stage for Lê’s explorations into the relationship between relics, ruins and memory. Bookending the survey is “Cambodia-Reamker #36” (2023), a large woven photograph that is 86 inches wide. In it, Lê fuses images from the Reamker, Cambodia’s version of the Sanskrit Ramayana, an epic poem about the balance between good and evil, with portraits of prisoners from the Khmer Rouge’s notorious Tuol Sleng prison. Lê traveled to Cambodia and photographed the murals at the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. In this series, he weaves his imagery of these colorful and delicate murals with close cropped black and white reproductions that focus on the faces of the young condemned prisoners.



Dinh Q. Lê, "Cambodia-Realm #36," 2023, C-print and linen tape, 65 x 86 3/4".

In works such as "Dismantling Icons" (2003) or "Untitled 3" (2004), brightly colored stills from Hollywood films about the Vietnam War — "The Deer Hunter," "Apocalypse Now," "Born on the Fourth of July" — are combined with black and white images documenting the actual war by photojournalists. In many of these compositions, patterns appear within the weaving that become a third layer. Taken together these layers add both form and content. In this case, Lê works with his own photographs as well as those he appropriated from various sources. The pieces often combine black and white historical images with more intensely colored film stills or images culled from consumer and popular culture.

In "Double Distorted Portraits" (2017), large eyes come in and out of focus as the viewer moves between black and white images of two child prisoners and a fiery red-orange background that surrounds them. Similarly, in "Night Vision" (2008), the eye and the mind transition, from foreground to background, images that oscillate between hues of green, black and white to reveal a hovering helicopter, soldiers, and victims of war. Again, Lê brings together past and present while alluding to the (sadly) unavoidable and (seemingly) ever-present conditions of war.

Integral to his process is the study of history and culture. He purposely uses fragments and representations from different sources and is aware that his reconstructions offer only an incomplete whole. Lê's works were not only about the conflict in Vietnam. He also brought imagery from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan into his later compositions. Through appropriation — of a craft (weaving) and imagery — Lê developed a unique process that allowed the fragmentation and the reconstruction of different genres and eras to rewrite history and show the discrepancies between fantasy, memory and reality.

We can never know where Lê's abbreviated body of work may have gone from here. Even so, this survey exhibition is more than just a celebration of his creativity. It features aspects of his work which makes a strong case that it will remain influential and significant as time goes on.

Jody Zellen is a LA based writer and artist who creates interactive installations, mobile apps, net art, animations, drawings, paintings, photographs, public art, and artist's books. Zellen received a BA from Wesleyan University (1983), a MFA from CalArts (1989) and a MPS from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (2009). She has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1989. For more information please visit www.jodyzellen.com