

# ARTWRIT

## 07. JODY ZELLEN REVIEWS DINH Q. LÊ

Best known for his woven photographic works, "Elegies" at PPOW, marks Vietnamese American artist Dinh Q. Lê's transition into the digital realm. Two video are shown, "From Father to Son: A Rite of Passage" (2007) and "South China Sea Pishkun" (2009), in addition to a new series of photographic works derived from the "South China Sea" animation. The war in Vietnam, specifically the involvement of the United States therein, has long been the subject of Lê's work. (The artist's family emigrated to Los Angeles in the late 1970s.) In his multi-media works, he fuses real and imagined memories of the war drawing imagery from his memory, material he has read, as well as documentaries and Hollywood films that deal with or reference the war.

Memory, myth, personal and cultural identities are explored in his work. For "From Vietnam to Hollywood" (2004), he appropriated the tradition of grass-weaving to combine images from Hollywood films about Vietnam with found images of unknown Vietnamese. These works created complex photo-tapestries that juxtaposed not only color and black-and-white, but the perspectives of different cultures on the country and war. How the war has come to be remembered and represented is a motivating factor in Lê's work, one that continues to shift as he delves deeper into different pasts, real or imagined.

While Lê is well known for his woven photographs, video has been increasingly present in the exhibitions of the last few years. Part of his 2008 exhibition of photographs from "The Hill of Poisonous Trees" was a video entitled "The Penal Colony," shot in the political prison on Con Dao Island, Vietnam, which was well-known during the war for torturing anti-war activists. This four-channel installation simultaneously showed the now scrubbed-clean walls of the prison while asking viewers to imagine the horrors of its past. Another piece, "The Farmers and the Helicopters," from 2006, is a three-channel video installation that explores the symbolism of the helicopter as a tool for both destruction and salvation. "The work presents a helicopter made by a group of farmers, who are obsessed with the symbolic power of the flying machine as a vehicle of aid and rescue throughout the world -- but not in Vietnam, as is suggested by footage excerpted by the film of helicopters during the Vietnam War and in Hollywood action films." The dichotomy of the positive and negative potential of the helicopter, as the Vietnamese understand it, prompted Lê to further pursue it as an icon of the war.

The helicopter is, for better or worse, is the anchor of Lê's current installation in Chelsea, which is based on an historic event. On April 30th, 1975, The North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong were marching toward Saigon while the Southern Vietnamese Army, American military and U.S. diplomatic personnel were trying to escape. The U.S. helicopters were fleeing in panic toward the South China Sea searching for U.S. Army aircraft carriers to land on. Running out of fuel, and unable to reach the aircraft carriers, hundreds of helicopters were forced into the water. "South China Sea Pishkun" imagines the plight of those crafts. (Lê references a Blackfoot American Indian term, 'Pishkun,' "referring to the site where they used to kill roaming bison by driving them to a

panic and then running them over a cliff."

In this animation, Lê uses a 3D-modeling program to render the helicopters, placing them in a cloud-studded digital ocean. The fact that nothing is real is both the power and the downfall of the piece. Over a twelve minutes, individual, and then swarms of helicopters tumble out of the sky and plop into the water. Clearly unmanned, and digitally created, the toy-like crafts hover above the waves then suddenly spin out of control and crash into the water. They are swallowed by the ocean and never seen again. The work is simultaneously humorous and chilling. Like elements that have been removed from a war-play video game, the virtual objects allude to the real, yet are just play things. Devoid of context, yet clearly referencing a specific time and place, Lê calls attention to a forgotten event.

In addition to the video, Lê is showing numerous large-scale color photographs of the helicopters falling into the water. These prints lack the impact and the immediacy of the animation, seeming more like extracted stills than works in their own right. Whereas in Lê's woven photographs two works are interlaced evoking memories and suggesting different perspectives on the same moment, these depopulated images are essentially enlargements from a video game, where the human element and therefore any reference to those who were lost, has been erased.

Lê returns to a kind of weaving with "From Father to Son: A Rite of Passage" (2007), a two-channel video in which selections from *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* are juxtaposed. The work focuses on the relationship of father (Martin Sheen) to son (Charlie Sheen), who play soldiers in both of these two iconic films about the Vietnam war. The characters confront real and imagined demons as they negotiate the traumas of the war. The two-channel set up evokes the father-son dynamic that is at the core of Lê's work, but also alludes to the difficult relation between those who stayed and those who left Vietnam. The struggles with the aftermath of this or any war is implied. While Lê's subject is Vietnam, since that war is resonant with personal experiences for the artist, the perils of war are timeless. These images have a timeless and universal quality as well, one that permits the viewer to project contemporary concerns. Here lies the power of Lê's work.

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P.P.O.W, NEW YORK CITY  
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February 4 - March 14



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