

Dinh Q. Le, *The Headless Buddhas of Angkor*, 2012

DINH Q. LE

SHOSHANA WAYNE GALLERY

BY JODY ZELLEN

FUSING PAST AND PRESENT, IN “REMNANTS, RUINS, CIVILIZATIONS and Empires” Dinh Q. Le has transformed what began as the mining of his Vietnamese history into a more expansive project that examines and connects the cultures of Cambodia and ancient Sumer. His complex visual explorations are about the evolution and demise of civilizations over time. In this new work (all from 2012) he departs from his exclusive focus on the war in Indochina, bringing in a new element—the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Le continues his well-known strategy of weaving together two photographs (adapting the Vietnamese tradition of creating a grass mat), transforming the originals into grids and patterns that make it difficult at first glance to read either image. As with lenticular photographs, it is necessary to move the body in relation to the image to see both pictures. His source images are black-and-white photographs of abandoned temples taken during Le’s travels to Cambodia as well as images of artifacts from ancient Sumer now housed in museums. Through the juxtaposition of images from Cambodia with those of Sumer, Le is suggesting similarities in the decline in power of both places.

In his “Empire” series Le’s stacked photographs become 15-foot towers where each photograph is a building block. The construction of the display suggests the original architecture of the temples’ columns. Le juxtaposes photographs of the rubble from Cambodian temples now in ruin with archival photographs of those killed during the war in Vietnam. Submerged in these dark images devoid of color are remnants and artifacts of people that no longer exist. The individual photographs and the grids within them are Le’s attempts to resurrect the past while suggesting that empires are impermanent.

The “Sumerians” series includes photographs of carved stone reliefs and ancient friezes. These are intercut with

photos of Iraqi and Afghan citizens culled from the Internet. In both series the specifics of both place and people are obscured so Le’s juxtapositions become timelines that metaphorically intertwine the past and the present. His powerful work resurrects icons and images from two civilizations that have been torn apart by war, suggesting the recurrent nature of conflict. Le’s montages call to mind Martha Rosler’s “Bringing the War Home” series in which she juxtaposed found photos culled from *House Beautiful* magazine with images of soldiers in combat. But where Rosler’s commentary is direct, Le’s critical voice is more oblique.

The Headless Buddhas of Angkor is a grid of 15 large-scale non-woven prints that holds court on the far wall of the gallery. Each depicts one of the famous headless Buddha statues at Angkor Wat. The Buddha statues are draped with saffron colored sashes which are replaced periodically at ritual events and are part of a tradition throughout Southeast Asia to dress carved wood or stone deities in real clothes. The spice-colored sashes stand out against the blue-gray stone figures and decaying walls and bring a suggestion of life to the headless sculptures. The color images, which represent regal and stoic (albeit truncated) bodies, ironically suggest hope, yet in the context of the exhibition also make reference to Taliban’s destruction of the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan in 2001. While Le succeeds in linking past to present within a specific culture in his photographic montages, his attempts to make connections across cultures never quite consummate. His weaving of fragments never makes a whole, but rather suggests interrelationships and parallels that span places and times.