

The Museum of Modern Art

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

About An-My Lê's Two Rivers

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Over the past 30 years, An-My Lê's compelling photographic series have expanded our understanding of the intensity of political conflict, subtly engaging the representation of modern warfare, as well as its psychological impact. Lê does not take a straightforward photojournalistic approach to depicting combat. Rather, with poetic attention to politics and landscape, she nimbly explores the environmental repercussions of military activity, the nuances of displacement and diaspora, and the perpetuation of violence, sometimes in obscured forms, across the globe. Her heightened sensitivity to militarized landscapes is in evidence in photographs and films that reveal a dissonant layering of distinct landscapes and wars across time and space. The battlegrounds of Vietnam, as imagined by people who may not have been there, are transposed to the forests of the American South (the sites of Civil War battles), and soldiers not yet familiar with the Middle East imagine its terrain in the American West (the sites of the Indian Wars). From these misaligned geographies and historical ruptures, Lê devises relational models for navigating and mapping these flows, and for worldmaking out of the transoceanic stories that come to light. The result is a poetic, even intentionally ambiguous view of history and, consequently, of our shared present.

The two rivers in the exhibition's title are the Mekong River in Vietnam and the Mississippi River in the United States, two important geographic formations that appear in Lê's photography from her earliest to her most recent works. The link Lê forges between the Mekong and Mississippi deltas foregrounds the transnational corollary of an unpopular war—diaspora and migration, the daily entanglements of tradition and lifestyle—in images that belie the existence of static memory and amplify the consequences of conflict beyond strictly military activities. The title also calls forth other bodies of water, including the Rio Grande, running along the Mexican-American border, which appears in the series *Silent General*; the Hudson River, in the series *Trap Rock*; and the fountains of Parc de Saint-Cloud, outside Paris, in *Fourteen Views*. The river is a sweeping metaphor brought to life in this presentation, inviting us to reflect on the flow of time and history, and the layering of disparate geographies.

Between Two Rivers will mark the world premiere of two new, never-before-seen projects that, in the artist's words, "break the frame" of the camera and foreground Lê's conceptual multidisciplinary practice. *Someone Else's War (Gangbang Girl #26)* (2016–23) comprises a series of eight hand embroideries—some large scale, others the size of a laptop screen—based on a pornographic film Lê stumbled upon while researching Vietnam War reenactments, featuring a multiracial cast of performers playing the roles of GIs and Vietnamese sex workers. Converting the low-res pixels of the source material into stitches, employing the restorative act of mending—of material repair, of making amends—Lê turns gonzo X-rated material into a critical analysis of war, sexual labor, and exploitation. In these tapestries, as in many other bodies of work, Lê strays from the direct investigation of combat to explore its shifting edges. War becomes not a singular cataclysmic event but a quotidian mode of existence that structures our social and affective lives.

The second brand-new work, *Fourteen Views* (2023), is a discontinuous photographic cyclorama, an elliptic installation of 14 vertical panels of photographs Lê made in Vietnam, Louisiana, and France. Taking pictures along the Mississippi and Mekong rivers and deltas and the waterways in the environs of Paris, she charted the fluid imbrications of land politics, law enforcement, and the histories of migration. Although it provides an immersive experience, *Fourteen Views* is not the sort of unified view promised by the painted panoramas of 19th-century Europe. Her cyclorama disrupts the visual continuity usually set by the format, suggesting a fluid, slippery transversal of borders that, as it diverges from the linear, offers the possibility that a truth may be expressed, even as that truth is in a displaced relation to fiction. The panels interlock in a montage of intermittent geographies and incommensurable times, with images taken between 1994 and 2022 of subjects such as a bamboo boat on the Hoàng Long River in northern Vietnam and bald cypress trees in Chicot State Park, Louisiana, flooded by frequent storms and alterations in the area's natural hydrologic systems. Additional sections of sky have been digitally added to the panels to elongate them, creating a continuous horizon and sense of proximity between pictures separated by location and multiple years. The additions range from complex, fluffy cumulus clouds in the operatic style of 18th-century Rococo painting to an aerial drone, a 21st-century imaging technology of mass surveillance. Bending our understanding of the past, she defies national boundaries and opens perspectives into the affective connections shared by diasporic people; she invites us to reflect on the erratic, circular nature of time and history, the layering of racial identities and geographies, and the intimacies that grow, paradoxically, out of conflict.