

# Việt Nam (1994–98)

## Delta (2011)

Shortly after the normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam in 1994, Lê returned to her birth country for the first time in nineteen years. She revisited the half-remembered sites of her childhood in the south and ventured into the unfamiliar terrain of the north, where her mother had grown up. Lê found herself grappling with the complexities of diasporic life: “I felt that I didn’t recognize anything in Vietnam. Whatever it is I was looking for, it was in the landscape.” Using a large-format view camera, she photographed deep-focus outdoor scenes and human figures enfolded into the environment, casting the landscape as a layered repository of war, history, and memory.

Lê further explored the war’s migratory legacy in her Delta series of color photographs, which focus on the everyday lives of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American women and girls in Ho Chi Minh City and New Orleans. In linking South Vietnam and the southern United States she creates a sense of geographic displacement and cultural convergence.

# Small Wars (1999–2002)

## *đô-mi-nô* (2021)

In 1999, Lê traveled to Virginia and North Carolina to photograph a group of Vietnam War reenactors for *Small Wars*, whose title refers to armed conflict between unevenly matched combatants. The experience sharpened her sensitivity to militarized landscapes, where, she said, “every hilltop, bend in the road, group of trees, and open field became a possibility for an ambush, an escape route, a landing zone, or a campsite.” The reenactments, in which Lê was asked to play the roles of a South Vietnamese soldier and a Viet Cong guerrilla in exchange for access to the events, replace the battlegrounds of Vietnam with the terrain of the southern United States, where most of the combat in the American Civil War took place. The superimposition of wars, time periods, cultural histories, and disparate landscapes, which in reality cannot be mistaken for one another, creates a sense of dreamlike unease.

In the installation *đô-mi-nô*, Lê further explores the psychic aftermath of war. Inspired by her mother’s wartime pantry, these shelves are stocked not with provisions but with jumbo-size replicas of the Zippo lighters that American GIs brought to Vietnam, some wrapped in handwoven cozies and others inscribed with phrases reminiscent of those on the soldiers’ originals. The work’s title alludes to domino theory, the Cold War conjecture that a country falling to Communist forces would result in the fall of others around it.



# 29 Palms (2003–04)

After the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, Lê obtained permission to access and photograph a military training camp in Twentynine Palms, California. The photographs in this series show Marine Corps recruits staging battles in the Mojave Desert, in preparation for combat in the terrains of Iraq and Afghanistan. A pair of projections joins close-up shots of the soldiers with wide-angle views of the vast, arid landscape. As in previous works, 29 Palms strays from the subject of actual war; in this series, the photographs capture its preludes, simulations, and premonitions, treating war not as a singular event but as an everyday and ongoing way of living that subtly structures our spaces as well as our social and emotional lives. “My pictures stand in complete opposition to combat photography,” Lê has said. “We are dealing with parallel subjects, but the outcome—the meaning—is completely different.” The fact that the site was also a training ground for soldiers during the Vietnam War heightens a sense of uncertainty about time and place.

# Events Ashore (2005–14)

For the series *Events Ashore*, Lê followed the US Navy on maritime and coastal missions over the course of nine years, aboard battleships, aircraft carriers, and nuclear submarines, at outposts and bases across seven continents. These photographs of activities far from the heat of battle examine the quieter peacetime presence of the United States around the world: for scientific research in the Arctic and the Antarctic, earthquake relief in Haiti, and flood prevention in Ghana, among other endeavors. In these noncombat encounters with other countries, Lê captures the US's staggering military machinery, which she sets against the vaster forces of weather and geography. Dissonant arrangements between bodies and settings produce a sense of unease, undercutting the common notion that peace is the opposite of war. "There's a fine line between coming to help and invading," Lê has reflected, "and it has to do with physical and economic presence and the ways in which Americans occupy the land."



# *Fourteen Views* (2023)

This installation, specially made for *An-My Lê: Between Two Rivers*, recalls the traditional painted cycloramas of nineteenth-century Europe—circular panoramas that before the advent of the cinema were a popular form of spectacle. The cyclorama presented viewers with unbroken, idealized landscapes; that such landscapes were achieved and maintained through military and colonial means was the unspoken premise, an authority inseparable from their visual continuity. Lê's version offers an immersive experience while also disrupting this authority through the gaps between discontinuous images taken in different years, starting in the 1990s, and in different places, among them the Mỹ Thuận Bridge over the Mekong River in Vietnam, the banks of Bayou St. John in New Orleans, Hanoi seen from the village of Bát Tràng, the gardens of the former Château de Saint-Cloud outside Paris, the majestic Bản Giốc Falls on the border between China and Vietnam, and the sugarcane fields of Houma, Louisiana. This gathering together of landscapes and entangled histories embodies Lê's idea that "history doesn't move through time in a straight line."

**Fourteen Views** 2023

Fourteen wallpaper-and-wood panels

Acquired with the support of the Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art, and the Carol and David Appel Family Fund in honor of Roxana Marcoci

# Someone Else's War (*Gangbang Girl #26*) (2016–23) Gabinetto (2016)

This installation pairs two series—photographs of two sets of sexual imagery separated by two thousand years—that raise enduring questions about intimacy, desire, and the politics of violence and power. In 1999, Lê came across a pornographic film featuring men dressed as American GIs and two young Asian women as Vietnamese sex workers. Scenes from the film became *Someone Else's War (Gangbang Girl #26)*, in which digital images are embroidered into tapestries. Despite the use of a traditional Vietnamese handicraft, the works' dimensions—some the size of large TVs, others of laptop computers—evoke the screens through which pornographic images are consumed.

In 2016, Lê visited the Secret Cabinet (*Gabinetto Segreto*) at the National Archeological Museum in Naples and photographed erotic sculptures and wall paintings excavated from the ruins of Pompeii, some from a brothel. Frozen in time by volcanic ash from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 BCE, the items place the racialized sexual performance of *Someone Else's War* in the history of spectatorship, visual pleasure, and sex labor.



# Silent General (2015–ongoing)

The series *Silent General*—titled for a text about Ulysses S. Grant, the eighteenth US President, by the American poet Walt Whitman—unfolds like a travel narrative, taking us from the southern and southwestern United States to California, New York, and Washington, DC. Its thematic fragments bring together markers of both contemporary political rifts (patrol officers on the US–Mexico border, students after a Black Lives Matter protest, a replica of former President Donald Trump’s Oval Office on the television show *Saturday Night Live*) and unresolved historical conflicts (Confederate monuments, a Civil War film set, a burning sugarcane field) to illuminate current battles over race, migration, and belonging. “I’ve been making this series,” Lê reflected, “to relieve anxiety about what’s been going on in the past few years—division, chaos, racial tensions, all stuff I would not have felt so deeply five years ago. What makes America America? The wilderness, the vastness, our sense of history.”

# Trap Rock (2006–07)

In 2006, for a series commissioned by Dia Beacon, a museum north of New York City, Lê photographed the machinery and operations of a basalt quarry that she regularly passed on her train ride along the Hudson River from the city to Bard College, where she was teaching. The quarry, which opened in 1880 and was run by the New York Trap Rock Company, was part of a regional network of mines dating back to the seventeenth century, many of them now abandoned ruins. While Lê's wide-angle landscapes recall the sublime expanse of the paintings of the nineteenth-century Hudson River School, which proposed harmony between humans and nature, the scenes of extraction and heavy machinery foreground industrial transformation. Her choice of site, near the United States Military Academy and the mines that supported the Continental Army and the Union Army in the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, invokes the alterations to the landscape brought about by wars on US soil.