

Dinh Q. Lê's Pure Land: Beauty in Everything | COBO Social

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Dinh Q. Lê's Pure Land: Beauty in Everything



Installation View of Dinh Q. Lê's Pure Land. Courtesy of the artist and Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok.



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Dinh Q. Lê, *Untitled #5 (Light from darkness, truth always rises)*, 2018, UV print on silver vinyl fabric, 116 × 174cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok.

Naima Morelli

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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

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The effects of the Vietnam war are transfigured by American- Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê into mythological figures for the show "Pure Land" at Tang Contemporary Art, Bangkok

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist and Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok



Installation View of Dinh Q. Lê's Pure Land. Courtesy of the artist and Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok.

In the past month, purity is something that both Bangkok residents and visitors alike have most craved. In one of the most intense spells of air pollution endured by the city thus far, people have been yearning clean air and unhindered breathing. Waking up to a red sun and a grey, hazy sky, we can't help but cringe, nor can we dismiss the grave impact of environmental destruction conducted by humans.

Heavy with these dire reflections, I took off my n95 air mask to walk inside and breathe the purified air of the building where Tang Contemporary Art is located, where "Pure Land" by American-Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê, curated by Loredana Paracciani, is currently on view. The vision that welcomed me felt soothing. Harmonious white figures of children in meditative poses or dancing on lotus flowers felt like solace. Elegant and hurling in élan, these sculptures induced a sense of lightness, peace and careless effervescence.

However, there was also an energy emitted, which subliminally conveyed a sense of warning. At first I thought it was the coral red wall. Then, upon closer inspection, while walking through the statues, I started noticing strange bumps on the children's back. I started wondering why many figures were fused into one, their limbs contorted, their anatomy twisted. It was also present in the pictures all around the walls of the gallery, expanding our sense of disquiet. Desaturated natural landscapes were superimposed to shadows of babies in the womb, evoking a sort of natural spirit, hidden in a forest.



Installation View of Dinh Q. Lê's Pure Land. Courtesy of the artist and Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok.

But if there is a spirit, it has nothing to do with animist spirituality and everything to do with human havoc. The inspiration for Dinh Q. Lê came from his noticing people, especially babies affected by terrible physical deformities since their birth, in a special hospital. He investigated the subject further, and found out that those physical anomalies were due to the use of a substance called Agent Orange, a herbicide used as a chemical weapon during the Vietnam War.

The chemical is capable of damaging genes, resulting in deformities among the offspring of exposed victims, as well as producing cancer. Up to four million people in Vietnam were exposed to the defoliant, which had in its mixture the ultra-toxic TCDD dioxin. The Red Cross of Vietnam estimates that up to 1 million people are disabled or have health problems as a result of Agent Orange contamination.

Agent Orange also caused enormous environmental damage in Vietnam. Over 3,100,000 hectares of forest were defoliated. Defoliants eroded tree cover and seedling forest stock, making reforestation difficult in numerous areas. Diversity of animal species sharply reduced in contrast with unsprayed areas. Dinh Q. Lê's black and white photographs in this sense are powerful reminders of how humans and nature are not only interconnected, but also the same thing.



Dinh Q. Lê, *Untitled #5 (Light from darkness, truth always rises)*, 2018, UV print on silver vinyl fabric, 116 × 174cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok.

For the artist, this investigation corresponds to his ongoing interest in memory and trauma regarding his homeland, which he left with his family in 1978. From the US, where they finally relocated, Lê started questioning the perceptions of the Vietnam War and its lingering consequences on the Vietnamese people. Indeed, as much of a denunciation of the atrocious effect of war and chemical

warfare, "Pure Land" is also a crude look at the stigma attached to those with physical deformities. Most people are uneasy in approaching or even looking at deformed bodies. In Vietnam there is additional social stigma for these people affected by abnormal conformation, as it calls for a personal and collective reconciliation with the country's painful past.

Confronted with artworks highlighting such reality, we can't help question what instruments we have to cope with it? Here is where the matter of spirit comes into play, as Lê suggests. In the show, the artist masterfully shows us a reality beyond the body. He conveys the beauty which lies in everything, untouched by chemical havoc. It is something that goes beyond the imperfect body, towards transcendence.

The title of the show recalls a specific branch of Buddhism. Simplifying Buddhist doctrine reflected in "Pure Land," we can see it built on the belief that we will never have a world which is not corrupt. This is why we must strive for re-birth in another plane, referred to as the "Pure Land". This place provides a stepping stone towards enlightenment and liberation. Seen through this lens, the exhibition can result seemingly pessimistic. It suggests that the only way to transcend suffering is in by existing in another dimension, beyond life here on earth.

Walking past the glass door of Tang Gallery however, I felt all but hopeless. The responsibility to heal wounds by our own means still exist. But in order to do that, we to connect on a deeper level. It is that élan, that hope, that sense of beauty, of pureness which we strive for that keeps us going. We can find a 'Pure Land' all around us even amongst the most hideous of realities. More importantly, we can find this 'Pure Land' within ourselves. What we need to do is to bring it to fruition in the physical world.

[Pure Land](#)

Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok

01.12. – 03.01, 2019

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of "Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione" a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice

revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

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