

Installation view, "Dinh Q. Lê: Photographing the thread of memory" at musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, 8 February - 20 November 2022. Photo by Léo Delafontaine. Image courtesy of the artist and musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac.

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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 for...

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Photographic material from the past, visual archives, and history has always been central to the practice of Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê. Despite a practice spanning various media and conceptual experimentations, the artist is perhaps most renowned for his works intertwining images resulting in a new, alternative image.

Inspired by watching his aunt weave mats, the artist blends two different images to a surprising juxtaposition

through a hand-cutting and weaving process. What emerges from his images is a commentary on the widespread role of photography as the two-dimensional fabric of our reality, and a critical reflection on the darkest moment of the history of Vietnam and other parts and the world—issues he feels personally connected with.

“Dinh Q. Lê: Photographing the thread of memory” at the musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris marks the first comprehensive introduction of Lê’s weaving work to a European audience.

The show comprises three different bodies of work from the 1990s to present day. The first section, “Light and Belief”, is focused on Vietnam, with reference to the Vietnam War and the experience of the Vietnamese diaspora. “Splendor and Darkness” looks at the genocide carried out by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Lastly, “Adrift in Darkness” utilises images of migrants to reflect on the tragedies of crossing the Mediterranean by boat.

On the occasion of the exhibition, we sat down with the artist to talk about the themes of his new show and his weaving process.



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Your work has been shown in many different countries, and can be read differently depending on the cultural context in which it is presented. Did you think about how European audiences might perceive your work when selecting the works for this exhibition?

My artworks are very personal, and most of them are tied to my history. It’s really important to consider the context, and at times spell out my personal history, in order to provide an entry point for the audience so they can have an easier time understanding where I’m coming from. In the US, for example, I’ve been doing shows for so long that the public is quite aware of what I do, and where I’m coming from in terms of biography, whereas in Europe not so much. In Europe, over the years I have been showing video installations here and there, but never really a survey of my photo work. So, for this show, the curator and I wanted to have three timelines running and interweaving with each other. And I thought that was an excellent idea.

In the show, you have weaved together images of the regime of the Khmer Rouge with images of Angkor Wat. Can you tell me more about your personal connection to Cambodia?

The funny thing is that I started thinking about the series on Cambodia before my “*From Vietnam to Hollywood*” (2004) series. So that project actually started a long time ago, most of the work shown in Paris came from my residency at STPI – Creative Workshop and Gallery in Singapore.

In terms of my personal relationship with Cambodia, over the years I visited the country many times, particularly from the mid-1990s to 2000. And I still keep going back. I was again in Cambodia just recently. I guess I have a little of an obsession with the country, as a child growing up in Ha Tien, which is a town bordering Vietnam and Cambodia. I felt I belonged to both countries in a way. The border didn’t really seem to exist, and we passed it quite easily. So many relatives and people I know live on both sides.



Dinh Q. Le, *Adrift in Darkness*, 2017, digital print on Awagami bamboo paper; laser-cut and weaved around cane structure; dimensions variable. Installation view in "Dinh Q. Lê: Photographing the thread of memory" at musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, 8 February - 20 November 2022. Photo by Léo Delafontaine. Image courtesy of the artist and musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac.

Another interesting part of the show is the series "Adrift in Darkness", about the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean. This topic is even more relevant geographically for the European public.

In the series I'm talking about the experience of being on a boat, in the middle of nowhere, trying to get someplace safe; this is also very personal. My family and I were boat people in 1978. When I watched migrants wanting to reach Europe, I always think of my own family who escaped by boat to Thailand, eventually settling in the US. I wanted to make work that highlighted this event which was beyond our control, the situation that we ended up in. And in today's turbulent and unstable world, I think it was really necessary to make this work, for people to pay attention to the condition of displacement and confusion.



Dinh Q. Le, *Light and Belief: Sketches of Life from the Vietnam War*, 2012, 70 drawings, pencil, watercolour, ink and oil on paper, dimensions variable. Installation view in "Dinh Q. Lê: Photographing the thread of memory" at musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, 8 February - 20 November 2022. Photo by Léo Delafontaine. Image courtesy of the artist and musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac.

Vietnam and Cambodia both used to be French colonies. While most of your work looks at the period after, the exhibitions "Barricade" (2014) and "The Colony" (2016) do relate to this period of history. Is the colonial past of Vietnam something you will ever delve further into?

The show "Barricade", a collaboration with French-Algerian rapper Hamé (aka Mohamed Bourokba), was about our shared history of colonialism and how we historically fought separately but with a similar spirit against

French imperialism. On the other hand, the show "The Colony" was one of the most complex projects I have ever realised. It was about the guano trade, which brought a lot of movement in the Pacific, and opened up a trail similar to the more famous spice trail. It was a story around this trade that fascinated me.

In terms of imperialism, over the years, I have really thought about the colonial relationship between France and Vietnam. I come from a generation that is American now, so initially, I regarded it as something quite removed from my everyday experience. But when I was in Paris last time to set up the show, I was also able to go through the museum's archives, and I found a large holding of historical photographs of Vietnam. I saw pictures of the Vietnamese ambassador going to Paris to sign the agreement in the 1900s that was basically a sign of resignation by my country, and the thought has stayed with me since. So, I started researching the history between Vietnam and France, and the roots of this colonial history. I will most likely engage with that photographic archive in the future. We'll see.



Dinh Q. Le, South China Sea Pishkun, 2009, 3D animation video, 6min 30sec. Installation view in "Dinh Q. Lê: Photographing the thread of memory" at musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, 8 February - 20 November 2022. Photo by Léo Delafontaine. Image courtesy of the artist and musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac.

In your practice, is finding photographic archives something that really encourages you to start a new weaving work project?

I think that when you see something in person, it becomes very real. As someone who grew up in the US, I felt a strong pull to talk about the Vietnam War. It's also because I was in the middle of it, and it affected me so much that it was very real for me. The subject is so large that I have yet to really have space to think about Vietnam's colonial history with the French. However, over the years, the Vietnam War sort of consumed my life and my interest. And so today, when I held this photograph of the Vietnamese ambassador that travelled to Paris to sign a kind of surrender, I finally have space to emotionally feel the heaviness of that part of history. And of course, I know those events had an impact on my life, even if not so directly. When this became emotionally real for me, I think that's when my mind started to find room for this project to enter.

Between researched-based projects and photo weaving, you juggle many different projects at the same time. What is your routine like in your studio?

The weaving is something that doesn't demand a team, unlike other projects such as installations and video work. Weaving is very personal, I can just go to the studio and do it. It's quite simple, it just takes a lot of time. I mostly do it in between major projects, as a meditation of sorts. I can focus on the images and do the weaving, but at the same time, my mind also thinks of ideas for other projects. I think there are always a couple of projects going on in my head and physically in the studio. While I have to separate them in some way, they always intertwine with one another too.





Dinh Q. Le, *Splendor & Darkness #32*, 2017, foiling and screen-print on stonehenge paper; cut, weaved, and burned; 221 x 350 cm. Installation view in "Dinh Q. Lê: Photographing the thread of memory" at musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, 8 February - 20 November 2022. Photo by Léo Delafontaine. Image courtesy of the artist and musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac.

What are you working on at the moment?

Right now, I'm working on a scenario about this very powerful woman who played a very important role in the Vietnam War, helping in the war effort. I want to convey a different view compared to how—in the West particularly—women in Vietnam during the war have been portrayed, namely as either monsters or prostitutes. Like Madame Nhu, the former wife of one of our prime ministers, who was dubbed at the time "The Dragon Lady". Of course, when a powerful woman speaks her mind, she's automatically being portrayed as a monster. I think the direction of this project will be either a film or weaving work, or both. The weaving allows me to sit and meditate on this character that I'm writing about for the script. It's all a work in progress, we will see what happens.

Dinh Q. Lê: Photographing the thread of memory

8 February - 20 November 2022

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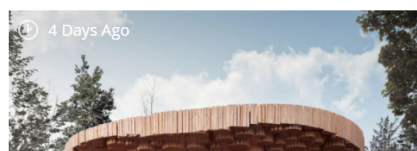
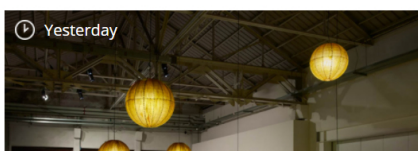
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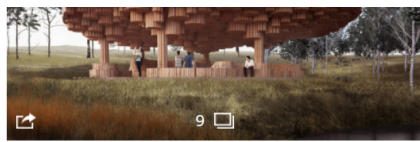




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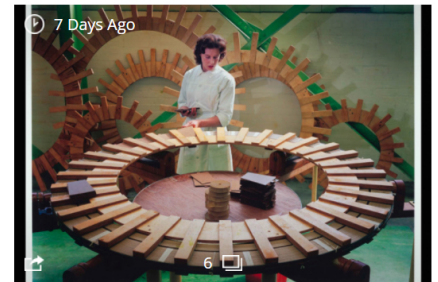
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