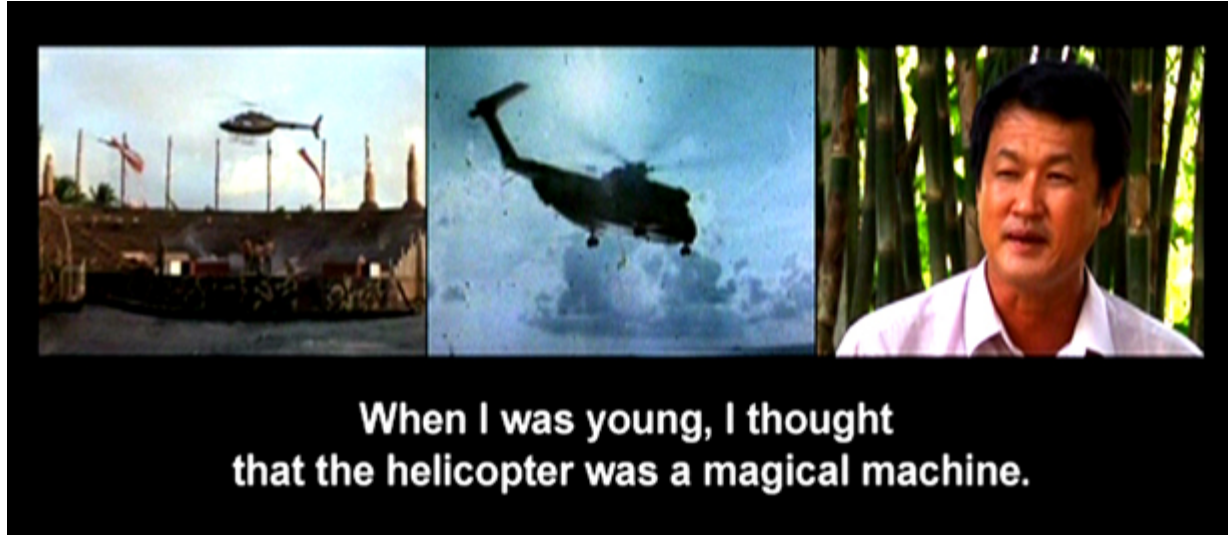


Helicopters from Vietnam: A Q&A with Dinh Q. Lê



© 2010 Dinh Q. Lê. Courtesy the artist; P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York; Museum of Modern Art
Still from Dinh Q. Lê's "The Farmers and The Helicopters," 2006.

By Emma Allen

Published: June 29, 2010

NEW YORK— Tonight will herald the opening of **Dinh Q. Lê's** exhibition, *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, on the second floor of the **Museum of Modern Art**. The show, running for six months as part of the museum's "Projects" series, will be the first solo exhibition by a Vietnamese artist in the institution's history. Lê, who lives in Ho Chi Minh City, will present a three-channel video — made in collaboration with artists **Phu-Nam Thuc Ha** and **Tuan Andrew Nguen** — and a helicopter built by a Vietnamese farmer and a self-taught mechanic.

Are there any Vietnamese artists who you think should have been given a solo show at MoMA before now?

I don't know. The idea of contemporary art has changed, and I think the advantage of coming into that whole field in the last 16 years is that it's still new to Vietnam. But in terms of the Vietnamese artists who worked in the Modernist tradition, I think that in the West and in America we need to consider these artists and the kind of work they've done. I think it's very important and we definitely should look at it again.

Your work often incorporates historical narratives, specifically with narratives relating to the Vietnam War. Do you work from personal memory, historical documents, or family narratives? To what degree do you investigate other people's accounts of your national history?

I think it started out with my own obsession, but now it's branching out into a larger narrative that encompasses a diverse range of stories and recollections. But it's also about building new narratives, and building new memories, and I think that's where I am at this moment. Before I was trying to make work that looked at these old narratives, but now that Vietnam is moving forward those narratives are also moving forward. So it's a completely different way of looking at our history, which is a very complicated history.

Recently your work focused on "woven photographs" that you made by interlacing strips of blown-up pictures, creating evocatively blended images. How did you move from that body of work to the video and the helicopter installation that will appear at MoMA?

They're not that far from each other, the works. The photo-weaving is a weaving of narratives from three different sources, from Hollywood movie images, documentary images, and family pictures — they're all cut up and woven into this tapestry of memories and fictions that all merge together. The video is in a way an extension of that practice, of that way of working. So the video is a combination of documentary footage, Hollywood footage, and interviews with people in Vietnam about their memories and their ideas about helicopters during the war and today. In a way, the video works as an extension of the photo-weaving. It's a kind of continued development of the idea of the complexity of our stories. We have a tendency to have only one perspective and then the voices from the other side are not really heard. So I'm trying to create a work about that.

Who else's stories have you been incorporating into these pieces? They were collaborations, weren't they?

Working collaboratively with not only the helicopter builder but with Tuan Andrew Nguyen and Phu-Nam Thuc Ha on the video has been a new thing for me. To collaborate with people, with artists and also with Hai [**Tran Quoc Hai**], who built the helicopter and who is not an artist, it's opened up a whole new way of thinking for me, about what it means to be an artist.

Do you find it constructive or frustrating to try to reconcile your understanding of Vietnam's history with other people's memories? Do you find that there's a big difference in how you see certain historical events, or such symbols as the helicopter, versus how they're seen by the people you're working with?

At times it can be really frustrating. But I think that we also respect each other, what we do and each other's perspectives, and in a way we have different areas of expertise. It used to be just me in the studio, and now I'm thinking of the larger picture. Just working with people who are not artists at all is definitely opening up a new way of thinking for me about art and what it means for me, my relationship to art, my relationship to community and to other people who are not into art.

Do you think that the people you've collaborated with outside of the art world are interested in your artistic representations of these loaded historical events and objects?

I think it's still a very complicated relationship. I think for some people, like Hai, he is still trying to wrap his mind around this idea that the helicopter he made is now an art object, not some piece of machinery. And I think he slowly has come to understand the context, and how to look at things in a new way. For people like Hai, the traditional idea of beauty... well, today we all know that that idea has completely changed. So I'm trying to explain that to him. And it's an interesting dialogue for me — very interesting for me to kind of try to explain it to him and at explain it to myself as well.

It will be interesting to see your piece installed at MoMA, where the Arthur Young helicopter hanging in the stairwell is on display simply as a design object. Do you think people will think find that your helicopter resonates with Young's one? Do you think it will force people to reinterpret the old helicopter?

I think people are going to look at these two objects and see two completely different things. The green helicopter from the design department is a finely finished, machine-made object. Everything is well designed. This helicopter that Hai made is really a handcrafted helicopter. And it has a whole different kind of demeanor. It's much more human in a strange way. It's much, much more human. The relationship I think the viewer will have with these two helicopters is completely different, which is kind of wonderful because it really speaks volumes about how even though they have the same function, the way they were made gives them such different meanings.

I read an article in the *Wall Street Journal* about your art collection, and I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about yourself as a collector. Collecting seems to me to be another way of constructing a subjective historical narrative, by including some things and excluding others and choosing how to display them.

I started by collecting Vietnamese ceramics ranging from Han Dynasty to the Ly Dynasty. It started out because I was afraid that my narratives would be lost, because so many ceramic pieces are being sent out of Vietnam for consumption outside of the country. So I just started with this collecting, because I was worried that they would be gone forever, and they're also really beautiful, particularly the Ly Dynasty ceramics. They look so contemporary, which is really fascinating. Then I started collecting more contemporary Vietnamese works. We're sort of at the beginning of it, of this new kind of conceptual, performance, and installation art, which again is part of my history. Of course, we all have personal taste — there's no escape from that, but I tried to be as inclusive as possible. And then myself and three friends — Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Phu-Nam Thuc Ha, and Tiffany Chung — we opened a gallery to try to represent as diverse of a voice for Vietnamese art as possible.