Putting the “Vietnam” Back in the Vietnam War

The country didn’t fall off the map when American troops withdrew 30 years ago.

By Kim Theriault

Most of the events and exhibitions in the city’s ongoing Commit to Memory exploration of the Vietnam war reflect familiar American attitudes rooted in the experiences of that time. But “Stages of Memory: The War in Vietnam” at the Museum of Contemporary Photography offers something different: the imaginative, thought-provoking perspectives of six artists, all but one Vietnamese by birth, on issues that don’t necessarily spring to mind for Americans. What happened to the Vietnamese as a result of the war? Is their identity still defined by it? What’s the relationship between those still living in Vietnam and its expatriates?

Internationally recognized artist Dinh Q. Le—born in Vietnam, raised in the United States, and now living in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon)—brilliantly addresses these questions in his series “Persistence of Memory,” which examines the way American pop-culture images of Vietnam helped form his identity. The title comes from a Salvador Dali painting of the same name that combines representational images in surreal ways to reflect on the creative process. In Persistence of Memory #10 Le has woven a war-era black-and-white image of soldiers together with a colorful landscape from a Hollywood film about the Vietnam war, reflecting the commingling of his own real and imagined “memories.” The helicopters fighting wildfires near his California home, for example, reminded him of those he’d seen in Vietnam. Then he remembered there were never helicopters in his village—he was recalling scenes from Apocalypse Now. With its fragments intricately woven together in irregular patterns, this mosaiclike piece creates a visual experience that fluctuates—like Le’s memories—between sources, the black-and-white images burning through the more familiar cinematic scene.

One of the most powerful works in the show is Le’s video documentation of an installation/performance he did in the market in Ho Chi Minh City. For Damaged Gene Project he set up a stall that sold clothing for deformed children—monogrammed with the names of the chemical companies that produced defoliants—and...
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**Photography**

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Toys like two-headed dolls. Dioxin, used in Agent Orange, still contaminates Vietnamese soil, and neither the U.S. nor the Vietnamese government acknowledge that since the war there’s been a thousandfold increase in the number of Vietnamese children born with birth defects. Damaged Gene Project confused and often repulsed the people in the market, but despite the cultural stigma of deformities, some revealed, when pressed, that they knew or were related to a child born with one.

Like Le, Liza Nguyen, daughter of a Vietnamese man who fled to France, returned to Vietnam and recorded the war’s lingering effects in physical and political terms. “Surface” is made up of banner-size photographs of soil samples from various well-known war locations, such as My Lai. Greatly magnified, each sample has its own texture and color, and you find yourself looking for some remnant of the war, like Agent Orange or blood, amid the rocks and twigs. Nguyen contrasts her greatly enlarged images of soil samples with small snapshots of the monuments, billboards, and other propaganda that constitute the current Vietnamese government’s official take on the war.

Chen muses on a life that might have been and challenges our conception of Vietnam as having been devastated by the war. By contrast Howard Henry Chen, born in Vietnam in 1972 and raised in the United States, offers a glimpse of contemporary Vietnamese life: his photographs record his return to Vietnam as a tourist last year. These seemingly innocuous vacation shots artfully combine the colorful amusement parks and restaurants that are part of Vietnamese culture today with images of Chen’s cousins who remained in Vietnam. Through these vibrant, affectionate pictures, Chen muses on a life that might have been and challenges our conception of Vietnam as a place thoroughly devastated by the war: it not only survives, it prospers.

Vietnamese-American Binh Danh uses the most unusual photographic technique, reconfiguring well-worn war-era news photos he appropriates from magazines or the Internet. After making negatives from the images, he puts them on top of leaves placed under glass and exposes them to sunlight, producing images of soil samples with small leaves placed under glass and exposing them to sunlight, producing images of soil samples with small fragments of the objects that his father used while serving in the war. Like Tim O’Brien in his novel *The Things They Carried*, Miller reminds us of the importance of the small objects soldiers had in their possession, limited to what was easily portable. For Miller’s father, these were items like rope and a 1968 datebook—though what kind of pressing engagements a soldier might have in the jungle is left to the imagination. Miller’s work may be intended as a transition between “Stages of Memory” and another exhibition on the museum’s first floor, Jeffrey Wolin’s “Inconvenient Stories.” But Wolin’s photographs of veterans and texts of interviews with them add nothing new to the tale of Vietnam, simply exploiting soldiers’ trauma without offering anything worthwhile artistically. The images are bland and uninvective, and though the narratives are compelling, they get lost amid all the objects that his father used while serving in the war. Like Miller’s work does amid the Vietnamese-centered visions in “Stages of Memory.” Perhaps An-My Le, a Vietnamese-American who at 45 is the oldest of the artists here, best represents Americans’ uneasy relationship to the war. Her series of large black-and-white photographs, “Small Wars,” documents reenactments of Vietnam battles in the woods of South Carolina. Although Le doesn’t appear to be sitting in judgment of adults playing soldier, the viewer is certainly left to question such activities, and to wonder whether reenactments of the Vietnam war are any better or worse than those of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. All seem to stem from misperceptions of reality. *Small Wars (Lesson)* is in part a self-portrait: Le sits with a “soldier,” a poignant reminder that the war has had very real effects on many for more than 40 years. Unlike visions of the Vietnam war that only look backward, “Stages of Memory” focuses on its legacy today; in the process dispelling fraudulent pop-cultural images and forcing us to reexamine our understanding of the war and of modern-day Vietnam.
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