

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

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AN-MY LÊ
Silent General

24 January – 29 February 2020
Opening Reception: Thursday 23 January, 6 – 8 pm

Marian Goodman Gallery London is pleased to present the first solo exhibition of An-My Lê in London, featuring a major presentation of her ongoing project *Silent General* (2015–), together with selected works from *29 Palms* (2003-04).

Born in 1960 in Saigon, Vietnam, photographer An-My Lê is recognised internationally for exploring the layered histories, aesthetic conventions and ethical considerations of photojournalism. Having fled Vietnam with her family in 1975 to settle as a political refugee in the United States, Lê specifically engages with how memory, place and geopolitics form part of media representations of war, national identity and community. Informed by the histories of 19th and 20th-century landscape photography, documentary reportage and conflict journalism, Lê's work offers a reflection on how reality and myth are portrayed and contested.

Lê's expansive *Silent General* project (2015–) documents a symbolically charged strand of recent history in the United States. Comprising six fragments or photo essays, the work was prompted by the June 2015 mass church shooting in Charleston, South Carolina. Nine African Americans were killed and subsequent calls were made for the removal of Confederate flags and statues from official buildings and public spaces. Concerned with extending reflection beyond the breaking-news cycle, Lê embarked upon an extended road trip to document the complexity of representing history. One of the resulting photographs features statues of secessionist generals Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard sequestered in temporary wooden housings at the Homeland Security Storage. Suggesting an iconography of conquest and power that has its roots in broader contexts of colonialism and migration, the photograph pointedly conveys realities of displacement within the identity and diversity of the United States.

Silent General also explores contested histories of people and place, extending the artist's interest in the fluid space between landscape photography and social portraiture. It includes photographs of the sometimes demarcated and sometimes invisible border between Mexico and the United States; female border patrol officers who stand either side of a transnational bridge; migrant workers who move between labour, land and culture; and churches and national holidays which memorialise tradition, religious belief and congregation communities. The title takes inspiration from a fragmentary passage in Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days* (1882) whose subject is the American Union General Ulysses S. Grant. Part-biographical, part-idealist, this short text eulogises a common man who rose to a position of great power and influence, whilst remaining humble and grounded. This familiar 'American dream' narrative signifies for Lê a literary and historical reference suggesting the 'experiences of a shared past in an unfolding present tense'.¹

The upper floor of the gallery will feature a selection of photographs and a video work from *29 Palms* (2003–04), which more specifically addresses the history of war and landscape photography. Documenting the expansive, arid environment of a US Marine Corps camp in the Mojave Desert, the photographs portray training activities – stagings and rehearsals for combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Lê's photographs of abandoned dwellings, camouflaged officers, night strikes and the diffusion of explosive devices evoke both the theatre and deadly reality of war. Alluding to historical war photographers such as Roger Fenton and Matthew Brady, Lê used a large format field camera (5 x 7 inch) and undertook long observational sessions. In contrast to combat photography, where risk and violence are an inherent part of reporting from the frontline, *29 Palms* reflects on the role of re-enactment, simulation and technological distance which has become an increasingly common attribute of contemporary warfare. Produced during a period when media reporting of the Iraq War

¹ Stories.daylight.co. (2019). *An-My Lê: The landscape of Conflict*. [online] Available at: <https://stories.daylight.co/an-my-le-the-landscape-of-conflict>

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was driven by live coverage and breaking headlines, *29 Palms* prompts us to question how our proximity or separation to the action and consequences of war are directly tied to media representations.

An-My Lê lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. A graduate of Stanford University, she holds a Masters of Fine Arts from the Yale University School of Art and is Professor of Photography at Bard College in New York where she has taught since 1999. Lê will have the first comprehensive solo exhibition of her work at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh (USA) in March 2020, having previously had solo exhibitions at the MK Gallery, Milton Keynes (England) and Museum Aan de Stroom (Belgium) in 2014; Baltimore Museum of Art (USA) in 2013; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (USA) in 2008; Dia: Beacon in 2006–07; and MoMA PS1 Contemporary Art Center in New York in 2002.

An-My Lê is the recipient of numerous awards and grants: in 2012 she was awarded the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship; in 2010, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award; in 2007, the National Science Foundation, Antarctic Artists and Writers Program Award; in 2004 the John Gutmann Photography Fellowship; and in 1997 the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship.