Dinh Q. Lê's Art Creates Dialogue Between Cultures and Generations

Judith van Praag

With "A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê", the Bellevue Art Museum presents exactly what makes BAM a center for the exploration of art, craft and design. The compelling attraction of Lê's work is for a large part his ability to combine the seductive elements of conceptual art, the finesse of craft, and the re-presentational power of design.

On the surface Lê's photo-weavings appear neat, clean, shiny and perhaps even decorative. At first glance there's an impressionistic quality, moments of light caught by the camera, an eye pleasing collage of color impressions. But upon closer inspection the depth of the imagery, the literal and figurative perspective becomes apparent. The artist has multiple layered stories to tell, and let's put it this way, if you are in a hurry, you'll miss out on his conceptual intent.

Dinh Q. Lê, an American *and* Vietnamese artist, shares his perception of the complexity of history; using Hollywood movie stills, press photos of the Vietnam (or American) War, portraits of Cambodian teenagers killed by the Khmer Rouge, as well as photos of Renaissance Judeo-Christian, and ancient Asian artifacts.

Born in Vietnam in 1968, Lê and his family escaped from their hometown, Ha Tien in 1977. In 1979 they emigrated from Thailand to the United States.

"In Junior High, in California, I spoke little or no English, so I had no friends. I went to the library, and because I couldn't read English, I looked at art books. Later, at the university, the curriculum was Western Art and History, of which I had taken in a lot already. But, I was asking myself, where do I fit in? What is my history?"

Lê didn't feel painting or sculpting suited him. Eventually he chose weaving —a craft he saw his aunt perform back in Vietnam— as his own medium.
He would literally weave images of his own history together with those of Western culture, creating the fabric that he as a Vietnamese and American is made of.

A photo tapestry at the entrance of the exhibition shows a man in black slacks, and a white shirt, facing a Mandala Thangka. The photo of the male figure is cut vertically into narrow strips, the warp; the photo of the Thangka is cut likewise, but horizontally, providing the weft. Woven warp and weft make man and background become one.

In many of the pieces in the show it's difficult to focus on one or the other photograph used for the weaving. In one series

pastel pink and baby blue Hollywood movie stills are woven together with black and white press photos of the Vietnam (or American) war. It's when different sensations of recognition are intertwined, that craft becomes art. You forget the source of either image, and are left with a shift in consciousness.

Impressive also is "Mot Coi Di Ve" (Spending One's Life Trying to Find One's Way Home Version II, for which the artist created a curtain, sewing together about 1,500 black and white photographs, bought in second hand stores in Vietnam.

In 1995 Lê returned to Vietnam, the following two years he would travel back and forth, staying three months on his Mom's couch in San Francisco, saving the money he made as a graphic designer, to sponsor his next three months in Vietnam. All that changed in 1997 when he started to be represented by galleries in Portland Ore., Los Angeles and New York City.

In "The Imaginary Country", a four channel video projection shows people walking into the sea. Children of the Vietnamese Diaspora are shown on the opposite wall. They speak of the ambivalence and duality they felt upon returning to Vietnam.

"The images of the clam pickers walking into the sea, that was a "déjà vu. I was only 10 years old but I remember walking to the boats, I was one of them…." Lê says. He adds that he's not allowed to show these videos in Vietnam, the communist government won't allow people to talk about the Exodus. But they are shown in private, and the effect, a dialogue between the generations is slowly starting to take place.

Such is the case at BAM, when a Korean patron confides that the text accompanying the artwork reminds her of her own war experience. Her teenaged granddaughter, watching "From Father to Son: A Rite of Passage", with on one track Martin Sheen in "Apocalypse Now", and on the other his son Charlie in "Platoon", listens in on what her grandmother says.

Published by BAM, the catalog is a beauty, the photographs (naturally) great and the writing most insightful. Included are essays by curator Stefano Catalani and Viet Thanh Nguyen, a report on the making of "Mot Coi Di Ve" by Moira Roth, and an enlightening interview with Dinh Q. Lê by Stefano Catalani.

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