

Q & A

DINH Q. LE



Since the early 90s, Dinh Q. Le has been one of the art world's most recognized Viet Kieu artists. At the end of this month, his new three-channel installation, *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, will be the subject of a six-month solo exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art. **Tom DiChristopher** speaks to Dinh about the upcoming show and the genesis of his more recent work. Photo by **Richard Harper**.

Your installation, *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, includes a three-channel video and a full-size helicopter built by an engineer in Tay Ninh Province. How did this all come together?

I read in the newspaper about how Tran Quoc Hai built the helicopter, and the way he talked about it was really interesting. The helicopter is such an iconic object during the [American War], but when Tran Quoc Hai talked about the helicopter, he was saying that he wanted to build the helicopter to help people—to help in emergency evacuations, to help with farming. So in a way, he's changing this idea of the helicopter from

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a war machine as we know it when we think of the helicopter related to Vietnam.

What was more interesting was how the general public wrote in to the newspaper in support of his idea, of his desire to build this machine. In a way it's like Vietnam was trying to move forward—creating new memories—changing the idea of a war machine to a new idea of what this machine could be. In a way, this helicopter is kind of a marking of a transitional point in Vietnam.

Originally I wanted to bring his helicopter to a show that I was asked to do at Asia Society in New York. The problem was the gallery ceiling was too low, so I couldn't bring the helicopter ... I came back [to HCM City] a little bit disappointed, so I decided to do a video. [Content development and production company] Propeller Group here in Saigon run by Tuan Andrew Nguyen are very good friends of mine ... so we started working together to make this three-channel video happen. The Asia Pacific Triennial in 2006 commissioned the work, so we got some funding to create the video.

I'm curious about how your relationship with Tran Quoc

Hai developed.

We only had a little blurb that says he's in Suoi Day, Tay Ninh. We have no idea where it is, because Suoi Day is an hour away from Tay Ninh, so nobody knows where it is. So we were like, let's just rent a car, and we go there and we basically ask all the xe om drivers, "Where is this?" [laughs] So eventually we found him, and he was really open about this idea. His helicopter had always been seen as a machine, and now I come and ask to look at it from an artistic perspective, and he loved that idea ... We also invited his neighbours to be part of the film because we wanted their ideas, their memories of the helicop-

ters during the war. Everybody was just very open.

Some of your early work dealt in part with your own memories of the war and how, as a Viet Kieu, they were partly informed by American film and media. Do you view this as an extension of that work?

My interest in the [American War] has always been about how that history has been mostly written by the West. I've always been trying to—maybe not completely undermine it—but at least insert a different point of view into that narrative. And I think this work in a way is probably my most successful work. Even though a lot of footage comes from Hollywood and documentaries that were taken by Westerners during the [American War], the only voices you hear are from the Vietnamese, so in a way I silenced the voices from the West. So this is the first piece of work that, primarily, the voice only comes from the Vietnamese perspective. I think in a way it's marking a change in my work also.

For *Signs and Signals from the Periphery* (2009), you also used ready-made objects like the tyres used by merchants to advertise street-side shops.

I've always been a great admirer of the people, the resilience and the inventiveness of the people. Again, it goes back to the war because you constantly have to move because the war might come at any time. You have to be able to pack up and leave and settle down wherever you are and be able to survive right away. It's kind of interesting, this mentality. You can see it still happening in Vietnam.

So you see the poor people surrounding themselves with whatever they can get their hands on to attract your attention to what they are selling. Some of them are the most wonderful things. I've been looking at them for years, but I think I was a little bit too obsessed with the [American War] to really think about this work. Going back to *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, I think that work really freed me to think about Vietnam today. And so I was thinking, "Where is Vietnam today? What is happening in Vietnam?" Some parts of Vietnam are still trying to deal with this history of the [American War]. But I think there's also another part that has been forced to move on because of the necessity of survival. I wanted to look at that part of Vietnam, as well.

If you look at the objects they've created, they're completely abstract. If you don't know how to read the signs, they're a kind of a puzzle, a kind of abstraction. It's so close to the language of contemporary art of today that all you have to do is switch the environment they're in. Very simply, I just took them from the street and put them in the white cube of a gallery and it completely changed the meaning and the context.

You exhibited one of these works, a bicycle stocked with Vietnamese flags, at HCM City's San Art recently. Did you consider how that might be interpreted by local Vietnamese for whom it's an everyday sight?

That was one of the pieces I had in mind right away, because the local audience, they see this work all the time—this bicycle with the flags. They see it on the street every day, but after a

while, they don't pay attention. It's sort of taken for granted. So I wanted people to look at this work in a different context. It was sort of a gamble. I thought a lot of people were going to dismiss it; "Oh, he's just taking something off the street." But I think something wonderful happened. Here in the gallery context, [the audience] really looked at it for the first time.

People don't look at things, and I think that's the problem. We're so busy with our daily lives. I want people to think about what it is on the street that they're seeing and yet not seeing—when it's in the gallery context, force them to really think about their idea of everything they see on the street. I think that's what the goal is, and I think it was very successful. It was in all the newspapers. [Laughs]

That body of work contains a neon-lit tyre that you said reminds you of Dan Flavin's light installations, as well as a piece entitled *Fountain for B.N.* [Bruce Nauman]. Is there a conscious effort there to bring Vietnamese imagery into the contemporary art dialogue? It wasn't a conscious effort but I think because this is part of the history, part of the vocabulary that I'm part of—contemporary art—I'm always seeing things in relation to that history. It wasn't conscious, it was just very effortless. It was probably one of the easiest bodies of work I've ever done. [laughs] I guess because I'd been thinking about them for so long that when the ideas all clicked together, it just flowed so effortlessly.

And I think maybe that's the thing about who I am—I was born in Vietnam, raised in America, educated in the West and educated in the language of Western contemporary art. Now coming back, this is where the two meet within me. I'm sort of a combination of the two—the West and the East, the local and the international. That body of work is really about who I am in a way, how I see the world.

For an extended interview with Dinh Q. Le, visit asialife.wordpress.com. ■