LITERATURES, CULTURES, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

# Environment and Narrative in Vietnam

*Edited by*
Ursula K. Heise · Chi P. Pham

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**LITERATURES, CULTURES, AND THE ENVIRONMENT**
*Series Editors:* **Ursula K. Heise · Gisela Heffes**

*Environment and Narrative in Vietnam* brings together essays about Vietnam's natural environments and environmental crises from the perspective of culture, with particular attention to narrative templates that have shaped perceptions and interactions with nature on the part of different communities. The essays in this volume explore theoretical problems in the assessment of ecological stewardship and attitudes toward nature across cultures. They focus on both majority (Kinh) and ethnic minority narratives about nature and seek to outline how different ideas of modernization, from the French colonial project to the Marxist understanding of nature on the part of the Communist government, have shaped perceptions, policies, and activism regarding the environment. The essays also highlight the tensions and confluences between nationalist nation-building projects and economic integration into global markets for environmental thinking over the last half-century, and they analyze how texts from literary fiction to contemporary news media represent different environmental cultures in Vietnam. Taken together, the essays in *Environment and Narrative in Vietnam* begin to fill a significant gap in the understanding of environmental cultures in Asia and in the Environmental Humanities. This is an open access book.

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ISBN 978-3-031-41183-0

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# Đinh Q. Lê's *The Pure Land* and Ecological Phantoms: Levitating Sarcophagi, Submerged Spirits

*Conor Lauesen*

## 1 Introduction

Born in 1968 in Hà Tiên—a province located near the Cambodian border of the southern Vietnamese delta—Đinh Q. Lê and his family were forced to flee Vietnam when he was a young boy. In interviews, Lê has often recounted this 1978 story of escape from the genocidal campaign of the Khmer Rouge. After some time in a refugee camp in Thailand, Lê and his family eventually found permanent asylum in California. Twenty years later he returned home for the first time. It was during this first return trip in 1998 that Lê visited his families' grave, a transgenerational locus of loss where five generations of loved ones are buried.

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U. K. Heise, C. P. Pham (eds.), *Environment and Narrative in Vietnam*, Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41184-7_8

The Khmer Rouge regime's power that forced Lê's family into exile was heightened by the American bombing campaigns that likewise ravaged the countryside. The violence in the border region of the Khmer-Viet Mekong Delta, therefore, was multivalent: B52 air raids and the dust clouds of Agent Orange were deployed as tools of US military destruction even as local Khmer Rouge junta forces slaughtered the land and its people. It was only in the year 2000, during a visit to Vietnam, that US president Bill Clinton accepted national responsibility for the more than 2.5 million tons of bombs dropped on politically neutral Cambodia from 1964 to 1975. Previously classified Air Force data confirmed this horrific statistic. Although he was born on the Vietnamese side of the border, Lê spent his formative youth years enmeshed in this historical catastrophe.

His monumental installation *The Pure Land* (2019) is a multimedia project comprised of sculpture and photography that hearkens back to this traumatic landscape (Fig. 1). Shining porcelain-like icons are carefully

**Fig. 1** Đinh Q. Lê, *The Pure Land*. Installation view. (Credit from Tang Contemporary Art, Bangkok, Thailand)



positioned across the floor, and large-scale photographs printed on silver vinyl sheets hang on the red-painted walls. This site-specific installation haunted the gallery space of the Tang Contemporary Art Center in Bangkok during the winter of 2018–2019. What do we see in Lê's *Pure Land*? How does the installation reimagine environmental dislocation, dreadful memories, and historic violence? Why does Lê's 2019 work import a visual vernacular of ecology, the transformative sacred and grotesque narrative fracture? This chapter suggests that through sustained looking and an absorptive bodily engagement, Lê's *Pure Land* offers a gothic reconceptualization of landscape and Buddhism, shared trauma, and a collective social past in contemporary Vietnam (see Vann 2019).

On first approaching *Pure Land*, it may appear as if Lê's spatially conjoined aesthetic objects portray some otherworld of sublime beauty and religious ecstasy. Lê's sculptures summon a lexicon of both ancient Buddhist iconography and Western baroque sculpture. Indeed, mythmaking and the grotto realm of epiphanic religious statues seem like sensible analogs. Concurrently, the first look at *Pure Land* could conjure up the visual language of postmodern "shimmer" and gloss, glisten, and polish (Rose 2017: 52). However, Lê's palette of grays, silvers, and whites functions as a mere nominal device, a formal tool of visual negation. This gossamer shine is one of many thin veneers in *Pure Land*. Instead, as one continues to look, it becomes clear that Lê's sense of mechanical precision and 3D-printed technical sleekness is only surface-deep, a base layer of ornamental pretense: the romancing sheen to conceal the larger pathos of his artistic project.

Rather, Lê's *Pure Land* is a visual elegy, a tactile graveyard of fantastically twinned bodies. The grace of lotus reeds and blossoming petals functions as a visual foil to obscure the pain. Quickly, viewers begin to notice attendant elements of the uncanny on some of the bodies: four arms, one torso, and two heads. In one of Lê's seven untitled sculptures, a sinewy prepubescent body prostrates inside a lotus bud, his two frontmost hands reverently flipped upwards in a gesture of Buddhist prayer (Fig. 2). In this phantasmatic doubling, Lê's art installation begins to spawn its redemptive visionary universe. Eminent phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty reminds us that "every perception is a communication or a communion with the world ... and the communion has healing factors" (2013: 373). Operating on the edge of this dialogic interfold, Lê's gestalt sensibility surfaces in *The Pure Land*. Soon enough, an apparitional effect subsumes the gallery, and the aesthetic forms unveil their pregnant

**Fig. 2** Đinh Q. Lê, *The Pure Land*. 2019. Installation view. (Credit from Tang Contemporary Art, Bangkok, Thailand)

spectrality. The photographs and sculptures alike portray the victim-angels of Agent Orange.

A palimpsest of calm creatures and hazy aquatic photography, the taboo subjects—guiltless children and voiceless mothers, the toxic fissures of environment and atmosphere—are exposed (see Lê in Paracciani). Cultural anthropologist Mai Lan Gustafsson's central question in *War and Shadows: The Haunting of Vietnam* is pertinent here: "If the war haunts Vietnam, who or what haunts the Vietnamese? It is the angry spirits of the dead, or *con ma*. The millions of dead from the war joined other classes of beings in Vietnam's otherworld, known as the *thế giới khác*" (2009: 11). Although Lê's miraculous statues and quixotic images purport to stand alone in strange introversion and staid reverie, the gallery space operates as a recuperative community altar and shared space of prayer. Archetypal figures of loss, Lê's ghost objects gather inward.

It is as if the artist's sleight of hand was only an initial gesture of concealment, a subdued act of repudiation. For witnesses, the belatedness (of circumstantial details) functions as a generative grief, deference imbued with both transformative infinitude and creative sublimation. Enmeshed



in a process of generative accruing perception, spectators are thrust into the haunted cosmological sphere of *Pure Land*. In conversation with curator Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani, Lê further highlights this empathic exchange:

> Coming home [in 1998] I was simply shocked by the many people with deformities begging on the streets. That got my research started, learning more about it, reading about it and meeting up with people for information. That was also difficult because, at that time, this problem was a taboo subject—people were afraid to talk about it. If you did talk about it, people thought they might give birth to a deformed child. So, nobody was talking about it, there was no help for these people. (Paracciani 2019)

As a pantheon of unremembered victims, Lê's inflected objects slowly accrue fresh gravitas and summon the polyvalent language of shared disfiguration and loss, rebirth, and longing. Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* illuminates the unique quality of haunting "as an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely" (2011: xvi). Lê's hybrid subjects revel in a similar indexical state of flux: *Pure Land*, in other words, is a symbiotic ecosystem constitutive of both public mourning and catastrophic loss. Throughout this chapter, I therefore analogously read Lê's work as an embodied matrix of bereavement, an interwoven communal space and echoing proclamation of spirit solidarity. I suggest that the content and form of *Pure Land* ultimately dovetail to create a panoramic scene of imaginative regeneration, a novel worldscape most prophetic in its own dense *mise-en-scène*. Paracciani is helpful when she writes:

> As early as the 1990s when Lê started his research on this topic, he quickly realized the legacy of Agent Orange had acquired a spiritual dimension, whereby people prayed to the conjoined infants who died, believing they were pure spirits. In life, these infants were dreaded; in death, they are elevated among the deities of the Buddhist pantheon—if only for the people to appease their own fears. (Paracciani 2019)

*Pure Land* is rhizomatic synthesis. More precisely, Lê's 2019 project is a conjunction of necromantic Buddhist landscape and a revolutionary future nonsite of emancipation (see Tien 1997). In this mystically structured arena of heterodox Vietnamese selves, queered forms of karmic rebirth and transcendent spiritual identities blossom. What disparate

stories of shock (both local and universal) are embedded in Lê's reappropriated images and chimerical figures? How should we best understand the confluences of image and history, materiality and memory, resuscitation and reconciliation floating just below the surface of *Pure Land*? Where does the story of ecological pollutants emerge in his installation? A revisualization of history and the remaking of dreadful images are the forces that construct this chapter.

To approximate the narrative pitch of Lê's work and the aesthetic intensity of *Pure Land*, I first carry out a close visual analysis of the exhibition. I formally position the work within a wider framework of grotesque realism, folk gothic, and supernatural narratology. An inchoate multiplicity of strident voices and submerged stories triangulate in *Pure Land*. Next, I detail the historical background and traumatic social underpinnings of Lê's 2019 installation piece. At stake is a momentous (and variegated) structure of feeling generated by Lê's landscape as a collective response to the Agent Orange tragedy. A history of skin and rebirth, the story of *Pure Land* likewise starts with dust. The slow toxic burn continues today, and in Lê's work, we see the dead applying pressure on the gruesome microphysics of war. Last, I situate Lê's personal history as an artist and witness, as *Việt Kiều* (overseas Vietnamese) and refugee, and his larger oeuvre in the Buddhist vernacular. Coexistent with the stories of ecological erasure and social fissure burrowed in Lê's landscape, I situate *Pure Land* as a commemorative site of ancestral worship, a dominion of transgressive death rites and fluid kinship. Lê's 2019 project is an emotive cartographic horizon wherein a somatic poiesis dwells and revolutionary, intracorporeal drama unfolds.

## 2 Đình Q. Lê's *Pure Land* Installation

> What is fascinating to me is that some Vietnamese deities also have multiple arms, legs, and heads. This piece grows out of my fascination with the idea of collapsing distance between mythology and reality.—Đình Q. Lê (Paracciani 2019)

The pathos of *The Pure Land* is a strange visual space most rightly understood as a protean clearing of melancholic disruption in narrative and landscape. Consider the artist's self-reflexivity in the above epigraph: to enfold truth in fiction, fact in mythos, liberation in suffering. In Lê's emancipatory vision, a multiplicity of realities and proliferation of limbs



becomes part and parcel of the everyday. Gustafsson's *War and Shadows* shows us that the line between the living and the dead is thin in Vietnam, and I agree with Gordon when she argues that "the ghost is not simply dead or a missing person, but a social figure" (2008: 8). Through Lê's gestures of defamiliarization, spectators of *Pure Land* are asked to envision a future beyond the lost histories of these child victims. Dynamic imagistic vectors, in Lê's *Pure Land* we are beholden to both the dislocated scars of environmental fracture and future utopic archaeology of the unborn. Gradually we begin to understand how a similar deep confluence of dialectical terms—memory and disavowal, fictional and mimetic, personal and public, dispossession and excess, death and rebirth—dwell inside Lê's creation.

Through sequential displacement and kaleidoscopic distortion, stable notions of common time and terrestrial space evaporate in this ecosphere of shapeshifting tricksters, in an echo of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque: "The grotesque body is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body ... the grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon" (1984: 317–320). Read as an embodied lacuna of transgenerational grief, Lê's *Pure Land* presents a metamorphosis of narrative, a visual entanglement in the romantic grotesque. Where do the biochemical scars of history, spiritual trauma from the delta, and ellipsis of temporal orientation coalesce? What do we see when we look closely at Lê's juxtaposition of photography and sculpture? We begin from the inside out, both literally and figuratively: our first visual thicket of inquiry are Lê's porcelain-like white sculptures.

Although the individual figures appear atomized in their reticent quiet, Lê's paranormal forms collectively spring from the spectral life of mud. Nils Bubandt's *Haunted Geologies* is right to posit that "mud is cosmopolitical: at once a political symbol and a cosmological agent. The political agency of mud is deeply entangled with the world of spirits" (2017: 135–136). Submerging from the grime and muck of botanical matter, *The Pure Land* offers these misplaced souls an alternative place of birth. Lê's calm pictorial sensibilities invent this realm of unreason, and his sculpture *Untitled #6* is a personified representation of this love (Fig. 3).

The girl's reflective skin is soothing in the white porcelain finish of Lê's statues. In *Untitled #6*, the child's eyes contemplatively fixate on some distant nowhere as a whimsical braid hangs down her left shoulder.

**Fig. 3** Đinh Q. Lê, *The Pure Land Untitled #6*. Installation View. (Credit from Tang Contemporary Art, Bangkok, Thailand)

Kneeling in a blossoming lotus, Lê's angel-victim is a reborn deity. With a quiet set of hands dignifiedly raised, her body posture is a common *mudra* position. At heart level, the child's fingers gently link in an act of dialogic communal prayer. Her thumbs and forefingers barely clasp to form circles that touch: the right hand just faintly faces outward as her left sensitively tilts inward. This Buddhist invocation is often termed "*Dharma-chakra Mudra*." A signal of universal instruction, the beneficent mandala wheel of Buddha's teachings is contained in the girl's *Pure Land* pose. A symbol



of devotional poise and elegant learnedness, Lê's necromantic sculpture sees between the lines.

Now notice an uncanny second posture of raised hands. Emerging from unseen shoulder blades, two additional reverent arms spread like wings. In surrender, this humbling gesture evokes both the horrors of war and the emancipatory release of the divine. The *Pure Land* is a supernatural landscape of lost clouds and forgotten dreamscape night terrors. Once encased in a casket of trauma, the potent life force of *Untitled #6* purports to live again. As if to magically renew her own body, the child's altruistic mudra teaching posture is doubly imprinted on her own skin. A mirroring shadow of shadows, this interminably generous hand position is written in light along her abdomen. Auto-generative, the circular silhouette tattoo is a twofold echo of darkness. With our heads now bowed, specters from the other side of light begin to beam through *Pure Land Untitled #6*. Only then can we approach the dancing shadows imprinted on her stomach.

In Lê's fiberglass sculptures, the material plays an ambivalent role. "The combination of the ancient medium of porcelain, with its resilience to time and pressure, and the new, cutting-edge finish of the figures confers a definitive historical narrative to the works," Lê comments (Paracciani 2019). His keen awareness of loss bends the past, breathes into the atmospheric void of the present, and disorients the prismatic light of the future as he lives in melancholic resistance along with the figures he has created.

In *The Visceral Logics of Decolonization*, Neetu Khanna describes the *visceral* as "a concentrated site of postcolonial crises," a potent surface that shuffles "between the materiality and metaphor of bodily life" (2020: 2). Self-conscious organisms of alterity, the crystalline life-formations of *The Pure Land* are a haptic articulation of this liquescent strangeness. As ruptured embryonic surfaces and latent societal wounds, the limbs of Lê's project seem to reach out to grasp viewers in a benevolent figure of perichoresis. Khanna also reads the visceral as an "embodied interface that confounds distinctions" (2020: 10). An act of transfiguration, the subversive poetics and communal politics of Lê's *Pure Land* activate the phenomenological contours of historical experience: the unborn rise, the dead undead, the living mere simulacra. In this way, the objects of Lê's work become a redemptive reservoir of humility and grace; their introjected kindness is a reconfiguration of lost selfhood, their dispossession an enactment of liberation. Applying pressure to the "real," Lê discursively shifts the "creative energy of biological matter without seeking to restore the [racialized] subject to a fictive state of wholeness or integrity" (Khanna

2020: 30). And any discourse intent to "justly remember" is reversed through a valence of empathy and reception, touch and reorientation (Nguyen 2016: 19). I, too, then ask, importing an alike vernacular of postcolonial theorist Gyanendra Pandey: "When and how do we archive the body as a register of events; or gestures, pauses, gut-reactions; or deep-rooted feelings of ecstasy, humiliation, pain?" (quoted in Khanna 2020: 7). Inside *Pure Land*, an ulterior corporeal logic of occult mysticism blooms.

Immersed in this utopian sphere of freedom and nonbinary state of historical resurrection, Lê's *Pure Land* suspends narrative progression: pauses and gaps, recursion and futurity replace the linear structure. Instead, a multiplicity of anachronistic ontologies and narrative tropes scaffolds both the form and content of the installation. Rapt with a gothic sense of folk levity in shared suffering, *Pure Land* revels in its own phantasmatic otherness. In Bakhtin's words, "dialogic expression is unfinalizable, always incomplete, and productive of further chains of responses: meaning is never closed and always oriented toward the future" (1987: 170). Through Lê's *Pure Land*, we witness how the pathos of a work's creativity can make a world an expressive end in itself. Neither naively idealist nor maudlin, Lê's melancholic icons drift—their gentle gazing at once confessional and prosecutorial—in a dialogic space beyond the value-based demands of blithe market negotiation, utilitarian exchange, or reductive language-based thinking. Ears to the sky and souls to the earth, Lê's universally resilient objects lift off in a state of ascension.

## 3 Nature's Fate: Environmental Conflagration and Photographic Ghosts

On red-painted walls hang Lê's ten large-scale photographs, UV-printed on silver vinyl fabric. Synthetic sheets resembling leathery skin, these watery images secrete questions of living materiality and environmental ruin. In conjunction with re-presenting the myriad scars of Vietnamese social abjection that continue to plague communal order and cultural cohesion, the photography of *Pure Land* reimagines the inexorable stains of ecological devastation (Fig. 4).

Looking closely at Lê's painterly pictures, we witness a haunted aquatic scene wherein fragmented lotus images and motley slices of vegetal life interfold with historical photographs of malformed fetuses.



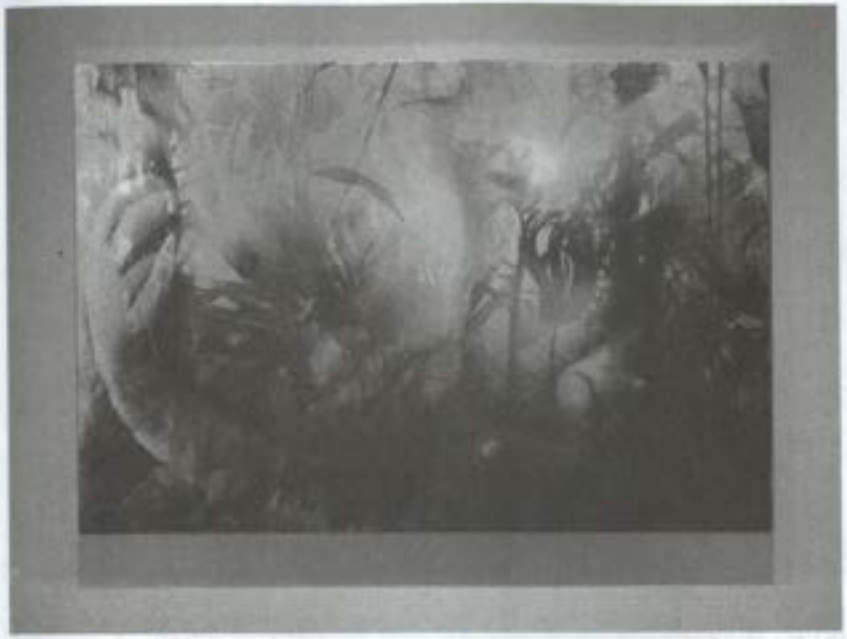

**Fig. 4** Đinh Q. Lê, *The Pure Land Untitled #3 (Light from darkness, truth always rises)*. 2018. UV print on silver vinyl fabric. 116 × 174 cm. (Credit from Tang Contemporary Art, Bangkok, Thailand)

Superimposed—and acting as a formal bridge between the human and natural environment—Lê's multilayered (composite and variegated exposure) portrait-landscapes reappropriate the tragic Agent Orange images of Phillip Jones Griffiths (Fig. 5). Whereas Griffiths' harrowing documentary photography from Từ Dũ Hospital unapologetically shows us the horror, suffering, and tragedy of biochemical violence, Lê's photographs, instead, present a strange convergence of otherness.

A post-apocalyptic union of forgotten human spirits with the flotsam and jetsam of the world's profuse detrital matter, the large-scale photographs offer an intimate adaptation of *the real*. Defamiliarizing both the sublime and grotesque, Lê's photographic portraits meld victim infant bodies and levitational leaves into one; dovetailing, the natural world of earthly debris, dislocated uteri limbs, and virgin skin generate some ulterior cosmology. At stake is not merely the porous membranes of overlain

**Fig. 5** Phillip Jones Griffiths, *Deformed Fetuses Preserved in Formaldehyde at the Từ Dũ Hospital*, Saigon, Vietnam 1980. (Courtesy of Magnum Photos)

printed images and intertextual interface, but more importantly, the deleterious epidermal stains of skin and infinitely wounded ecological terrain.

Call Lê's suturing vinyl-photography an aesthetics of *becoming*: to emerge, to surface, to materialize. A form of submergent transmigration, perhaps they also, bespeak an aesthetics of emergency; the micro-gestural profundity of *Pure Land*, an activating agent of nonhuman thresholds (see Fig. 4). Immersed in Lê's artistic act of magic, the Vietnamese twentieth-century story of dioxin pollutants—a nightmarish memory scape that includes the suffering of children, land destruction, and atmospheric poisons—becomes visually resituated within a landscape of absences and post-human actors. In "Untitled #3," a squeezed fetus hand at far-left quakes with slanting light rays and a nubby bright spot at the center collides with the crevice of a missing shoulder's fold inside a strand of ripe foliage standing faintly atop an infant's lost carotid artery shadow. Within the frame, it is as if even discreet internal light sources conjure apparitions of absence. The world speaks. The organic howls. Nature reasserts its primacy.



The artist commented directly about environmental dislocation and traumatic bodily deformations of Agent Orange in a 2018 interview: "For a long time, Từ Dũ Maternity Hospital [in Saigon] collected the fetuses to study them. These photographs come from that collection. Incidentally when in the 90s I researched conjoined twins the Wall Street Journal estimated a 1000% increase in Siamese twins in Vietnam" (Paracciani 2019). Although photojournalist Phillip Jones Griffiths' disturbing pictures are some of the only visual documents that remain of these malformed Agent Orange fetuses, Lê's *Pure Land* is a kindred evocation of lost souls from this violent past. Reappropriated images, the gothic photographs of compassion collapse any simple logos of legible environmental residue or temporal narrative convention.

It was also not by accident the artist selected to mobilize one of the world's most highly produced plastic materials—temperature-resistant vinyl—when printing the large-scale images. Intermedial visual montage, the translucent UV photographs are thus metonymically entwined with the tactile chemical universe of this high-strength thermoplastic polymer: in other words, form and content alike contain a melancholic pathos of engineered catastrophe and environmental dislocation. Within this viscous melding of fertile biochemical pastes, Lê's reincarnate Buddhist ethos transfigures warped infant images: *Pure Land* is an imaginative tableau of reappropriation and regrowth wherein fetal decay is fantastically reborn in an alternative microcosm:

> Through the photographs I want to express how these children are like the lotus, symbolizing purity from earthly sins in Buddhist tradition, emerging in beautiful full bloom from muddy water. Born of contaminated soil and beneath the water, these children are pure, and they emerge pure. That's why in the whole show all the figures are children, either fetuses or infants. (Lê in Paracciani)

Comparable to the animate ecological holocaust and narrative elements in Lê's *Pure Land* installation, the history of Agent Orange warfare in Vietnam is also a residual eco-palimpsest. During the ten-year period between 1961 and 1971, the United States government and military deployed a program of biochemical destruction on the people and land of Vietnam. Labeled "Operation Ranch Hand," the aerial bombardment now generally referred to as Agent Orange consisted primarily of six defoliants and herbicides. With their goals of eradicating vegetation,

defoliating essential crops, and exposing Viet Cong soldiers, US military missions were biologically reprehensible from inception. It makes some kind of degenerate sense that the branded fuselage logo on planes carrying the dioxin canisters read 'Only We Can Prevent Forests,' a sinister pun on the US Forest Service's Smokey Bear (Lewis 2006): 599. Diane Niblack Fox writes, "US military records show that 30–50 percent of the coastal mangroves were destroyed, along with roughly 24 percent of the upland forests and 4 percent of the total crops. The ballpark figure given for chemical devastation of the south as a whole is 10 percent; in some provinces, 50 percent of the vegetation was laid waste" (2013: 213).

An anonymous drawing published during the 1960s massive US aerial campaigns of Agent Orange (Fig. 6) is representative of the environmental catastrophe. In this terrifying propagandistic sketch, a lone wanderer, another reductive version of some northern Viet Cong soldier in black pants, is suffocated by the toxic limbs of animate tree branches.

A once fecund landscape of green transformed into a barren spectral moonscape. The caption reads: "Deep in the forest no one will know of your death; there will be no one to share in your grief" (*Không ai biết tới cái chết của các bạn trong rừng sâu: Không ai thương tiếc*). In the hellish atomic landscape, two snakes ensnare the feet of the helpless figure, and a virulent arabesque force envelops the scene. The ghoulish bark and phantom ecosystem of this caricature sketch is an X-rated version of the desolate Cà Mau landscape photograph below.

This historical picture of a lone child in a barren landscape records the isolated human interaction with this devastated space (Fig. 7). The setting of this anonymous image is the southernmost Vietnamese Delta—a once-verdant course of waterways, foliage, and aquatic life—is a region bordering Lê's familial home.

The formal similarities between the Cà Mau picture and Lê's *Pure Land* photography are plain: the organic subject matter, black and white tonality, analogous horizontal orientation, exiled human presence, a discreet aquatic site. However, whereas the fright of both arrests our vision by signaling the environmental horrors of Agent Orange, the affrontness of Lê's photography obfuscates the wider ecological surroundings; in other words, this proximate nearness adjudicates any traditional landscape and instead emotively saturates the frames with the detrital zeitgeist. Lê's *Pure Land* photographs are anti-heroic, their remoteness an active animus of erasure where illegibility is paramount and curiosity supreme.




**Fig. 6** Anonymous illustration. Psychological Warfare Posters Promoting the US-South Vietnamese Cause During the Vietnam War, 1965–1969 (photo no. 306-VP). (Courtesy National Archives)

**Fig. 7** Anonymous photograph, Cà Mau. (Courtesy of the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam)

On the contrary, the Cà Mau picture immediately reveals an unadulterated scene of natural horror. Enveloped in this ruinous garden, a viscous pool of water marks the foreground; a sole tree trunk, fallen and parallel, encloses the brackish pond and denotes topographical space; behind and encompassing the lot, some devilish fleet of mangrove boughs extend their shredded limbs upward (anthropomorphically) beyond the muted horizon line. Encased within their wooden skeletal reach and amidst this grove of macabre totems, viewers are offered a glimpse into the uncanny. At the center, however, a lone shirtless young boy—standing just beside and in rhyme with the bulbous and gloomy tree stump—situates us straightaway, albeit demonically disorienting, inside the ground of the living world. An adrift sentinel, it is as if this child is some guardian to our lost earth. To look (or stand watch) within the haze of this metallic delta is to see into the prismatic fissures of an obsidian mirror, a landscape erupted in chemical dioxin vapors. No redemption. The obliterated terrestrial realm—a photograph in situ at the War Remnants Museum in



**Fig. 8** Đinh Q. Lê, The Pure Land *Untitled #8 (Light from darkness, truth always rises)*. 2018. UV print on silver vinyl fabric. 116 × 174 cm. (Credit from Tang Contemporary Art, Bangkok, Thailand)

Saigon—is only a semblance of the land that was. Yet perhaps lodged, scattered, or sunken, somewhere within the Cà Mau scene of horror lie the emergent seeds of Đinh Q Lê's future *Pure Land* installation.

Let us return now to Lê's pictures. In *Untitled #8 (Light from darkness, truth always rises)*, we singularly confront the muddled primeval palimpsest of *Pure Land* earth and incarnate (Fig. 8). An infant's phantom hand reaches to block her eyes. Covering vision from the horrors of life, she lies on her back. Perspectival arrangement implodes in Lê's photograph as viewers are asked to turn their bodies and torque their heads: only then do we begin to vaguely see the tilted horizontal frame and mournful face of our infant subject. In the foreground and at the far right above her scalp, a fuzzy stem seems to extend upwards; an overlaid image of a different stringy seedling traverses the child's left arm and leads our eyes to some imprecisely warped diamond plant blossom.

At the bottom, the silhouette curvature of the baby's mid-back is a barely visible contour. The faded form accentuated by a ladder of darkened shade lines vertically enshrouds the child's profile. With knees bent, the infant's ghostly feet disappear amongst an iridescent nest of silver environmental debris. The vertigo animacy of geologic life in *Untitled #8* is a chiaroscuro cloud of grief wherein depth, scale, and size congregate in novel alignment. Meanwhile, the metallic wallpaper-like backdrop is a hallucinatory mosaic abyss of laced ecological shapes. Ceremoniously alone, each of Lê's ten *Pure Land* photographs depicts a similar accumulation of suffering. Environment shattered in perpetuity and unknowable lives lost, the artistic work is a liquid nightmare memory only temporarily solidified in material form.

Jinah Kim's analysis of postcolonial grief and memory-building as a structure in *Postcolonial Grief: The Afterlives of the Pacific Wars in the Americas* (2019) begins with the question, "What kind of transformative politics is enacted when we name the deaths of those considered unworthy of mourning and remembering" (1). I suggest we see Lê's contiguous subjects—in union with the multigenerational tragedy of chemical defoliants across Vietnam and the technologies of war that made ecological devastation possible—as kindred portraits of "unworthy death." Even more specifically, I want to mobilize Kim's notion of *transpacific noir*, "a genre full of broken and degraded bodies, which makes visible the necropolitical that structures US military dominance in the Pacific arena during and after the World War II era" (68–69). Let us understand Lê's project, too, as a site of "postcolonial grief," labeling the scars of Agent Orange as palpable remnants of necropolitical trauma.

In excavating "sites of unhealing [as] the locus of both loss and creativity," Kim presents a reorientation of art and literature that ultimately enables what Gordon calls "transformative recognition" (2008: 66). Correspondingly, Lê's *Pure Land* traces this compelling figuration of the ghost in a hungry state of feeding while also reimagining the damaged bodies, fractured landscapes, and misplaced spirits of chemical warfare. "This redemption involves refusing the death sentence and its doom, involves refusing to be treated as if one was never born, fated to a life of abandonment and spectrality" (2011: 15). Lê's necromantic sculpture and photography, in other words, contest the dominant global narrative of American empire-building and blasé cosmopolitan trends of fetishistic mass-production, and also resist—in their furtive spectrality—the vulgar tropes "upheld by the ritualistic production of the Asian body as one in



pain and in need of rescue" that impede communal mourning (Kim 2019: 2).

From a certain vantage, I want to last read Lê's *Untitled #8* as a prenatal version of the reclining Buddha. In Buddhist theology, the resting posture is often an auspicious indicator of true earthly liberation: the Buddha's symbolic sleeping pose signals an imminent transfiguration into the *Parinirvana* realm of the afterworld. Correspondingly, Lê's inversion of the holy icon and spiritual precept in *Pure Land Untitled #8* intimates a similar transition to a post-karmic state of equilibrium for the angel-victims of Agent Orange. It is not surprising, therefore, that in Buddhist philosophy, the Pure Land is a metaphysical paradise beyond the hills in the West. The religious goal of all earthly beings is to be reborn in this state of bliss: in brief, the Pure Land is a final celestial place beyond samsaric reincarnation, an otherworld of consecrated beings outside of our earthly plane of suffering.

Lê's *Lotus Land* (1999) is an almost exactly analogous early intervention: a pictorial representation of the trauma and rebirth of Agent Orange, an artistic iteration of cyclical redemption (Fig. 9). In a 2001 interview,

**Fig. 9** Đinh Q. Lê, *Lotus Land (Monsanto & Uniroyal Chemicals)*, 1999. Fiberglass, polymer, wood, paint. Approximately 36 × 24 × 24 in. (Courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica)

the artist himself explained the pathos of this installation and its tragic approximation of Agent Orange:

> The piece is about the birth defects in Vietnam as a result of the chemical defoliant [Agent Orange] used by the US Army during the Vietnam War. One of the effects has been a tremendous increase in Siamese twins born in Vietnam … Most of the twins do not survive due to limited expertise and facilities here. I have found that in some villages where the children are born, they are starting to worship them. The villagers believe that the children are special spirits. (Lê, quoted in Roth 2001: 46)

While phenomenologically *Lotus Land* lacks the emotive gravitas of *Pure Land*, viewing the two works in tandem exposes the artist's scope of commitments when reimagining the past: memory and war, meaning and sorrow converge in Lê's landscapes. The Italian scholar A. Ponzio (2016) argues that "the body as presented by grotesque realism is undefined, unconfined to itself, a body in relation of symbiosis with other bodies, of transformation and renewal through which the limits of individual life—and this is the essential point—are continually transcended" (10). In Lê's recursively twinning praxis of emancipatory aesthetics and communal rendezvous, he returns to the most prescient forces of his work.

## 4 Buddhist Cosmology and Vietnamese Ancestral Devotion

Without attributing simplistic psychological motivations to Lê's work, it seems reasonable to conclude that parts of Lê's personal narrative—most especially his early experiences of communal violence and traumatic psychocultural displacement—have come to inform his artistic output. The visuality of his oeuvre attests to this, and much of his individual artistic work speaks (at times directly and often indirectly) to myriad forms of transnational violence affecting both the landscape and daily life of his youth. In a 2018 *Pure Land* conversation, Lê's reflections on time and fragility, materiality and resilience are explicit:

> I have always been fascinated with porcelain and ceramic. Ceramic is quite fragile, but also very hard, very strong. It is the duality of ceramic. In particular, ceramic can endure through centuries and still look exactly like the day fresh out of the kiln. It has this amazing ability to survive but at the same time it is so fragile … Amid this long, drawn-out destruction these 800-year-old objects managed to survive. That is what amazes me, this ability to be so fragile and somehow survive. The same could be said of these children, who have had to live with these deformities, so fragile yet so strong and resilient. (Paracciani 2019)



This temporal endurance also informs Lê's 2001 installation *Một Cõi Đi Về*. Deemed an international success, the title *Một Cõi Đi Về* ["An Eventual Return Home"] references both Vietnamese folk singer Trịnh Công Sơn and Buddhist philosophy. The work began with an intimate, private collection of family photographs and soon developed into a larger installation piece populated with pictures of strangers—the majority of photos purchased from second-hand and antique stores scattered around Saigon at the turn of the twenty-first century. The most compelling visual iteration of this original program was installed at the San Jose Museum of Art in 2018 and entitled "Đinh Q. Lê: True Journey is Return" (https://sjmusart.org/exhibition/Đinh-q-le-true-journey-return).

Using around 1500 old family photographs, Lê created a quilt of visual artifacts and soft memory. A remapping of the past, this cascading vertical tapestry conjures eerily parallel objects of *memento mori*: a diaphanous bricolage of reappropriated images, fragmented lines of text, and adhesive strings form a liquescent mirage of remembrance. The artist's resolute commitments to intermedial objects, multivalent narratives, and temporal disjuncture—motifs already on display in this early work—remain emblematic of Lê's aesthetic sensibilities. During a 2010 *Art Info* interview, Lê further revealed the pathos and roots of his creative building process in his levitating sheets. "The photo-weaving is a weaving of narratives from three different sources, Hollywood movie images, documentary images, and family pictures woven into this tapestry of memories and fictions that all merge together" (Allen 2010). As in the uncanny mood evoked in *The Pure Land*, observers are enveloped in an austere space of contemplation. Lê's persistent preoccupations with memory and loss were again the generative impetus for the project with its devotional mourning nests and reimagined domestic sites of melancholy. A different iteration of heterogeneous communion, these resplendent paper houses of light provide a last resting place for the many nameless, faceless casualties of war.

Let us also recall that during the early 2000s, village communal houses and family ancestral shrines were rebuilt across Vietnam. Through a process of efficacious social engagement, the once-forbidden dominion of

ancestor worship, hungry ghosts, and lost Buddhist souls was reactivated across the contemporary Vietnamese landscape. The Vietnamese-American poet Ocean Vương's analysis of splintered time and the ghosts of stillness are perceptive in this case: "In Buddhism, it is believed that when one dies a tragic, emotional, or sudden death, the spirit might not realize it has died at all—and so it's imperative to remind that person of their present, bodiless state. It is also believed that when the body perishes, one's hearing ability is heightened, since the spirit becomes more air-like and can therefore hear with its entire being" (2017: 373). Empathically aligned with the lingering shards of time, Lê's chimerical objects tend to listen in this vibrant web of syncretic cosmology and trans-familial sacred practice.

In Vietnamese Buddhism, the concept of the Pure Land is complex. The term refers to both a central sect and a teaching process in Vietnam, as well as a blessed site of Buddhist invocation; the idea is at once celestial and infinite, praxis and custom. In this harmonious otherworld, emancipated Pure Land spirits hover together in a forcefield of benevolence (Fig. 10). The Pure Land is a holy tableau replete with regenerated icons of kindness. "Along with this popular form of Pure Land, there is also a higher aspect, in which Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, is equated with our Buddha Nature, infinitely bright and everlasting" (Tien Ju 1997: 11). The Vietnamese Buddhist incantation "*A Di Đà Phật*" approximates this figure of divine synchronicity. Within this meta-utterance of unbounded goodness resides the Amida Buddha, an icon of infinite light. A metonymic practice, a sect of beliefs in the Mahayana Buddhist faith, and a sphere of eternal bliss, the Pure Land encompasses this exact sort of polyphonous iteration. Most directly applicable to Lê's mystic *Pure Land* installation are the tenets of Buddhist reincarnation in the Pure Land.

Lê's installation *The Pure Land*, on the contrary, considers the many lost and missing, dead and forgotten persons during the decades of war that engulfed the Vietnamese landscape, psyche, and population. Kwon's *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* outlines this spirit world that continues to affect everyday life in Vietnam. Coining the term "ontological refugees," Kwon relates broken family relationships to supernatural presences: "In the communities of southern and central Vietnam, kinship rarely constitutes a political homogenous entity. These communities' genealogical unity is crowded with the remains of wartime political bifurcation … Thus, in the ancestor worship of this region, the dead are united in kinship memory and bipolarized in political history" (2012: 88–89). This desire to reclaim



**Fig. 10** Amitabha, the Buddha of the Western Pure Land (Sukhavati). Ca. 1700. (Courtesy of the Met's Open Access policy)

the missing, to name again the dead and rehabilitate the living, appears in a variety of common sayings in contemporary Vietnamese communities; for example, "As rivers have a source and plants have roots and seeds, so too do humans have ancestors and altars" [*Con người có tổ có tông như cây có cội, như sông có nguồn*]. This implies that living and dying without community leaves individuals stranded, and spirits trapped in liminal otherworlds transform into abject forces of darkness. In *Pure Land*, Lê's necromantic tryst with the spirit world acknowledges the ghosts' anonymity as an inextricable condition of otherworld agency lodged within the very condition of their meaning.

Perhaps the most salient of these various death rites is the ceremonious *tiễn hồn* ritual, a spiritual cleansing and sacred system of cyclical regeneration that purports to send off deceased souls to the Pure Land after forty-nine days of wandering. Liturgical chants, communal prayers, and shared offerings during this seven-week period post-mortem triangulate a transcendent forcefield of goodness and solace, merit and virtue for the deceased. Lê's visual ontology in *Pure Land* is a belated activation of a similar path of rebirth. A testimony to otherness and prayerful recognition embraces these forgotten souls in Lê's Vietnamese dominion of spirits. In motion and with a sensual disposition of undefeated despair, Lê's *Pure Land* cohort steps forward into an unknowable parallel world "haunted by historic alternatives: sometimes as nostalgia, sometimes as regret, sometimes as a kind of critical urgency" (Gordon 2011: 7), levitating sarcophagi, *Pure Land* angel-victims born within mud blossom into eternal bliss. Walking in this ethereal sculpture garden of pure light, museum goers commune with ghosts.

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