

Review – Return Engagements

Written by Martin Duffy

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Return Engagements: Contemporary Art's Traumas of Modernity and History in Sài Gòn and Phnom Penh

By Việt Lê

Duke University Press, 2021

Việt Lê is a Professor at the California College of the Arts and co-author of the photobook *White Gaze*. In this earlier study, Professor Lê massively contributed to a long-overdue exposé of the colonial trappings of that household familiar, the *National Geographic* magazine. Just as his photomontage offered a 'toolkit' in dissecting imperialism and its redolent history, *Return Engagements* is also a roadmap for those looking afresh at contemporary affairs. Indeed, Lê's portraiture of the visual arts and memory history in Vietnam and Cambodia offers much of interest to scholars of International Relations. Oftentimes, because of our preoccupation with the gargantuan tapestry of IR, we overlook the reality that daily events are visualized through localized images and objects. Thus, the contemporary arts of countries like Vietnam and Cambodia offer elegant bridges for immersion into the trauma of this regional and international experience.

Return Engagements comprehensively explores contemporary visual art in Cambodia and Vietnam in a delicate dissection of themes of colonialism, trauma, and human displacement. The art market of the region has often seemed to dance in step to the juxtaposition of horror and commercialization – an apparent fetishization of contemporary conflict. Refreshingly, Lê shows that a new generation of visual artists and filmmakers have moved imperceptibly beyond this oppressive legacy. He discusses Tiffany Chung, Rithy Panh, and Sopheap Pich as bravely disrupting traditional categorizations of the “diasporic” and the “local”. Simultaneously insiders and outsiders, their highly original work offers fresh perspectives which in turn challenge longstanding preoccupations about the region.

In a beautifully written preface, Việt Lê relives his own childhood trauma – his desperate raft escape from Saigon as a three-year-old child. Elegantly, he writes

“The body has its own logic, its own memory. The afterlife of trauma leaves invisible traces. My dangerous ocean escape and the laps I swim draw invisible lines. They have shaped who I am. I cannot capture how it feels to almost drown as you leave a country where your mother takes you into the water because she fears you will die on land. My passages since then have been physical and psychological. All I can offer to explain them is a tracing of these experiences...” (p.xi).

Return Engagements thus contributes to its author's own courageous retracing process.

Organisationally, this impressive volume commences with an introductory section entitled, “Risky returns, Restaging, and Revolutions” which sets out the platform for his analysis of modernity, visual culture and trauma in the contemporary art of South-East Asia and Asian America. It is a very comprehensive *tour de force*, summarizing a vast literature on diaspora studies and greatly enriching our knowledge of the social and historic context. It does not always make for easy reading, however, as the language is brim-full of concepts about form and content, and their idiomatic resonance. Nevertheless, this is a superbly executed overview of current thinking, combined with excellent

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suggestions for future revisionism of colonialist history. In particular, it genuinely re-locates the authentic lives of the people who are at the heart of this experience.

The first chapter focuses on how traumatic memory inspires creative work. This is particularly significant, as we often think of trauma through exclusively negative lenses, whereas in this manuscript we have superb examples of intellectual discovery set against an environment of miserable adversity. The writer's deft interweaving of narratives of trauma drama are carefully interspersed with reference-points such as the concept of "just memory", and a mix of micro and macro-level observations of that quintessential life vista of "what remains" (p.104).

The second chapter turns substantively to the world of local and diasporic Vietnamese artists. There is illuminating discussion of the breakthroughs achieved by Sandrine Llouquet and Tiffany Chung, among many others who have successfully blurred and shifted the boundaries of what it means to write about the Vietnamese experience. In chapter three, the focus shifts to personal and public archives, drawing on the contemporary artwork of the Cambodian painter Leang Seckon, and the Vietnamese-American filmmaker, Hong-An Truong. Again, the author manages to unearth positivity amidst all the apparent negativity, as he concludes

"Their return to personal and historic archives indicates archive fever. It is both symptom and desire. It is both the death drive and the pleasure principle. It is love unto death. ... In the mind's eye, still, the planes hover, and the bombs burst. Everywhere these blooms bleed" (p.188).

Chapter four, the final substantive chapter, is a juxtaposition of town and country. He delicately teases out the life experience of Phnom Penh based sculptor, Sopheap Pich, and Saigon conceptual artist, Phan Quang. The graphic section on the cruel legacy of Agent Orange may be among topics of most pertinence to IR students. As Lê states: "the American War's legacies remain hidden underfoot, beneath the concrete jungle's well-heeled pavement, seeped in soil, streams and blood" (p.226).

It would be difficult to assemble a conclusion to a work which is so original in its interweaving of historicity, culture, and trauma. Happily, Lê rather composes an emotive epilogue hinging on the Diamond Island disaster, where many young Cambodians lost their lives on a collapsed bridge, "a flirtatious evening turned into tragedy", and part of the recurrent trauma of modernization (p.244). It is an apt conclusion to a book which elegantly intersperses past and present, emotion, and resilience.

This writer had the privilege to serve extensively for the UN in Vietnam and Cambodia. Lê's work immediately reminded me of the trauma artist, Tim O'Brien, and of one of my American visits. In 2019, when I saw, "Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975" at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, for me it was "Tiffany Chung: Vietnam, Past Is Prologue" which stole the show. It is a genuine perspective of the Vietnam War era through proudly Vietnamese eyes. I still remember the modest but prosaic words in her video interviews with the older members of that large-scale Vietnamese diaspora. Listening agog to those muffled Vietnamese voices and deferential translations, it seemed that every story personalized and visualized those traumatic times, sometimes in words of anger or regret, and always in emotion. In *Return Engagements*, Việt Lê carries this implicit 'art of protest' beyond the auditorium into a 360-degree vista of past trauma as "Prologue". Thus, in many ways, Lê offers the artwork of people like Tiffany Chung (and I think in particular of "The Vietnam Exodus History Learning Project") an appropriately analytical platform.

One has a sense that *Return Engagements* consolidates this field. Chung has talked about her family's civil war narrative – her late father was a helicopter pilot in the South Vietnamese Air Force, and imprisoned for 14 years in brutal re-education programmes. It is a sombre fact that such a tortuous history has never been part of the American view of the conflict, and was crudely erased in Vietnam. Professor Lê is a superb academic-practitioner, and with his careful wordcrafting, the art and culture of the Vietnamese and Cambodian diasporas is rescued and (happily) preserved. He does this with an appropriate respect for the gravity of crimes discussed, but also with an optimistic view of survivor creativity.

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As others have suggested, one of the great strengths of this tightly written and magnificently illustrated book is that Lê cautiously moves the terrain of academic argument about displacement away from traditional governance boundaries. From ersatz colonial imitation, the action switches into the enriching plateau of artistic achievement, amidst a brooding legacy of trauma. It is a fresh look at the painful residue of diaspora, at massive population displacement and return. It also looks anew at the energy of refugee communities, their adaptability and at the concept of diasporic selfhood. Based so much on the author's intensive exploration of the curatorial world, what Lê offers is both a palimpsest of art criticism and a novel exploration of diaspora experience as subtly distilled in copious vignettes of creative output. Whether the medium is painting, poetry, photography or sculpture, this book brings the artistic endurance of diasporic experience to life. It is genuinely a break-through project, and impressive in its breadth and scale of focus.

One finds comfort from the cataclysmal narrative of South-East Asian contemporary history, that it has begotten such creative beauty. This is reflected in the extraordinary achievements of the artistic populations of Vietnam and Cambodia, at home and abroad. The achievements of artist-practitioners like Professor Việt Lê are testimony to how diaspora communities profoundly enrich their newfound settlements in every part of the world. IR students will find much of interest in this capacious study.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.