

## [PRESS RELEASE & website]

### **Pure Land**

Solo show by Dinh Q. Lê

Curated by Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani

### **Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok**

12 January–1 March 2019

**Opening:** January 12th at 6 pm

**Artist and Curator in Conversation:** January 13th at 4 pm

Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok proudly presents *Pure Land*, a solo show featuring newly commissioned works by acclaimed Vietnamese-American artist Dinh Q. Lê. Devised in line with Lê's enduring interest in the notions of memory and trauma, *Pure Land* emerges from critical investigation of the ripple effect across Vietnamese society of Agent Orange, a herbicide used as a chemical weapon during the Vietnam War. As much as a memory of war, the ruinous effects of Agent Orange, from birth defects to physical deformities, are still considered a taboo subject, hindering personal and collective reconciliation with the country's controversial past. For *Pure Land*, Lê visualizes the trauma of the war through thought-provoking photographs and sculptures of physical anomalies and conjoined twins intertwined with lotus flowers as a powerful Buddhist allusion to ascending from the murky depths.

The glaring contrast between this aesthetics of divinity and the atrocity of war, combined with the use of unconventional materials that push the boundaries of art-making, conjure in *Pure Land* a space of innocence and purity to challenge social stigma against deformity and abnormality, and to confront the horrors of war. At the same time the air of mysticism that imbues the works further fosters Lê's remarkable artistic narrative and his ability to counterpoise art and social critique—"...and of course, then, only then learning can take place."

Lê and his family left Vietnam in 1978 when he was 10 years old, following the end of the war. When he returned to live in Vietnam in the 1990s, much to his shock, Lê found Saigon District 1 populated by physically deformed people begging on the streets, many of whom victims of direct exposure to Agent Orange or contaminated food. 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.

Conceptualized over one year in collaboration with Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok, *Pure Land* addresses this taboo subject, aestheticizing, through the works, the representation of mental and physical trauma. As such Lê creates life-size sculptures of conjoined twins resting on lotus blooms, cast in high resolution to achieve their fine porcelain finish in tune with local craft traditions. Vietnam is long recognized for its historical kilns and exquisite porcelain, which Lê adapts in his new series as a way to reflect the ongoing social plight of Agent Orange in contemporary Vietnam. Furthermore, 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. Alongside the sculptures, *Pure Land* also features a new series of grayscale photographs showing birth defects, printed on silver vinyl sheets. While the use

of this synthetic medium imparts a ‘futuristic’ dimension to the works, the photographs themselves are based on archival images from Tu Du Maternity Hospital in Saigon. On the vinyl sheets the images are spliced and superimposed with the organic likenesses of lotuses, this time viewed from underwater. Together, the sculptures and photographs constitute a provocative, site-specific installation that is able to crystallize the trauma and horrors of war, rendering them both local and universal, and where the viewer becomes the observer and the victim all at once.

The exhibition is accompanied by a comprehensive publication featuring the newly commissioned artworks of *Pure Land*, including a curatorial essay by Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani, as well as an engaging interview with the artist about his practice and the production of this new body of works.

#### Dinh Q. LÊ Bio

Lê's (b. 1968, Vietnam) work and art practice revolve around the themes of identity, history, and memory, which span various mediums from his well-known woven photographs and tapestries to handmade paper, and video and mixed-media installations that question the reception and consumption of images and how visual culture may inform a national identity. Lê and his family left Vietnam in 1978 and lived in refugee camps in Thailand before relocating to the United States. In California where he lived and went to art school, Lê was sparked by the prevailing perceptions of the Vietnam War and its lingering consequences on the Vietnamese people.

Lê has been invited to exhibit at the 50th Venice Biennial, as well as dOCUMENTA (13) at Kassel, Germany. In 2012 he exhibited a major solo project at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Lê has participated in numerous international exhibitions, recent solo exhibitions include San Jose Museum of Art, California, USA (2018); Singapore Tyler Print Institute (2018); Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands (2017); Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK (2016); Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Japan (2016); Site Gallery, Centre for Contemporary Art, Sheffield, UK (2016); Artangel, London, UK (2016); Mori Museum, Tokyo, Japan (2015); P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York, USA (2014); San Francisco Camerawork, USA (2013). Selected group exhibitions include Hong Kong Art Centre (2017); Nam June Paik Art Center, Yongin-si, South Korea (2017); Asia Society and Museum, New York, USA (2017); Trapholt Museum, Kolding, Denmark (2016); Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, Poland (2016); Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia (2015); Carré d'Art, Nîmes, France (2014); Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Texas, USA (2012); The Annenberg Space for Photography, Los Angeles, USA (2012); The Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA (2012); National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan (2011). Dinh Q. LE works and lives in Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam.

#### Loredana PAZZINI-PARACCIANI Bio

Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani is an independent curator, writer and lecturer of Southeast Asian contemporary art. Complemented by continuous dialogue with artists and art professionals, her research and curatorial practice revolve around critical sociopolitical issues in Southeast Asia, advocating a counter-hegemonic and non-Western-centric discourse. Loredana currently curates *Diaspora: Exit, Exile, Exodus of Southeast Asia* (2018) with MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum, and edited the accompanying publication, a collection of essays that examine art and society at the periphery. Her other recent exhibitions include *Heads or Tails? Uncertainties and Tensions in Contemporary Thailand* (2017) with Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York; *The Game/Viet Nam by LE*

*Brothers* (2016) with Jim Thompson Art Center, Bangkok; and *Architectural Landscapes: SEA in the Forefront* (2015) with Queens Museum, New York. She has published in numerous academic journals, such as Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore; Frames Cinema Journal, University of St Andrews, UK; and New Asian Imaginations, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore, among others. Loredana received her MA in Asian Art Histories from LASALLE-Goldsmiths College of the Arts, Singapore, and she is currently undertaking her second master's degree in History of Art and Archeology at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), London, with a focus on theoretical and cross-cultural studies. Loredana lives in London, UK, and Bangkok, Thailand.