A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê

BELLEVUE ARTS MUSEUM

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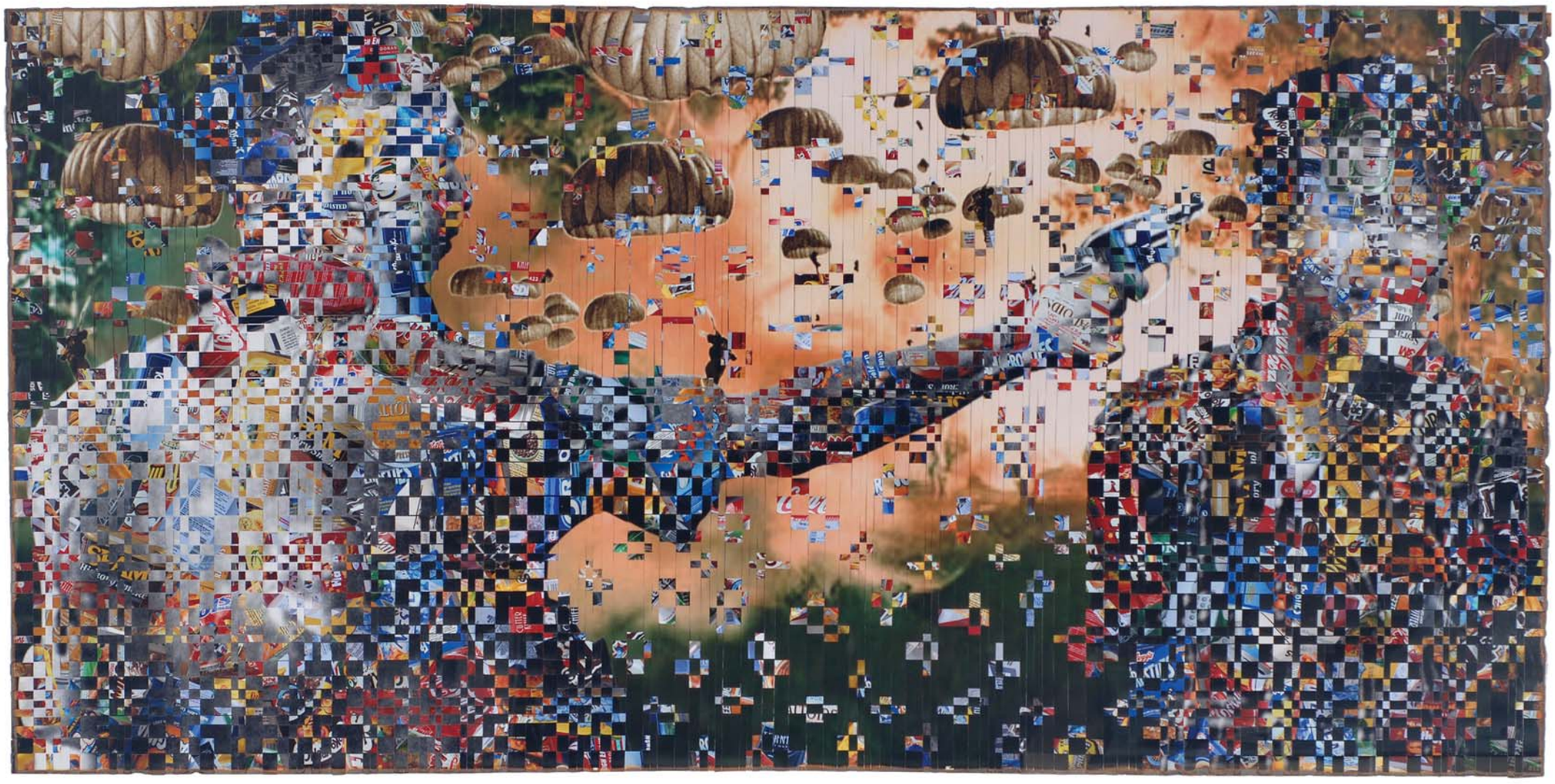

Impossible to Forget, Difficult to Remember: Vietnam and the Art of Dinh Q. Lê

If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in:
only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory.
—Friedrich Nietzsche[1]

On Secondhand and Other Kinds of Memory

The Vietnam War has burned itself into Dinh Q. Lê, as it has upon so many of his generation and the one that came before. Even those born too young to remember what the Vietnamese call the American War might have what Marianne Hirsch calls a "postmemory," a recollection passed along from someone else.[2] I like to think of this kind of remembrance as secondhand memory. Since many of the things that refugees owned in the early years of our American life were secondhand, it is only fitting that some of our memories may have been used by others as well. Sometimes these memories are intimate legacies bequeathed to us by our families and friends; other times they are the equally intimate fantasies dreamed by Hollywood. The archetype for this kind of daydream is *Apocalypse Now*, one of our modern-day Grimm's fairy tales, in which napalm lights Vietnam's dark forest. Many Americans remember Vietnam from watching movies like *Apocalypse Now*. For having paid the price of a movie ticket, they, too, can say, as Michael Herr famously did, "Vietnam, we've all been there."[3]

But is Herr's claim still true? My students tell me that they have heard of the Vietnam War, but have no sense of what happened and how Americans got there. These students are not a postwar generation but a wartime one, born in the eighties and nineties and living through Iraq. For them there are not even secondhand memories of Southeast Asia, of Indochina, of Vietnam. What is this foreign country to this American generation, then? Perhaps I found the answer recently when I went up to the rooftop bar of a chic downtown Los Angeles hotel for a drink. With my glass in my hand, looking out over the railing, I saw a movie being projected onto the wall of a neighboring building: *Apocalypse Now*, playing silently in 35mm, at the climactic moment when a mud-slick Martin Sheen emerges from swamp water to hack Marlon Brando to death. Nobody on the roof looked twice.

Perhaps we should paraphrase Herr for today's Americans, as "Vietnam, been there, done that." The Vietnam War has become part of the visual wallpaper decorating many American minds; it no longer burns. But for overseas Vietnamese the war is still vivid, a magnesium flare floating in their American night. Their sense that the war may be forgotten, or narrated differently than the way they remember, frustrates them. Lê speaks eloquently of this frustration when he discusses his series *From Vietnam to Hollywood*, which

> is drawn from the merging of my personal memories, media-influenced memories, and Hollywood-fabricated memories to create a surreal landscape memory that is neither fact nor fiction. At the same time I want the series to talk about the struggle for control of meaning and memories of the Vietnam War between these three different sources of memories. . . . Hollywood and the U.S. media are constantly trying to displace and destroy our memories about the Vietnam War to replace it with their versions.[4]

Another name for these kinds of mass-media memories that Dinh struggles against are what Marita Sturken, drawing from Freud, calls "screen memories."[5] These memories both *screen out* other memories and serve as

FIGURE 4
UNTITLED (CAMBODIA SERIES #4)
From the series *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness*
1998
Dye destruction prints and linen tape

VIET THANH NGUYEN

the screen for the projection of our own private and collective pasts. Although screen memories don't have to be images, most of our most vivid screen memories from Vietnam are from photography or television news: Phan Thi Kim Phuc, the naked, napalmed girl running down a road in Nick Ut's 1972 photograph; Thich Quang Duc, the Buddhist monk who set himself on fire at a Saigon intersection in 1963 to protest President Ngo Dinh Diem's treatment of Buddhists, an immolation caught by both still and moving camera; Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan, executing a Viet Cong suspect during the Tet Offensive of 1968, an act captured by both Eddie Adams's still camera and by an NBC television crew.

Photography and cinema are two of the manifold layers of recall explored in Dinh Q. Lê's art. The Vietnam War itself is the bedrock, but accruing upon that is the sediment of memory, layers upon layers, each one thinner than the next, with the final layer nothing more than a varnish, easily scratched, easily tarnished, easily erased. The memories that we think everyone knows or should know, because they hurt us so much, cease to matter. Each of us reaches this moment when we realize that the rest of the world no longer cares, if it ever did, about our memories. One task of the artist is to confront this apathy, to challenge it, and to affirm the importance of those memories that belong to the individual, the losers, and the forgotten. This is a task both hopeless and hopeful. This is what Dinh Q. Lê does in his work; in his words, "I must keep fighting to keep the meanings of these memories alive."[6]

On Being David versus Goliath

In Dinh's series *From Vietnam to Hollywood*, "Hollywood" becomes the symbol for all things visual rolling forth on the assembly line of America's great cinema-industrial complex. The series prominently references both Colonel Loan's execution of a Viet Cong suspect and the immolation of Thich Quang Duc in two works, *Russian Roulette* (fig. 5; p. 21) and *Immolation in Color* (fig. 6; p. 22). Both of the original images fired up American feelings, leading the general public to suspect that something was terribly wrong in South Vietnam. In *Russian Roulette*, Dinh weaves together two historical events: the execution of the Viet Cong suspect (a real event) and the infamous Russian roulette sequence in Michael Cimino's 1978 film *The Deer Hunter* (a cinematic event). In that sequence, Viet Cong soldiers force American prisoners of war to play Russian roulette. Dinh takes a series of still images from the film that show one prisoner being forced to pull the trigger, and then suffering the emotional consequences of surviving. While the atrocity of Russian roulette never actually happened, the fictional idea of it, through Cimino's landmark movie, became legend, speaking to the horror—the horror!—that was Vietnam for America. Cimino's cinematic event becomes real, a celluloid memory just as good for a moviegoing generation as any eyewitness memory, and perhaps even better.

Conversely, the Eddie Adams photograph, while a snapshot of something that really happened, has become nearly cinematic in its global impact. For me, the irony is that the photograph is more powerful than the moving pictures recorded by the television crew, which depict the bullet hitting the head, the body falling, and the gushing of blood onto pavement. No matter how graphic and violent, the moving image cannot capture the haunting quality evident in Eddie Adams's single photograph. Here, life and death are frozen, forever suspended in the Viet Cong suspect's grimace of tension and terror. In contrast, the moving image pushes us beyond that tension and terror, due to its having a prelude and an afterward to the moment of death. We watch the soldiers who witness the execution glance at the dead body and then walk on. We walk on with them because we identify with the living, not the dead. In contrast, Adams's photograph captures the static quality of a powerful emotion; it is not a narrative pushing us along, but a locked room in which we find ourselves trapped. While our memories may sometimes be driven by a narrative, as in the Zapruder film footage of the Kennedy assassination, it's arguably the case that our most potent memories are these locked rooms of feeling. The difficulty for the photographer is being present to capture that feeling in the moment of its inception, brief and volatile as the splitting of an atom. Every photograph that manages to frame that split second when white-hot memory brands our flesh thus gains an aura of the miraculous.

Russian Roulette both shows us that aura and shreds it, quite literally. The images of the Russian roulette sequence are repeated again and again, then shredded and woven through the image of the real execution. These repeated images form the background to the foregrounded image of Colonel Loan firing his gun into the head of the Viet Cong suspect. As a background collage, however, the Russian roulette images don't recede. They intrude, breaking up the Adams photograph of the real event. *Russian Roulette* suggests that the Adams picture influenced the Cimino film, but it also suggests that the reverse is true: the Cimino film disturbs our memory of the Adams picture. Yet this disturbance is very much the same thing that Adams's picture does to the

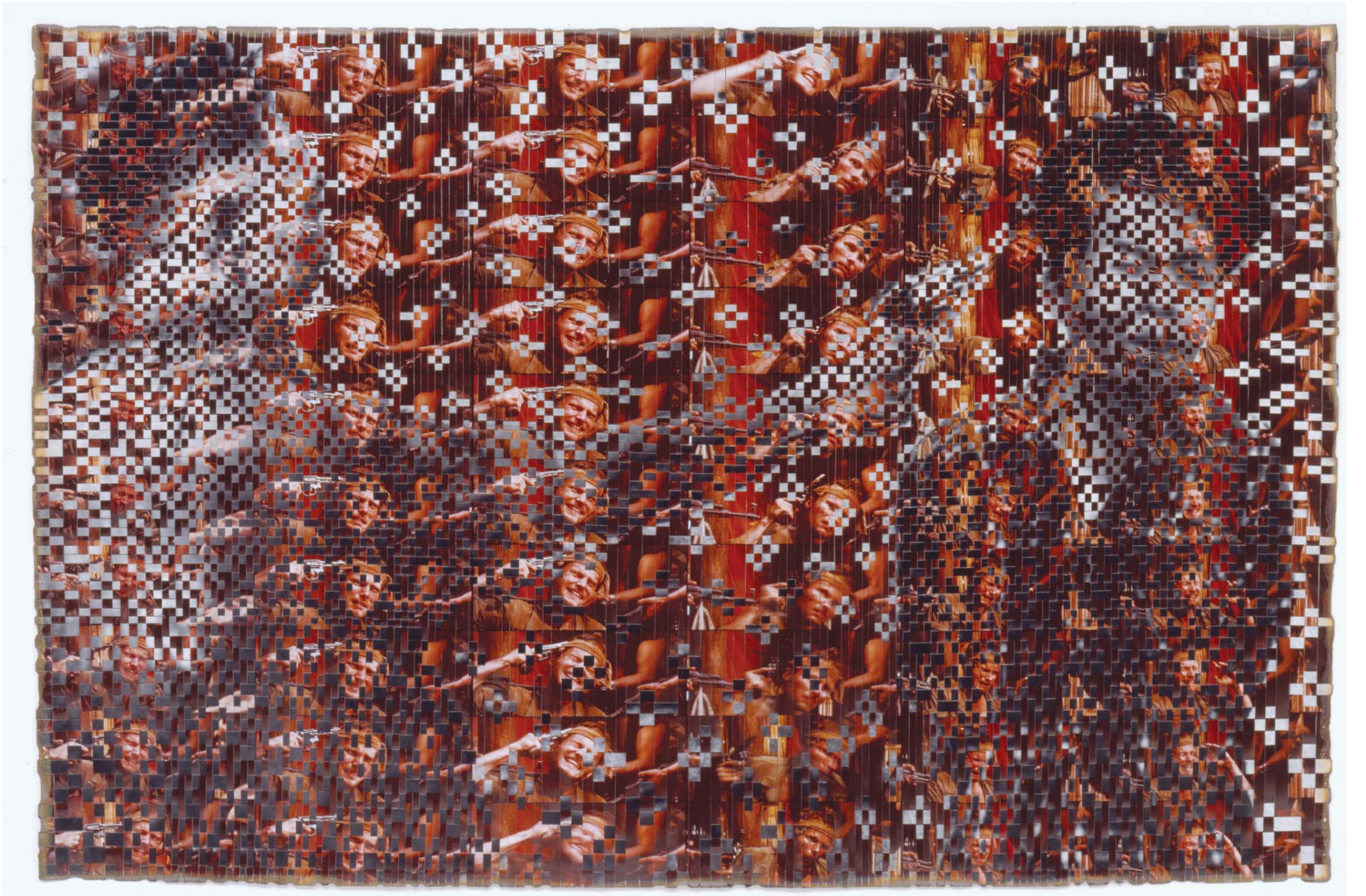

FIGURE 5

RUSSIAN ROULETTE

From the series
Persistence of Memory
2002
C-print and linen tape

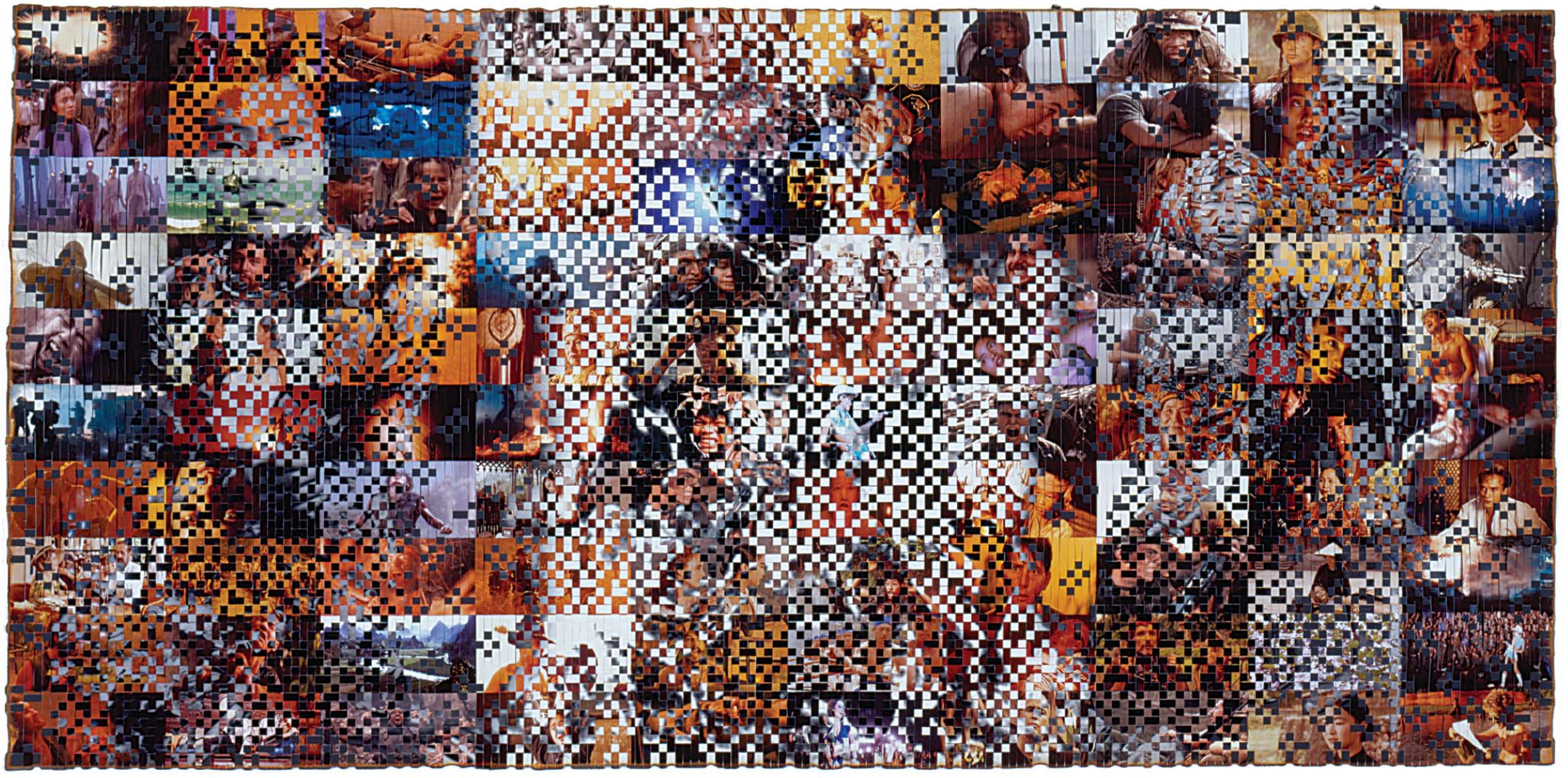

FIGURE 6
IMMOLATION IN COLOR
From the series *From Vietnam to Hollywood*
2002
C-print and linen tape

execution it records. Since only a handful of eyewitnesses saw the execution, almost everyone who remembers the event actually only has a memory of the Adams picture. What Dinh's work tells us is that memory is impure, for after photographs record our memories, these photographs themselves can become memories, vulnerable to further acts of borrowing or theft, ad infinitum.

In this process of creating, borrowing, and stealing memories, some memories may get erased permanently, as happens in *Immolation in Color*. Any use of the word "immolation" in the context of the war must bring to mind the image of the burning monk, whose action shows us one meaning of the word immolation: suicide as protest. But *Immolation in Color* offers no such image of the suicide. The burning monk has vanished. In his place is a collage of full-color movie stills drawn from an army of war movies, including *Apocalypse Now, Heaven and Earth, Platoon,* and *Indochine*. These stills show us the other meaning of immolation: ritual sacrifice. What usurps the monk's pure act of suicide is the impure spectacle of Vietnam constantly being put to the torch, a ritual ceaselessly enacted in these American movies. This spectacle is so bright that when we look away, we may be too blinded to see any actual Vietnamese people. Thus, in *Immolation in Color*, the full-color images are so overpowering that we can barely see the Vietnamese people in the traces of black-and-white photographs woven through the movie stills. These photographs of everyday people are not like Eddie Adams's iconic photograph; they offer only minimal resistance to cinema's onslaught. So while *Russian Roulette* tells us that the miraculous photograph can stand up in silent, memorable protest against the mass-produced movie, the way the lone Chinese dissident placed his body in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square, *Immolation in Color* tells us that most photographs of people without history are doomed to anonymous defeat.

Since memories are like photographs, and photographs can become memories, the implications of *Immolation in Color* for the disappearance of both can be depressing. It's a David and Goliath fight, this struggle between the photograph and the movie, between the individual's will and nationalist power, between private memory and corporate recall. Dinh's work explores that unequal struggle through two themes that serve as titles for some of his work: *The Persistence of Memory* and the *Destruction of Memory*. Memories are the sparks brought to life through this endless friction between destruction and persistence, forgetting and remembering, amnesia and its opposite. Some memories will ignite a fire; others will live a brief, solitary life, and die. The two fires illuminating Vietnam for the world are probably these: one is American, by whose light we tell tall tales about the war as a fall from innocence, a tragedy of the American Adam encountering sin and self-knowledge in the garden of Vietnam; the other is (North) Vietnamese, by whose radiance we sing a legend about heroic, revolutionary struggle, the triumphant climax to a thousand-year history of throwing off foreign invaders and colonizers. Lost between these fires is the cloud of sparks that makes up the diffuse South Vietnamese account; these are the memories of the losers, from where Dinh's work emerges.

The South Vietnamese are understandably attached to their memories of pain. Aren't we all? As Susan Sontag notes, "victims are interested in the representation of their own sufferings. But they want the suffering to be seen as unique"[7]; and, "it is intolerable to have one's own suffering twinned with anybody else's."[8] Thus, not surprisingly but with great irony, few Vietnamese care to speak of what happened across their border, in Cambodia, the "sideshow" kept secret from the American public.[9] Ironically, and perfectly in keeping with the war's brutality, the conflict in Cambodia was much more horrific. While the world hasn't forgotten the Khmer Rouge's slaughter of a third of the population, perhaps there is a tendency to forget that the American bombing of Cambodia destroyed the social fabric of peasant life, creating the conditions for the Khmer Rouge's emergence. Neither is Vietnam innocent when it comes to Cambodia. Vietnam's war with the Khmer Rouge in the late 1970s ended the genocide and the rule of the Khmer Rouge, but also established the reach of Vietnamese power into Cambodia. In its corner of Southeast Asia, Vietnam dominates, shedding its role as victim of the United States and France. In his series *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness*, Dinh draws attention to Cambodian suffering, a history that if recalled by the Vietnamese makes any Vietnamese attachment to their own pain a little more difficult to carry on. Dinh's interest in Cambodia is remarkable because it was the Khmer Rouge attack on Vietnamese border towns that drove Dinh's family from their home. But instead of regarding himself as a victim of the Khmer Rouge, Dinh reaches out from his own history of displacement to look at another people's pain. In so doing, he contributes to the work of memory demanded by the genocide.

On the Dead's Own Terms

Untitled (Cambodia Series #4) (fig. 4; p. 18) features Dinh's trademark technique of cutting images and weaving them together in order to fuse the "splendor" (of Cambodia's past) with the "darkness" (of Cambodia's genocide). The

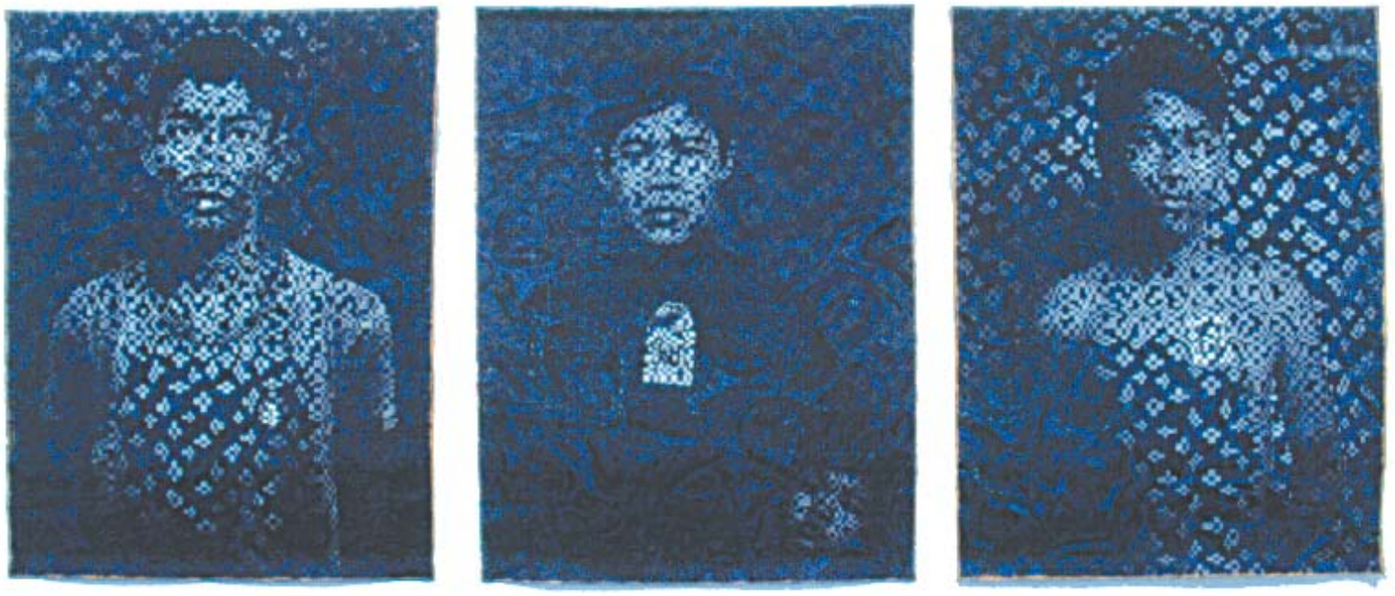

FIGURE 7
UNTITLED (TRIPTYCH)
From the series *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness*
2000–2005
C-print and linen tape

photograph of a man who was a Khmer Rouge victim emerges from, and merges with, the stone carving of a temple at Angkor Wat. *Untitled (Cambodia Series #4)* follows the pattern of the artist's weaving work, where "one image relinquishes itself to another. Faces and figures coalesce, then dissolve again into pure pattern in a continuous rhythm of revelation and concealment."[10] In *Untitled (Cambodia Series #4)*, the work alternates between revealing and concealing the monumental past, embodied in Angkor Wat, and the countless dead. Even though it is easy to remember that past as splendorous, Holland Cotter points out how darkness overshadows its beauty, since Angkor Wat was built by the labor of many as a tribute to kings: "The message is clear: art has always been as much an accomplice as a deterrent to human brutality."[11]

Although the brutality of the genocide makes it hard to imagine how art can also deter brutality, Dinh's *Untitled (Triptych)* (fig. 7) suggests a possibility. As a form, the triptych is rooted in Western Christian religious art, which Dinh explores in an earlier *Untitled* (fig. 7; p. 57) from 1997, where Mary cradles Jesus after he has been taken down from the cross. In the same way that Christian religious art recalls the crucifixion of Christ as a beginning rather than an end, so does *Untitled (Triptych)* gesture at how the dead continue to live by haunting us and asking to be remembered. *Untitled (Triptych)* features three images of men (and a boy) who were victims of the Khmer Rouge at the Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, where some 17,000 people were murdered from 1975 to 1979. The Khmer Rouge photographed their victims, and Dinh draws his images from their archive of terror. These Khmer Rouge photographs are disturbing because we know what will happen to those captured (only seven inmates survived Tuol Sleng). But these photographs disturb in another way, for, as Sontag points out, "the more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying."[12]

By turning the dead into a work of art, *Untitled (Triptych)* runs the risk of grave-robbing the dead and stealing their images. The living can do so because they are strong and the dead are weak. In so doing, the living may also allow themselves to forget the ugliness of the dead's passing. Yet, given the almost unavoidable context of the Cambodian genocide, this danger may be minimal. The benefit the artist offers us is the creation of something splendorous, a sense of how the humanity of these people cannot be terminated because of the way they died. Thus, by weaving other images taken from the carvings of Angkor Wat through these photographs, Dinh urges us to look at the dead again, beyond the stark fact of their victimization, and into their potential resurrection through art. Resurrected in this way, the dead have the potential to touch us.

Inasmuch as the dead might want to affect the living, so might the living want to touch the dead. To touch and to be touched

are two aspects of feeling brought together in Dinh's series *Texture of Memory*. Here, portraits of Khmer Rouge victims, taken from interrogation photographs, are embroidered onto cloth. These portraits are hard to see at first, but Dinh's intent is for the images to emerge over time. "I want viewers to read the portraits like Braille," he says. "When the series is exhibited, viewers will be invited to touch the embroidered parts, and the oil from their hands will darken the white threads. The images will become more articulated and visible over time, comparable to the shiny textures found on bas reliefs at Angkor Wat."[13] Touching here becomes a metaphor suggesting that the more we try to remember, the more vivid our memories will be. But touching as a physical act, with its physical consequence of oil on cloth, has another meaning beyond metaphor. In *Texture of Memory*, emotions and memories may be intangible and invisible, but they are nevertheless so palpable as to be even more real to us than many physical objects. In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, these intangible, invisible things are "rememories" that we can stumble across in our everyday lives. These rememories include not only feelings but also historical events, places, and people. Like the slave plantations and murdered slaves in *Beloved*, the killing fields of Cambodia with their buried dead are rememories too. What they tell us is that the past can happen again if, paradoxically, we do not remember. We can touch the past and it can touch us because "nothing ever dies,"[14] an insight both terrifying and hopeful, depending on our relationship to the past and to the dead.

But the challenge posed by the sheer number of the dead is tremendous. During the Vietnam War and the Cambodian genocide, up to three million Vietnamese died, and up to two

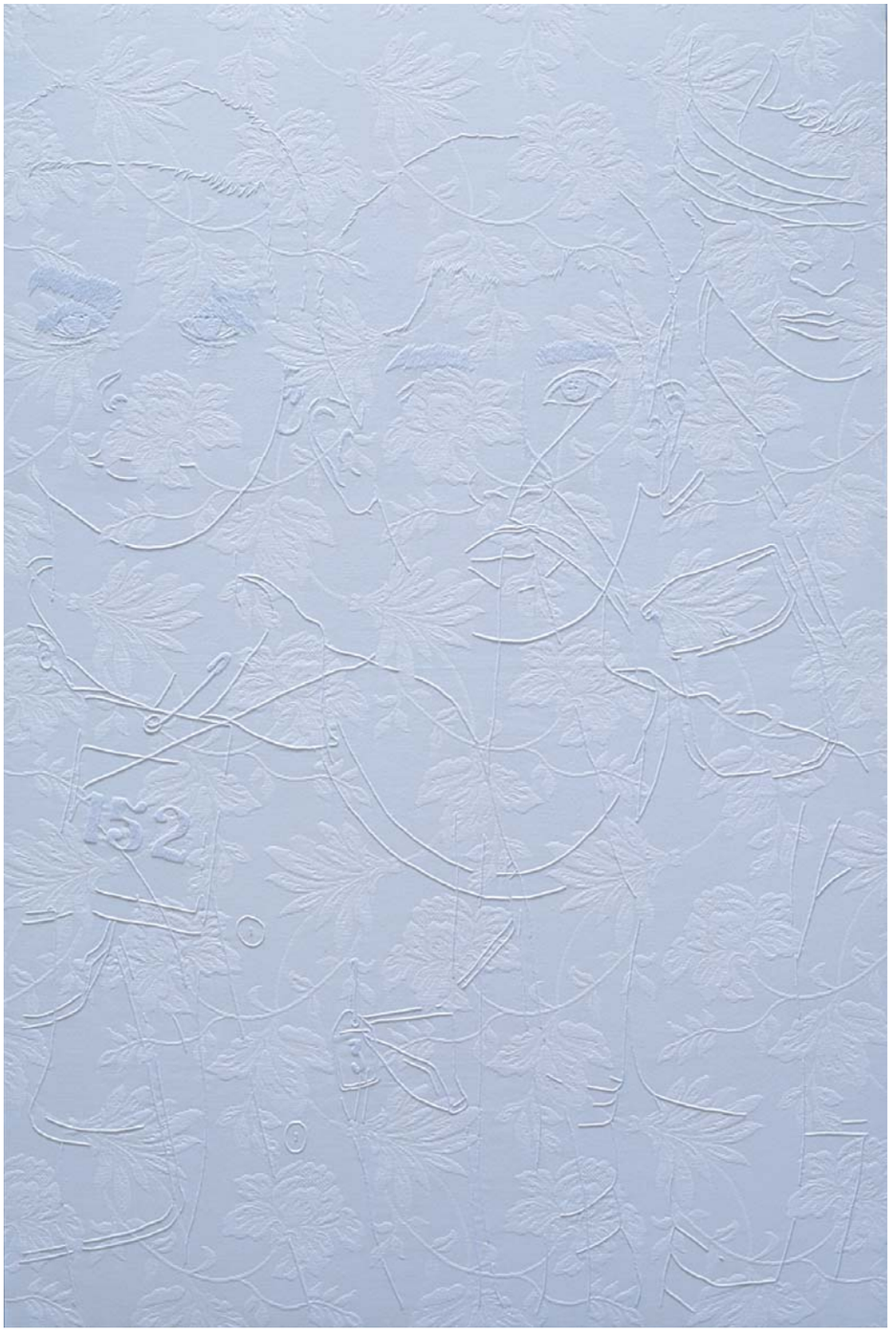

FIGURE 8
UNTITLED
From the series
Texture of Memory
2001
Embroidery

million Cambodians. Many of them, perhaps the majority, were civilians. How many died is not possible for us to enumerate, and how to name them will be a task that we can never complete. Compare this impossibility to what Americans have accomplished, counting and naming their 58,193 military dead at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.[15] Maya Lin's magnificent, dark wall, asking to be touched, dwarfs any comparable memorial or monument in Vietnam or Cambodia. The relationship between the numbers of dead and the ability to remember the dead is not an accident. The American firepower that inflicted the disproportionate body count upon Southeast Asians is a part of the same military-industrial complex that makes possible so many other things: the polished perfection of the memorial; the bureaucratic capacity to track the American dead; and the political ability to fight wars overseas, where foreign civilians will die rather than American ones. Memorials to the dead thus symbolize more than just our mourning for the dead; they symbolize our nation's very ability to remember. But with resources much more limited than Maya Lin's, how does the artist concerned with the Southeast Asian dead confront the problem of remembering the countless and the nameless?

Dinh's answer is not to try and count them or name them, a task doomed to failure. He chooses instead to rendezvous with the dead on their own terms, accepting their anonymity as the very condition of their meaning for us. He does so in *Mot Coi Di Ve* (fig. 10; p. 30) by populating the work with the photographs of unknown people, bought in bulk from secondhand stores in Vietnam. These snapshots and portraits were left behind or lost by their subjects; they are photographs without captions and faces without names, which is another way to describe ghosts. Some of these people may have died in the war or in fleeing from Vietnam, but even if they are not dead now, one day they will be. Death is photography's guarantee for its subjects. Some two thousand of these found black-and-white photographs, strung together by thread and linen tape, comprise *Mot Coi Di Ve*, which Dinh translates as "spending one's life trying to find one's way home." The fronts and backs of the photographs alternate; on the backs are original messages or quotations from several sources. One is *The Tale of Kieu*, Vietnam's most famous narrative poem.[16] Another is *Hearts of Sorrow*, a collection of oral histories of Vietnamese refugees in America.[17] As a collage of photographs and text, *Mot Coi Di Ve* has no individual subject, unlike the photographs themselves. As a collage, *Mot Coi Di Ve* suggests the collective nature of the Vietnamese refugees' desire to return home, some- times literally, but most often at least in memory.

Through its collage of photographs, *Mot Coi Di Ve* recognizes the uniqueness of each one of the other's many faces, but resists the impulse to name those without names. Their anonymity is both their tragedy and their humanity, these dead, missing, lost, or forgotten people who have passed beneath history's wake. These wandering souls represent not the plight of a minority but the fate awaiting all of us. Dinh's work neither glorifies nor dehumanizes its ghostly subjects; instead it fulfills the ethical challenge for the artist working with and among refugees cast out of their homeland, suggesting memory's incompleteness, especially in the presence of furious desire, the contradictory yearning to imagine one's memory as complete or to forget the pain of the past altogether. Thus, like memory itself, *Mot Coi Di Ve* is not singular, whole, and linear. The design of it suggests memory in fragments, strung together randomly, shot through with gaps and holes even when not infected with mass-media images. In place of stars and stripes or three red bars upon a yellow field, the banner being waved through this work is memory's tattered flag, the one symbol followed by all far-flung refugees.[18]

On the Difference Between Fire and Water

Dinh's most recent work on memory turns from photography and still images to video and moving images, the more fast-paced media dominated by American culture. His clever *From Father To Son: A Rite of Passage* (fig. 24; p. 50) looks at the American memory of the war as processed through Hollywood, from *Apocalypse Now* to *Platoon*. Martin Sheen stars in the former film, his son Charlie in the latter. Through the magic of editing and a split screen, the Sheens are put into dialogue together. Gradually, the viewer sees the parallel plots develop, reaching the same climax: the ritual killing of an older American soldier by a younger American soldier. Vietnam has corrupted the older American soldier—Tom Berenger's Sergeant Barnes in *Platoon*, Marlon Brando's Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*—and the younger American must kill him in order to live. Dinh's point is that the work performed by these screen memories transforms the Vietnam War from a geopolitical conflict, with ideological and economic meaning, into the soul-searching personal drama of fathers and sons, men and boys. The Vietnam War becomes a conflict between Americans, who remember the Vietnam War not so much as a civil war fought in Vietnam, but as a civil war in the American soul. In this drama, Vietnamese faces, personalities, and even bodies

disappear, as in one of the final shots of *Platoon*, where American soldiers unceremoniously bulldoze Vietnamese corpses into a mass grave. Looking at these corpses, we may find it hard to remember the sticky web of divided loyalties and passions that drove the Vietnamese to fight the French and the Americans, as well as each other.

Thankfully, Dinh's other video works turn more to the question of what the Vietnamese thought, felt, and remembered. In doing so, these videos offer some hope of extracting the Vietnamese from the quicksand of American memory. His gripping video *The Farmers and the Helicopters* (fig. 38; pp. 68, 69) still references the war in Vietnam, most vividly through the images and sounds of American helicopters. The helicopter, more than any other piece of American machinery, has come to symbolize American technology in Vietnam. Unlike the B-52 bomber or F-4 Phantom, both capable of delivering much more destruction, the helicopter was terrifying in a different way. As Wayne Karlin notes, Vietnamese fighters often found their encounters with these helicopters to be the most frightening of combat experiences because of the intimate proximity of intimidating technology.[19] The director Emile de Antonio, in his classic 1968 documentary *In the Year of the Pig*, intuited the symbolic meaning of the helicopter when he used the sound of the helicopter's rotating blades as his film's soundtrack.[20] Echoes of de Antonio's "helicopter concerto" appear in *Apocalypse Now*, where the helicopter is a key icon, and again in *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, where helicopter scenes from *Apocalypse Now* feature prominently. In that movie, the Vietnamese are usually seen only from a distance, running away from or shooting back at American helicopters. But in *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, Dinh devotes one channel of his three-channel video to Vietnamese people speaking about their memories of American helicopters.

While dialogue between Vietnamese and Americans is almost never seen in American movies, this video creates a conversation between Vietnamese people and American technology, whose voice is the helicopter concerto. In contrast, the Vietnamese voices are human, and the memories of helicopters that they speak of are diverse. "Helicopters are immoral," one woman declares, a point hard to dispute when so many of the shots in the video are of helicopters launching rockets and spitting bullets. Even the helicopter's perspective is rendered through gunsights. Not surprisingly, other interviewees testify to running from pursuing helicopters, or staying still and hoping not to be harmed. They were caught in the Vietnamese peasant's catch-22: stay and be a sitting duck, or run and be shot as a Viet Cong. Despite this, one of the interviewees testifies to the way helicopters seduced him as a little boy. With a helicopter, one could fly and even save lives. One could also kill, of course. The helicopter for him symbolizes the ability of American power to take away lives or save them, to terrify or enchant, all made possible by an expensive technology beyond the reach of a small, poor country like Vietnam—South or North, then or now.

But of all Dinh's work about the war, *The Farmers and the Helicopters* is the most hopeful. Vietnam does not remain forever burning, and the helicopter does not remain forever menacing. Instead, the story Dinh tells is one in which the Vietnamese defeat and reclaim the helicopter. We see the desperate evacuation of Americans and South Vietnamese from Saigon in 1975 by helicopter, ending with some of those helicopters being pushed overboard from the flight deck of an overcrowded American carrier. That image says everything about the American effort, one in which expensive helicopters are disposable, and one in which mighty technology cannot determine victory. Yet, for all the terror dealt by the helicopter, a survivor of its attacks is able to say, years later, "Now I see it as a dear friend." The helicopter's capacity to rescue and to aid means it can be reconstructed as a symbol of peace, as it becomes for another interviewee. Instead of tilting at windmills, he builds his own helicopters from spare parts and fabricated pieces, in the hopes of using them to help the living.

This kind of helicopter stands in for the hopes of an older generation that remembers the war, one of whom says of the younger generation that they have forgotten the past; to these young people, she says, "history is like a fairy tale." For those who have lived through a painful era, the desire for it to be as present and as immediate to those who have not lived through it is understandable. And yet if one could choose between living with memories of pain and living in a fairy tale, which would one choose? Perhaps the answer is not an either-or choice. For the man whose quixotic quest it is to handcraft his own helicopters, the heavy metal of history can be refashioned into a fairy tale. For the postwar Vietnamese and their overseas cousins, perhaps approaching history and memory like fairy tales is not just an act of ignorance, but also a willful gesture toward changing the association of the past with a horror story. After all, Vietnam is a country and not a war, or so goes the rallying cry for many Vietnamese at home and abroad who are exhausted by the American obsession with the Vietnam War.

In Vietnamese, the word "country" is

rendered as *nuoc*, which, as Huynh Sanh Thong reminds us, has a second meaning: water.[21] The Vietnamese have always associated Vietnam with water, given the way its entire eastern border runs against the sea. It's appropriate, then, that the dominant visual motif in Dinh's video *The Imaginary Country* (fig. 9) is water. In this four-channel piece, two sets of visual images box in the viewer. On one wall is a projection of an ever-changing series of young Vietnamese Americans who speak of their return to Vietnam. For these Vietnamese Americans, Vietnam is indeed the imaginary country they have fantasized about their entire lives. For them, every return is a negotiation between soft-focus expectation and the *cinema verité* of Vietnam's harsh reality, a give-and-take that can devolve into conflict and rejection. As they talk, their gaze is directed at the viewer—but also at the opposite wall, toward which the viewer can turn to see a triptych of videos portraying Vietnamese fishermen walking into the receding tide of the ocean. Like the helicopter, the ocean both gives life and takes it away, particularly for these fishermen and for many of the Vietnamese who fled by sea after the war. The ocean, with its immensity and fluidity, becomes a perfect symbol for memory itself, always necessary, never contained, and sometimes as terrifying as only a force of nature can be.

Dinh's video suggests that we should fix our eyes on this image of the endless sea, turning away as we do so from the burning jungles of *Apocalypse Now* with which we started. Like the ocean, memory is more powerful than any machine, or so we hope. Long after the tanks and helicopters and jets and bombers have been turned into scrap metal, a human memory might survive, passed along from generation to generation like "a feather on the breath of God."[22] The identity and fate of the lone dissident who faced down a tank in Tiananmen Square is unknown to us, but his image survives, and so long as it does, so also does our memory of him. We remember him because he puts flesh in front of steel, hope in front of death, love in front of war. Dinh's art explores these same registers where humanity confronts terror. In the end, what Dinh shows us is that instead of fighting fire with fire, we should be fighting fire with water. After all, it's true that Vietnam is not a war, but a country. A country of beauty. A country of rain. A country of memory.[23]

FIGURE 9
Stills from **THE IMAGINARY COUNTRY**
2006
Four-channel video installation

NOTES

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11 Hollan Cotter, "Two Sides' Viewpoints on the War in Vietnam," *New York Times*, December 9, 2005.

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