



Sarah Pickering, *Land Mine*, 2005.

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## War. What is it good for?

**Two shows at MOCP consider our past and present conflicts.**

By Ruth Lopez

The first sweep through the ground floor of one of the Museum of Contemporary Photography's two exhibitions leaves us parched. An-My Lê's large, silver gelatin images of battle scenes and soldiers-in-training are printed so flat (without strong whites or blacks) they almost look like engravings. It takes a deeper viewing of "Under the Clouds of War," which is made up of Lê's two series "Small Wars" and "29 Palms," to appreciate how that quality enhances our experience of the work: We can imagine a soldier's discomfort in the hot desert or in the woods, bogged down with too much gear.

After another more studied lap around the gallery, we pick up the back story. And that's when the work becomes interesting: Lê approaches her projects partly as a documentarian, but what she captures are staged events—these are men who spend their weekends reenacting the Vietnam War in the wooded hills of Virginia. The artist's biography is also key: Lê was born in Saigon in 1960, just after the war started, and came to the States as a refugee in 1975—the year the war ended. She went back to Vietnam for the first time in 1994, just a few years out of the Yale M.F.A. program in photography, and began a series of landscapes of her native country. Lê's art became part of an exploration of a war that devastated her native country and divided her adopted one.

It was five years into this exploration that she discovered this group of war reenactors, and contacted them to ask if she (and her camera) could spend time with them, and they agreed.

It's not clear which is stranger—the reenactors, or the photographer who is willing to don the uniform of the Vietcong, as she did, and participate in the war games as a “gook.” We are getting something out of Lê's whacked-out bravery, but what? Do we really need to get in touch with our inner warrior, or the humanity of dudes obsessed with finding historically accurate footwear or whatnot? “Small Wars” provokes these questions and more, and we're grateful. For all the miserable problems we inherit from war, we can stand to consider why we do it a bit more.

Lê's other series of images here, “29 Palms,” is a continuation of this exploration of war. When the troops were sent to Iraq, Lê attempted to go as an embedded photojournalist but was denied access. Instead, she was allowed to go to a Marine base in Twentynine Palms, a 586,000-acre training camp in the southern Mojave Desert of California. In this terrain, which is supposedly similar to Iraq, Lê worked on “29 Palms,” which is a record of that ersatz war environment and the young men and women preparing for battle. In “29 Palms,” we learn how soldiers get ready to face the enemy by portraying the enemy. Barracks are adorned with anti-American graffiti, and marines are assigned to dress as Iraqi police or civilians and create confrontations for practice. It's an unreal situation in preparation for a surreal experience.

The much smaller companion exhibition on the upper floors, “War Fare,” continues to explore the topic by showing the work of five artists. Martha Rosler's now classic series of photomontages in “Bringing the War Home” occupies most of the tiny second-floor gallery. These images—which combine Playboy nudes, home-appliance advertisements and newspaper pictures of war—are social as well as political critiques. Rosler takes images of war and places them right outside the windows of our perfect living rooms. Created between 1967 and 1972, they scream out the horror of death that was occurring on the other side of the world, while we went about our business at home.

Among the newer work here is former Army sergeant Sean Hemmerle's color images. Hemmerle also contributes to our understanding of the media's role in how we see or understand conflict. With a large-format camera, he documents such environments as a government war command center and the interior of a national network's newsroom, and places them side by side. They appear as interchangeable spaces.

British photographer Sarah Pickering's large and gorgeous color images of staged explosions tell us something about the industry and commodities surrounding the business of war. But we don't need to know that to find the images compelling.

*“Under the Clouds of War” and “War Fare” are at the MOCP through January 6, 2007.*