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What the Vietnam War Can Teach Us About Today's Conflicts

'Past is prologue' in two shows at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, following the 50th anniversary of the Tet Offensive



The war in Vietnam, which spanned two decades from 1955 to 1975, occupies a troubled place in American memory. The bloody 'quagmire' imperiled US Cold War policy, claiming the lives of some 58,000 American troops and over a million North and South Vietnamese soldiers. (Many more were wounded, or left with long-term psychological trauma.) A draft packed the military's ranks with poor and middle class men, even as the connected, well-heeled and white (including three US presidents) studiously evaded combat. For a US already riven by the social upheavals of the 1960s, the protests that defined the latter half of that decade seemed an even more profound tattering of the social fabric. Many – especially the young – were galvanized in no small measure because the conflict was the most mediated to date: war correspondents on TV news and features in glossy photojournalism magazines all served to 'bring the war home', literally beaming it into the kitchens and living rooms of an affluent populace unfamiliar with the face of war.

Such dissonance was brought into jarring relief by California sculptor Edward Kienholz's *The Eleventh Hour Final*, first shown in April 1968 at the Gallery 669 in Los Angeles, in the immediate aftermath of the Tet Offensive. The installation has been restaged for 'Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975' at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, an exhibition featuring over 100 works by 58 artists made during, and in reaction to, the war. Kienholz's tableau is a pitch-perfect recreation of a domestic living room, all cheap wood panelling and neat mid-century furniture; its spare interior is centred, naturally, around a console TV set, here rendered as a tapered plinth. The screen is frozen in time, recounting a familiar scene from the nightly news: a tally of US and 'Enemy' dead and wounded, the numbing abstraction of a war seen from the comfort of an emerald sofa. A forerunner to Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, Kienholz deftly employs the grotesque to plumb the depths of trauma and repression. Here, he disrupts the scene's sterile veneer with a more uncanny transmission. A wax head gazes back from within the television and beyond the tallies, disfigured by napalm fire – that most famous of Dow Chemical products, rained from US warplanes upon the jungles of Southeast Asia.



Edward Kienholz, *The Eleventh Hour Final*, 1968, multi-media. Copyright Kienholz. Courtesy: © the artist and L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

Though his late-surrealist idiom was highly insouciant, Kienholz was finely attuned to the contradictions at the heart of the US project, and the darkness that pulsed beneath the endless sunshine and prim suburban exteriors dotting the country's landscape. In 1970, he began a proposal and study for *The Non-War Memorial*, tens of thousands of military uniforms articulated in clay, to be scattered across a formerly pristine meadow in Idaho, intentionally despoiled in an echo of the American defoliation and 'Rolling Thunder' bombardment of the Vietnamese countryside. According to the project documents (envisioned in 1970/1972) Kienholz envisioned this as a counter-monument to be built over the course of the summer by a 'mix of artists, students, activists, etc' before turning the project over to a museum.

The Non-War Memorial was never executed, but the study also appears in 'Artists Respond'. As curator Melissa Ho writes in an accompanying essay, '[there] is by now a recognized American art of the Vietnam War.... Yet it took years for this art to gain critical attention.' Importantly, much of this work was made by women and artists of colour, used novel forms of performance and visual culture, or represented important deviations from the modernist or minimalist party line.

Accordingly, for Ho, a great deal of this anti-war material 'was unseen, unexhibited, not written about, perhaps not even considered art...' In bringing such works together, 'Artists Respond' seriously considers projects long hidden from view: Corita Kent's bold screenprints; Terry Fox's 'defoliation' action; Timothy Washington's meditation on being a black draftee. They are interspersed with famed contemporaries such as Dan Flavin, Hans Haacke, Yvonne Rainer and Nancy Spero, whose projects are reframed and restored to their political immediacy. At the centre of the show are four large-scale montages by Martha Rosler, a mashup of magazine genres – consumerist comforts colliding with documented atrocities on the other side of the globe, in her iconic 'House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home' (1967-72).

Of course, from the Vietnamese perspective, the war didn't need to be 'brought home'. US involvement on the peninsula was part of a larger French and British colonial enterprise dating back to the 18th century, amplified in 1946 by the onset of the Cold War. The North, for instance, simply called the conflict 'The American War.' In addition to one million military fatalities on the Vietnamese side, more than two million civilians were killed. A palpable trauma lives on in the scarred landscape, and in the memories of a younger generation, many of whom were born to the conflict's more than 700,000 refugees.



Tiffany Chung, *Remapping History: an autopsy of a battle, an excavation of a man's past*(detail), 2015/2019. Courtesy: © the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

This diaspora is global in scope, but concentrated in the US, mostly in California and Texas. In accounts of the Vietnam War – especially by artists – the experiences of Vietnamese people are often absent. The boldest aspect of 'Artists Respond', therefore, is that it has been paired with 'Tiffany Chung: Vietnam, Past is Prologue', a solo exhibition which showcases the artist's wide-ranging practice, from striking oil, ink and acrylic drawings to archival detective stories to moving video documentaries, across just a few small galleries.

Raised in Southern California, Chung was born in 1969 in Da Nang and returned to Vietnam in 2000. Her ongoing projects are acts of psychic cartography. She traces the flows of diaspora through elaborate embroidery, and excavates a long-forgotten 1971 aerial operation using family mementos and hand-made diagrams. *Remapping History: an autopsy of a battle, an excavation of a man's past* (2018) uses radiant colour to bring arcane tactical diagrams to life; it tells the story of Chung's father, an elite ARVN helicopter pilot, who was downed and held captive until 1984.

Chung's is but one of countless such stories, of families separated in the fog of war or forced into exile. Her own acts of memorial are part of a larger mosaic, as a younger generation comes to terms with the past. In this sense, 'Artists Respond' and 'Vietnam, Past is Prologue' both contend that 50 years on (and during a state of endless war on multiple fronts), the conflict in Vietnam still has much to teach us. Fittingly, the interior of Kienholz's *Eleventh Hour Final* is static but for one thing: the latest issue of the *TV Guide*, resting between an ashtray and a floral arrangement. An augur of the carnage that now, as then, ceaselessly bombards our retinas. Past is prologue indeed.

Main Image: Edward Kienholz, The Eleventh Hour Final, 1968, multi-media. Copyright Kienholz. Courtesy: © the artist and L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

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