

Dinh Q Lê: The Colony.....

Ikon Gallery Birmingham 27 January to 3 April.....

The title of this new large-scale video installation refers to Franz Kafka's short story *In the Penal Colony*, the sparse landscape of which Dinh Q Lê considers analogous to the Peruvian Chincha islands where the videos were made. Beginning with a view of distant craggy clusters in bluish haze, the islands are next seen covered with thousands of nesting birds that accumulate there because of the abundance of anchovies in the surrounding sea. The main visual characteristic of the work is the birds' mesmeric patterns of flight.

Lê uses technology associated with spying to tell the hidden story of these islands. Here, the azure of an inlet viewed from above gives way to a descriptive mix of banality and menace when we see that the videos have been made with drone cameras. These slightly jerky panoptic machines surveil the dereliction of boom and bust harvesting of guano – bird manure – an exceptionally high quality fertiliser that was found in great quantities on the Chincha islands. The need to enrich soil in cultures with intense

agricultural production such as Britain, signalled ‘The Great Guano Rush’ of the 1850s, where imperial powers scrambled for the resource, leaving in its train conflict and the exploitation of slave labour, until the guano reserves were exhausted. Lê’s videos depict the labour-intensive digging, bagging and stacking of remnants of this fertiliser that continues at a smaller-scale today.

Framing this history are two YouTube films screened on flat monitors displayed on the floor. They record a similar land grab or resource grab occurring today in the South China Sea, where Chinese authorities are extending their territory into international shipping lanes and air space in an effort to control trade and resources. The soundtracks overlap throughout the installation to produce a cacophony of birds, music, machinery harvesting Guano and voices heard contesting the Chinese encroachment, as we witness their craft manoeuvre into the contested zone.

Although this current installation differs from Lê’s earlier work a comparison helps place *The Colony* 2016 in perspective. The lyrical emphasis of his Vietnamese identity and personal history – he was a refugee from war with the Khmer Rouge but later returned to Vietnam – has been transformed in this show into a post-colonial allegory. Historical and symbolic parallels are drawn between the mechanisms of colonial imperialism and the

power plays of today. Lê consistently returns to the mutability of the past to question roles of authorship, themes that are extended in *The Colony*.

Lê has used Kafka's *The Penal Colony* before in connection with the history of Vietnam and Cambodia particularly in the 2008 woven photograph series 'The Hill of Poisonous Trees' which refers to Tuol Sleng, a notorious prison and a site of torture and genocide built by the Khmer Rouge in a former high school. Photographic images of the prisoners are interwoven in Lê's characteristic method, similar to a woven mat, with tourist images of the Buddha from the temple of Siem Reap.

This is intense subject matter and in the Ikon show Lê has distanced himself and his own history through the extended metaphor and allegory of the Chincha islands. As artistic intention this is conceptually precise, while the sense of narrative can be compared with literary form: Lê's first-person account has evolved into a *Bildungsroman*.

Previously Lê has addressed the issue of presenting a culture as victim by producing films that include testimony and artwork by survivors of the Khmer Rouge and by people living in Vietnam today. This approach creates a critical dynamic between the ideologies behind what is considered amateur and what is

considered professionally authored. This is reiterated and developed in the Ikon show through the juxtaposition of video footage garnered from YouTube with the elaborate, professionalised production of the Chincha island films which together make up *The Colony*. The mutability of the past is an Orwellian theme: ‘Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past,’ runs the Party slogan in *1984*. Lê’s apprehension of this leads him to cross threads of received historical narrative and to overlay them with points of critical reversal.

The Colony ends as we see the cameraman with his hands extended receive a drone as it descends from a day’s shoot. At this point of casual closure which reveals the film’s production, the author recedes so that, to some extent, existential responsibility for catastrophic historical events is laid open and the viewer eventually feels a reprieve from Kafkaesque anxiety and absurdity.

Stephen Lee is a writer and an artist.