



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

fellowship in 2012. She has since travelled widely to take photographs of the Coast Guard's activities—search and rescue, counter-piracy, fishery patrol.

On a cold Wednesday earlier this year, Lê, who is petite, with blunt-cut black hair, was at the Coast Guard's training facility in Cape May, New Jersey, to take some of the photographs for the commission. At 8 A.M., she accompanied new recruits for "hose training." To approximate the experience, picture a TV Yule log—that flickering, heatless image of a hearth—enlarged to the size of a movie screen. Then add a smoke machine, roaring sound effects, and four hoses discharging sixty pounds of water pressure per square inch at the simulated fire.

For the recruits, the challenge was to soak the screen before their oxygen tanks ran out; for Lê, it was to take a crisp photograph of the pixelated fire without getting her equipment wet. Donnie Brzuska, a public-affairs officer, was on hand to help out. He suggested—twice—a posed shot of recruits in formation, wearing firefighting gear. Lê hesitated.

"Does the lighting suck too much?" Brzuska asked.

"The lighting sucks," she said.

Lê first turned her camera on martial subjects in 1999, when she camped out with Vietnam War reënactors in Virginia. Lê, who is Vietnamese, came to the States in 1975, as a political refugee. The Iraq war galvanized her to explore real military training at a Marine Corps facility in California. "I'm not an activist," she said, "but I was completely distraught." She thought that observation might quiet her anxiety. Before shipping out to Iraq, marines trained on battleships, and Lê photographed them on board. Since then, she has visited military bases on every continent and eaten steak in the captain's quarters on an Arctic submarine. ("It smelled like feet and old socks.")

Back in the fire simulator, Lê set up her large-format wooden camera in the red-lit room. Fourteen recruits crouched to direct powerful jets of water at the screen.

"Stand by for photo!" Brzuska belated.

"They don't have to be perfect or posed," Lê ventured.

"Yes, they do," Brzuska replied. "I'm looking out for you, Ma'am."

Brzuska had prepared a schedule of events for Lê's visit, but she wanted to explore. After he took her from a dorm to the building where recruits have their hair buzzed and their uniforms tailored, Lê paused in a classroom. Wooden tables, painted in alternating blocks of red and yellow, lined the walls. At the center of each block was a notched mount for a gun's barrel. The tables were used for gun maintenance.

Lê ran her hand along the surface of one of the tables. "Will they be using these at all?" she asked.

"I don't think it's in the schedule, but we can make it happen," Brzuska said.

Five recruits were summoned to pose, and Lê asked them to stand behind the tables, facing her and holding their firearms. Their instructor, Petty Officer Andrew Bigwood, objected. "They cannot point a firearm at you."

"Even if they're not loaded?" Lê asked.

Bigwood shook his head.

"It's the camera, not me. I mean, I will be there, but I'll be using the cable," she said, referring to the camera's short cable release.

Bigwood wasn't persuaded. "You can't stand in front of a gun. If you want to stand off to the side . . ."

"It's just their backs then," Lê said. "It's not that interesting."

"She could wait until we take them apart, and then she stands at the front and takes a picture?" a stocky female recruit named Olson suggested.

"So long as they're not assembled," Bigwood said.

Lê instructed the recruits on which gun parts to hold, and where to direct their gaze. She ducked under a black-and-silver cloth to focus her lens. Olson slumped and her eyes grew glassy. From under the cloth, Lê called Olson's name. A few beats later, she did it again. Olson's chin jerked, her attention back in the present.

"Ma'am, do you want me to look down? Because you keep calling my name and then not saying anything," Olson said.

"I call your name and you respond and it's perfect," Lê said, then clicked the shutter release.

Brzuska checked his watch. "One thing I've learned handling artists is you can't rush art," he said.

—Anna Altman

BEHIND THE SCENES POINT AND SHOOT



Last month, the artist An-My Lê installed fifty-two photographs in the Coast Guard's brand-new headquarters, in Washington, D.C. For federal construction projects, the General Services Administration allots half a per cent of the budget to art, so, three years ago, the G.S.A.'s Art in Architecture Program awarded two million dollars in commissions to three artists. One was Lê, who won a MacArthur