



Chris is a very close, like best
Helicopter in Vietnam. He was
killed in the war. I hope
I would could take off and save
him.

your son
Lutz

July 18–October 7, 2012

The ten photographic sets that make up Lutz Bacher's *Bien Hoa* (2006–07) are deceptively simple. Large color inkjet images, reproductions of yellowed black-and-white photographs, are presented above handwritten notes written on the backs of the original prints. The annotations were made by a man stationed at Vietnam's Bien Hoa Air Force Base in 1969, identified only as Walter, who is alternately the author and the subject of the images. We see Walter posing at a military desk with his section chief, in an armed helicopter adorned with a playboy bunny, in front of sand-bagged barracks, and at gunpoint, "surrendering" to a Vietnamese woman. Other photographs depict the bleak situation—burned-out helicopters, fire drills, and fences separating the base from the local town. Bacher found the cache of photographs, which had been mailed from Vietnam, at a Berkeley salvage store. Originally meant for an intimate audience, the photos are displaced by Bacher's decision to remake them as her art. She channels the voice of an African American man fighting in the Vietnam War, decisively situating that voice, through her own authorship, in a new time and context.

On their own, the images are charged with America's uneasy history of armed aggression and recall our complex legacy of racism and popular unrest; with Walter's notes, however, that general discomfort becomes deeply personal. Referring to an image of himself seated inside a helicopter he writes: "This is a Huey Cobra, the badest [*sic*] Helicopter in Vietnam. Those are rockets on the side of the ship. I wish I could take off and come home. Your Man, Walter." With his comments, Walter reveals feelings of complicity in the military apparatus of the war, as well as his desire to return home. It is hard not to wonder how Walter wound up in Vietnam and what became of him: was he drafted or enlisted by the many recruiters targeting African American neighborhoods at the time, promising subsidies? Did he return home safely?

Presented, as they are here, in a museum setting, Walter's self-conscious commentaries on his photographs take on new relevance. In some cases, Walter's inscriptions sound almost like a tourist writing a postcard; in others, he seems to have been more concerned with the composition of the image than with the grisly content of a scene: "This is a practice session that the Fire Department has every now and then. They are practicing on a burning helicopter. I messed up on my border at the top of the picture." Bacher's enlargements invite us to hone in on these details and scrutinize the photographs aesthetically, as Walter directs: "This is Bien Hoa looking at it from the Air Base. This is a pretty good picture. Now do you think that's beautiful? Can you see the wire, keeping the people from attacking the Air Base?" Walter's grim interjections foil our sense of detached aesthetic judgment.

Likewise, Bacher, conspiring with Walter, complicates easy explanations of her work. Curiously, the only two photographs in the series that remain unannotated feature a gun. In the first, Walter poses solemnly in front of sandbagged barracks in full military uniform. In the second, he is dressed in Vietnamese garb, playfully surrendering at gunpoint to a local woman. This reversal, from American soldier to Vietnamese prisoner, illustrates not only the paradox of Walter's situation, but also Bacher's. Without captions to describe Walter's feelings, it is unclear if he fought willingly or if, like many soldiers at that time, he was ambivalent about our presence in Vietnam, or perhaps even sympathized with the local's desire to enact political change. Faced with these gaps in explanation, viewers are left to wonder about Walter's intentions in setting up the photographs as he did, with this strange role reversal. The reasons for Bacher's own reversal, exchanging her voice for Walter's, is also left ambiguous.

Shifting between Walter, of whom nothing is known, and Bacher, *Bien Hoa's* narrative refuses to be fixed in any one time or place. For that reason, the work feels contemporary, alive with the contradictions that make up our present moment. Bacher uses found images, objects, and text to confound easy understandings of authorship, gender, race, violence, and power. Despite being composed of discarded photographs, *Bien Hoa* resonates as a pivotal description of a fraught moment in United States history, yet this history still feels open to interpretation. Bacher, exhuming the photographs and aligning her voice with Walter's, inverts any sense of their cohesion.

Dena Beard

ASSISTANT CURATOR

Lutz Bacher has had solo exhibitions at Kunstverein München, Munich; PS.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York; and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. She was recently included in the 2012 Whitney Biennial in New York and previously participated in group shows at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. Bacher lives and works in Berkeley and New York City.

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Lutz Bacher: *Bien Hoa*, 2006-07 (detail); inkjet print mounted on aluminum; 24 × 36 in.; ballpoint pen on photographic paper; 8 × 10 in.; courtesy of Ratio 3, San Francisco.