Dinh Q. Lê’s *Crossing the Farther Shore* incorporated hundreds of photographs taken in Vietnam during the 1940s–1980s, with the majority dating to the pre-Vietnam War era before 1975. These images were far from the iconic ones of a war-torn Vietnam that many of us know so well. Instead, they were personal and familiar, the kind that might fill any family’s photo album: portraits of loved ones, couples on vacation, scenic vistas, weddings, birthdays, and family gatherings. Lê started to collect these photographs when he moved back to Vietnam in 1996. He and his family had fled at the time of the Vietnam War, and when he returned to Saigon to live and work he began visiting antique stores and second-hand shops in hopes of finding his own family’s photos. Instead, he found thousands of images documenting the everyday lives of Southern Vietnamese people – how they dressed, looked, and felt. Such photos are one of the few records of South Vietnam that have escaped from the Northern Vietnamese communist government’s systematic effort to erase the pre-1975 existence of the South. They became a kind of surrogate family album for Lê as he began using them in his art to preserve them and to show this pre-Vietnam War era history.
Lê stitched together photographs, some facing out and others turned inward, making room-like enclosures that alluded to the mosquito netting under which people slept. Suspended at different heights throughout the gallery and pooling lightly onto the floor, the arrangement of fragile-looking sculptures had a presence both stately and poetic that Lê called a “sleeping, dreaming memory of Vietnam.”

On the backs of some photographs appeared notations made by their original owners, while others held bits of found or handwritten texts added by Lê from a variety of sources including recollections of Vietnam drawn from interviews conducted by the Vietnamese-American Oral History Project and from interviews from the Houston Asian American Archives at Rice University’s Chao Center for Asian Studies. On some, Lê took lines from the epic poem, *The Tale of Kieu*, by Nguyễn Du (1766–1820). Considered to be the most significant work of Vietnamese literature, the poem tells the story of Thúy Kiều, a beautiful woman who sold herself into a loathsome marriage in order to save her family from ruin. After many trials and much suffering in far away places, she eventually makes it home and is reunited.
with her family. According to Dinh Q. Lê, it is a poem for which most Vietnamese people can recite the first four lines, and one with which many Vietnamese people who fled the country can identify.

I thank Dinh Q. Lê for his revelatory and deeply felt work of art that became a contemplative space for individuals and a place for dialogue between two generations: those individuals who left Vietnam, and the many children who grew up in the United States with Vietnamese parents. The photographs spoke for themselves, conveying something different to each of us. Experiencing Crossing the Farther Shore was to consider, too, the larger questions about how each of us defines “home” as we attempt to connect with our pasts. These thoughts and feelings are also evoked in Bao-Long Chu’s poem, Ten Photographs: Dark, Made Light. Reflecting on images in the “treasure trove of black and white photographs that my grandparents and parents carried with them,” Chu imparts real and imagined family stories in the language of poetry.
We thank Rice University’s Chao Center for Asian Studies and especially Tani E. Barlow, Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Professor of Asian Studies and the Center’s Director Emeritus, for her encouragement and for supporting the research and commissioning of Dinh Q. Lê’s *Crossing the Farther Shore*. We are also grateful to Nathalie Roff, Yasu Nakamori, and Betty Cartwright whose hospitality made Dinh Q. Lê feel at home in Houston. For true and lively conversation about experiences of the post-war Vietnamese diaspora and its relationship to current Vietnam, we thank fashion designer Chloe Dao, poet Bao-Long Chu, and artist Dinh Q. Lê, for their participation on the roundtable discussion, “Voices from the Farther Shore.”

Dinh Q. Lê dedicated *Crossing the Farther Shore* to his mother and her friends, and to them we offer our appreciation.

Kimberly Davenport
Director
April 27th this year marked the 40th anniversary of my family’s fleeing from Vietnam in 1975. The sky was bone gray and the C-130s drummed thunder into the tarmac. What I witnessed as a child was that everything can fall down, burn or just blow away. To my right, my sister Khanh; my left, my sister Van. We stood in the order of our births, the six of us holding on to each other’s hands. We were waiting for what? Flight to where? No one told me. The rain whispered its sibilant sorrows to the wind. My mother heaved her seventh child in her arms, at her feet a Samsonite full of photos.
The girl in the photograph is fourteen or twenty. She is standing by a plumeria, her right hand barely touching the smooth trunk. Her lips parted just so, as if to say something to the one on the other side of the camera about not wanting tears, about sweetness and spinning, or something passing through the bright sky that late afternoon, the future of loss hidden in the shadow just beneath her left collarbone, then gathering in the honeyed perfume as if the intoxication of all those cropped-out blooms might make her forget, or turn her in the wind, any leaf floating.

Look how he is marked: stigmata in the recess of his palm, a burnt rose or blood scar, a black brand. This is the emblem of his end, a line of grief inherited from his mother’s hand, from her mother’s hand: a hard break in the heart line that bears the weight of mothers, of daughters (and one cursed son) across centuries. Broken prayer sticks under his dreams. He is getting old, soon it will be too late. But in this scallop-edged photo he is smiling, all teeth and no eyes.
This is Chùa Trần Quốc. Minh-Tri’s ashes are scattered there. When lighting incense, after the stick has ignited with a glowing ember, do not blow the flame out with your breath, but rather wave your hand to extinguish. Bow three times to Buddha. He was one in this picture. Father never made peace with his death, a thousand miles from home. Father said nothing when he heard the news. I remember how he traced the heart of my palm, he took my feather hand and held it to his cheek. The temple is red but you can’t tell. Buddhists say that there is a source of and path out of suffering.

This was taken in 1961, the year after I married your father to spite my true love for leaving me. I think of him, his warm fingers counting the bones in my wrist, as a telling wind that stretches up the country I barely recall, just the mouth of Bến Hải River, his sodden body clinging to the moon’s light, crossing the farther shore, body of night floating over grass, fallen body breaking with the water’s constant breaks. I have not one memory of that lingered place, but several possibilities that surface in dreams. But the truth is, you don’t know.
A family picture: my father and mother, my three brothers, four sisters, cross through alleys and city gates, stay awhile in alcoves and shelters afforded by dreams and ease of sleep. We among the huddled masses, a sea of gaunt faces, black hair, buck teeth, alike in rage, alike in patience or exhaustion except for the one wandering away: I am the dreamless one outside their doors, the worried somnambulist listening through keyholes, cracks, to the steady outpour of sighs and breathing. In the photograph itself we look happy, as though nothing else matters.

It was 1968. The white has yellowed and there are no sharp edges, but then again it is a photograph of a dream: my sister and her twin just six weeks old, asleep and swaddled in faded cotton, their mittened fists touching one another in reassurance. My mother who took the picture was happy. At that moment, she had not yet experienced the unnamed sorrow, the unbearable darkness of a mother burying her child. What sounds like grief? A mother sinking into a chair, clutching a photo. I have come here too late, her body gone, already ash.
I wait for him. One more waiting in a lifetime of waiting: under the eaves of mother’s house I waited, her incantations in the foyer marked time, my eyes searched the dirt road leading to our home for signs attesting his arrival – clouds of dust, flurry of wings, the lilies bowing down to greet him. I wait with my heart on my tongue, patient, full of revisions, my woman heart, my dumb tongue. Are we one body, one ache at attention? I know too much furtive waiting, flowers don’t bow down, flight means leaving, not arriving, the world hides itself in all this dust. I’m afraid I live I die too much by the promised hours, and I wake only to find myself bowing in the foyer, the early dust above my head, and flight burning through my fists.

1954. My father and mother, southbound on the long road from Hanoi to Saigon. In the rain season they came, a steeped ache in their left sides, the augury of another life, eyes closed to the exhaustion of forgetting. What is left? Nothing but the faces they see, always with them, like a photo in a beloved’s wallet. 1975. Water bound flight on the treacherous road from there to here. My father’s arms across my back as we slept among the sleepless, a cargo of flesh. I glance at this photo again and again.
You can’t tell, but in this picture he carried a bullet lodged in his left shoulder, a palm width from his heart. The man whose hand he was holding loved him, but not the way he wanted. The sky above seemed framed by edging banks of dark clouds. His face was young – unrecognizable, like the stranger you turn to in an alleyway whose furtive glances promise kinship, whose touch says, I know the way, like the one you take in mid-morning, the one you drive out by noon, the one whose body is hardened salt as you turn to look one last time before the city consumes itself.

Sunlight flmes the room. You sleep. Your mouth biting on words unsaid. The jade Buddha on your breast is translucent like a ghost that will rise over me. I am on my knees. I mean to gather all the scattered photos strewn in this room. Believe me when I tell you, you have come far. Deep rivers here carry no bodies. All I want is for you to stretch your fingers out and dive into a body not buoyed by water, but wings. What more can be done or remembered?
My name is Mary. I was born in 1925. My parents were farmers. They were happy. We lived in a small village. We had a lot of land. We grew vegetables and fruits. We sold them at the market. I remember the market days. They were fun. I sold vegetables. My mother sold fruits. We made good money. We had enough to eat. We also bought clothes. My mother made beautiful dresses. She was a good seamstress. I remember the dress she made for my sister's wedding. It was beautiful. It had a blue bow. My sister was very happy. She looked beautiful in the dress. We had a big party. It was a great day. I was happy. I have many memories of those days. They were good times. I miss them.
ky niệm ngày 11.4.68, tại Việt Nam tổ chức các hoạt động mừng ngày 1 tháng 5 và ngày 30 tháng 4, kỷ niệm chiến thắng coer Bach Mai. Nơi đó, người dân ra đường vui mừng, hát và nhảy mừng cuộc chiến đấu của nhân dân ta chống lại sức ép của Mỹ và đế quốc Pháp.
Fortunately, we met a Singapore fishing boat, and the wife of that fisherman was Vietnamese. They helped us with compass, gasoline, and they showed us that "now you go down to this direction towards the south, you just go from morning to the afternoon you will reach Indonesia, when you get to Indonesia, they will welcome you." Sure enough, we went from morning to 6pm. We reached Indonesia on April 29, and Indonesia was still receiving refugees, and we had to wake up a little so that they could receive us.
Dinh Q. Lê was born in 1968 in Hà Tiên, Vietnam. His family escaped war-torn Vietnam in 1978 and settled in Southern California; Lê grew up in Los Angeles. He holds a BA in Fine Arts from the University of California Santa Barbara and a MFA in Photography from the School of Visual Arts, New York.

In 1996, Lê moved to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam, where he still lives and works. In 2007 he founded San Art, an artist-run exhibition space and reading room that promotes young Vietnamese artists. In 2010, Lê received a Prince Claus Award (Netherlands) “for his strong creative work . . . advancing free thought and contemporary visual expression in a context of indifference and hostility.”

Lê exhibits internationally and has had solo exhibitions at Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan (2015); Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, United Kingdom (2011); and Museum of Modern Art, New York (2010). His work was included in the 2013 Carnegie International, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany (2012); and the 50th Venice Biennale, Italy (2003).
Dinh Q. Lê, *Crossing the Farther Shore*  
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Originally from Vietnam, Bao-Long Chu is a Houston-based poet. Rice Gallery thanks him for his contribution to this catalogue.

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