

BOOMERANG

A war memorial in the present

by Jessamine Chan

War has long been a popular subject of film, books and other art forms. Themes of heroism and honor get equal billing with politics and greed. As is the case with the Vietnam War and World War II, the current war in Iraq will no doubt continue to inspire (and compel) filmmakers, writers and artists to share their views on war.

An interesting example of an artist's reaction to the war in Iraq is Audrey Chan's *Boomerang*. This 23 minute video loop combines footage from American soldiers and Iraqi insurgents, news clips, a montage set to Aretha Franklin's "The House That Jack Built" and pieces of a documentary about Maya Lin, the designer of the Washington DC Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Threaded through the images and music is Chan's poignant first person text. I recently discussed the people, the politics and the process of *Boomerang* with my sister Audrey.

The development of *Boomerang*

I worked as a grassroots field organizer prior to the 2004 presidential election and had the opportunity to speak with hundreds of people at their doorsteps about the government. That experience lingered with me, both in its urgency and in opening up a dialogue between individuals. For me, that is how I want my video to function, as a conversation between citizens.

Taking inspiration from Maya Lin's design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated in 1982, the year I was born, and marked a radical shift in our understanding of the way memorials function and what they represent. It was a dictate of the design contest that the memorial not be "political." As Maya Lin said, her memorial design did not serve to glorify war, but was dedicated to the individuals who sacrificed their lives.

However, to choose to represent the scale of human loss in war rather than romanticizing military aggression as a patriotic gesture was in itself an inherently political act. What would it mean to take Maya Lin's project one step further, to make it about people *and* politics. Is it possible to make a memorial to the present, rather than wait for the war to be historicized?

Her use of uncensored video clips not seen in mainstream media

It was a horrifying process and it took me several weeks to be able to watch all of them. The videos did not come with any description other than rudimentary filenames. The low-resolution videos included insurgent attacks on American soldiers, beheadings of hostages, corpses littering a street after a suicide bomb attack, and American soldiers' home video at checkpoints or on patrol. It was disturbingly convenient to witness war on my laptop computer.

The notable absence of name dropping in the piece

Early on, I made a list of words and names that I would intentionally avoid using in this project – words like democracy, freedom, Bush and victory. I wanted to find a different vocabulary for talking about war and our relationship with our government.

If we are going to make any progress in understanding the war, we first have to understand our role in the current conflict. To point fingers at the administration without a degree of self-examination is to propose that the people can be separated from politics, to assume that we can point to the government without also pointing at ourselves.

Audrey Chan's *Boomerang* will be showing at group exhibits in New York and Los Angeles. **V**
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