

# THE AMERICAN WAR

February 6 — March 21, 2020

Pao Houa Her and Sadie Wechsler expose the residue that remains in Southeast Asia and the United States in the aftermath of what is known stateside as the Vietnam War (1955–1975).

The American War caused more than three million casualties and imprinted lasting trauma upon the people and terrain of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The Secret War in Laos, run by the C.I.A. and executed by the U.S. Armed Forces, ravaged more than thirty percent of the countryside and created nearly a half-million refugees. To this day, unexploded ordnance in Laos is still detonating, taking life and land from people in the countryside. Pao and Sadie create and collect materials that reflect how these wars continue to shape lives and land across the world, especially the Hmong people from Laos.

During this war, the U.S. Armed Forces kept American troops as removed from direct combat as possible, primarily engaging in aerial warfare. The U.S. deputized the Hmong people, an ethnic minority in Laos, to wage ground combat against their historic adversaries. The result is that Hmong people were persecuted in Laos after the war, following the U.S. Armed Forces' ceasefire.

Pao Houa Her's photography addresses Hmong identity and related notions of desire and belonging within the Hmong-American community. Pao was born in the northern jungles of Laos in 1982. Her father and grandfather fought on behalf of American forces during the Secret War in Laos.

Like hundreds of thousands of fellow Hmong refugees, Pao's family fled the conflict by crossing the Mekong River, with Pao carried on her mother's back. After living in refugee camps within Thailand's borders, Pao and her family came to the United States in 1986.

**A  
R  
T** at  
**S** King Street  
Station

Today, Pao is compelled to tell her own stories, because her experiences are not represented in the dominant Hmong-American narrative. While that narrative is uplifting, it is incomplete, because it emphasizes the successes of Hmong-American men while minimizing adversity and excluding Hmong women's voices: "Our struggles here in America of holding on to our culture while facing pressure to assimilate are integral to our stories."

In conversation with Pao Houa Her's images are photographs by Sadie Wechsler. They are evidence of her attempts to understand and account for the continued bloodshed of the United States through "being an American tourist in a place ravaged by American bombs."

Sadie grew up in a family of white American peace activists who vehemently resisted the American War in Southeast Asia, even as they reaped the privileges of U.S. imperialism. She has visited museums, sites of death, and memorials in Laos and Southeast Asia to better understand how American wars continue long after they are "finished." Sadie also mines military archives in the U.S. to visualize state-sanctioned impacts of these wars.

As artist-researchers, Pao Houa Her and Sadie Wechsler present people, scenes, and objects directly photographed by the artists, alongside archival images. Pao integrates images from the Hmong Archives in St. Paul, Minnesota, while Sadie contributes public domain images from the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Some images are presented as captured, while others have been altered to evoke a more psychologically accurate portrait of Laos than documentary-style shooting could produce.

As friends and collaborators, Pao and Sadie met while studying photography, then visited Laos together at Pao's invitation. There, they initiated a conversation that both dissected and complicated their different relationships to the global impact of The American War. This exhibition is the first physical presentation of their ongoing dialogue.

**A**  
**R**  
**T** at  
**S** King Street  
Station