

LE BROTHERS



Portrait of Le Brothers. Courtesy the artists.

LE BROTHERS, *Into the Sea*, 2011, still from three-channel video; 21 min. Courtesy the artists.

Brothers in Art

BY ANNIE JAELE KWAN

I first saw the Le Brothers's large-scale three-channel video projection installation *Into the Sea* (2011) at the 2013 Singapore Biennale in 2013. The video featured the identical male twins in a series of beautifully filmed scenes set against the languid backdrop of the ocean. On one screen, the long-haired shirtless pair dig into the sand on a beach, and one buries the other in the sand. The scene then cuts to them sitting, facing the sea in a pose of meditation. In the center video channel, they take turns to climb, and carry each other's body with effort and care, onto the open bow of a boat, against an expanse of blue water and sky; while in the final screen, also on the same boat, one brother sits cross-legged while the other winds colored yarn around his hair and body. These actions are performed slowly, accompanied by a mournful soundtrack; all three sequences conclude with one twin tying the other ritualistically with lengths of vivid red cloth.

Into the Sea is an act of poetic reflection on the conflict years of Vietnam's recent history that have left indelible traces both visible and intangible across the country's landscape and psyche. It is one way that the Le Brothers have addressed the healing of scarred memories in Hue, where in 1968 one of the bloodiest and protracted battles of the American-led war in Vietnam left the city virtually destroyed, with more than 5,000 civilians killed.

Born in the Quang Binh Province in 1975, the Le Brothers are Le Ngoc Thanh and Le Duc Hai. The war in Vietnam ended only 27 days after the artists were born, and as such, their identities are inextricably linked with an imaginary ongoing battle as they witnessed the struggles of reunification in the postwar years. The Le Brothers have been creating stirring, absurdist studies on war, loss, separation, healing and hope across a multitude of contemporary disciplines, including installation, sculpture, painting, video and live performance, with the repeated use of motifs of the color red, military signifiers, and using their uncannily identical appearance.

Apart from *Into the Sea*, another of their key works is the tripartite project titled "The Bridge" (2010–) which was filmed near border zones that historically divided the respective countries of Vietnam, South Korea and Germany. The trilogy's first part, *The Bridge* (2010), shows the Le Brothers walking, running, rolling, climbing and so on, in symmetry across the Hien Luong Bridge, a structure in the demilitarized zone

(DMZ) that divided the north and south of Vietnam after the First Indochina War in 1954—this demarcation became essential to territorial warfare during the American-led war in Vietnam. The resulting video focuses on the central uniqueness of their work as it embraces the brothers' physiological and psychological connections as identical twins to explore themes of political separation and reunion. As the bridge remains a material and symbolic signifier of division, the artists, with their synchronized physical exertions, literally embody the difficulties in rebuilding Vietnam in recent history.

Wanting to understand more about their practice, I met up with the Le Brothers for lunch at a local restaurant in Hue, in April. The brothers are slight in build, heavily tattooed and were colorfully dressed in their signature look. They were lively and charming, speaking rapidly and often in stereo. I asked about the origin of their collaborative work; they repeated an apocryphal story of the same dream they had on separate nights in 2008. In this dream, the Vietnamese god "But," who appeared as an old man with long hair, told them, "Le Brothers, make good contemporary art!" After that—irrespective of whether the story is true or not—the pair began to work together under the joint moniker of "Le Brothers."

"Making" good contemporary art in the world of the Le Brothers also means cultivating spaces that have grown to be influential in Hue's nascent art scene. In 2008, they founded the New Space Arts Foundation (NSAF), a venture funded by sales of their artworks. NSAF's residency program has attracted more than 100 international and Vietnamese artists, including Ho Chi Minh city's Nguyen Manh Hung and New York-based Morgan O'Hara, to Hue. Participating artists live inside a two-story bungalow with a tropical garden and pond, where they can research and produce artwork. Each residency's duration and format is shaped according to the needs of the artist, and often results in an exhibition in Hue. While arts education in the city is still officially restricted to traditional schools of painting, silk and lacquer work, the impact of the Foundation's residency program cannot be underestimated, as it has brought a variety of contemporary artistic practices into the local arts community through cross-cultural dialogues.

In addition to NSAF, the Le Brothers are also associated with two other properties

in Hue, one a large mezzanine gallery, which they have leased mainly to use for exhibitions of visiting artists. The second is the popular camouflage-themed DMZ Bar, which was established in 1994. The bar is filled with camouflage-covered oil-drums, a helicopter model and rows of gilt-painted wooden guns. These designs by the Le Brothers were commissioned by the current owner of the bar, Le Xuan Phuong, who invested in their work because he recognized them as being instrumental in changing Hue's contemporary art landscape.

In April, the Le Brothers presented a new collaborative performance work, *DMZ Project* (2016), at the biennial arts and culture Hue Festival, which was held at the DMZ Bar. Directed by the brothers, the performance consisted of international and local performers including musicians, drummers, poets, singers, performers and dancers from Saigon and student volunteers dressed in brightly colored costumes. They performed in an environment of video projections, paintings and props to create a theatrical experience that is absurdist, anarchic and celebratory, and also signal the Le Brothers's aspirations for Hue to be situated as a locus for international collaboration. They explained to me that they are exploring a more inclusive, internationalist approach in their own practice, in keeping with their work at NSAF. This direction was also evident in the latest, and final segment of their "Bridge" project, which wrapped up in June. For this, the Le Brothers traveled to Germany to film at the old Berlin Wall. Unlike the first part at the Hien Luong Bridge, and the second part filmed in Korea's Ganghwa DMZ area (where the brothers also exhibited in 2012), this final segment included performers from Canada, Germany, Spain and the United States, and underlines the artists' hopes for borderless and multicultural partnerships in art-making.

As the Le Brothers's profile increases with more overseas exhibitions, they speak of retiring as artists in a decade, to concentrate on developing the Foundation and to cultivate the artistic legacies of the city using their international and local network. According to Hai, "It is very hard for artists in Vietnam . . . In Saigon and Hanoi, there are embassies but Hue is small, far away from the big businesses. Yet Hue was the last city for the last Vietnamese king and has a rich cultural history. We want to build Hue up."