

ART CLASS

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by

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ABSTRACT

Jonathon Shay, in *Achilles in Vietnam*, wrote that he is “deeply opposed to war, but just as deeply respectful of the soldier” (Shay1994, 206). This sentiment reflects my exact feelings and motivations for the seven paintings in my thesis show. My work addresses the internal conflicts that manifest in people and cultures during times of war. Through the anecdotal narratives I have created in my paintings, I am trying to illuminate the humanity that is lost or suspended in combat. I hope my art will help combat veterans forgive themselves and ease the constant regret many feel for what they were forced to do on the battlefield. Also, I want to share with the general public the knowledge I have gained while teaching art to an unconventional group of people. Art itself is the common denominator and the catalyst for understanding the unknown or unfamiliar.

DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis work to my mother, Anita Washburn, who is no longer with me.
She is missed.

EPIGRAPH

Art is intrinsic, it is not a plaything, it is an everyday affair and does not need a museum for its expositions; it should breathe in the common places and inspire us at the moments of decision in our work and play.

~William Carlos Williams

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DESCRIPTION

The impetus for my thesis show is rooted in a newspaper article I came across one morning in 2007, about the most recent fatalities in the Iraq War. There was nothing remarkable about the article itself. It repeated -- with adjustments regarding the time, place, and the names of the dead soldiers -- the same depressing information I had been reading for five years.

By that point the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had in many respects become background noise in the American consciousness. Shock and awe was a distant memory, the dinner-table debates over justifications for the invasions had grown stale. But the bloodshed continued and the dead and broken bodies kept coming back.

For whatever reason that article put in me the need to do something for the men and women who, after suffering so much for the rest of us, had been left to piece through the physical and emotional wreckage the wars had visited upon them. And then somehow get on with the rest of their lives.

I called up the San Diego Veteran's Hospital and asked if the patients might be interested in free art classes. I had been organizing mural projects for a group called The Art Miles Mural Project, and figured I could do a mural with a group of combat veterans just as easily as I had been teaching teenagers how to paint a mural.

Over the next three years my art class evolved and became integrated into a military-sponsored Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) treatment program in San Diego. It was important to me that the soldiers saw me as an artist and an art teacher, not an art therapist. So I called my work "Project-Based Therapeutic Art," or PBTA. The murals I make with the combat vets are very large and encompass complicated themes, making what I do different from traditional art therapy classes. Furthermore, I see my role being more in line with a facilitator than a therapist -- a facilitator for self-expression and strengthened cognitive capacities exercised and demonstrated through art.

Since the first day at the PTSD clinic, my PBTA class (which I will refer to as my art class) has, to a certain degree, taken over my artistic life. The people and stories I am privy to

inside my class have had a profound impact on my perception of the politics, psychology, and sociology of war. I am finding myself wanting to advocate, through art, for more compassion and understanding towards combat veterans.

Up until my art class I was less clear about my role as an artist in society and what my artwork signified. I have always considered myself someone with clear political convictions, but my politics had never entered into my artwork, which made me wonder why I was an artist in the first place. Now, however, I feel completely differently and see myself spending a significant portion of my artistic life advocating for individuals who have been impacted by war.

The manifestation of my thesis show is seven paintings weaving together a series of narratives that revolve around four themes: Alienation, the Individual, Futility, and Morality. All of my work embodies at least two out of the four themes. I did not realize that these specific themes would define this series until after I had finished the paintings. Initially, I wanted to focus on the general theme of fighting battles, instead of literally pointing to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, my response to what I see in my art class is so emotionally overwhelming for me that I can't help but wholly focus on the people fighting in these two specific conflicts.

The foundation for my thesis work is based on my desire to humanize the individual combat veteran and to sort through my own reactions to the two wars. America has waged or participated in 11 wars in the past 100 years, leaving our culture littered with iconic imagery of the hero returning from war. However, the reality of what happens in combat is far more psychologically injurious than what the civilian public assumes about combat experiences. The physical injuries are apparent, but the damage to the mind is harder to see.

The traumatic events that lead to a PTSD diagnosis are so severe that the brain functioning of an individual changes. A person with PTSD has a severely altered view of himself/herself and the world around them. Their injuries often leave them with a distrust of the outside world and a devalued sense of their own self-worth. War necessitates a suspension of

morality for those who must fight. The longer this suspension extends; the more havoc is released onto the psyche.

The first theme my work addresses is Alienation. Within my art class, every single PTSD patient I have worked with feels alienated by one or more of the following: the civilian society, their commanding officers, or their families and friends. It makes it extremely difficult to reintegrate back into society after a battle deployment. Often times I have heard soldiers and Marines say that combat was easier than coming back.

Solitary Confinement (figure 1) addresses the feelings of alienation experienced by a female Army Sergeant suffering from PTSD due to combat. She explained to me that once she returned home, she would choose to sit indoors with the curtains drawn, even when it was beautiful and sunny outside. The outside world had become too problematic for her. People with PTSD suffer from a multitude of symptoms including: nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety, emotional numbness, loss of memory, depression, uncontrollable anger, and emotional outbursts (Shay 1994). These symptoms make isolation desirable.

In addition, exhaustion resulting from the inability to sleep due to intense flashbacks and nightmares, along with the multitude of psychological challenges, leads many people with PTSD to self-medicate. All the PTSD patients I work with have alcohol and/or drug addiction issues.

Projected on the wall behind the figure, are the memories she can't shut off. Her hands are covering her face, and she is bent at the waist in despair. Alone in this room she is battling her mind. The images on the walls are not real; they are figments of her imagination and are painted translucently to reflect this non-reality. She is reliving a traumatic experience and losing her ability to distinguish the flashback from the present moment.

Temporality is an important component in the overall schema of my work. There is definitely a big difference between how a soldier feels before a deployment (he/she is excited to go to war), during the deployment (where he/she experience the action) and after they return home (to deal with what they have seen and done).



Figure 1: *Solitary Confinement*, 48" x 40", Oil and encaustic on board

Within my narrative stream I don't include the time period before going to war because I feel this has been repeatedly flushed out in American media. A common narrative theme in our popular culture is the young male wanting to go to war to prove himself. This rite of passage is illustrated very well in the 1975 film *Deer Hunter*. The three main protagonists come from a small town in Pennsylvania, two get married, and fairly soon afterwards all three enter into the Vietnam War. The war does not end up being what they thought and their initial enthusiasm is replaced by the reality of combat. Similarly, today's troops are also excited to head to war, but the span of time before war, the anticipation of what is to come, does not enter into my work presently. I am more interested in highlighting the time during and after a deployment, specifically, the increments of time in between or after the action.

By "action" I mean combat. In reality, soldiers and Marines spend a lot more time on patrol or waiting to go out on patrol than in actual firefights. It is in the time in between the action when they can pause and reflect on how they feel about what is going on around them. I believe this time of reflection can resonate differently for each person who has lived through the same circumstances.

Individualism, my second theme, surfaces during the time spans between the action. Members of the military are perceived by the public as a homogenous entity that, theoretically, thinks and feels the same way about what he/she is participating in. I find this extremely problematic because it denies the fact that each soldier has a personality and personal history that sets him or her either together or apart from others.

The narrative portrayed in *Badal* (figure 2) highlights an individual I worked with in one of my art classes. He and the rest of his cohort decided that they wanted to make a mural that focused on the actual jobs they performed in the military, pointing to some of the positive aspects concerning their work. Instead of wholly focusing on the more mainstream ideas concerning combat deployments, this group wanted people to know about what they did beyond going into battle and firing weapons. Within this group we had a bridge builder, an electrician, three medics (one of whom who had been shot five times at the Fort Hood massacre), and a FORECON (Force Reconnaissance) Marine.

Paul, pictured in the painting, was the FORECON Marine. He did kick down doors and kill bad guys, but he was also tasked with negotiating with tribal elders to help prevent innocent Afghans lives from being lost. Although his loyalty was first to his Marine brothers, he also was very concerned about the welfare of Afghan civilians. The fact that he was an elite Marine did not mean he had forgotten his personal notions of right and wrong. In fact, it was the corruption of his moral code and the stress of his job that led to his PTSD.

The second dominant figure in the painting is representative of the other side of the story, a story that begins about 2,000 years ago on the other side of the planet. Needless to say, Afghan culture is tremendously different from American culture. It doesn't have a government that represents all of the people in the country and there is no constitution. However, what the people of Afghanistan do live by is an established "code of life" called *Pashtunwali*. There are nine principles that make up Pashtunwali: self-respect, righteousness, asylum, hospitality, loyalty, bravery, trust in God, honor of women, and revenge/justice (Cohent 2012).

Badal is Pashtun (the dominant language in Afghanistan) for “revenge”. The principle of badal is ingrained into Afghan culture regardless of religious or ethnic differences between tribes. When harm is done to one Afghan, all Afghans must seek justice for the victim. Regardless of any positive work the Americans engage in, like building up Afghanistan’s infrastructure or meeting the medical needs of impoverished people, any unintended collateral damage destroys any good that has been done. The people of Afghanistan will seek revenge.



Figure 2: *Badal*, 40” x 36”, Oil and encaustic on board

Behind the Afghan elder there is a group of kids on an opposing rooftop flying a kite. The kite symbolizes hope and futility. Futility (the third theme in my overall thesis) lies in America’s quest to overcome the centuries old xenophobic culture of Afghanistan. The hope the kite indicates is found in the courage displayed by the elder by communing with the Americans. The Taliban expressly forbids both engaging with the Americans and flying kites (Rawa.org 2001).

Lighting, location, and the proximity between the two men in *Badal* are meant to suggest a private conversation occurring during a lull in the action, creating space for negotiation, before the violence begins again. The men in the picture are meeting in secret on a rooftop, just before sunrise. We see Paul’s face, strong and skeptical, but as an intent listener. At its core, this

painting shows the humanity of two disparate men trying to find common ground despite overwhelming odds.

Futility (figure 3) and *Futility II* (figure 4) further investigate the futility of outsiders trying to manipulate Afghanistan militarily. Since 1979, the Afghans have been engaged in war either with foreign invaders, like the Soviet Union (1979-1988) and the United States (2001-present), or with the homegrown Islamist militant group, the Taliban (1996-present).



Figure #3, *Futility*, "48" x 30", oil and encaustic on board

Artifacts from these wars are scattered and half buried throughout Afghanistan's landscape. Afghanistan is littered with hundreds of thousands of land mines placed by the Soviet military during that decade-long war. To this day, some 60 people a month -- many of them children -- are killed by these land mines.

On the wall in *Futility*, in front of the soldier on the right, centuries old blood is recovered with the new blood of today's soldiers and civilians. Dripping down, the blood pools at the base of the wall and seeps into the gutter. The entire scene is lit by unseen phosphorescent

bombs, going off overhead, which provide an unnatural light to intensify and dramatize the action.

Futility II includes the larger half of the combat unit seen in *Futility*. The whole of the painting is filtered with an artificial green light. The green is meant to represent simultaneously the past and present, old and new. For many centuries, green, symbolizing fertility, has been the color of Islam. However, green is also a featured color in 20th century night vision technology.

The paintings are two interpretations of the same scene. With my use of color I am placing the viewer at a literal distance from the action. The viewer is looking through night vision goggles in *Futility II*, and in *Futility*, the light is dangerously intense, warranting distance from the event. The lighting and cropping are meant to create a sense of intimacy, while at the same time acknowledging the voyeurism inherent in watching violence.

Similar to *Futility*, *Futility II* has a gutter with water passing by the soldiers' feet. Within the gutter we see a single paper boat. I chose a paper boat as a metaphor to bolster the concept of futility. A paper boat is hard to navigate, floating along with the wind and water currents until it bumps into something and gets stuck, or eventually bogged down with water. To a large degree, this is how I feel about America's extended engagement in Afghanistan. Regardless of our technological advantages and super power status, battling in Afghanistan is a futile endeavor that is claiming way too many American and Afghan lives.

Morality (figure 5) pulls back from the micro investigations of *Futility* and *Futility II* to see a more complete depiction of the action. Inside this painting I have juxtaposed a little Bedouin girl against men in the midst of combat. She plays a dual role in the narrative. One the one hand she is a little girl, inherently innocent, witnessing horrible violence. On the other hand, her pose is indignant and skeptical as if she is standing in judgment of what is before her.

This painting resonates with the soldiers and Marines more than any other that I have shown them. Although I do not ask, specifically, about the events that led to their PTSD, I know through conversations, that injury to children is a major contributing source of trauma. Innocence of children is universal. In regards to my own work, the easy association between

children and the concept of morality helps me to convey my belief that the most damaging aspect of combat on an individual is the break down of their moral code. They simply can't forgive themselves.



Figure 4: "Futility II", oil and encaustic on board

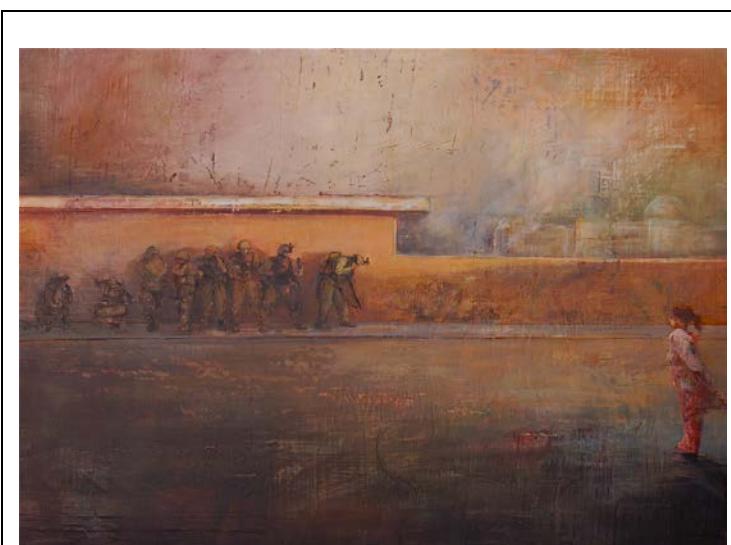


Figure 5: "Morality", 48" x 40", oil and encaustic on board

All of the stresses inherent in combat, like prolonged periods of heightened state of alertness, separation from family, watching friends die, lack of sleep, and living in constant fear, are exponentially damaging to the psyche of a soldier who experiences multiple deployments. PTSD rates increase by 2.5 times by the second deployment (Cohent 2012). Dr. Paul Ragan, an associate professor of psychiatry at Vanderbilt University, explains this phenomenon best: “The bottom line is trauma is cumulative. It embeds itself in your brain and you can’t shake it loose.”

Multiple Tours of Duty (figure 6) addresses the negative impact of multiple deployments and was, in part, inspired by the March 11, 2012 massacre of 16 Afghan civilians and one unborn fetus. The American soldier responsible for the atrocity was on his fourth deployment. In addition to a traumatic brain injury he had sustained in another deployment, he is now thought to have had undiagnosed PTSD. What is self-evident, however, is that this soldier and father had cracked.

In the painting, he is weighed down by his pack that, in addition to holding his food and equipment, also metaphorically carries the weight of his war experiences. I indicate the unseen aspect of his burden with bloody shoes tied to his pack. Often when I have seen pictures or have had firsthand knowledge of tragic car accidents or explosions, I am surprised by the fact that the shoes of the victim will be blown off and found many feet away from their body. For me, the shoes illustrate the unknown quantity that occurs during extreme impact; the impact is both physical and psychological.

The color palette in this painting is both hopeful and dark. The figure’s face is hidden and his body mostly remains in shadow, contrasting against the night sky. On the ground, however, we see the colorful blankets being lit up by the full moon, leading to a more hopeful interpretation of the scene. Like the dramatic value contrast seen in moonlit desert landscapes, I am using my color palette to juxtapose the spirit of the Afghan people with the destruction of a man.

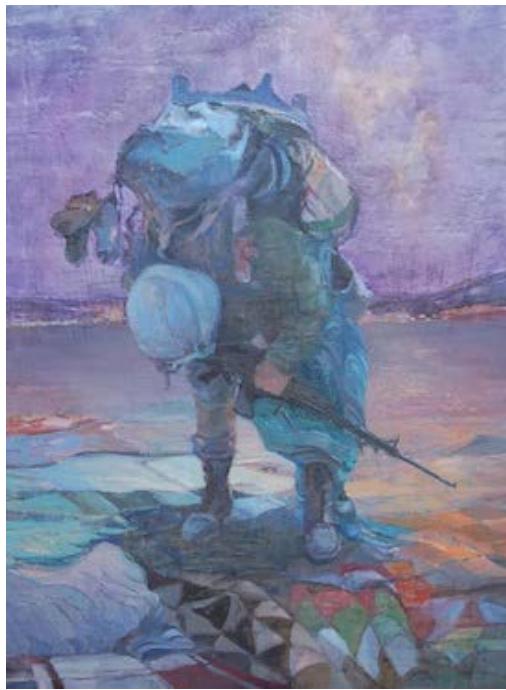


Figure 6: *Multiple Tours of Duty*, oil and encaustic on board

On the soldier's helmet I have painted a barcode. I took the symbol of the barcode from a comment one of the Marine's in my art class made. This is a man, who had not been home with his family for an entire year for 10 consecutive years, said he felt like a barcode instead of a human being over in Afghanistan. Overwhelmingly, the men and women in my class feel like a number in the wars they have fought in and all of them have been deployed to war multiple times.

Initially, the piece focused on the normative stress of combat being exacerbated by multiple tours. However, after reading about the March 11 massacre, I decided I needed to reference this horrible event. The actions of this soldier crystallize the dangers inherent in multiple deployments of our troops.

In the initial design for *Multiple Tours of Duty*, I had the same foreground figure slumped over underneath the tremendous burden. After the massacre, I painted 17 colorful blankets to cover the earth, symbolizing the victims who had been murdered while they slept.

The pregnant mother's blanket is overlapped with a tiny baby coverlet. The blankets are underfoot of the soldier, with one blanket hanging down from his pack.

A full moon lights the desolate desert landscape and the figure. I have always been intrigued by the unique colors and values of moonlight, and how beautiful its reflective qualities are, projecting onto the landscape. In the sky, above and behind the isolated figure, I have painted The Milky Way. The Milky Way is a symbol of possibilities. The possibility that our military will learn from the massacre on March 11, 2012, and our troops will be sent home.

Exiting Afghanistan, *Canine Unit* (figure 7), returns us to the United States. With the exception of *Solitary Confinement* and *Canine Unit*, I have located all of my paintings in the Middle East. By setting the scene for *Canine Unit* in the United States, I gave myself the opportunity to discuss my feelings about who among us ends up serving in the military versus who makes the decision to wage war.

Canine Unit is mostly a reflected image in a window, save the Doberman in the foreground. Although reflecting on a reflection is a somewhat contrived artistic device, I think that looking into a reflection at another person provides a barrier between the two parties that extinguishes the need for self-consciousness and social etiquette associated with staring at people. I want my viewers to stare at Rhonda, the girl pictured in the painting, and I want Rhonda to meet their gaze.

Rhonda attended a school for homeless kids that I taught at in San Diego. In her 16 years, she has never known the benefit of any kind of wealth or security. People with a low socioeconomic status, like Rhonda, head off to the military as a means of escape from poverty and an opportunity for higher education. Many, not all, of the soldiers in my art class went into the military for similar reasons, simply not having a ton of options to choose from. Although I firmly believe, as well as having been confirmed to me by guys in my art class and my boyfriend -- who was also a poor kid who joined the Marines -- the life skills and job training that accompany military service are very valuable. For me, however, the irony lies in the fact that

someone like Rhonda will serve her country, providing security for others that she has never personally experienced.

In *Canine Unit*, Rhonda is standing in the middle of a street next to a public school playground. The scene is intentionally chaotic and hard to distinguish to convey the instability and complicated nature of trying to navigate life in America as a young person with little adult support. In effect the playground is Rhonda's battleground.

As for the dog in the foreground, dogs have accompanied man into battle since ancient times. In Iraq and Afghanistan, dogs are sniffing out bombs, guarding (sometimes, to a questionable degree, threatening prisoners captured by the American military), and providing companionship to their handlers.

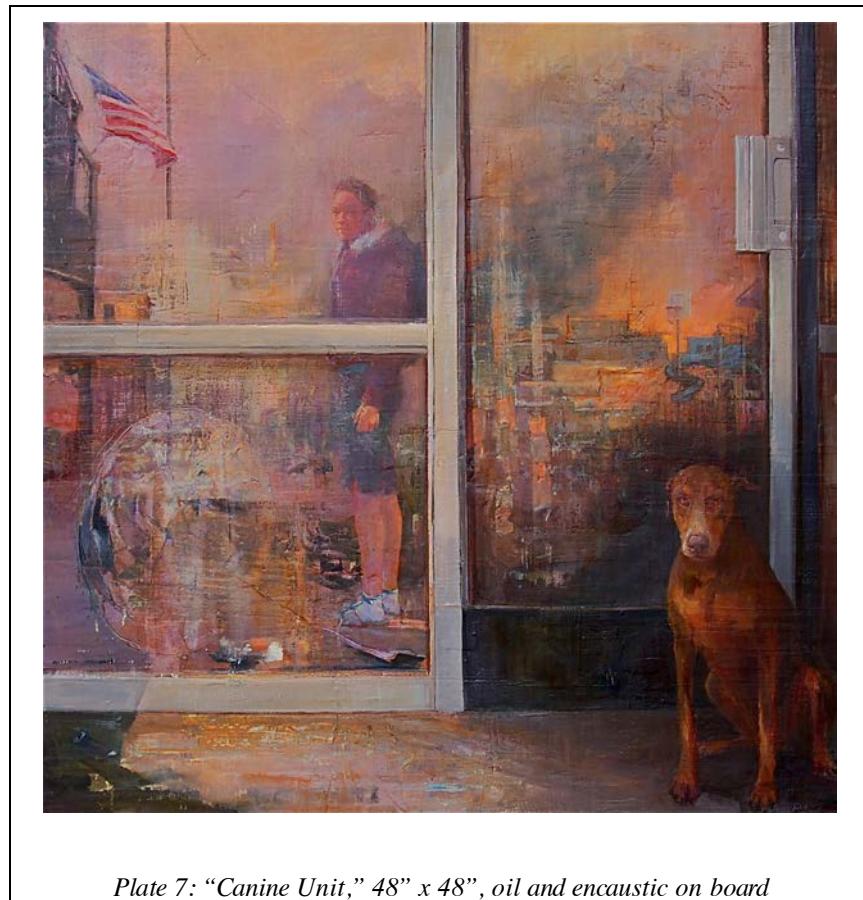


Plate 7: "Canine Unit," 48" x 48", oil and encaustic on board

Metaphorically, the dog in *Canine Unit* is the proverbial “dog in the fight.” The consequences endured by members of the military and their families are not shared with the majority of Americans, nor most of our Congressional leaders who, along with the President of the United States, have the power to declare war. I feel the unequal distribution of burden makes declaring war too easy. I think if the public gets a better understanding of what the experience of combat does to an individual, they will be more conscientious in deciding whether or not they should support our soldiers being sent to fight.



Figure 8: *The Book of Dogs- An Intimate Study of Mankind's Best Friend,*
by Unknown

Understanding that there probably will never be a time without war; I am, however, hopeful for a shift in the American culture’s willingness to support our engaging in war. Unlike Vietnam, the public is, theoretically, very supportive of the American troops when they return home. When I talk to people about my thesis work, I witness a genuine compassion for our veterans. My hope is that this compassion will become so prevalent that it will force the Veteran’s Administration to provide acute mental healthcare for combat veterans when they

return home and, most importantly, the military's complete annihilation of the stigma attached to PTSD. The civilian public can influence lawmakers to resist war and force the military to fully acknowledge the massive presence of PTSD within all of the branches of the American military.

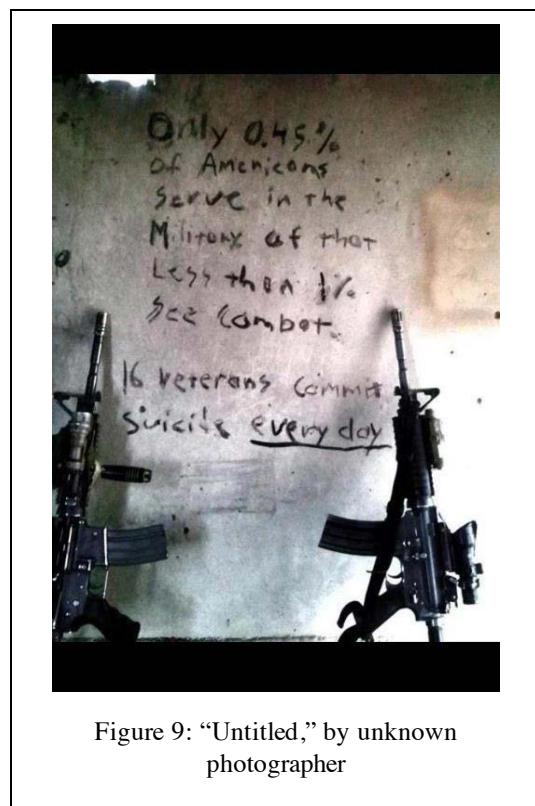


Figure 9: "Untitled," by unknown
photographer

RESEARCH

Predominately, my research was guided by my observations and conversations with the PTSD patients in my art class. In addition, I read books, journals and articles about PTSD, histories of war, and neurology to better understand the complicated nature of war and the effects of combat on a person's mind. In addition, I stayed informed about the current events happening in Iraq and Afghanistan through online newspaper and magazine outlets.

Aside from the journalistic and academic research, I spent time looking at the work of other figurative artists who create narrative art. Specifically, I researched artists who engage with war in their work like: Jerome Witkin, Francisco Goya, Leon Golub, Tony Scherman, and Otto Dix.

Leon Golub's work was the most evocative for me. Throughout his career he broached the subject of war on several occasions. Usually he would focus on torture and violence committed against the weak by the powerful. The concept of power and his confrontational painting style are both approaches and themes that are different from my paintings, but I feel and identify with the frustration he expresses in his work. I am inspired by both his courage to speak plainly, and the effectiveness of his painting technique in helping to deliver his message.

Technically, the encaustic process of Tony Scherman has also been tremendously influential on my art. I first saw his paintings in person in 2003 at a show in San Diego called "The Seduction of Oedipus". This show inspired me to begin experimenting with encaustic wax. I admire Scherman's ability to relate a story with subtlety. His subject matter is always well researched, thoughtful, and masterfully painted, whereas Golub paints from the heart, letting raw emotion guide his brush. With my work, I hope to pair the thoughtful and methodical I see in Scherman with the courageous passion I feel from Golub.

War documentaries played a major role in my research and helped me to better contextualize the motivations that move countries to war and the bonds that develop between the men who serve together. Listening to what the combat veterans from World War II said, in *Iwo Jima: 50 Years of Memories*, or the commentary from combat veterans from Iraq in *Frontline: Bad Voodoo's War*, it was impossible not to see the damaging paradox between the strikingly touching humanity shared between individuals who serve together, versus the inherent dehumanization that accompanies combat.

Children are definitely a shared trauma for all who fight in war. The documentary film *Restrepo* provided a visual that I had not previously either seen or, more than likely, avoided. I watched this very impressive Army unit hold down their position on a hilltop in Afghanistan, engage in countless firefights, lose comrades, as well as goof off. Towards the end of the movie, however, the filmmakers focus in on a child who had been severely wounded in a firefight between the Afghan militants and the Americans. Up until that moment in the movie, I had kept the obvious reality of the harm inflicted on children caught in these situations in the abstract, at

the back of my mind. The young face of the mangled child immediately had an effect on me, making it imperative that my artwork be considerate of the Afghan people, in addition to the perspective of the American soldier. Since the effect of war on the mind is of the greatest interest to me, I sought out books that dealt with combat PTSD. Specifically, *Achilles in Vietnam* by Jonathon Shay (a clinical psychiatrist who has worked with veterans since 1987) gave me an inside account of the clinical findings and research on PTSD. In addition to clearly outlining what PTSD is and how it affects the



Figure 10: *Mercenaries I* by Leon Golub, acrylic on canvas, 14 ft. x 8 ft., 1976. The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica, CA.

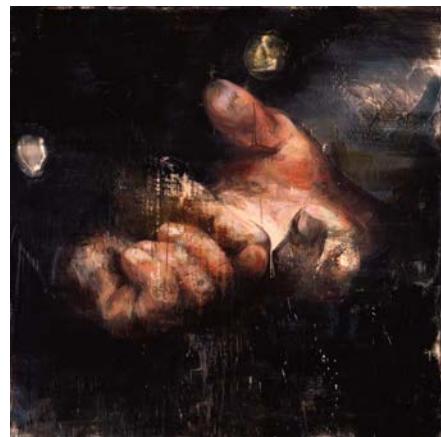


Figure 11: *Painting from the About 1789 Series*, by Tony Scherman, oil and encaustic, 60 in. x 60 in., 2007-2010. Collection of the artist.

mind, Dr. Shay succeeds in humanizing the veterans and their struggles to the civilian reader. Reading Shay's book was helpful in informing and validating my own approach to communicating effectively with veterans.

Direct interaction with the subjects of my artwork greatly simplifies my research process. Whenever I have a question about an aspect of war or PTSD, I just ask one of the guys. They are surprisingly open and actually seem to enjoy answering questions about their experiences. Although I am not opposed to taking some artistic license to dramatize my stories, it is important to me that my work is authentic and fair. For this reason, I have shown most of my paintings to the soldiers and, though I am usually a bit nervous, I look forward to their reactions. Overwhelmingly, they are just happy someone is taking the time to make art about them. They are not a critical audience.

Combat photography is my final source for research. Almost all of my references for my paintings were lifted off the Internet. I either ask permission to use an image from the original photographer, or I will sufficiently alter the photo to avoid plagiarizing it. The photos coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan document much of what I need to craft my compositions. Images of the emotion and hardware involved in war are right at my fingertips via Google Images. The technological advances in digital photography, printers, and real time access to information on the Internet make researching global events much easier.

The work of photojournalist, Scott Peterson, became one of my most important sources for pictures. His photos are not only beautiful, but also very poignant. Peterson had been imbedded with a Marine unit in Fallujah, Iraq in 2004. A Marine in this unit was in one of my art classes and shared with me a disk of digital photos that Peterson had given him. I contacted Mr. Peterson, asked, and received permission to incorporate some of his images into my paintings.

Often I have brought prints of Peterson's photos to my art class as references for the soldiers to use in their murals. The attention the soldiers pay to the photos is fascinating. I think they are trying to recognize the people and places in the photos to see if they have been there.



Figure 12: “Untitled” [Fallujah 2004} by Scott Peterson



Figure 13: “Untitled” [Fallujah 2004] by Scott Peterson

METHODOLOGY

Categorically, the biggest source of inspiration comes from the soldiers and Marines themselves. In my art class, during the initial ideation process, the guys will bring up something previously unknown to me, like the dynamics between American military and tribal elders, or how it feels to walk in 130 degree heat with a 100-pound pack on your back. Our conversations will trigger an idea for a painting.

Once I have a germ of an idea for a painting I begin to independently verify what the soldiers have told me with my own research. Most of the time this is done, as I have already mentioned, reading online newspapers, academic journals, and magazine articles.

An example of how this process works for me is the following: one morning in art class I watched Paul, the Marine found in *Badal*, look at a picture I had brought in featuring a large group of what looked to me like Afghan villagers, meeting with the American military. On his own, Paul had picked up the picture and began scanning it. I asked him what he saw. He began to dissect the image for me into which people were “friendly,” who the leaders of the village were, who was more than likely a Taliban or foreign fighter, which American soldiers were paying attention, and which were not. He knew how to interpret the people by their dress and body language from his experience as a covert Rincon Marine.

Up until this point I had not realized how common the interactions between the tribal elders and American forces were. However, after some independent research and asking Paul a handful of questions, I learned about the constant negotiations that go on between the village elders and the Americans. This new insight led to my painting *Badal*.

Often I will try to establish connections between the past and present knowing that comparative history will yield commonalities that will help contextualize current events. For example, reading about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was very fruitful in leading me to the realization that Afghanistan has, in one way or another, been engaged in various violent conflicts from its beginning, over 2,000 years ago.

I utilized comparative history in the two paintings, *Futility* and *Futility II*. Modern day soldiers are performing in a generalized battle scene that could have occurred at any point in the past 50 years. The re-wetting of the dried blood in *Futility* symbolizes past blood shed and the paper boat in *Futility II* points to history repeating itself. The boat repeatedly bumps into the side of the gutter, incapable of dislodging itself.

Initially the motivation for *Futility* and *Futility II* was not a point of comparative history and the futility of war. I had painted the two images of American soldiers engaged in battle as a macro investigation of the painting titled *Morality*. However, the more I researched about Afghanistan, the more I was inclined to want to make paintings concerning Afghanistan's turbulent history and its xenophobic culture. In regards to *Futility* and *Futility II*, it was the research that drove the content in the painting.

I ended up taking the two paintings of American soldiers engaged in battle that, at one point, I thought were finished, and reworked right over the top of them. I added the dried blood, the gutter, the paper boat, and then dramatically changed the lighting of both paintings to create more drama. Previously, the paintings lacked strength and purpose, so I had no problem rethinking and reworking the paintings to suit my new inspiration. I try very hard to not hold any one painting or part of a painting as precious, so that I am more willing to make changes.

Paying attention to current events, like the March 11, 2012 massacre I reference *Multiple Tours of Duty*, helps me to come up with ideas. When this specific event happened, I had been working on a painting depicting the extent of the physical and mental exhaustion felt by soldiers after multiple deployments. I read the personal history of the soldier who had killed the innocent Afghans and learned he was on his fourth deployment. This horrible crime illuminated the message I was already trying to convey with the unfinished painting on my easel. I redesigned the composition, adding the blankets, and the sky, to reference the massacre.

Once I make connections, like the history of conflict in Afghanistan or the role current events can play in my art, I begin accumulating images. Inundating myself with photos for hours at a time, I sift through combat photography searching for pictures that help me to

visualize how the various locations look and feel, as well as how the people look and feel. Most of the time, however, I am searching for specific pictures of relevant equipment, landscape, and people that I need to construct my compositions. For example, after reading about the March 11th massacre, I printed out all of the pictures I could find relating to the site of the massacre. The blankets in *Multiple Tours of Duty* are what all of the dead bodies were wrapped up in and covered with.

For *Badal*, I collected images of Afghan elders in a multitude of poses, took pictures of Paul, found still photographic images from the movie *Restrepo*, printed out several different kinds of Afghan teapots, and Afghan village rooftop scenes, all in preparation for the concept sketches. Usually I collect images before I begin drawing out my ideas.

Retrieving the images in advance of the concept sketches is helpful in constructing the anatomy of the figures and the structure of my environments. I like to paint from the real thing, not a contrived setup with my friends as models. I totally lose interest in painting from pictures of models pretending to be the people I am discussing in my work. Of course, this is problematic when my images from the media are grainy or heavily pixelated, but I will defer to one of the soldiers in my class to quickly pose for me if totally necessary. I am also not opposed to inventing parts of people or environments if I cannot find a suitable reference.

As a result of the multiple references I employ in constructing my compositions, I like to call my process “Frankenstein.” Just like Frankenstein’s monster, my paintings are built from varied pieces and parts assembled together to make one whole.

Once I have worked through several compositional variations in my 8 ½” x 11” sketchbook, I will settle on one concept drawing that I want to paint. Before I can blow up the drawing to the scale of my canvas, however, I have to prepare my painting surface because my painting technique involves encaustic wax.

The encaustic process originates with the ancient Greeks and Egyptians. Traditionally, encaustic is a mixture of powdered pigments and heated wax. The recipes for the wax vary depending on the artist. Personally, I stay away from the traditional recipes that include

turpentine or dammar resin, choosing to skip solvents altogether because I don't want to heat up and breathe their fumes. In addition, I don't mix powdered pigments into my wax because they are extremely toxic and easily inhaled. Instead, I utilize my own technique of alternating between layers of wax and layers of oil paint. The encaustic process I have developed for myself is also a "Frankenstein" of sorts. I utilize some of the traditional encaustic methods but also do a lot of experimentation through trial and error to achieve different surface effects.

To begin, I coat the board (I need a wood substrate to support the weight of the wax) with a layer of wax to seal the wood. I use a brush to apply the hot wax directly on the wood and then heat it with a heat gun so it fuses to the surface. My next step is, with my concept drawing in hand, to create a monochromatic value study on top of the single layer of wax. Sometimes I do the drawing on rice paper and then affix the paper to the board with another layer of wax. If I do add another layer of wax, I am sure to fuse the second layer to the first with my heat gun. Each layer of wax needs to be fused to the previous layer to prevent cracking.

Surprisingly, it is not heat that threatens the integrity of an encaustic painting; it is the cold. Wax can get brittle in the cold (in this instance cold is considered to be 40 degrees or less), so if each layer is not bound together by heat, there is the possibility that the whole painting can crack off.

Whether I paint on rice paper or board first, the next steps of my painting process, beyond preparing the board and blocking in my value study, are never exactly the same and do not follow in any specific order. Sometimes I paint over old paintings, other times I paint the board out white and then apply the wax that seals the wood. On other paintings, I will spend a significant amount of time on the initial drawing before I even begin painting. I like to follow an organic path of discovery in my work that is guided by a balance between preparation and intuition. Too much preparation stifles my desire and too little leads to too many corrections.

By the second or third pass on a painting, however, I will usually begin adding more wax. Each new layer of wax does not cover the whole of the board. Although sometimes I will recoat the entire board with an even coat of wax, it is not the norm for me. As the layers of wax

begin to build and I had more oil paint, I will often get out the paint scraper to scrape back on the surface, revealing some of the previous layers. I like to let parts of the under-painting show through because the original layers are thin and transparent, giving off a luminosity that is totally unique to this medium. Furthermore, the scraping creates a texture and palette that I cannot control. I like my paintings to have an unplanned aspect to them.

After about three to four passes over a painting, letting each layer dry in between, I set the painting aside for a week or more. I am always working on multiple paintings and drawings at once, never spending more than a few hours on a piece at a time. I find that if I focus on one painting for too long, I will overwork it and lose the freshness that is so important to me. I would rather have a painting be a little unfinished than overworked.

The methods I have developed to make my paintings are very personal and have taken years of experimentation. For me, the surface of my painting is of equal importance as the subject matter itself. One does not exist independently of the other; they coexist, working together to deliver my stories.

CONCLUSION

Art is intrinsic to the human being. The earliest humans made music and created sculptures and pictures, expressing their culture. Every time I teach the soldiers, I get to introduce them to what it feels like to be creative. Whether a person knows it or not, all people are creative in one form or another. My task is to open people up to the possibilities that art creation has to offer.

Just as I ask the soldiers in my class to open up, be bold, and unafraid, I, too, am trying to push myself out of my comfort zone to make art that is socially meaningful. I view my thesis work as the beginning of my taking more risks with the art I make. I want to be less careful as I move along my path as an artist.

That being said, this body of work represents me taking a chance by going back to school in my late 30's, as well as choosing a subject matter that is complicated and often sad. Never before have I put so much of myself into my art.

The subjects of my paintings are near to my heart and the compassion I feel for the soldiers is bigger than me. What happens to these guys, during and after combat, needs to be more widely understood. I feel like by teaching art to the combat veterans, I can help them to express themselves in a way that previously would not have occurred to them. Through the art they make, conversations that they may not currently have the words for can flow.

Once I finish graduate school, I will immediately be beginning a combat art program where I will collaborate with combat veterans to make public art. From two years working at the PTSD clinic, which I will continue doing, I have come up with a process that I will expand on at Art and Judith Barron Veteran's Center on the San Diego State University campus. The director of the veteran's center has agreed that access to art is an important service for her center and she is eager to partner with me.

For myself, I plan to continue down the path of narrative art creation that is relevant to current events. I will always make art in one way or another in one medium or another. Without a doubt, the life of an artist is romantic and full of possibilities. I can't imagine doing anything else.

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APPENDIX



Plate 1. Elizabeth Washburn, *Solitary Confinement*, 2011, Oil and encaustic on board, 40" x 48". Collection of the artist.



Plate 2. Elizabeth Washburn, *Badal*, 2012, Oil and encaustic on board, 36 in. x 40 in. Collection of the artist.



Plate 3. Elizabeth Washburn, *Futility*, 2012, Oil and encaustic on board, 48 in. x 30 in.
Collection of the artist.



Plate 4. Elizabeth Washburn, *Futility II*, 2012, Oil and encaustic on board, 48 in. x 30 in.
Collection of the artist.



Plate 5. Elizabeth Washburn, *Morality*, 2011, Oil and encaustic on board, 40 in. x 48 in. Collection of the artist.



Plate 6. Elizabeth Washburn, *Multiple Tours of Duty*, 2012, Oil and encaustic on board,
48 in. x 36 in. Collection of the artist.

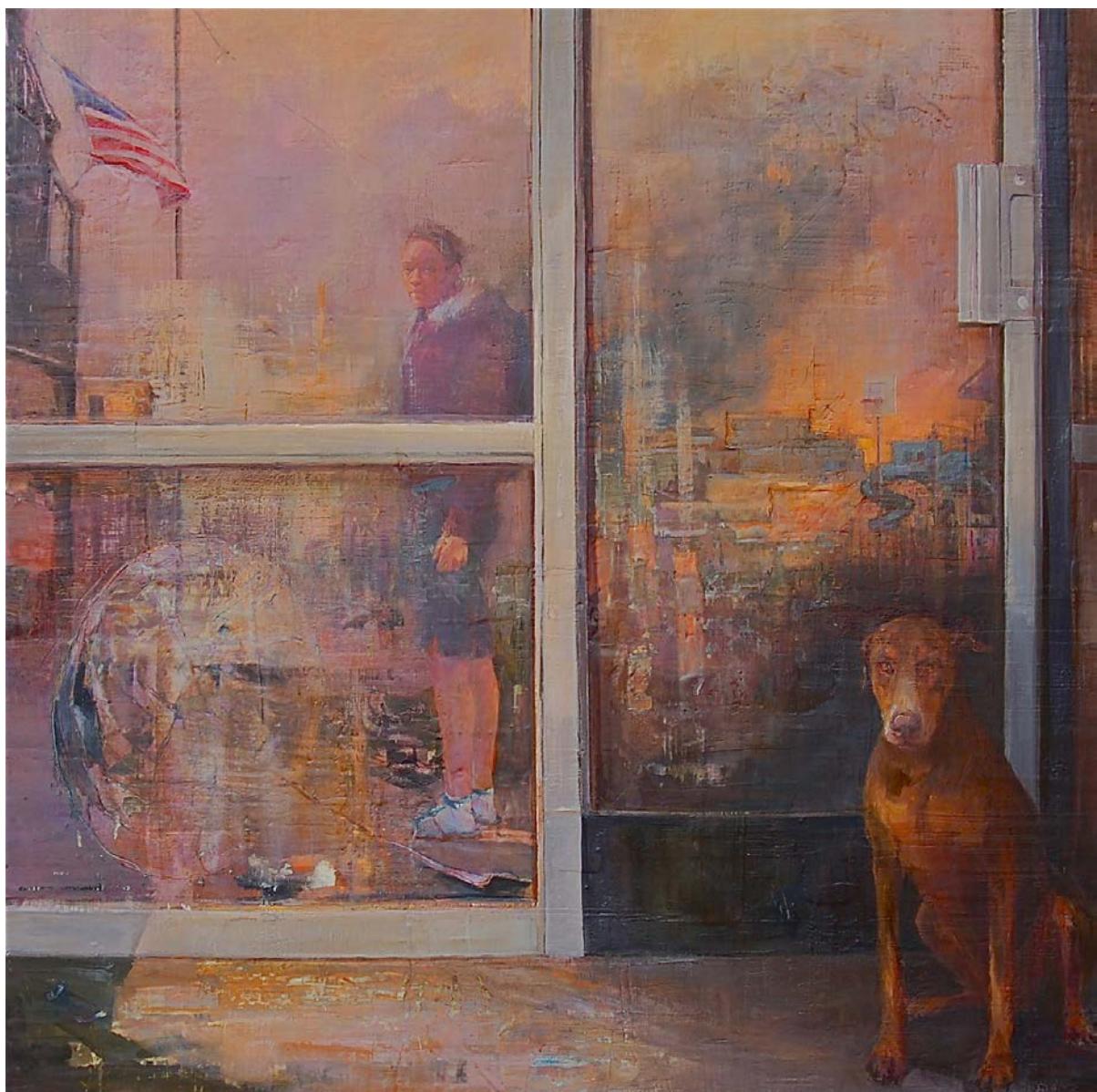


Plate 7. Elizabeth Washburn, *Canine Unit*, 2011, Oil and encaustic on board, 48 in. x 48 in. Collection of the artist.