

Masks, Mirrors, and Windows: The Photographs of Ron Whitehead with Interview

Larry Abbott

Ron Whitehead has taught art in Ossining, NY for twenty years. He received his undergraduate degree in Art Education from Messiah College in Pennsylvania and a Masters in Instructional Technology from Western Connecticut State University. He joined the Army in 1989 out of high school and served for four years in Louisiana, Germany, and Iraq for Desert Storm. After his honorable discharge he joined the Maryland Army National Guard while he studied at Messiah College. He currently lives in New York State.

Whitehead works in a variety of series, each using techniques of juxtaposition and superimposition of imagery to express his war and post-war experiences. Juxtaposition and superimposition are not unique in visual art, but Whitehead uses these techniques to create masks, mirrors, and windows to depict inner conflict and the impact of the past on the present, and in other works to show integration through spiritual belief. Eyes become mirrors, mirrors become windows, masks are put on and taken off. While many veteran photographers, such as Michael McCoy, Andrew Nunn, Johnny Williamson, Cheryl Softich, and Jose Perez present documentary imagery of soldiering, combat, and the effects of war, which are heartfelt and replete with personal meaning, and which take on a deeper meaning and resonance than simply recording a scene, Whitehead uses digitally-



Love a Veteran

manipulated photography to present visual analogues of his war and post-war experience. He has said he desires to "tell my story in ways I could not put into words." ¹

One major theme of Whitehead's work is the idea of the split self and self-alienation that results from PTSD. There is dissociation from the war (past) and post-war (present) selves, with these selves in tension and conflict. In such works as "Love a Veteran" (n.d.), he depicts himself with half of his face in camouflage and the other half "normal." He wears a jacket and tie, connoting his post-war life as a teacher, but he can't quite escape from his war past. In "Looking Back 3" (2016) his present day self stands at a sink looking into a mirror at his smiling Army self. Whitehead frequently recombines images and elements to create fresh visions and new interpretations, as in "Smoke and Mirrors 2" (2016). He stands at the same sink looking into the same mirror; this time the reflected image is a combat scene with wounded troops.

In "Just Another Day" (2018) a figure stands in a jacket and tie, with helmet and goggles suspended over an smoky, cloudy space where the head should be. In "Hidden Thoughts" (2018) he



Picking Up the Pieces

holds a mask of his face in front of his face. In "Picking Up the Pieces" (2018) (a series of three photos), a surrealistic face is composed of jigsaw pieces, with disembodied eyes and empty spaces. One work in the series shows an Iraqi desert scene with oil fires burning as part of some of the puzzle pieces. In another the center is a strip of paper torn horizontally, behind which

is a close up of an eye peering at the viewer ("TORN . . . between two TOTALLY different worlds . . .").

Can one successfully re-integrate these selves into a unified whole? Can the past ever be reconciled with the present?

Other works, like "Can't Sleep" (2014) and "Remembering" (2014) deal with the thoughts that often plague veterans. The latter embeds the text "Remembering Is Easy. It's Forgetting That's Hard." About "Remembering" he told me that "This piece is an attempt to visually show how it feels trying to fit back into society after coming home from Iraq." In "Rear View" (2014), taken from the point of view of a driver in an automobile looking through the windshield, the road ahead is in black and white while the outsized rear view mirror depicts, in color, a few dozen veterans in gear. Whitehead seems to be saying that thoughts of other vets and links to his military past are more powerful than the black and white world of the present.

The concept of the split self also appears in "Façade 1" (2018). Whitehead holds a mask of his face in front of his "real" face. On the cheek of his "real" face there is a superimposition of flames and black smoke in the desert. The use of the mask to suggest the split self also appears in "Façade 2" (2018). In this work he looks at the viewer while removing (or is he putting on?) a mask of his face. This theme is also clearly shown in "Two Face" (2018) and "Two Sides" (2018).



Two Sides



Two Face



Broken 2

The motif of the fragmented self seen in "Picking Up the Pieces" and related works is followed up in other photographs. In "Broken 2" (2018) one side of his face is shattered and blown apart, perhaps by a tank hit; in "Explode" (2018) his disembodied head hovers above burning Iraqi oil fields, the smoke and flames carrying away half of the face.

Explode



For Whitehead, the human eye and the camera lens are reciprocal. Both the eye and the camera



Camera

record and remember. In "Camera" (2018) the human eye becomes the camera lens and both record a battle scene with the lens exploding in violence. In "Eye" (2018) Whitehead asserts that experiences of war are not erased by time and distance but are in fact indelible. Similarly, in "Eye Lens" (2018), the camera lens becomes the retina seeing and recording burning oil fields.

Other works from the *Art of Healing* series show Whitehead "breaking the plane" of the camera lens by reaching out from the lens with a light meter while oil fields burn in the viewfinder (which could be an image from a memory card). A similar image shows Whitehead trying to climb out of the camera while a shot of Ossining High School is in the viewfinder. Burning oil fields smoke in the background, suggesting, again, the difficulty of separating past from present. In these reflexive works Whitehead is both making an image and commenting on the use of photography to create that image.



Eye

Some of his photographs in the *American Dream* series focus on current veterans and veterans'

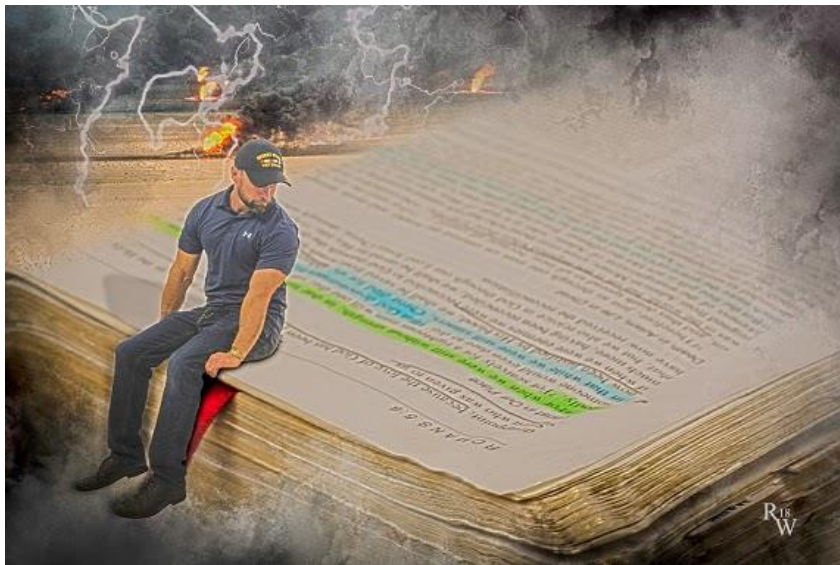


Eye Lens

issues. He hopes to raise awareness of the sacrifices made by the men and women in uniform and the problems many face upon returning to civilian society. He calls "Blood, Sweat, and Tears" (2018) his favorite piece because it "describes every combat veteran and shows the hard work that goes into

being a soldier and being in combat.”² Of the *American Dream* series he told me that “I wanted to express that it is often hard for combat veterans to come home a fully enjoy their freedom ... it is sad seeing that they fought so hard for it.... dripping paint symbolizing that The American Dream is almost out of grasp.” Beyond his own artwork Whitehead has a strong commitment to veterans and to using art to create a broader community which, he hopes, will allow vets to take a step forward. For nearly a decade he has brought his students to veterans’ hospitals so they can hear vets’ stories and turn those stories into artwork.

A tribute to Whitehead’s versatility is not only the various iterations of the theme of the split self deeply affected by the war experience and the difficulty of returning to society, but also the possibility of healing through religion. One of his series, *My Lighthouse*, reflects his Christian faith. Some works



Untitled

show a cross or a lighthouse reflected in his eye, while another layers Psalms 119:105-112 with his face and the American flag.

However, even in this series, the turmoil and anxiety of war are expressed, with war and peace, death and life, in conflict, a conflict not so easily eliminated by religion,

but at best leading to an uneasy co-existence. This is shown in one work (2018) where a miniaturized Whitehead sits on a Bible opened to Romans 5:8 while burning oil fields rage in the background.

Whitehead’s *oeuvre* “contains multitudes.” It is marked by its diversity and the wide range of the artist’s concerns, from memories of the battlefield to the effects of war to his religious faith. About his work

Whitehead has said, "I think with my art, it's a way for people to look at and understand what I've been through."³

Notes

¹ From article by Robert Zubrycki, *True Colors, The Paintings of Ron Whitehead*, Patch.com, Nov. 8, 2013.

² Video to accompany November 2018 exhibition at the Mahopac, NY Public Library

³ <https://www.dodlive.mil/2013/11/21/army-life-serves-as-muse-for-veteran-artists/>

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Ron Whitehead's work can be seen on his website: <https://sites.google.com/view/ron-whiteheads-portfolio/home>

Interview with Ron Whitehead

LARRY ABBOTT: Maybe we could start with a little bit about your military experience and how that led to becoming an art teacher at Ossining High School, how long you've been there, and what you are doing in your art teaching.

RON WHITEHEAD: I'm originally from Maryland and right out of high school I joined the Army because I wasn't college material. I knew I wanted to do something bigger and better with my life, so instead of hanging around, I decided to join the Army to give me some opportunities. I got the GI Bill and I had no idea I was going to use it. They asked me if I wanted it and I was like, "Sure, if I don't use it, oh well, but maybe one day I will." So I was signed up to be 11 Bravo, an infantryman in the Army. I did my basic training and AIT at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1989. My first duty station was Bamberg, Germany, with the 1st Armored Division. We were going to deactivate there in 1990 and then things broke out in Iraq, the situation in Kuwait, so they activated our unit again and we put all our tanks and Bradleys on boats and ended up going to Iraq for Desert Storm. We spent eight months there and we went through Saudi Arabia, Iraq and then down through Kuwait. After that I came back to Germany, finished up my time there and ended up in Fort Polk, Louisiana. For 2 years.

LARRY: You preferred Iraq?

RON: Yes. And then, a funny story—just really quick—after I got out of the Army, I did four years active duty, I went back home and joined the Maryland National Guard for some extra money and our Lieutenant Colonel there was my high school wrestling coach. So two months later we did our two-week deployment and we went back to Fort Polk, which I never thought I would see again, but we did. I

decided I really wanted to go to college, so I started taking some community college classes. I wasn't interested in art at all in high school, or any other time, but when I went into community college, I took 6 credits, two classes, and for one of them I chose an art class because I thought, "Hey, this will be a great way to just get started." I took 3-dimensional design, a sculpting class, and the professor just loved my work. She really encouraged me and I was like, "Oh wow, maybe I could do this." So that's how I got into art.

LARRY: You're doing digital photography mostly today, or do you still work in other media?

RON: I moved and transferred to a four-year school, Messiah College, where I focused on painting. I love painting. I consider myself a painter. When I retire I'm going to get a cabin somewhere and just paint. Now I'm an art teacher and my first 10 years of teaching I was at an elementary school and then a position opened up on the high school level, and I've been there for 10 years. I was teaching sculpture, I was teaching painting, I was teaching jewelry-making, anything. As an art teacher you are certified K-12, so when the digital age emerged they needed someone to help teach photography classes. I started teaching that and my work took off from there. My new work is based on my teaching of photography because I needed to hone my skills. I show and share a lot of my work with my students. I'm using the same techniques, just at a different level. It's sort of like the attitude you have in the military. To be a good leader, you have to be able to do the same things as everyone else. People recognize and respect that. I found that happens not just in the military, but also in life. The best leaders I ever had in the military were the people that were willing to get dirty, so to speak. That's one of the things I miss about the military. For instance, if we ran out of meals and there were five of us, and there was only four meals, the leader wouldn't eat, even if we tried to give him food. They put their soldiers first. I try to take on that mentality and do the same thing at my school and in my teaching. I tell them, "I'm here

because I want to be here," so it kind of changes their attitude. I'm not here to force them to do anything. I do a lot of my art work with them. If I'm doing a project, I'll start it and show them where I'm at and they're like, "Oh wow, how did you do that? " That starts conversations and I show them how to do what I'm doing. They get interested in using the process in their work.

LARRY: What process do you use in your photo colleges or digital prints, where you often have a juxtaposition of different images? How do you develop a finished piece?

RON: I usually think of works in a series, so I'll get something in my mind, the way I'm feeling, and that changes day to day or from season to season. I start off with what I'm feeling. I'm not a great writer, I'm OK, I've gotten a lot better, but I tell my stories visually, so my art is basically my way of telling how I feel. It's kind of weird. I start off with an idea, and then I figure out different ways of how to show that visually, like through digital art. I take a lot of photos of myself or I have my students help me take photos. I use different backgrounds and just go from there, growing and expanding, using Photoshop. I use different brushes, different eraser tools, and darkroom techniques, like burning and dodging. We teach digital first and then if you want to go into the darkroom you do that later, because it's all really the same terminology. It's just a different process. So if you can do one or the other, it's really about knowing how to use the camera. I want the people who see my work to know exactly what I'm saying. So I've got to be really intentional. When I take a photo, or if I want a student to take a photo, I have to sit and explain to them exactly what I'm looking for, be a little crazy about that. But I usually have it in my head before I do. Some of the best stuff I've ever done has been on my drive to work. I get this image in my head and I have to do it. Sometimes I'll sketch it out, but the imagery is never accidental. It's really intentional what I'm trying to create.

LARRY: How did the different series come about? You have a religious series, and one about self-identity that refers to your military experiences. In the latter you use masks and mirrors. You also have works that could be called combat photography. Are they interrelated?

RON: They all fit together because I don't flip-flop the way I'm feeling, I usually flip-flop on what I'm willing to share. I'm a Christian, I went to a Christian college, so my faith comes into all of the things I do, but sometimes I want to make it more deliberate. I would say my faith and my military experiences come out in all my projects. I feel I can't describe that verbally because it's really hard to sit and explain to civilians. My wife is amazing, my students are amazing, my friends are amazing, but it's difficult to sit down and talk to somebody who hasn't watched people die or just . . . I tell my students it's hard to explain how brutal combat is, how loud and chaotic, and it's really hard to put that into words, at least for me it is. So I try to show the experience through many of my images. It's like weaving. I always feel the same way but it depends on where I'm at in a particular day, like if I go to church and I hear a sermon that inspires me. I have different audiences I want to reach. I have people at church that I wouldn't feel comfortable sharing certain things with, but I could show them certain other things. But then some works are meant to be viewed by other veterans. I do a lot of work with my students and veterans and also make a lot of art work for veterans. That's my passion. Some veterans aren't good visually or don't like to talk to other people. They usually like to talk to other veterans so I go to different VA hospitals and interview them and make a story for them, visually.

LARRY: Do you work with your students on creating art with the veterans? You involve the students with that?

RON: I work with a colleague named Harry Quiroga. He's an amazing photographer so 10 years ago we started working together at the high school. I had him take photos of me and we did a bunch of series

together. I thought, "Wow that was pretty amazing, you made me feel good about myself." I felt that would be really great to do with other veterans and have my students participate. I went to the New Haven VA hospital every Friday during the summer. People don't understand you just can't walk up to a veteran and expect a conversation. I've had reporters call me up and ask, "Ron, why don't veterans want to talk to me?" And I say, "Because you don't know them." I went to the VA hospital and did a story for every veteran who was in the art therapy program. The next year, I asked the art therapists if they would feel comfortable if I brought my students. They said of course. So, you know, little steps at a time. It's a good challenge for the students. We pick 20 each time we go. We've been doing it for eight years. Before we get to the VA hospital we huddle up and I look them all in the face and say you're here because I wanted you to be here. I consider this my home. When we go in the door to the art therapy room, we want to show respect and I know you're the type of people who can do that.

LARRY: Do you see this as a healing process for the veterans?

RON: Yes. I always talk to the veterans before the kids and I tell them they don't have to participate. However, past participants will tell other veterans about it. That's the best part. We've had veterans observe for the first year and not participate and watch us do the program and then they participate the next year. We had one veteran who worked with two students who made art work for him. He came to the hospital that day and then turned around in the parking lot and went home and never got the art work because he didn't feel he could handle it. It's really emotional because we make it emotional. When the kids give the art work to the veterans, the best thing we do is, the students don't talk to the audience. When they stand up in front of everybody, it could be the veterans' wives there, their families, the kid talks to the veteran and says, this is why I made this, this artwork, because you told me your story.

LARRY: This goes both ways. It's helping the veteran but it's helping the student too.

RON: It's huge. We've had kids go into art therapy programs in college. The big thing is using your talents to help others. Although we're doing the program with veterans, I tell the kids this isn't just about me and veterans. I hope that 10 years from now, or 20 years from now, they're doing a similar program with breast cancer patients or the elderly in a nursing home. One good thing is in eight years we only had one parent that was concerned about her child going to a VA hospital. She was worried that her daughter was going to be talking to veterans about war. I explained that the program is not political, it's not about the war, it's about the veteran, it's about the individual. That's what makes it really powerful. We usually have three kids interview the same veteran so they make three separate pieces of art and they are always so different because each kid takes something unique from the personal interaction.

LARRY: Do the students make sculptures or photos or paintings?

RON: We'll have painters, sculptors, jewelry-making kids, photography kids. We invite the kids that may not be the best artists but who we believe would get the most out of the program.

LARRY: Let's talk about some of your series. One series that relates to your program with veterans is *The Art of Healing*. How did that come about and what are you trying to do in that series?

RON: So that series is really about me and trying to show people how hard it is for veterans to share. I've been out of the Army for a while now and it's taken me a long time to get to this stage of just being. I could have done it in paintings, I could have done it somewhere else, but now I'm just at a time that I actually feel like I can share and I'm in a good spot. It's really hard for veterans because people say that it's OK for veterans to have issues but then when you start putting it out on resumes it doesn't

work out. So there are a lot of double standards out there. I feel like I'm in a good space where I have enough roots that I could actually share stuff.

LARRY: The idea of the past affecting the present seems to be one of your major themes.

RON: Yes, big time.



Mirror

LARRY: In "Rear View" (2014), from the *Looking Back* series, the point of view is from the driver's seat in a car. You show the rear view mirror and in the mirror are veterans in color but the scene ahead through the windshield is in black and white. In another, "Mirror" (2015), you are looking into a mirror and the reflection is your younger self in the Army. Similarly, in another piece, "Hand in Mirror" (2018), there was a battle scene in the mirror. It looks like you are trying to reach into the scene, reach into the past. Could you talk about the interaction of past and present?

RON: The interplay of the past and present is about myself and fellow veterans, meaning that I feel very lucky because I have a lot to live for, like other veterans. I've been blessed in having an ability in art and teaching and having a good job. So I want to be able to tell other veterans' stories through my own as well. You know, sometimes if the background is black and white or the foreground or the future is black and white, that's representing some of the



Hand in Mirror

other veterans who may not be in a good place. I'm hoping that when people see this it will spark their interest so that they will ask questions and then I could shed some light on veterans' issues. So instead of saying, for veterans, one day a year is Veterans Day, it's not one day, it's every day, like life.

LARRY: You also have a number of images where the face is split, where one side of the face is "normal" but the other side is in camouflage, for example, in "Two Face." Some of these have text superimposed, like "Love a Veteran." This makes the "message" more explicit.

RON: The reason why I do that is because basically I think that's how people see me, people see me as



Just Another Day

one of the other, a soldier or a civilian, so I'm trying to show that I feel differently. People see me as an art teacher and some people know that I was in the service but they don't know how war affects you. So I'm trying to show that the experience really doesn't go away. Even though I'm in a suit or something like that, I still have the same feelings about the past that come up all the time. It's not like you just separate it. There's no separation.

LARRY: In "Just Another Day" you're in a suit and tie, but where your head is supposed to be is fog or a cloud with a helmet over the fog. What's that about?

RON: That one's about that people really can't see me for who I am. It's not me looking in a mirror because that's not how I see myself. I feel that's how people see me.



Mask

LARRY: In "Mask" (2018) and "Façade Mask" (2018) the viewer can't tell if you're putting the mask on or if you're taking the mask off.

RON: I did that on purpose to play both ways and just to share that what people see is not always what people feel. Because, you know, in the military you're trained, you got to suck it up, you can't be complaining and I hear a lot of people complaining about things, but that's not really the way I was brought up or how I feel. I also

Façade Mask

did a whole series with toy soldiers. I was brought up in the south. Always had guns. I had my BB gun and we used to shoot toy soldiers and play with them all the time. War is a lot different on TV and movies and video games and when you're playing as a kid than it is for real. That's why I was working on that series. It just came to my mind how different it was when you're training on the range and shooting against targets, which is a totally different thing. You could



never really be prepared for the real thing. Never. I will say, however, that the training does create a mindset. I drove a Bradley when I was in Iraq. There were people shooting tank rounds at us and small arms fire and I couldn't believe that I was doing what I had to do. I was totally a robot. The training actually worked but the feeling is a lot different than what you would think.

LARRY: It struck me that that split is present in a lot of the work. That idea of past and present but also the split between the veteran self and the civilian self.

RON: And I feel that I'm lucky because I understand that split.



Picking Up the Pieces 2

LARRY: Did it take a while to unify that, or to understand that?

RON: It did, because sometimes you feel either one way or the other. But now I have kind of come to grips with it and I understand the split.

LARRY: One work that speaks to that is "Picking Up the Pieces 2" (2018) where your face is comprised of jig saw puzzle pieces. How did that come about?

RON: That came about just thinking about the past and the future. I wanted to make sure that I pick up the pieces because I have a family now. It really came about because we were in our Bradley with seven people and three of us



Looking Back 2

LARRY: That motif of facial distortion comes out in other works, like "Looking Back 2" (2018) and "Parts" (2017).

RON: Yeah, those works show more frustration, because a lot of my work is usually upbeat, that one is really the frustration of people not getting it. It's really weird to describe. When times get really crappy I get better. I

didn't have children. Four of the guys had kids and wives. Even back then, being a 19-year-old, I realized the big sacrifice they were making. When I had my first child a lot of things really came up, a lot of my art really started, my levels of frustration and anxiety even went higher when I started having kids because I had a lot more to live for. It makes a big difference. I mean, I didn't realize it would affect me so much. It affected me in a good way. But fatherhood brought up a lot of emotions.

Parts





Paper Eye

get stronger. I've been in a situation where there's been an accident, a car flipped when I was going to church one Sunday, I'm in my suit and tie, and I got in the car and dragged people out.

LARRY: You also do what might be called battlefield photography, as in the *Eye of the Storm* series. However, these are not literal depictions of battle. You create a collage effect through the combination of images. In "Paper Eye" (2018) there's an Iraq desert scene with oil fires and in the center is a torn strip of paper with your eyes peering out. You're embedding a lot of different images in that one big image. Are you trying to depict your experience in combat?

RON: That one is kind of like all over the place. When people talk about different religions, or different people, people are people. When we were in Iraq, you know, people would say Radical Islam or something like that, but when people get pushed they will break. War is very violent and people are very fragile. So there's a lot of problems looking back, watching people die. People had mothers, fathers. We were at war, but still, that doesn't change the fact that I was there and we watched people die. That's really a hard concept for me to grasp.

LARRY: The images show the destructiveness and violence of war.

RON: Yes, but those were also a lot about the technique. I was trying new things, like with flames and brushes and smoke. There was a lot of pride in serving when I was there, but there was also a lot of



Blood, Sweat and Tears

rage. When you're in action and the team is doing its job you're happy, then you come home and you think about it again, and you say to yourself, maybe that wasn't so great. Ben Franklin said, "There never was a good war or a bad peace." The two worlds are really different. When I went to Messiah College my art work was much different because I was older than the usual student. When I painted this big American flag people in my class hated it. It was like a six-foot American flag and the teacher loved it. The other students were like "Eh?" The school is mainly pacifists who are conservative Christians but it was good for

me and it was good for them because I actually got to explain why I painted it, and then they got it.

LARRY: The flag colors and image appear in some form in a number of your works. You said that your favorite piece was “Blood, Sweat and Tears” (2018) because it describes every combat veteran and shows the hard work that goes into being a soldier and being in combat. The red, white, and blue paint across your face is dripping. Talk about how that came about.

RON: It represents all the sacrifice that has been poured out by our military members and their families. But it was really funny because we were doing a lesson in my class about fast shutter speeds and kids were dropping stuff in seltzer water, getting it to splash and make bubbles. So I was like, you know what, that’s really cool. One day I got a bunch of white paint and I brought my students in and told them I was going to do this crazy thing. I put paper on the floor and I had students help me. I was dipping my hands and face in paint.

LARRY: You have some photographs in the *Fight For It* series where you’re holding a skull that has a map of Iraq on it. Another has a skull in the shape of a hand. To me one of your best photographs is “Skull” (2019), where there’s a superimposition of your face with a skull and the burning oil fields in the background.

RON: I got a skull from one of the science teachers and I was dripping that in paint. I was just trying to show that the paint is dripping away but it’s still there. It was there to begin with and it’s there now. So



Skull

it's a part of me. I use the American flag a lot in a positive way, not being overly patriotic. I don't create a literal depiction of the flag. It's just a symbol for me. It's a symbol that I love and it means a lot to me. I take it in a historical context. The skull represents death and tragedy. Many veterans often associate with that when they come home. Being in combat can change you, and many of those feelings leak into civilian life.

LARRY: The *My Lighthouse* series has a more religious or spiritual dimension. These seem different from your other work, yet you still utilize the collage-like effect. How did this series come about?

RON: This is a really weird one, but our church every summer has vacation Bible school. And one of the songs they sing was "My Lighthouse." It's by an Irish group called *Rend Collective*. It's one of my favorite songs. It's about God, Jesus, being our lighthouse, always like a beacon. So this was more about how my faith is shown. All the pieces in the series were based on this song, a song that really helped me.

LARRY: There's also turmoil in the images. For example, in one you are in a rowboat on a stormy sea but under the waves is an open Bible. In others you are sitting on an open Bible but there are war scenes in the background.

RON: Yes, absolutely. There's turmoil but also comfort.

LARRY: In "Lighthouse 1" (2018) there's a reflection in your eye of the lighthouse, which becomes a cross.

RON: It's trying to be a reminder that we are all human. We all need something to remind us of our humanity. That is something that comforts me.

LARRY: And would you say that through your art you're trying to integrate your military experience with present life? The split imagery points to that.

RON: I'm just trying to send a message that it's OK to have that split. What makes me sad is a lot of veterans don't seek help because they feel that it's voodoo and people aren't going to understand them. There are so many veterans out there who don't register to get help or go to the VA and that's when they get in trouble. People have advocated for me and helped me, so that's why I show my work, it's all right to put my thoughts out there. I've worked with other veterans and they're always willing to



Lighthouse 1

have my work in their show. If I have a show, if anybody wants to be in my show, great, because that's what it really about. It's still like a brotherhood and sisterhood of trying to help each other out.

LARRY: So just to wrap up, what would be your overall thoughts about your work, how it's evolved, where you see it going?

RON: Really, it just evolved like I evolved, it just kind of goes. I don't have any plan. I just go with the flow and usually when I get to something I run with it. A lot of my work comes up if I'm at church. Music's also a big thing. If I hear an old song from the '80s when I was in high school it makes me think of the past. If I had to teach a sculpture class next year I might start doing some more sculpture because I want to do things in my art that I'm doing every day. I'm doing art at school with the kids and I work with veterans so I enjoy matching things that I'm really passionate about. The students know that when we go work with the veterans I'm passionate about that and art. I like showing people they can do things that they're passionate about and good at. We have kids that are good at the piano or violin. They should be using that to play at a nursing home, for instance. I just try to do my work naturally and tell the story of where I'm at. When people see my work at a show, sometimes I don't feel like I can tell them half of it. I can't tell them what I really want to tell them because I think my voice would change or something. But it's a start. My art work is like the starting point. It opens the conversation. A hard thing that people don't understand is that a lot of veterans don't go to the VA because you have to explain how you're feeling to people to get disability. You have to apply. And that hurts a lot of veterans. If I break my arm I get help. Veterans have to go in and fight for help, they have to go in and prove that there're having problems. That's really hard to explain to people, so I use my artwork. When I go to the VA I bring my artwork with me and most of the time the counselors don't want to see it but I tell them anyway, I'm not leaving until they look at it. The art shows how I feel. But that's taken a long time. I've had other veterans tell me you should write things down before you talk to people so you don't forget something. You know what happens? You get in that military mode that everything's OK. There's a phrase, "Too easy." That's what a lot of military people say. When somebody tells you, "Hey, go run five

miles up that hill," the response will be "Too easy." You just do it, because of the mindset. When you get to the VA and somebody asks you on a scale of 1-10 how you are feeling you'll say an 8, but you're really a 4 or a 1 or something like that, because you're trained to not show weakness. So it's really hard. But if you write it down it forces you to come to grips.

LARRY: How do you break that cycle?

RON: Probably one of the biggest things that's ever affected me are the Vietnam veterans. I mean, all the leaders when I was in Iraq were Vietnam vets. When I came home they're the leaders. I had cousins who were in Vietnam, never got a welcome home, but they made sure that I did. They treated us really well. So I want to do that also. One of the motivations with all my artwork, I want people to know the war still affects people. It's not about me, it's really about all the veterans and how lucky we are to have a family or have the little things.

LARRY: Do you see a continuity between Vietnam vets and the current vets? You served in the late 80s into the 90s. There are men and women coming back now who are in their 20s, so you really have multiple generations within the current wars.

RON: The Vietnam Era veterans are definitely doing an amazing job reaching out and letting other veterans know they're there. They're the ones at the airport, they're running the VFWs now. Our VFW commander is a Vietnam vet and he makes sure that everybody's welcome.

LARRY: You're almost 50. Do you see differences between your generation and those returning who are in their 20s?

RON: The biggest thing is most veterans take about five to six years to get into being a civilian. So usually, not always, but usually, veterans don't come and join the VFW, or something like that, right out of the service. They usually wait a little bit to kind of weave back into society and then they come. I did the same thing trying to get back, get my feet on the ground. The Vietnam vets took a little longer, just because they came back and they weren't treated right, they felt disrespected, so it took them a little longer. When I came back I had a cousin who got shot in Vietnam and he was thanking me, because we had a parade and he said it was like his parade. I couldn't believe that. I was so proud to know that we made them feel a little proud. It's a weird feeling. Here's what I mean. I'm in the checkout line at Home Depot and I didn't have my VA card and the clerk was like, "No, I can't give you the discount." There's a guy on the other side of the counter, watching, and he tells me to come over. He was a veteran and he says, I know you're a veteran. We gave each other a hug. I felt closer to him in 20 seconds than I probably felt to a lot of people I've known for years because we have that connection.

LARRY: What I found, being a non-veteran, is that the veteran or combat experience is separate from the civilian world and it's very hard for the civilian to fully understand the veterans' experiences. James Webb refers to this as a gulf between the two worlds. I can see the artwork, or read a book, or see a movie, but that's secondary. It's not the actual experience.

RON: Veterans are doing a better job now, not only the older generation, the Vietnam vets, of trying to bridge that gap. Before it was very separate. "You're not a combat vet and I am." I think that attitude is changing somewhat. The civilian wants to understand and that is OK.

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