



"Dressed to Kill"

"I did the sculpture and drawings in Vietnam, during the war. Later I used to have a kind of shrine in my studio, a collection of artifacts from another time: my helmet, some shells, other things GIs carried. I can remember my head shaved so it would fit inside the helmet...and these shells, the tracers on them left a beautiful yellow-orange trail after you fired them. The Zippo lighter, my flack-jacket cover...the gun I had smelled of the oil and cleaning bath; it stunk. That old gun had seen some fighting. Later I traded it to an Air Force guy for five gallons of ice cream...."

Joseph Clarence Fornelli (1965); Teak and brass 50-caliber shell casings, 22 x 13.24 x 12 in

THE NATIONAL VIETNAM VETERANS
ART MUSEUM

Introduction by Jerry Kykisz

The National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum

inspires greater understanding of the real impact of war
with a focus on Vietnam. The museum collects, preserves and exhibits art
inspired by combat and created by veterans.

IN 1981, A GROUP OF VIETNAM VETERAN ARTISTS, brought together by a suburban housewife with an appreciation for art, staged an exhibit—“Reflexes & Reflections”—in a Chicago art gallery. The theme was war, a touchy and still controversial subject, considering that less than a decade had elapsed since the turmoil surrounding that conflict began to dissipate.

The exhibit struck a nerve and began to tour nationwide, attracting new artists and critical acclaim at every venue. Some of the art was created in an emotional outpouring of unspoken experience, without consideration for recognition and possible display. Other artists were cold and calculating, brutalizing their creations with an “in your face” agenda to shove down the throat of public consumption. But almost all of it was heartfelt and created for the sake of art rather than for the sake of sale. The tour exhibited for 15 years on the road before coming to rest in a Chicago warehouse that was being converted into condos. In 1995, the Vietnam Veterans Art Group opened for its final exhibit, with little more than a hope and prayer that the show would continue on the road or in place. Viewing the entire collection for the first time, I was stunned by the power of the imagery and affected by the high quality of the craftsmanship. Memories suppressed for decades, were staring at me from the walls without guile. Unexpected adrenalin rushes lay in

ambush around every corner as ghosts surrounded me, with tales of courage and sorrow. There was a palpable sense of pride for a job well done in bearing witness to the unimaginable. The experience was like a “in country” mini-tour, a spiritual journey that was as unsettling as it was healing.

Early in 1996, Mayor Daley saw the exhibit and offered the collection a permanent home in the South Loop. The National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum opened its doors in September, just weeks prior to the Democratic Convention, which had returned to Chicago for the first time since 1968. The delegates, a good portion of who were committed to the upcoming Clinton Administration, were less than enthusiastic about competing for press time with a museum dedicated to a war that their nominee had managed to skip. That sentiment was matched by the stony attitude of most of the artists about making nice with some of the intellectual elite who claimed that killers couldn't possibly be real artists. A group of visiting artists lounged on the rooftop of the NVVAM, listening to the speeches and music echoing from Soldier Field, smug in the camaraderie of their convictions and warmed by really cold beer.

The first few years of the museum's life blurred by—there was much to do and everyone spent long hours at it. The transition from arts group to museum standards was tough and could be compared to a long range patrol returning to garrison after an eternity in the bush. Rules and regulations, lawyers and accountants, No Smoking and Keep off the Grass signs appeared without warning. The business side of the creative process loomed like the monsoon season and by the time the artist members on the board of directors began to notice and question irregularities in the direction of the leadership, a quagmire was forming. Labels were lobbed: a “war museum,” an “art therapy collection,” and a “propaganda institution with a political agenda,” were some of the more thoughtful serves. The pressure built and attitudes hardened as we fought amongst ourselves over what would be displayed and what was consigned to storage limbo.

Hawks and doves circled and called each other shortsighted and other ignorant names. An exhibit titled “Children of War” inspired by Kim Phuc, (last seen running naked and burned from a napalm strike) when she came to visit the museum, caught flak for opening at the Peace Museum in Chicago. It was as if peace and spit upon went hand in hand in the memories of some otherwise intelligent folks. A proposed exhibit that included an exchange with North Vietnamese artists caused consternation on both sides of the Pacific, eventually falling apart because of bickering and political pressure. Eventually the disgruntled and disillusioned left—promising never to return—and an uneasy calm set in.

Meantime our audience was evolving as more and more students were visiting and asking questions. Often teachers, who were also vets, were teaching history and literature and art, and they, with their students, contributed powerfully to the

educational perspective of the artwork. The themes of our exhibits expanded when we began to collaborate with colleges and universities on diverse subjects such as political science (Innocence, War & Reconciliation), battlefield medicine (Medic) and psychology (Trauma & Metamorphosis). Some progressive VA Hospitals and clinics began utilizing art from our collection in PTSD treatment (Healing Arts).

In 2006, the NVVAM hosted the first exhibit by a veteran of the war in Iraq and found new interest, with fresh controversy, in an old story. Comparisons were inevitable and the media couldn't avoid making them, but to the museum, the reality was that sacrifice and courage unite all generations of veterans. The images that follow offers a sampling of the almost 2000 pieces of artwork in the collection.

—Jerry Kykisz, General Manager & Artist Member



"Class of '67"

"My paintings are of the horror show that was Vietnam: butchery carried out for politicians, bureaucrats, and ambitious generals whose egos would not let them say 'enough'; art for an indifferent public; art to honor those who lived and died there, and earned only a few hundred dollars a month. It would take a lifetime to paint it all."

Charlie Shobe (1984); Oil on Canvas, 22 x 28 in



“Portrait of a Soldier After War”

“My works are washed in the blood and tears of suffering, of annihilation, of brother killing brother—all the baggage of humanity’s shame. In my youth I was drawn and woven into the fabric of Vietnam, into a history written in shame, not pride. I left my career as a writer and entered the world of painting because what I was compelled to say words will not satisfy. This portrait, this face of monstrosities, is a vehicle to expose the kind of wickedness that the human soul can create and, in turn, suffer.”

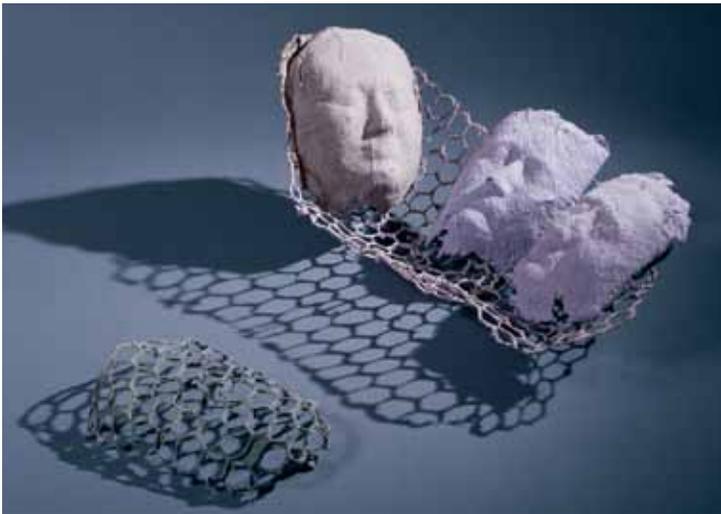
Cao Ba Minh (1993); Oil on canvas, 31 x 26.25 in



"One, Two, Three, Four, Let's All Go to War"

"The title One, Two, Three, Four comes from the Vietnam-era song by Country Joe and the Fish, whose chorus goes, 'One, two, three, what are we fighting for....' I originally titled it One, Two, Three, Four, Let's Go to El Salvador—I made it at about the time of that war, after Vietnam, but it seems too topical to me now. It could just as easily be called Off to War. It is really about young people who embrace the "romance" of war and with a jaunty step go off to dance with death. It is made of junk that was run through a shredder. One foot is a crushed and cut tricycle. The figure is intentionally skeletal, with a stance caught in mid-stride, at the moment of impact when death has happened but he has not yet realized it."

Michael Helbing (1980); Scrap-metal elements, enamel, 68 x 49.5 x 52 in



“Back in the World Again”

“I was an Air Force lab tech and did autopsies and bagged bodies in Thailand. I also did the same thing for a while when I got back to the States. Yes, Back in the World, Again is about how it felt to come back. The pieces of bone, brass, shells, braided in the creature’s hair and hanging from its belt, are tokens, mementos, souvenirs, transitional objects of our life. We all carry tokens with us to strange places for magical protection.

William Dugan (1979); Scrap iron & brass, hog skull, leather, bone, nails, beads, shells, ceramic, 84 x 48 x 48 in

“Healing the Wounds of War”

“My mother was an artist. When I was a child, I loved anatomy—the body in motion—and I loved art. During the Tet Offensive in 1968, our unit treated 496 surgical patients in thirty-six hours.”

Mary Margaret (Peggy Riddell) Caudill (1990); Hand cast paper, 9 x 17 x 18 in



"We Regret to Inform You"

"This work was not done by the congressman riding to work in his chauffeur-driven limousine, reading the *Washington Post*, nor was it done by the anchorman of the six o'clock news, but by the man who pulled the trigger on the M-16, dropped the bombs, and threw the hand grenades. This is the war by those who fought it."

Cleveland Wright (1979); oil on canvas, 35.5 x 26.5 in



"POW"

"The POW pieces started with my belief that there are still American POWs in Vietnam, China, Russia. I became obsessed with the blindfolded; the idea of being bound and blindfolded. During the 1968 Tet Offensive, one night in Song Be the Viet Cong dragged a guy off—he was on a listening post on one of those foggy nights when you couldn't see the guy next to you. We heard his moaning over the radio and the rustling of the bushes. We were only a few hundred yards away and no one could help him. We are blindfolded on this planet; we are unable to see what we do to each other. We are taught to see what we are told to see. When I found stone I found life itself; when I sculpt, I learn to see."

John McManus (1988); Alabaster and bronze, 37 x 19.5 x 10.25 in



“Chi Town”

"I arrived in Vietnam two weeks before the Tet Offensive in 1968 and came home on Christmas Day, 1968. Every event within that time period was charged with extremes: yelling, explosions, drunkenness, exhaustion. I was unprepared for the beast I met in Vietnam. It left me shaken. I hope to reflect this state in my work. I paint for myself, no one else. I still have not dealt with all of my Vietnam War experiences—some are much too difficult to revive. I relived some of them in the work while I was painting it, so as far as I am concerned the work is part of the Vietnam War, as I experienced it."

Michael Duffy (1981); Oil on Canvas, 25.25 x 31.25 in

“Orphans burning”

"I knew some young people once, right out of high school, who would risk their lives for people they didn't know, because duty and conscience required it. How are they now? Where are they? I really miss them, in spite of their various forms of insanity, which used to scare me, but which I now understand. . . . Remember the guy who kicked the door down to get us to the underground hospital in time? Well, he died two weeks later, or so I was told. Deathland, Stinkland, Vietnam, how could a few million American teenagers possibly save you?"

Randolph Evans (1980); Oil on canvas, 48 x 61 in



"Mental Anguish"

"There is no mystery to my art, though some might find it mysterious. I am a war artist, and if there is mystery in war, it is only perceived as such by those who have not lived with war. In the pain of war, some objects may change form, but they are never out of focus. . . . a prisoner of war may go mad and become a castle-haired mountain of shifting flesh."

Theodore Gostas (1982); Acrylic on burlap over hardboard, 45.5 x 25.5 in



"Hill 881"

"My paintings, drawings, and prints after I returned from Vietnam oiled the gears of my deep engagement in art, heightened and liberated my convictions about the war, and what art could be and needs to be. I felt, and still do, that in order to paint one must be inside life, death, so hard that everything is understood, dealt with, nothing left out. . . . I can't get Vietnam out of my system. I couldn't get rid of it even I painted flowers."

Richard J. Olsen (1967); Oil on canvas, 41 x 64 in



"I'm hit"

"My drawings show lacerated, visceral images of exposed veins and muscles; through this kind of imagery I intend to show my figures as actual men, not heroes—men whose own bodies explode from within. The seared skins express an unsuspected ferocity and frailty that is as self-wounding as it is defiant. . . . There is the real and there is the dream. You make art somewhere between the reality of being and the reality of becoming."

Richard Russell Yohnka (1979); Pastel on paper, 60.25 x 42.5 in