

The Illumination

—Matthew Foley

In the Fall 2010 Veterans Only Orientation Course at Eastern Kentucky University, Travis Martin and Brett Morris presented the opportunity to submit creative work to the first edition of *The Journal of Military Experience*. As an alternative to two exams, the students were allowed to produce short stories, poems, and artwork. The end product was a collection of creative works representing America's war culture. My contribution to *The Journal of Military Experience* was a process-art piece that I now call, *The Illumination*.

The nightmares of a warrior become the reality of a warrior through perception. Perception connotes that an option is available: Warriors who choose to perceive do so with the knowledge that the effects of this act influence the product—the nightmares, the values, and the place in society—that the warrior will carry with him or her after war. Perception—the ability to perceive—is inside of us all. Also, and in regards to what led to the construction of *The Illumination*, perception is a process. What follows is an example of warriors engaged in the act of perception, deciding who they are, who they have been, and who they will be after war.

On November 11th, 2010, veterans gathered to read the names of those who have perished in the Global War on Terrorism. I took the list from this reading and used the paper to produce powdered charcoal. As the veterans tore up the names of comrades who had fought and died alongside them, they talked, shared stories, and discussed the significance of destroying a physical embodiment of the pain that they all carry with them today. Next, we gathered around a fire to burn the destroyed list of names. The burning of the names released carbon in the same way that the veterans released their pain and suffering, replacing it with camaraderie and a community representative of their respective futures.

Using the charcoal, I composed three drawings representing pre, during, and post-war mindsets. The act of turning the list—the memorial—into artwork immortalized the fallen in a way that I had not previously thought possible. Through the process, I encountered the unanticipated effect of my own act of perception. I began with the simple desire to create art—to find an audience and help my career—while fulfilling my class requirements. My desire to help others was always present, but it increased exponentially as the project continued. I found myself engaged with the emotions and futures of those seeking the act of perception through my art.

My intent was to help other veterans gain a semblance of control over their world. At the same time, I hoped to help those without knowledge of America's war culture find a window into that disparate mode of existence. I completed my drawings, but the work was not complete. While the act of destroying names drudged up the emotions, pain, and sadness they felt (or should have felt) during war, the veterans also understood that these names were about to be put to work in the act of memorialization. As the veterans placed the names into a bucket meant to collect the ashes of future charcoal, they created something from their nightmares that just so happened to solidify their new place in society. The perspectives of these veterans changed: They gained control over their past and perceived a new future.

I completed three pieces of art using the charcoal. The first piece of art represents the soldier preparing for war, of innocence anticipating its own demise. Next, I depicted the experience of war, of chaos and the suppression of emotions for the sake of survival. Finally, I envisioned the warrior's view of the future, or the loneliness and uncertainty of being disconnected from the society they fought to protect. These three pieces embody the mindset of our Armed Forces—the individual soldier—in various stages of conscious and unconscious psychological development. But there was one more stage in the process before the act of perception could emerge in its full, empowering form.

Lining the three pieces of art along a wall outside of the university, I gave veterans a chance to physically express their emotions—to impress themselves—upon these aspects of the veteran psyche. The veterans explicitly destroyed the art. Implicitly, and however, they helped to create the image of destroyed and damaged identities represented in the three drawings. In essence, the act of perception took form through the art as the veterans found a way to make their emotions tangible, striking, and decimating what was taken away from them. As a result, the act of destruction became an act of construction; the veterans released psychological emotions physically; a light was shined directly upon the aspects of themselves they lost as a result of war. The veterans were better able to understand themselves while helping to create something that would teach the world about the sacrifices they made. This act of perception became *The Illumination*.

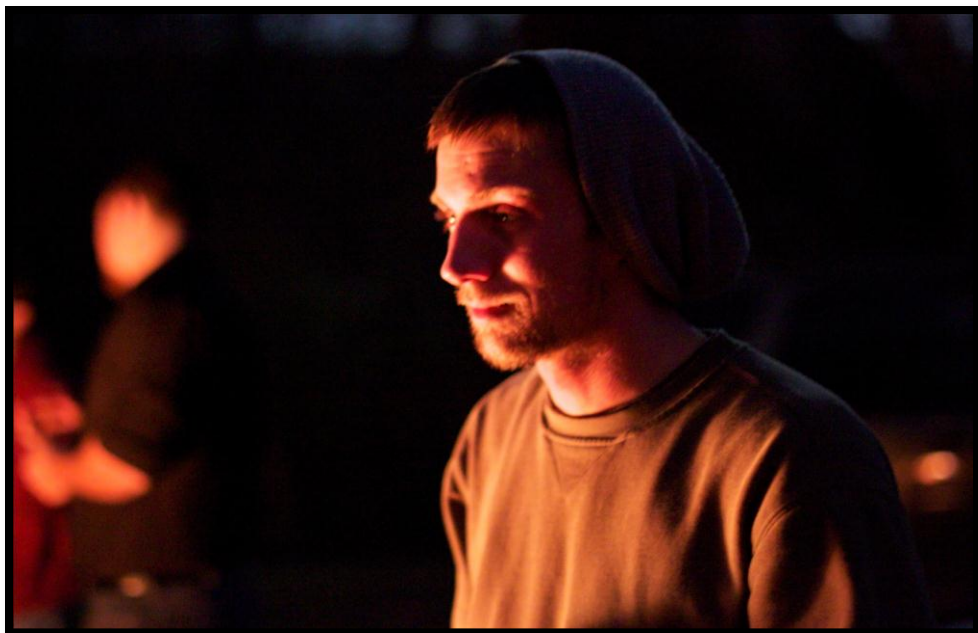
—I would like to send a special thanks to the Lexington Visual Collective for allowing me to use their studio while working on The Illumination.



Above: The initial gathering for the burning of names read during the Veterans Day Global War on Terrorism remembrance ceremony.

Below: The veterans unwind, relax, and share stories as they destroy the list.





Above: At this point, I am hoping that the project works out. I begin considering the psychological implications of my work.

Below: We burned the list in a steel can. Flames jumped and whistled from the top. This became the subject of conversation for the rest of the night.





Left and Below: I harvested the charcoal the next morning. Oddly, names survived the burning process along with newspaper articles describing political strife.

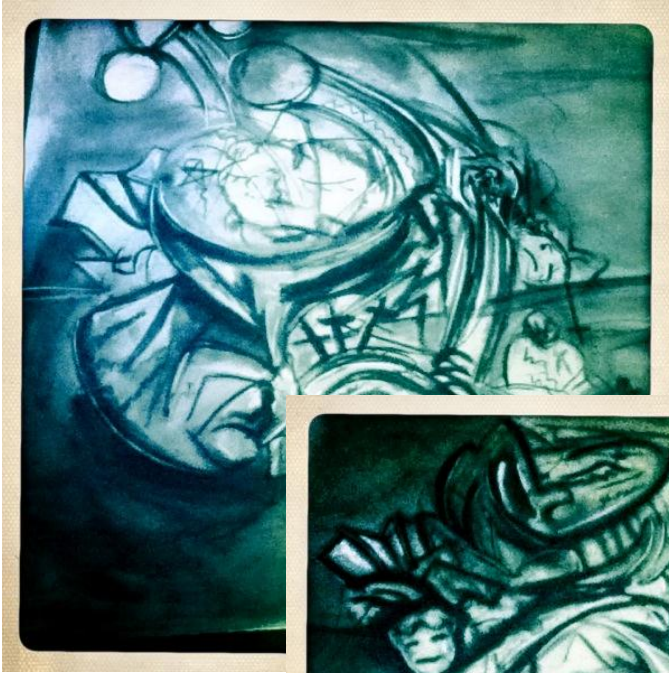




Above: The beginnings of the pre-war drawing.

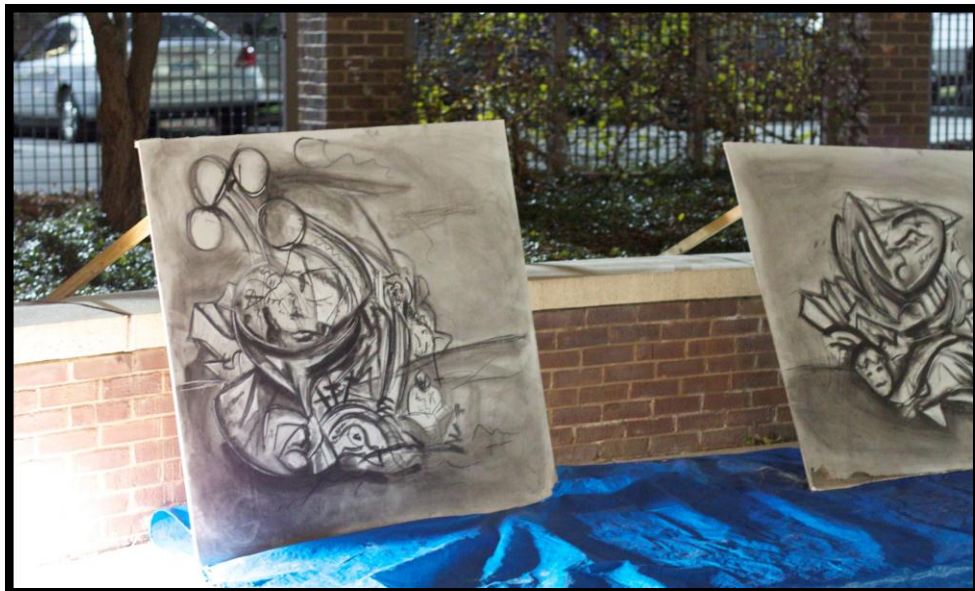
Below: The pre-war drawing is in its final stages and I have started work on the during-war piece.





Left and Below: The three drawings are complete and ready for the next phase.





Above: I set the drawings up outside of the EKU Student Success Building.

Below: Passersby were confused about what we were doing.





Above: I gave the veterans the options of tools and even charcoal to add to the artwork. It took some time for the veterans to understand how to create through destruction.

Below: The destruction has begun.





Above: All of the drawings have been battered. The veterans are still a little hesitant to destroy.

Below: I assured them that they were not simply destroying the art I created. Rather, their acts *were* the creation.





Left and Below: At this point the veterans begin to let loose.



Right and Below:
The destruction phase concludes with the veterans pouring out their emotions into the act of destruction.





Above: We pick up the pieces.

Below: As we wrapped the fragments in a tarp, we began discussing the implications of this artwork. We carried the pieces away like fallen soldiers, discussing what it means for a warrior to grieve. Instead of carrying away their fallen comrades, they realized they were carrying away pieces of themselves.





The Final Product:
Illumination of the Pre-War Mind

The Journal of Military Experience



The Final Product:
Illumination of the Mind at War



The Final Product:
Illumination of the Post-War Mind

The Journal of Military Experience