

Introduction: Artwork

— Creating the Tangible from the Intangible Jenny Bell

History proves that wars cannot stifle or silence artists and writers. If anything, war has been an inspiration for creative minds— a driving force—for those who have experienced it first-hand. The eight artists featured in this second volume of the *JME* represent all spectrums of society affected by war—from the child of a service member, to the concerned civilian, to the active-duty soldier—and their works demonstrate how vital the creative process is in helping artists deconstruct troubling experiences and reconstruct them on their own terms.

Despite society's perceptions of the military, those who have experienced the horrors of war first-hand are perhaps more likely than the average civilian to turn to the arts. Many see it as a way to reconcile memories of yesterday's experiences with the reality of today's depravity. One has only to look at the vast body of work that emerged from the World War I era to see that this is true. Creating a tangible work of art grants the veteran-artist an opportunity to grasp hold of an intangible memory, manipulate it, control it, and even purge it. Lawrence Haward explained this ability in his lecture to the University of Manchester during the height of WWI:

Where painter and poet have some conviction of their own to express, where they look upon the world through the windows of imagination, we shall naturally expect to find really vital emotion aroused in them when their theme is as pregnant of emotion as war must be.

Vital emotion is exactly what can be found in the works included with this volume.

Timothy Chiasson—son of an airman, active-duty soldier, and veteran—picked up the pencil when a fellow soldier was killed in Iraq. However, Chiasson is a veteran-artist who has *not* chosen to address the darker side of war. Instead, and as it was explained to me, he wants to share a story through his artwork that “everyone can relate to.” The iconic, patriotic symbols that appear in his pieces do just that. Chiasson’s art affirms our culture’s shared values and morals, representing the conviction of service, serving as a reminder of the brotherhood that has always existed between comrades-in-arms.

Photography is unlike painting or sculpting; the artist must take something *real* and present it through a different, narrower perspective. Art makes viewers question the world around them. The included photographs of former soldier Tif Holmes ask a question: “What do we do with the aftermath of war?” Her photographs are deceptively simplistic, complicated by her treatment of the subject matter. Holmes frames her subjects in a way that asks the viewer to confront a reality not so obvious to the naked eye.

The paintings and sketches of Steve Beales show how the soldier is always shrouded. His works are either completely devoid of color or saturated with the blood-orange that sometimes appears in the sky at dusk. In this way, Beales’s work is reminiscent of the canvas of war itself. Like Chiasson, he focuses on honoring his subjects and portraying the universality of wartime experience: loss, dedication, fear, sacrifice, and courage.

Despite the controversial subject matters of their collaborative artwork, Karen M. and Anthony C. (both children of service members) are strong supporters of the men and women who serve. They consider themselves to be street artists with a mission: “to educate the populace and be the voice of those who have none in our political world.” They manage to address some of the most divisive issues related to this generation’s wars. The mask they use, for example, is a common

symbol used in their hand-made stencils; it serves to remind us not to be blinded from the truth.

Stephen McCall, a former sailor, created hundreds of pieces during his twenty-five years as an artist. In the poem “Terry’s Way” McCall supplements the art piece *Nalepa* and attempts to come to terms with the suicide of a shipmate and “bring light upon that broken soul.” “Broken” is a good word to describe *Nalepa*. Without reading the poem or gazing upon the subject’s face and body, it is easy to recognize—from the asymmetry, jagged edges, and dark colors—that the artist is haunted by irresolution. This volume gives its readers a rare opportunity to view the painting and the poem side by side, offering them (and the artist) a way to interpret this tragic event.

It takes a special kind of artist to analyze a written work and translate it into a piece of art. The included sketches by Clayton D. Murwin are not *just* attempts to mirror the words of others; they pick up where the words left off. The “Hounds of Hell” sketch brings the Marines’ “Devil Dog” to life whereas the sketch accompanying “The Great Military Adventure” summons the pain that lives on in its author. Murwin understands the value of telling stories through pictures, of consolidating the heart of a story into a single, poignant image.

Perhaps the most confrontational pieces of art featured in this journal are those of the cover artist, Jessica Dittbenner. Dittbenner is five times a war veteran. *Deployment Sketches* serves as this work’s cover. It is a collage of images and symbols easily recognizable to those who’ve served downrange; the chaos of the work depicts the chaos of war. Dittbenner explores another theme of war—cost—through works such as *Pilot* and *Through It*, where Dittbenner presents a naked figure painted in the form of a crucifix, perhaps a statement about how veterans are often stripped of the ideals and convictions that defined them and how, after the war, they struggle to get “through it.”

Despite the difficulties that go along with creatively addressing war, an artist is afforded one luxury that the writer is not: They can disappear within

abstractions, symbols, colors, and the limitlessness of their medium. Howard so aptly puts it:

War, in fact, in any of its aspects does not provide the artist with easy material to handle; but the difficulties diminish in proportion as it is treated in the spirit of decoration.

Artists are able to seek salvation in their craft through that very “spirit of decoration.” *JME* contributors demonstrate how artists can succeed where others have failed, in the tangible act of creation from the intangible act of war.