

SOLDIER'S HOME:

Veterans' Art in Central Florida

September 6, 2018—January 7, 2019



Curated by Dr. Rangsook Yoon, *Director of Experiences and Curator*

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INTRODUCTION

Rangsook Yoon, Ph.D.

The title of the exhibition is borrowed from Ernest Hemingway's short story *Soldier's Home*, which first appeared in a collection of stories inspired by his wartime experiences and memories, *In Our Time*, published in 1925. In *Soldier's Home*, the protagonist, Harold Krebs, returns to his small Oklahoma town after serving in the Marines in Europe. Instead of a hero's welcome, however, he finds himself largely disconnected from everyday American life. Paying the price for his time of adventure, his courage, and his service in response to the nation's call to serve in Europe, he is now left brokenhearted, bitter, and apathetic, with no faith in God and without any feelings for the women in his life, his father, or his country. Sadly, nearly a century later, this powerful story of an anti-hero dealing with traumas in postwar American civilian life still resonates with those returning home from foreign wars. Therefore, Hemingway's *Soldier's Home* has timeless metaphorical power, even in our own era.

This story also provides a connection to the concurrent exhibition at the Maitland Art Center. Shortly after America's entry into the First World War in April 1917, the founder of the Maitland Art Center, J. André Smith (1880–1959), like Hemingway, served in Europe. He enlisted in the Army Reserve and received officer's training at Plattsburgh Training Camp in New York. He first served with a camouflage unit, and then became a senior officer and commander in a war art program, consisting of eight professional artists, who were to document the activities of the American Expeditionary Forces. Though Smith survived the war, a barbed wire injury he incurred in 1917 ultimately caused his right leg to be amputated in 1924.

His visual renderings and wartime letters to his mother, many of which are exhibited here for the first time, are largely silent regarding the nightmarish world that he bore witness to while in France. Smith, however, undoubtedly experienced shell shock, as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was then called. Yet, as is known, earlier generations did not talk or share much about the war with others. Thus, the character Harold Krebs in Hemingway's story provides several intriguing psychological insights into Smith's character, as well.

Timed to coincide with the centenary of the end of WWI on November 11, and aiming to honor Smith's legacy as a veteran and an artist, *Soldier's Home: Veterans' Art in Central Florida* consists of two different sets of artworks that share the fact that all the artists were or are veterans: Smith's own works and words on paper on the one hand, and artworks of various media by three local veteran artists on the other. Displayed in Gallery 1 are Smith's etchings, war letters with accompanying drawings, and independent pencil and watercolor works, which together capture a number of his wartime experiences in France. Instead of rendering the horrors and inhumane conditions of trench warfare, he preferred to record various "unsensational" background activities of the American Expeditionary Forces, as well as to depict allegorical scenes. After the war, Smith published *In France with the American Expeditionary Forces* (1919), which included his wartime drawings accompanied by his own accounts. In the foreword to the book, Smith writes, "War posed for me in the attitude of a very deliberate worker who goes about his task of fighting in a methodical and thorough manner. If the picture of war which the sum total of my drawings shows has any virtue of truth or novelty it is in this respect: It shows War, the business man, instead of War, the warrior."

In Galleries 2 through 4 are works by three local veterans: Jim Hosner (b. 1944) and Michael Moffett (b. 1945), both of whom served in the Vietnam War (1964–1975), and William Gura (b. 1956), who served in the US Navy. Their artworks are heterogeneous in terms of media, style, and content, but they are all the results of working through wartime reflections and traumas. While Moffett's works are unflinching in their criticism of the atrocities of war and the resulting dissociation from normal American life, Hosner and Gura sidestep these issues and focus more on personal dimensions, creating images drawn from their own private experiences.

Through these artworks, we see the enduring impact of war on individuals' postwar civilian lives—the lasting, complex psychological costs of war—as well as the cathartic process that can come from artmaking for those suffering from the symptoms of PTSD. What did they go through and what ailed them? What are the realities, and consequences, of US warfare? As columnist James Carroll wrote in an August 19, 2013, *Boston Globe* article, "American society seems to have moved on from Vietnam, but has it? An unresolved disorder, tied to a societal PTSD, shows itself in the way the United States has replayed the mistakes of Vietnam not once, but again and again. An unreckoned-with denial of our unfinished Vietnam trauma certainly undergirds this nation's war-making in Iraq and Afghanistan, where, for Americans, it is 1973 all over again."

This exhibition gives cultural recognition to the artistic achievements of these local veteran-artists. Given the importance of their stories in conjunction with their artworks, Hosner and Gura have been interviewed by my summer intern from Florida State University, Carly Pennant. I have edited those interviews for the sake of clarity and condensation. In the case of Moffett, we have drawn on a newspaper article by Billy Cox, a reporter at the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, which is reprinted here by permission. The three accounts share the same general theme—the artists dealing with their PTSD—although their takes are very different from one another. Together, the artworks and their stories open a dialogue on the indelible impacts of war—its visible and invisible scars. Ultimately, they show art's power when artists tackle their respective realities in truly creative, genuine ways.

MICHAEL MOFFETT (b. 1945)

Born in New York and raised in Cocoa Beach, Florida, Michael Moffett studied art in several colleges, including Brevard Community College and Palomar College in California. With youthful vigor and feelings of invincibility, he joined the Marine Corps in 1967 at the age of 22. Though aware of the dangers, he states, he wanted to see it all.

While stationed for nearly a year in Da Nang, Vietnam, Moffett carried his Kodak Instamatic with him everywhere, photographing and documenting the normal daily routines of his fellow combat soldiers. After returning to Florida in 1969, Moffett, using the GI Bill, resumed his art studies at the Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, although he never completed his degree. Over the past fifty years, he has created a diverse, yet consistent body of work.

Moffett is something of a provocateur, and some of his artworks have created controversy. For him, art seems to be not only a form of personal expression but also a means of resistance—allowing him to stand in opposition to authority, social conventions, war, and so on—and many of his works tend to upend societal norms. He is not out to please the viewers of his work, but rather, confront them with unvarnished and satirical representations of ugly realities. Beneath the surface of his sometimes-garish aesthetic choices and uncomfortably dark representations, Moffett’s thought-provoking art insists on deep empathy for those who suffer from wartime traumas, while simultaneously emphasizing the dignity of people and portraying the theme of universal humanity.



Figure 1

The following article, “Sarasota son turns Vietnam trauma into provocative art career,” written by reporter Billy Cox, originally appeared in the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* on November 9, 2017.

COCOA BEACH — The man in the wheelchair looks scary real, like he could get up and walk. But there’s the prosthetic leg. Not to mention a grimace so deeply etched it suggests the act of thought itself is a form of paralysis. Even the cigarette drooping from the corner of his mouth is barely hanging on.

The fiberglass wheelchair man’s Hawaiian shirt, a pack of Camels peeking from the pocket, tells a story. Its tropical patterns include a splash of service medals from Vietnam, a laminated Veterans Crisis Line badge, the dutiful American flag pin, and an “I Voted 2016 Presidential Election” sticker. One hand steadies a walker, the other clutches a Heineken.

But wheelchair man is incomplete without the other half of a brainstorm called “Portable War Memorial.” In the studio’s display window, the bespectacled wheelchair man sits opposite another version of himself, same face, but with horrific differences. The subject of wheelchair man’s scrutiny, upper torso only, is mounted atop a scale-model military tank with “USMC” stenciled across the front.

Tank man has a black patch strapped across one eye. He aims a revolver at his head, a twitch away from blowing his brains out. Below the knuckles of tank man’s gun hand is a tattoo: “Point Toward Enemy.” The tank man assembly rests atop a pedestal that puts him eye level with wheelchair man.

If it ended there, “Portable War Memorial” would be astonishing enough. But during an exhibition at the Orlando Museum of Art last year, tank man rolled into the place under remotely controlled power. Loud, abrasive, equipped with a soundtrack of engine gurgles and the intermittent bang of a gun, the contraption’s unexpected and disturbing intrusion into the lobby stopped patrons dead in their tracks. Their silence is recorded by a camera attached to the tank.

The author of this experience is sculptor Michael Moffett, who — using facial molds — literally shaped both pieces in his own image. He shaved his head and facial hair to create his characters, then used sewing needles to thread individual hair follicles onto the sides of wheelchair man’s resin scalp.

Over the decades, Moffett has been accused of creating “shock art” of a gratuitous nature, designed solely to provoke and agitate. Depending on which subject you’re talking about, he might even cop to it. But “Portable War Memorial” is not one of those pieces, especially given the epidemic of veteran suicides playing out across America.

“This one couple, they came up to me, and she’s talking about how her dad is a veteran and he won’t talk about it, and I’m like, yeah. I mean, what the f--- is he gonna say,” Moffett wonders at his studio in Cocoa Beach. “If he’s in combat, what do you think he’s gonna say? ‘Oh, you know, guess what I did when I was in combat, let me tell you a really funny story’ — no. Where’s that conversation gonna go?”

Yet, that’s exactly what Moffett’s aggressive work is doing — triggering gut-level and perhaps overdue conversations about the reptilian side of human potential. A Marine Corps veteran whose post-traumatic stress diagnosis is rated for a 50 percent service-connected disability, the former Sarasota resident spent most of 1969 dodging fire in Vietnam. He came home at war with illusions and decorum.

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Mom was an Army lieutenant in World War II, Dad was a Navy commander and engineer who worked with experimental drone technology in the European theater. The Moffetts’ second — and middle — son Michael grew up in the postwar afterglow, watching new mythologies and their messengers, like John Wayne and Audie Murphy, spread glory across the big screen.

His family moved out of New York and invested in a Siesta Key motel called Bonita Sands. Michael enrolled as a fifth-grader at St. Martha Catholic School, where his illustrations in American history class, especially those involving combat, were singled out. He was a two-way football star at Cardinal Mooney High, where he graduated in 1964.

The Bonita Sands venture would flop, and dad moved on to an engineering job with RCA on Florida’s east coast. Older brother Richard would become a dentist and make Sarasota his permanent home until his death last year.

After Mooney, 18-year-old Michael Moffett hit the road. He studied art formally, first at what used to be Brevard Community College, then at the erstwhile Manatee Community College, and finally at Palomar College, a California junior college, whose “fantastic art program” gave him a glimpse of a bigger picture.

“The stuff that really intrigued me (about renowned artists) was not so much their art but the way they lived

their lives,” he says. “You look at somebody like Van Gogh, where there was no consideration of any kind of a commercial venture. He had some issues mentally and emotionally, but he’s seeing the world in a different way, and he’s not thinking ‘Man, I hope I can make a really cute piece to sell.’ He went out there and did what he had to do.”

But Moffett made a radical pivot in 1967. He decided to sacrifice his own individuality by immersing himself in the Marine Corps. The stalemate in Vietnam was fueling an increasingly raucous peace movement, but the young man who admired Van Gogh didn’t care much about the politics. He was young and immortal. He had something more personal in mind. “I wanted to find out what f---ing war’s all about.”

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When his nearly yearlong tour of Vietnam ended in October 1969, Moffett returned to the States intact, in uniform, toting a captured enemy assault rifle in a sling, back when airport rules were different. Like the Vietnamese who tried to kill him, Moffett breezed home to Florida almost as if invisible, despite the eye-grabbing trophy. The other things he brought back, the heightened sensibilities, would take years to assume full stature.

Third Battalion 7th Marines, Moffett had been a roving radio operator — “like a knight in a chess set” — stationed southwest of Da Nang amid otherwise anonymous topographical blips called Hill 10 and Hill 55. The Americans called the high ground Dodge City.

Moffett’s unit spent much of its time making contact along the Laotian border. He lost count of the firefights. Cobra gunships poured fire onto enemy positions so close that spent casings rained like hailstones. Nighttime exchanges involving tracers lit up treelines in unforgettable surrealism, “like that bridge scene in ‘Apocalypse Now,’” Moffett recalls.

He compares life under fire to an out of body experience, “like when people think they’ve died and they have this vision of themselves.” Maybe he was in that mode when, walking point, he stumbled across a North Vietnamese hideout — complete with field hospital — that led to his capture of the Soviet-made SKS semi-automatic. Maybe he yelled, maybe he screamed, he can’t recall. What he knows for sure is, it wasn’t Audie Murphy. He didn’t fire a shot.

“All I remember is seeing movement, a rifle sticking out from a bunker, and I went charging up the hill. I don’t know, all I was thinking was ‘Go get ‘em,’ like what I did as a linebacker in football. How close I came to getting zipped, I have no idea.” By time he reached the goal line, the NVA had fled so quickly that Moffett and his

colleagues discovered rice boiling in pots. They destroyed everything they found.

Moffett carried a Kodak Instamatic into battle, but not everything that came his way revealed its true nature in celluloid. After returning to Florida, he resumed his studies, at what was then called Ringling School of Art, from 1970-72. With a head teeming with complicated stuff, Moffett moved to Cocoa Beach to be near family, where he opened an ironworks foundry to pay the bill for his visions.

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The audience quietly freaked in 1980, when Moffett's first and only commissioned piece of art was unveiled in Cocoa Village. He called it "Fountainhead." Within half an hour, an emergency meeting of Village merchants convened to banish "Fountainhead" as quickly as possible.

A year earlier, Moffett's work had won Best Sculpture at the exclusive Disney Art Festival in Lake Buena Vista. It was a three-piece exhibit called "The Altar," with two jet airplanes morphing into avian raptors, and a third image — an ostensibly pregnant female figure with webbed feet — pinned flat on her back, bomber-wing arms splayed like a horizontal crucifixion.

Underestimating the even darker turns his work was taking, Cocoa Village officials paid their hometown talent \$1,000 to create bold public art. But they failed to include a clause about prior review. "Their only stipulation," Moffett recalls, "was that it couldn't be phallic. And it wasn't."

At the time he was commissioned, Moffett's takeaways from Nam were beginning to hatch and multiply, stalking childhood and innocence. War machinery erupted from the limbs and torsos of baby dolls, toys shapeshifted into claws and crustacean armor, a stark naked mutant straddled a warplane as if stoking its libido. Imagine a menagerie created by Allen Ginsberg and Ralph Steadman.

Thus, on that memorable October afternoon 37 years ago, the unsuspecting mayor of Cocoa flung the canvas off Moffett's big surprise. At 220 pounds, "Fountainhead" stood alone, without peer. Applause was hesitant and tepid.

It was a functional water fountain assembled with what looked like severed body parts. Its foundation sat atop casts of two mismatched feet. Limp hands dangled from opposite sides of the bronze cube; from straight on, recessed but visible inside the cube, a nude female upper torso greeted onlookers. At its summit was a cadaverous bald head, vaguely feminine, eyes closed, tilted upward, mouth concealed behind masking tape.

Peel the tape off, and there it is — the water nozzle,

clenched between vampire fangs. Meaning that Cocoa Village strollers who wanted a slurp of water would have to guide their lips toward the canines of Nosferatu.

"I knew it was a strong piece," says Moffett. "I didn't think it was going to be such a calamity."

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Half a dozen of Moffett's paintings rated a September-October exhibition at the five-year-old Bishop Gallery in Brooklyn. Inspired by Syria's refugee crisis, Moffett's interpretations — particularly of children in peril — fit well within the scope of Bishop's mission, says Gallery co-owner Stevenson Dunn.

"We love work that gets to the unadulterated truth," says Dunn, well aware of Moffett's reputation. "These are truths you need to know, but maybe you don't know you need to know it until you see it. Personally, I would like to see (his war work) in an academic setting, because he's presenting a side you'll never get in textbooks or in the classroom."

Moffett's New York exhibition was part of a package with three other Central Florida artists recommended by Orlando arts promoter Jeffrey Shonkwiler. President of the Artists Registry.com Inc., Shonkwiler concedes that "being in a room with Moffett's art is a challenge because the energy coming off it is so strong."

That said, those nontraditional depictions of conflict on multiple levels "bring a lot of respect for what our soldiers went through." More broadly, Shonkwiler adds, "Everyone has a level of light and darkness in them. Sometimes you need stark imagery to help people get back into the light and heal."

Michael Moffett's work stands among that of untold numbers of veterans managing their pasts in a variety of creative ways. The largest venue is the National Veterans Art Museum in Chicago.

Established in 1982, the erstwhile Vietnam Veterans Art Museum has since opened its doors to the contributions of survivors from all wars. Some 2,500 pieces of art, representing more than 225 veterans, are included in its permanent collection, which draws anywhere from 9,000 to 11,000 visitors a year.

"I anticipate the PBS series (Ken Burns' 18-hour documentary, "The Vietnam War") will have an impact on us. Certainly good conversations are already happening as a result," says Museum Executive Director Brendan Foster.



Figure 2

“We’re not here just for the veterans. Our ultimate goal is to bridge the gap between veterans and society, so that people can get a better understanding of what they went through, and hopefully become more empathetic and understanding.”

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Moffett’s 1,000 square-foot studio off Highway A1A in downtown Cocoa Beach is a window into the inner sanctum, of gutted sacred cows and icons swamped by a rising tide of chaos. The soundtrack is Miles Davis, light jazz, Tom Waits.

This is where elements of Rockwell’s celebrated “Freedom from Want” Thanksgiving table and Wyeth’s girl-in-a-field “Christina’s World” classic are fused into an entirely new hybrid called “Home For the Holidays”; napalm blossoms behind the feast. “Fountainhead” is here too, immortalized in a “Wanted Dead Or Alive” wall-sized poster. Over there, a bomb-dispensing Mickey Mouse has been reimagined with a tank-barrel snout. Across the room, another mold of Moffett’s face is pin-cushioned with pencils—à la Wes Craven’s “Hellraiser”—and titled “Rats don’t like #2.” This is a tribute to the French Charlie Hebdo artists murdered by religious fanatics in 2015.

Moffett likes to say his work holds a mirror to the interior life of the observer, that it evokes their own insecurities, not his own. He recalls a confrontation with the director of a central Florida art show several years ago.

“She’s in my face and she says ‘Are you Michael Moffett?’ and I go ‘Yeah.’ And she says, ‘Well, your work is very

sexual, erotic and violent’ and I said ‘You know, that’s all coming out of your head,’ and she lost it. She didn’t know what to say. And I go ‘I guess you’re not gonna invite me back again.’” He shrugs. “But you know what? She’ll never forget Michael Moffett.”

Mostly, what he hears are at more subdued decibel levels. An active-duty military guy and his retired Air Force father recently paused before “Portable War Memorial” in the window display. The son made a disparaging remark but dad insisted on giving it a harder read. Moffett stepped outside to join the analysis. Dad said he was never in combat but he saw what it did to some of his buddies.

“The son hadn’t really been open to any of this stuff,” Moffett recalls, “but suddenly, the three of us are all talking together, having this moment, and I’m watching the father and son kind of bonding together. You could actually see where what the father was saying was beginning to sink in with the son.”

The stories he hears, unsolicited. Total strangers talking about the holes in their lives. Sometimes tears say more than words.

“This goes way beyond art, this is about what people really are,” Moffett says. “It’s almost like some of them have been waiting for somebody like me to come along to give them an excuse to talk.”

If only he could fix Independence Day and the bombs bursting in air. He knows how dogs feel. “The Fourth of July,” says Moffett, “just makes me wanna get out of town.”

JIM HOSNER (b. 1944)

Born and raised in Michigan, Jim Hosner studied psychology and mathematics at Central Michigan University from 1964 to 1969. While he was there, the US involvement in the Vietnam War continued to expand. Seven draft notices, six physicals, and a three-month appeal allowed him to successfully avoid being drafted into the military, but after Hosner graduated, he was told to report and began serving in an artillery unit. Hosner, a pacifist, says in an interview that he felt as though he was an indentured servant during his nearly yearlong service. He escaped the severe physical injury of being shot, but he contracted malaria, from which he almost died after returning to America. Hosner moved to Florida in 1982, which helped him with his seasonal depression. In Chu Lai, Vietnam, he started making jewelry at the artillery training base, where arts and crafts classes were offered, partly because he wanted to create a piece of jewelry with a peace sign. Using the GI Bill, Hosner returned to formal schooling to get his master's degree in psychology, and while in graduate school, he also took a number of art classes. Hosner started painting because of the vibrant dreams he was having, which he called "cosmic videos."

Hosner, like many other Vietnam veterans, did not realize that he had PTSD until much later in his life, around 1999, although he was experiencing feelings of depression and anxiety after returning, and had a serious nervous breakdown in 1987, which incapacitated him for close to three weeks. Experiencing the difficulty of dealing with his emotions, which Hosner denied for a long time, he eventually sought therapy, where he realized he was not alone and that things could get better. Studying psychology, he also became much more interested in the workings of the mind, which, in time, led him to meditation and energy work such as Reiki. This has also helped ease his depression. Hosner states, "Art helped me because it gave me something to focus on. I can be agitated and then when I sit down to paint, things calm down."

INTERVIEW WITH JIM HOSNER

Where are you from?

I was born in Michigan, and I spent most of my youth and young adulthood there. We lived in numerous places, but in high school, my parents decided we were going to move to a farm just north of Detroit. They wanted to make sure us boys weren't getting into any trouble, so they had plenty for us to do on a farm. In the end, it was a real benefit to me because I got to see what real food was, how it was produced, and where it came from. Nutritionally, I got off to a fabulous start because we mostly grew our own stuff and we didn't use fertilizers or pesticides. Back then you'd call it "home grown," but today we call it "organic."

I went off to college after high school at Central Michigan University. This was 1969 – right in the middle of the Vietnam War. They had the draft, and people were doing things to get out of the draft, such as staying in school, getting jobs, etc. I was determined to get my degree before I went because I knew that if I didn't, I wouldn't finish it. Six physicals, seven draft notices, and a three-month appeal got me from the middle of the term to graduation. Once I graduated, I got myself a job as a teacher, which was draft-exempt, so I did that for one term. After the fall term, I started looking for another job. It was kind of bad timing, and I didn't find a job, so they drafted me. It was pretty exciting, walking into the reception center in Detroit and there were people outside protesting saying, "You don't have to go! Canada is only a fifteen-minute bus ride away! People will help you!"

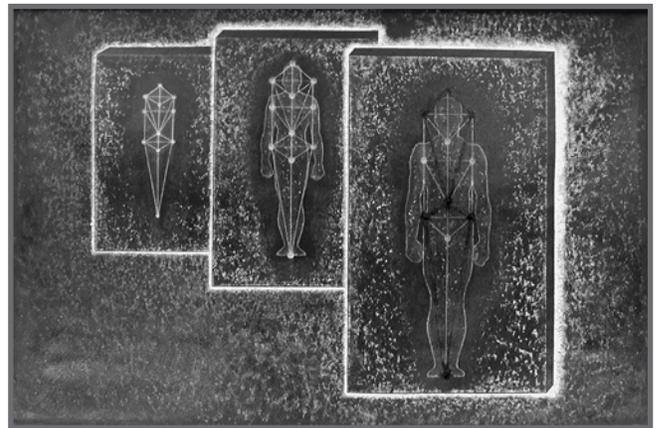


Figure 3

Did you think about going to Canada?

Oh yeah. For a while. I had a friend that did. Some guys I knew from high school and college left too. And then it came my turn, and I thought, "If I don't go [to Vietnam], they are going to put me in jail. I don't want to be in jail. If I go, I want to make sure I'm not in the infantry. I'm going to stay away from that." I signed up to be a helicopter pilot, and that lasted for five or six months of training. However, the average time of surviving when you come into a hot landing zone is about five minutes. You are loud, you move slow, and you're a sitting duck. I decided that I didn't want to do it, so they put me in artillery since I had a background in math.

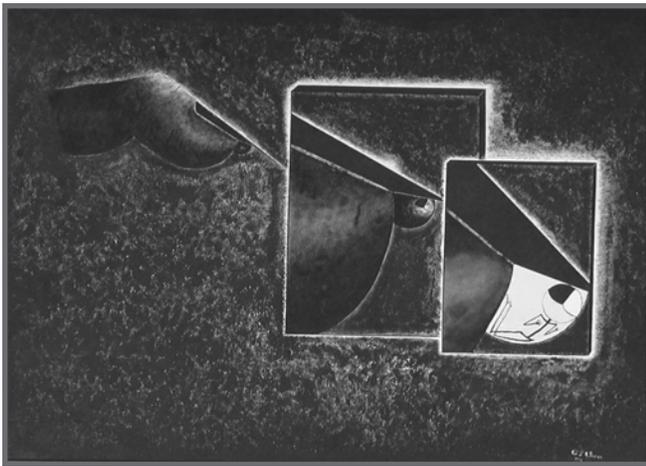


Figure 4

We flew to Vietnam, and as soon as I walked out, I could not believe how hot it was. The first thing I thought to myself was, "Oh my God, I am going to die. They are going to give me a gun, and I am going to spend the rest of my year here shooting, and if I don't get hit, it will be a miracle." Fortunately, it didn't happen that way. We only got shot at a few times, but boy I can remember every one of them. We got overrun once, and we had helicopters come in to stop the sappers in the wire. That's when the cannons came out, and [they] slowed those guys right down. It was pretty exciting. I was okay until I went out and looked at the dead guys. I didn't eat much for a couple of days. After that, I thought, "You know, we are all going to die. I don't mind dying, I just don't want to drag it out. If I go, make it quick." Fortunately, that didn't happen, and when I came back, I got the GI Bill, and I thought, "Wow, I'm a lucky guy. I'm alive and I can go back to school." I went back and got my master's in psychology. In the meantime, I took a bunch of art classes. I took the same jewelry class three times. When I finally graduated from graduate school, I decided to move to Florida. When I was in Vietnam, I got malaria and I almost died when I got back to America. Once you get malaria, you don't handle cold weather very well, so I moved down here for that, and it also helped my seasonal depression. I've been here since 1982 and I moved in with my friend Jim.

I've been fabricating ever since I was a kid and I always have enjoyed working with tools. I got interested in jewelry-making when I first got drafted into the military. It was 1969, and the hippies were all out talking about peace. I wanted to get myself a peace sign because I was in the military and I felt like I was an involuntary servant or indentured. I wanted a peace sign, but I couldn't find one. The next weekend, on a Saturday morning, I went walking around the base at artillery training, and in one of the buildings, they had arts and crafts. They had woodworking, ceramics, jewelry, etc. I started walking towards the jewelry department, and I saw the kiln and all the tools, and I thought, "Peace sign!" So, I cast a peace sign out of sterling silver and put it on my dog tag chain. I took my dog tag off and laced it on my boot so I could carry my peace sign around.

How did you get involved at the Art and History Museum?

I brought all my jewelry tools with me to Florida, and I was doing a lot of art festivals for my paintings. I do acrylic surrealist paintings. I made jewelry just because I really liked it and sold some of it. Someone mentioned I should check out a class at the Art & History Museums, so I did, and I met Whitney Wolfe, who taught bronze casting here. That was in '87 or '88. I was interested in teaching a class, so I signed up. I always taught Sunday mornings, and more and more people signed up, so I started teaching more classes.

You started painting after Vietnam?

Yes. I started painting when I was in grad school because I would have all of these dreams. All of these paintings come from either a dream or a meditation. I call them my "cosmic videos."

You said you didn't realize you had PTSD until later in life?

Yeah, not until much later—around 1999 or something. I had a pretty serious nervous breakdown in 1987, and I was incapacitated for two or three weeks. I was conflicted, constantly berating myself. I never learned how to deal with my emotions. They don't teach you much of that in the Army. For a long time, they denied it was real. I was depressed, anxious, and lost. I didn't want to think about it. It took me a while of going through therapy to realize that putting it behind me and shutting the door only works for a while. If it ever came up, I denied it. I got pretty good at that. I eventually had the nervous breakdown and I didn't sleep much for eight or nine months. Once I started going to therapy, I realized, "Oh, I'm not alone. These guys do know what I'm talking about. I guess it's not quite so bad." [...] Meditation and energy work allowed me to pull myself out of depression. It was kind of a breakthrough. I've been studying that metaphysical thing for a while.

Do you think that art has played a role in this therapy process?

Absolutely. Art helped me because it gave me something to focus on. I can be agitated, and then when I sit down to paint things, [I] calm down.

The reason I got so into jewelry is because I have PTSD. I would get really depressed, and I didn't think anything was worth it. I'd say to myself, "Okay, it's my brother's birthday. I'm going to make him a present." I would go into the shop, and I would sit there and just look at the metal. Sometimes I would look at the metal, make a mark, and then leave. I'd do this about four or five times, and it slowly helped me bring myself out of my depression as I worked. Painting is kind of the same thing.

WILLIAM GURA (b. 1956)

Born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, William Gura wanted to be a medical illustrator in his youth, having worked as a hospital emergency medical technician. In 1974, he began to study photography at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. Yet, coming from a military family, and given that most of the young men he knew were either going to or coming back from the Vietnam War, Gura felt obliged to join the military. He thought that going to Vietnam would make for a complete life. The war ended in May 1975, but thinking that if he did not enlist then, he never would, he quit school to join the U.S. Navy in 1976, opting for the position of illustrator draftsman. After having attained the rank of Chief Illustrator/Draftsman in the Navy, he was honorably discharged as a Chief Petty Officer in Orlando in 1996.

While in the military service, he participated in the intelligence field for eleven years, and was stationed in various locations, including the Pentagon, and with U.S. Central Command, where his job involved active war planning and real-time solutions to wartime needs in Iraq and Afghanistan. Due to the injuries he incurred while in the Navy, he is now a disabled veteran. He has been diagnosed as “hyper-vigilant,” and finds himself always on guard: “All the war planning, watching people getting blown up, it was no fun. Knowing that you plan things to happen and how many hundreds of people suffered because what I was a part of? It wears on you. I wasn’t physically in battle, but we planned everything where people would die.”

After his retirement, Gura resumed his illustration work, particularly portraiture, a focus he has long loved. He designs and fabricates all the props that he draws. For Gura, art is pure enjoyment rather than pain therapy. He states, “The creativity portion of it never ends [...]. It’s God putting this in my head. God has a purpose in these drawings to relate to somebody who can say, ‘Man, I feel like that sometimes.’”

INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM GURA

Where are you from originally?

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

What brought you down to Orlando?

The Navy. I joined in 1976. I went to boot camp here in Orlando, and I retired here in 1996. I did a full circle, and I came back to where I started from.

Did you live in Pittsburgh all your life until you moved to Orlando?

Yep, until I was 19. Then I came to boot camp here, and after that, I went to Washington D.C. I was in the Presidential Honor Guard for two and a half years. I went from there to the Pentagon, and then to the Defense Intelligence Agency, then back to the Pentagon. I did that for six and a half years. And then I went to Reykjavik, Iceland, which was considered sea duty for me. I was an artist and illustrator for the Navy. I went from Reykjavik, Iceland to Tampa, Florida, working in US Central Command for four and a half years, with USS Mount Whitney. I was commanding a control ship for the Commander, Second Fleet. I did that for three and a half years, and then they sent me back here to retire in Orlando.

How long were you in service for?

Twenty years and 24 days.

Do you have a family here?

Yes. I have a wife of 40 years, and I have three sons.

Tell me about your decision behind going into the Navy.

At the time, I wanted to go to Vietnam. In Pittsburgh, I worked in hospitals as an EMT, and everyone around me was going to war and coming back from war. My dad was in the Navy, all my uncles were in the Army and military during WWII, and I just felt an obligation that I needed to pursue that. I graduated in '74, and I went to the Art Institute of Pittsburgh because I wanted to be a medical



Figure 5

illustrator. I wanted to have some sort of backup. Being an EMT was an exciting job, but I thought that going to Vietnam would make a complete life. [...] I did two more years at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, and I thought, if I don't go now, I'll never get in. I signed up in September of '75, but the war had already ended, and I missed my call. I still went into the Navy. I opted for the illustrator draftsman, which there was no schooling for, so I took the test for the illustrator draftsman, and I passed that. I became [a] third class petty officer. Then I went to the Pentagon, and they started shifting me around.

When you say that you were an illustrator, what all did that entail?

When I was at the Pentagon, for the morning brief, I had to show up at 3:00 a.m. to meet the briefer who had been there since 11:00 p.m. the night before, gathering real-time information over the wire about what is happening in war zones in other countries. We would put a brief together from 3:00 a.m.-7:00 a.m., and then we would take it downstairs where they would do a "murder brief," where they would kill stuff they didn't want and add stuff they needed. We were in charge of file cabinets full of slides, and we had to go get slides for the brief and put together the text for it. Then we would project it and do the brief for the Chief of Naval Operations before 8:00 a.m., and once we had the brief done, everybody would come in, and we would do it again. I also did portraits and a lot of knot work. Every summer in the Presidential Honor Guard, I would do portraits of the reviewing official, and I would present it to him as a gift.

How did you get into knot tying?

A long time ago, my aunt had an old library. When I was 13, I was going through the books one day, and I found a 1941 Popular Mechanics yearbook. In there was an article on how to square knot a cord for your camera case. I started doing that, and then I was intrigued with it. [...] it keeps your mind active.

Your knot workpieces are so orderly and amazing. Do you have OCD when you work on these?

Oh, yes. I do. My portraits, too. If you [would ask] my wife, she'd tell you how many went in the trash for some little reason. I'd complete one and then rip it in half because I know it's not right.

Is that something you've had all your life?

The job I had in the military required absolute precision. You had to be right all the time. If a knot isn't tied right, it's the wrong knot. The precision part probably came from that, but partially my upbringing too. We [my siblings and I] were abused in [that] we couldn't make a mistake. It's a trait that has just carried over.

You mentioned that you have been diagnosed with PTSD?

Yes. I was diagnosed as hypervigilant; I always have to be on guard. All the war planning, watching people get blown up—it was no fun. [...] [H]ow many hundreds of people suffered because what I was a part of? It wears on you. I wasn't physically in battle, but we planned everything where people would die.

Do you feel your experience in the Navy has changed your art?

I think essentially it's the same. Portraits have always fascinated me, but the creativity part hadn't come around until about three or four years ago when I became permanently disabled. I have degenerative disc and joint disease. Recently, in the past three or four years, I couldn't do any of the big stuff I was doing before, so I started doing smaller stuff for people. And then it got to the point I couldn't do that either. I prayed one time, and I asked God, "You've given me this talent, but I can't do the stuff I like to do anymore. Wake me up with something new." I started waking up in the morning with these fantastic visions in my head. So, then I needed props, so I'd start making props with my sewing machine. I've got pirate outfits and cowboy outfits and all kinds of outfits I've created. My wife started photographing these things, and I would draw them. These visions have gotten me back on the art table so [that] I can use the talent that God has given me.

Do you ever experience art as any sort of therapy? Maybe pain therapy?

Not so much a pain therapy. It's just absolute enjoyment when I sit down at the table because I know what I produce is going to come from within. I can pull things from my head, and no one has that except me. Then, I can translate that onto paper. The creativity portion of it never ends. And the fact is it's not me—it's God putting this in my head. God has a purpose in these drawings to relate to somebody who can say, "Man, I feel like that sometimes."

Do you ever go out and share your work?

In the Disabled Veterans Show, yes. Unfortunately, part of PTSD is that you become an introvert. You don't really have any close friends. I sit at home and enjoy being by myself. I'd prefer not to have an outside relationship with people, so I don't have to put on a mask or be somebody I'm not. My hard work is my company, and my wife is my best friend.

Do you feel that your experience in the Navy changed you?

Yes. I think if I hadn't joined the Navy, I would have probably ended up living behind a dumpster somewhere because of the abusive situation at home. You were never good enough to do anything. If I hadn't joined the Navy, I would have been a nut case or homeless. The Navy gave me focus; I was able to use all my OCD on war planning. Your precision had to be exact. That gave me an outlet for that precision.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

1. J. André Smith, *Untitled (Soldiers and St. George)*, etching, 11 ¾ x 16, undated (ca. 1919).
2. J. André Smith, *Untitled (Soldiers on Rooftop)*, watercolor, 13 x 17 ¾, undated (ca. 1918-1919).
3. J. André Smith, *Untitled (Three Soldiers)*, watercolor, 13 x 17 ¾, undated (ca. 1919).
4. J. André Smith, *Resting Soldiers*, etching, 14 x 11 1/8, undated (ca. 1919).
5. J. André Smith, *Soldiers in a Building*, ink drawing, 16 ¼ x 20 ¼, undated (ca. 1919).
6. J. André Smith, *Soldiers Marching by a Church*, etching, 5 1/8 x 7, 1919.
7. J. André Smith, *Soldier in the Rain*, in *Letters from the A.E.F.: Part One*, pen drawing, 10 ¾ x 8 ¼, April 16, 1918.
8. J. André Smith, *Peace*, in *Letters from the A.E.F.: Part Four*, watercolor drawing, 10 ¾ x 8 ¼, November 11, 1918.
(1-8 are in the collection of Art & History Museums - Maitland)
9. Jim Hosner, *Blue Diamond*, acrylic on canvas, 74 x 43, 1999. **(Figure 3)**
10. Jim Hosner, *The Big Lie*, acrylic on canvas, 27 x 39, 1987. **(Figure 4)**
11. Jim Hosner, *Untitled II*, acrylic on canvas, 27 x 39, 1989.
12. Jim Hosner, *Key in the Lock*, acrylic on canvas, 32 x 46, 2008.
13. Jim Hosner, *Caught in a Bad Dream*, acrylic on canvas, 33 x 48, 2008.
14. Jim Hosner, *RSVP*, acrylic on canvas, 32 x 45, 2007.
15. Jim Hosner, *C.P.D (Constant Pain Device)*, cast aluminum sculpture, 12 x 10 x 5, 1989.
16. Jim Hosner, *Split in Twine*, cast aluminum and bronze sculpture, 12 x 39 x 5, 1990.
17. Jim Hosner, *Ego in Overdrive*, welded aluminum sculpture, 74 x 48 x 36, 2009.
18. William Gura, *Reflection*, pencil on bristol board, 23 x 24, 2016. **(Figure 5)**
19. William Gura, *Depression*, pencil on bristol board, 23 ½ x 25 ¼, pencil on bristol board, 2016.
20. William Gura, *Angel of Mercy with a 22 kill*, pencil on bristol board, 19 x 22 ¼, 2016.
21. William Gura, *Sailors Lament*, braided cotton cord over stretched canvas on plywood, 14 ½ x 14 ½, 2016.
22. William Gura, *Knock off Fancy Work*, braided cotton cord on plywood, 20 in. diameter, 2016.
23. Michael Moffett, *Marines 3/7 Deep in the Bush Looking for Charlie's HQ, Vietnam*, photograph, 13 x 19, 1969.
24. Michael Moffett, *Hill 10 Vietnam*, photograph, 13 x 19, 1969.
25. Michael Moffett, *Mountain Top LZ Digging in Near Laos*, photograph, 13 x 19, 1969.
26. Michael Moffett, *Marine Chopper Dropping Supplies and Picking up Body Bags, Vietnam*, photograph, 13 x 19, 1969.
27. Michael Moffett, *Rat with 2 Much Power*, bronze and toy bombs, 5 1/2 x 10 x 8, 2017. **(Figure 1)**
28. Michael Moffett, *Children's War Memorial*, bronze, 22 x 18 x 11, 1979.
29. Michael Moffett, *Pussy with a Ball*, ink and charcoal drawing, 18 x 24, 2014–15.
30. Michael Moffett, *!*, ink and charcoal drawing, 18 x 24, 2014–15.
31. Michael Moffett, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 2014–15, ink and charcoal drawing, 18 x 24, 2014–15.
32. Michael Moffett, *Untitled*, ink and charcoal drawing, 18 x 24, 2014–15.
33. Michael Moffett, *2020–Vision or Year?*, oil on canvas, 36 x 48, 2018.
34. Michael Moffett, *Landscape of Disinterest*, giclée print and oil paint on canvas, 48 x 83, 2017. **(Figure 2)**
35. Michael Moffett, *Portable War Memorial* and *The Viewer* (aka *The Portable Memorial*), resin, silicone, and various recycled objects, 2016.



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Front cover image: J. André Smith, *Peace*, in *Letters from the A.E.F.: Part Four*, watercolor drawing, 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$, November 11, 1918.
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