

Artwork featuring wounded soldiers offers insight and opportunity to reflect



Monse Wisdom, left, and Destinee Oitzinger hang "We Could be Heroes," a painting by Steve Mumford, at the National Veterans Art Museum in Chicago. The Joe Bonham Project, a collection of artwork about wounded soldiers, opens Monday. (Erin Hooley, Chicago Tribune)



By Barbara Brotman · Contact Reporter

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Joe Bonham Project opens at the National Veterans Art Museum on Monday

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The soldier stares straight out from the painting, James Dean-handsome but war-ravaged, lying in a hospital bed holding an X-ray of his spine held together by metal.

Michael Fay remembers painting him.

"He was possibly the most damaged person I met, physical and mentally," Fay said of the soldier depicted in the artwork leaning against a gallery wall. "He had been in and out of hospitals for nine years."

"His eyes were so bloodshot I asked him, 'You got pinkeye?' He said, 'No. I was up all night sobbing uncontrollably.' "

Every picture here has a story. The Joe Bonham Project is a collection of portraits of grievously wounded soldiers made by a group of combat and civilian artists. Fay is its founder and director.

The project has traveled the country since it began in 2011. But it is being shown in Chicago for the first time, at the National Veterans Art Museum, in a show that opens Monday. Fay was at the gallery the other day, helping hang the works for the exhibition.

It is art that bears witness and records sacrifice, said Fay, who named the project after the devastatingly wounded character in Dalton Trumbo's war novel, "Johnny Got His Gun."

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-memorial-day-art-wounded-soldiers-brotman-talk-0525-20150524-story.html>

"These guys, the moment before they got blown up, they were at the height of their manhood," he said. "Now they're completely vulnerable. ... They spend their day looking at their torn bodies."

But the artworks are only part of the project. The other part was the experience of creating them, the hours the artists spent with the soldiers in Veterans Affairs hospitals, talking, observing and sketching.

The soldiers who participated were eager to do so, Fay said; they wanted their stories told.

"I was very nervous," said Fay, a former Marine Corps combat artist. "I'm going into these hospital rooms with these guys who are pretty messed up. There are ostomy bags, festering wounds, pain, sweat. It's bad enough when it's your own family members, and here I am going into these people's lives."

But the soldiers held nothing back. As the artists sketched, the soldiers talked — of their combat experiences, their wounds, their fears.

"There's an intimacy," Fay said.

"When you draw someone, you draw them out."

Around him, as he helped hang the exhibition, were the results.

There is a portrait of a Marine whose face is so scarred it almost looks hand-sewn.

And one of another Marine, whose injury left him perpetually salivating, depicted with a towel in his mouth. Next to him, the artist has written the soldier's daily therapy schedule and some of his thoughts: "Can I eat steak again? 'Cause I really like steak."



Destinee Oitzinger and Josh Mooi carry a large painting by artist Steve Mumford to hang in the Joe Bonham Project, a collection of drawings and paintings of severely injured soldiers in VA hospitals, at the National Veterans Art Museum in Chicago. (Erin Hooley, Chicago Tribune)

An enormous, arresting painting shows a medical team trying to save a deathly white soldier. It is an almost classical tableau anchored by a woman in blue scrubs kneeling on the soldier's chest as she pounds on it.

The artist, who witnessed the actual scene, told Fay that the team kept going until the chaplain told personnel to stop, that the soldier was dead.

Is it all too unbearably depressing?

"You know, at first I thought so," said gallery coordinator Destinee Oitzinger, who was helping hang the exhibit. "I wasn't quite sure where I was landing on this."

But now she finds herself moved at the way the artists got to know the soldiers and depicted them as full, com-