

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS

WE WERE SOLDIERS
A VISUAL BIOGRAPHY

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A thesis
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ABSTRACT

Through the painting thesis “We Were Soldiers; A Visual Biography,” themes of war, individual experience and the transition between combat and home life are explored through synthesis of the photographs of Navy Chief Warrant Officer Edwin Lee McInnis Jr.

METHODS: Over 2,000 photos taken by McInnis from 1950-1970 were digitally scanned and collaged as templates for large scale oil paintings. Photographs for collage were chosen based on the potential for visual dialog through comparison of scale, color, and content. Portraiture was used as a visual theme. **RESULTS/DISCUSSION:** The works created were presented in a show in Patterson Gallery in University Park, PA from March 1st to March 7th, 2009. Several charcoal and ink sketches and seven large scale oil paintings ranging in size from 54”x35” to 64”x40” were created.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Helen O’Leary for her endless support in my undertaking of this painting thesis project. Helen unlocked painting for me; I met her my Junior year of college, and after having taken many studios that seemed to define acceptable art and the way students are meant to progress, her class taught me that there is no mold. She promoted creation without belaboring sophistication or a final answer, and as a result helped me make my most impressive and pertinent work to date. Art demands fearlessness, and she gave me that. I can’t thank her enough for genuinely believing and knowing that her students have something important to say.

I would also like to thank both Jerrold Maddox and James Thurman for their guidance as my honors advisers. Their supervision and aid with the technical aspects of completing this project is incredibly appreciated.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

With the current state of communication and technology in this world, everyone seems to have an opinion, and many have the opportunity to express it. Given these two conditions, hundreds of perspectives rain down on us every day, whether we ask for them or not. I am more curious about visual, unspoken perspectives; I wish to explore the opinions of those who do not speak, and see how their viewpoint might change things. My paternal grandfather holds such a viewpoint.

As an eighty-five year old veteran of World War II, Edwin Lee McInnis II, otherwise known as Mac, served in the military for over forty years. He grew up in a large family of poor farmers during the Great Depression. He lived in South Carolina at a time when both racism and intense family loyalty were ingrained into his character. His life changed with war, and at the age of twenty-two, patriotic pressure required him to enlist in the Navy to fight abroad. He extended his service to a life-long career in the military during which he saw four continents and more than thirty countries all over the world.

Mac is the product of 1920s America, where a man who has been taught to hate different cultures can serve in a job in which they surround him. With such a confrontation of values, one's identity and principles become a bit fuzzy. His sense of self was not the only perception changed; people abroad treated him differently than those at home. Formerly a part of the racial majority, he was constantly placed in the minority while serving overseas. Also, as an American, he was viewed as prosperous, which was a stark contrast to his blue-collar reality. He served as the perfect voyeur; one disconnected from his surroundings and constantly mistaken for something he was not. I think he found the loss of identity strangely freeing.

Mac took over 2,000 photographs during his tours of duty overseas and times back

home. The collection is astounding. The pictures range from a handful of crisp touristy Parthenon shots to yellowed mid-air photographs of bomber planes to twenty years of stiff, washed out portraits of my father and grandmother. Some are quaint, some are alarming, and some are just bizarre. Throughout all of these different photos, however, my Grandpa remains behind the lens. All of these subjects were experienced and cropped by him, and his point of view marks every one. Patterns of shape and composition link photographs of seemingly different subjects. Although my Grandfather does not speak much about his time abroad, his photographs illustrate a part of his personal experience.

As an artist, I felt a need to interpret and document his experience through a visual source. Of course, my exposure to his slides only reveals his proudest moments; those he felt comfortable clicking through and projecting on a blank living room wall with his extended family watching. My interest lies in what conclusions can be made about the darker, missing pieces of his experience through the juxtaposition of what is already present. Through my narration of a former soldier during a current state of war, past conflict becomes comparable to current ones and his experience is given the public platform it deserves.



Image 1: Planes. Personal Photograph by Mac McInnis. 1960s.



Image 2: National Park. Personal Photograph by Mac McInnis. 1960s.



Image 3: Sailors. Personal Photograph by Mac McInnis. 1960s.



Image 4: Family. Personal Photograph by Mac McInnis. 1960s



Image 5: Pink City. Personal Photograph by Mac McInnis. 1960s.



Image 6: Red Family. Personal Photograph by Mac McInnis. 1960s.

Chapter 2: Methods

To illustrate the themes that I witnessed within Mac's work, I created digital and paper collages of his photograph and painted my interpretation of these collections. I constructed large scale canvases and painted oil portraits and landscapes that represent the scenes that my Grandpa witnessed, along with my own interpretation of his experience and the experience of the people he photographed. The process of assimilating and collaging photographs was based on the visual and abstract content of the photographs and the potential aesthetic and metaphorical relationships I could convey through their combination.

Chapter 3: Results

Within this section, I will describe the visual themes that surfaced during the project and describe the underlying concepts for all seven of the larger paintings.

Themes

The paintings created from Mac's slide collection are a technicolor interpretation of how life used to be for a veteran of the United States Navy. The paintings use visual themes of portraiture and variation of scale to explore ideas of authority, individuality, family power struggles, objectification, and the paradoxical nature of the military.

Within the first sketch I created in the series, seen below, I merged a photograph of two children selling berries with a photograph of sailors packed into a boat. The image of the overflowing fruit and the crowded sailors struck me as very similar, both visually and figuratively, as the sailors could be as much of a commodity as the cups of fruit.



Image 7: "Peas in a Pod, I mean, Birds on a Wire, I mean, Raspberries" Ink on paper, 95"x42"



Image 8: Detail 1, "Peas in a Pod, I mean, Birds on a Wire, I mean, Raspberries"

“Father/Son Dichotomy” (Oil on canvas, 68"x44", June 2008)

This painted collage includes two pictures from my Grandfather’s photo collection: one of my father and Grandfather in a parking lot of the university where my father was studying, and one of a city street in Jordan. From left to right, I created a contrast between domestic and foreign, light colors and dark colors, and father and son. My Grandfather, despite his extensive world travels through the navy, was a very staunch and close-minded man who believed in a very specific future for his son. At Florida State University, my father wanted to study international politics, but my Grandfather required that he study something like science which would guarantee a better living. I found it interesting that someone who had seen the world would not let his son be a part of it. By placing my Grandfather on the left side with American cars, and my father on the right next to a foreign country he wasn't permitted to study, I narrated a defining aspect of their relationship.



Image 9: “Father Son Dichotomy,” Oil on Canvas, 68”x44”



Image 10: Detail 1, "Father Son Dichotomy"

"Who Do You Report To?" (Oil on canvas, 64"x40", August 2008)

When collaging my Grandfather's photographs, I did not exclusively try to show the experience of my Grandfather. I was also interested in the effect of the military on his family. I illustrated this interest by merging a photo of my Grandfather's nephew and wife with a photograph of military helicopters. Both a mother and the government are types of authority figures, and by placing them both behind the little boy, I compared their evolving presence in a child's life. At what point does a boy realize that a federal figure may have more say than the woman who raised him? I also painted the experience of my Grandfather, who, as he was taking this photograph, was transitioning between military life and family life and coping with their differences.



Image 11: "Who Do You Report To?" Oil on Canvas, 64"x40"



Image 12: Detail 1, "Who Do You Report To?"

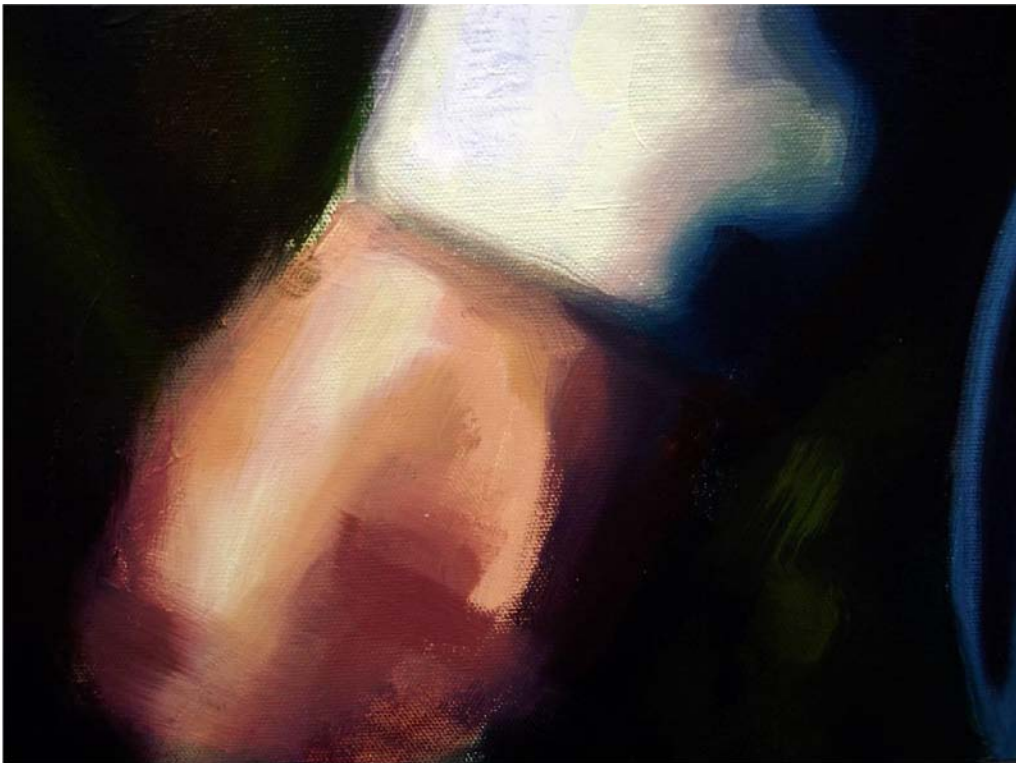


Image 13: Detail 2, "Who Do You Report To?"

"This Is What A Soldier Looks Like" (Oil on canvas, 60"x36", July 2008)

The military is a very remarkable combination of the organization and the individual. Comprised of hundreds of thousands of people, the branches of the military hold certain singular values and truths. Throughout my Grandfather's photographs from his time in the navy, he had many stiff pictures of officials in suits, and just of few more personal, candid photos. I illustrated this comparison between the individual soldiers and the higher military power by painting a more candid man in casual clothes who was posed in the third world squat position with simple forms of stilted officials in the background. The military is composed of real people, which is what I demonstrated in this painting.



Image 14: "This Is What A Soldier Looks Like," Oil on canvas, 60"x 36"



Image 15: Detail 1, "This Is What A Soldier Looks Like"



Image 16: Detail 2, "This Is What A Soldier Looks Like"

"Venom/Antivenom" (Oil on canvas, 60"x48", July 2008)

In "Venom/Antivenom," I compare a scene of an Indian man teaching a soldier how to draw the venom from a snake with another image of people grouped inside of a volcano. In the same way that the source of the antidote for a snake bite is the same animal that caused the problem in the first place, the role of armed services can be as the instigator or the key to healing. I emphasized the magnitude of the soldier's potentially healing or harmful role by placing the simplistic, small people in his care.



Image 17: "Venom/Antivenom," 60"x48"



Image 18: Detail 1, "Venom/Antivenom"



Image 19: Detail 2, "Venom/Antivenom"

"Hong Kong Woman" (Oil on canvas, 54"x44", June 2008)

While looking through my Grandfather's photographs I noticed that some seemed more touristic than others, especially when native peoples were involved. One woman in particular, from Hong Kong, did not seem to enjoy having her picture taken. I imagined her experience as a living tourist attraction, and having her picture taken by foreign soldiers. I emphasized these feelings of objectification by painting her face surrounded by images of prodding hands and of women that I found in other photographs. I included pictures of American women to compare females across cultures and age groups.



Image 20: "Hong Kong Woman," Oil on canvas, 54"x44"



Image 21: Detail 1, "Hong Kong Woman"

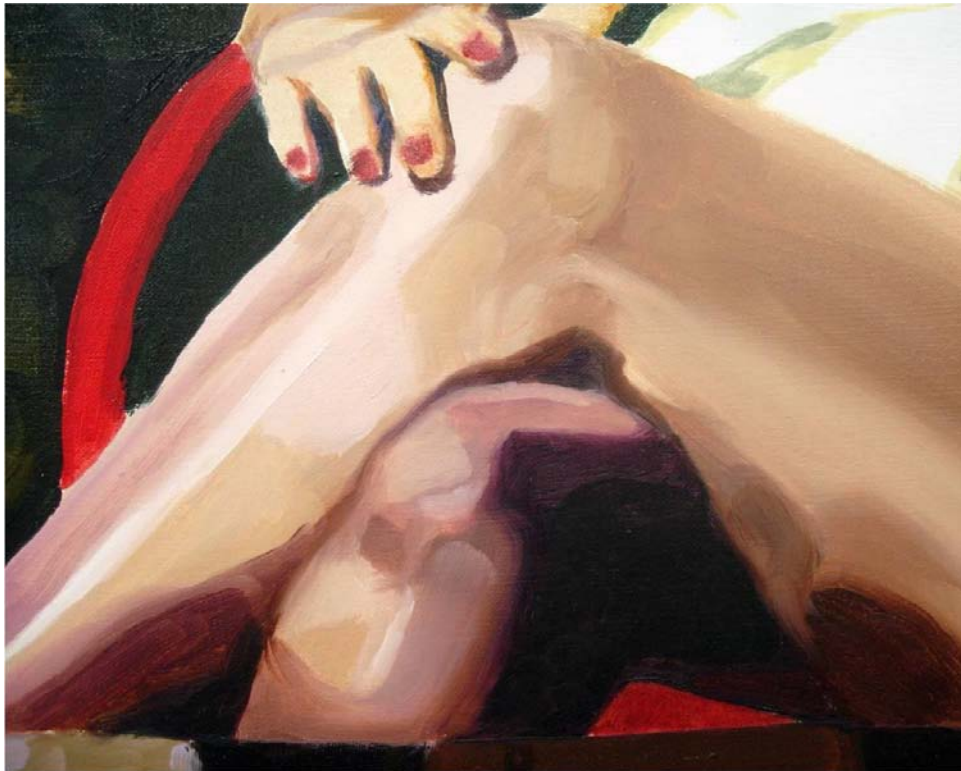


Image 22: Detail 2, "Hong Kong Woman"

"Different place/different fowl" (Oil on canvas, 54"x35", August 2008)

In this painting, I continue the theme of collage with my Grandfather's personal photos. As a poor rural farmer, the Navy gave him the opportunity to see people and places very foreign to him. In "Different place/different fowl," I combined an overexposed image of city pigeons with the landscape from which they came. As the photographer, my Grandfather had these exact visual points of views. By combining a new place with a new type of bird, I referenced both my Grandfather's background and the unfamiliar elements of his time in the service. I think of this painting as an opportunity to look through his lenses and see these images with the same new excitement.



Image 23: "Different Place, Different Fowl," Oil on canvas, 54" x 35"



Image 24: Detail 1, "Different Place, Different Fowl"



Image 25: Detail 2, "Different Place, Different Fowl"

“Runway” (Oil on Canvas, 46”x47”, February 2009)

In this painting, a scene of four cows and a farm is overcome by an airplane advancing on the runway of an aircraft carrier. This painting is a quite concrete visual metaphor in the way that my Grandpa’s military life forever changed his occupation and his life as a farmer. The momentum and bright colors of the runway scene eclipse the more muted scheme of the cows and pasture below it.



Image 26: “Runway,” Oil on Canvas, 46” x 47”



Image 27: Detail, "Runway"

Assorted Oil Sketches

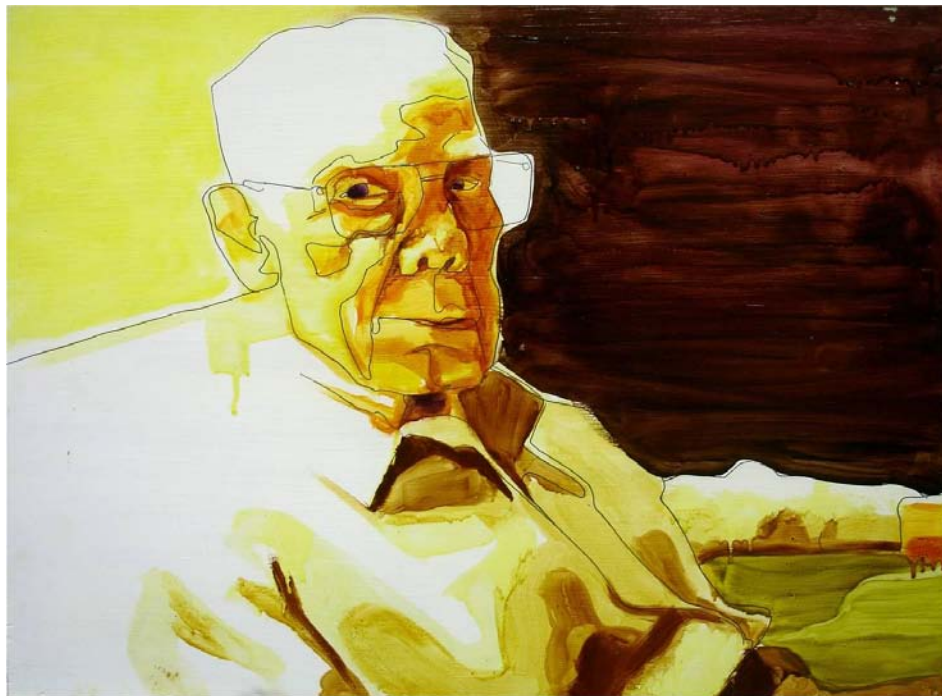


Image 28: "Grampa," Oil on Board, 24"x18"



Image 29: "Gramma," Oil on Board, 24"x18"



Image 30: "Missing," Oil on Board, 24"x 18"



Image 31: "Walking," Oil on board, 20"x30"

We Were Soldiers, Patterson Gallery, University Park, PA, 3/1/2009-3/8/2009



Image 32: Patterson Show 1



Image 33: Patterson Show 2



Image 34: Patterson Show 3



Image 35: Patterson Show 4



Image 36: Patterson Show 5



Image 37: Patterson Show 6



Image 38: Patterson Show 7



Image 39: Patterson Show 8



Image 40: Patterson Show 9



Image 41: Patterson Show 10

Chapter 4: Conclusion

By investigating my family history and applying known family stories and struggles to the photographs my Grandfather took, I was able to perpetuate the personal story of Mac McInnis and put a story to photographs that would otherwise seem anonymous to a viewing audience. Although I aimed to represent the perspective of my Grandfather, my own viewpoints may have a larger presence than was initially planned. However, my Grandpa's visual record still remains recognizable and salient. Overall, I successfully created a visual biography of the experiences of a man and his photographic subjects and made that unspoken, visual viewpoint available in a public way.

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The Saatchi Gallery. (2009). London Contemporary Art Gallery. Retrieved from

http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/saatchi_online_index.htm

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Thesis Title: We Were Soldiers; A Visual Biography
Thesis Supervisor: Helen O’Leary

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PRN Nurse Extern at Hershey Medical Center
Supervisor: Rita Barry
November 2009-May 2010

Volunteer at Baton Rouge Medical Center
Supervisor: Kathleen Miller
May 2009-July 2009

Solo Gallery Exhibits for We Were Soldiers
“We Were Soldiers” Patterson Gallery, University Park, PA, March 2009
“Art on the Move” Warnock Commons, University Park PA, January- March 2009
“Art on the Move” Old Main, University Park, PA, October 2008 – January 2009
“Art on the Move” Lewis Katz Building, University Park, PA, May-October 2009

Awards/Honors:

Deans List
Summer Discovery Research Grant
Member of Sigma Theta Tau, an International Nursing Honor Society
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