SUDDENLY, I DIDN'T WANT TO DIE

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts
of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

by

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December, 2015
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I Would Trade One Thousand Tomorrows to Have Back a Single Yesterday

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Had I not joined the Marine Corps and experienced the world and war with the perspective as a Marine, this would not have happened. I dedicate my art and my life on the idea that I live as I do because my friends and comrades paid the ultimate sacrifice. I remember their deaths so that I may live my life.

Cpl. CL/ Capt. CP/ LCpl. RP/ PFC SF/ Sgt. JK/ Sgt. DK/ SSgt CG MCRO

This art is not for them but for the living that continue to relive the horror.

I would like to thank Paul O’Keeffe for his dedication and support throughout my degree. His breadth of knowledge and firm grasp of contemporary art helped drive my practice through the difficult times. He consistently encouraged me to work through issues and reassess my work. Had it not been his style or approach I might not be where I am now.

I would like to thank those on my committee, Dr. Gustav Medicus who has supported me with my educational endeavors in and out of the classroom. Also, Navjotika Kumar whose firm understanding of contemporary art helped motivate me in ways I cannot express. I would like to thank Isabel Farnsworth for her passion and compassion for students and arts. Her encouragement helped move my work in new directions.

Lastly I would like to thank the people that made this truly possible, the installation crew how collectively put in over 300 hours of labor. In alphabetical order:

Danielle Brady
Eli Gfell
Kerie Johannes
Isabella Luzader
Carey Sammut

Agustin Sanchez
Kathryn Shinko
Trey Snowden
Shelby Solomon
Lindsey Taylor
PREFACE

“So there you are 25 years old, college graduate looking at a relatively successful future. You have more than just a few job opportunities that are incessantly calling you because you are in high demand. Any normal levelheaded person in the given circumstance would have taken the highest paying job and began their life. Maybe have that sweet colonial style brick house with a half acre lot and a fenced in backyard for your boxer to run around at full sprint after it takes a crap making massive loops sounding like a thoroughbred at thistle down. And maybe you have some sweet hardwood floors and a lovely dining room. And if you’re lucky you married your sweetheart and call her your own. Pretty sweet and plausible. I chose the following route. Two days following graduation from college (job offers still on the table) I stepped into a US. Marine Corps recruiting office. Logically I would be an officer because of my degree. But again logic has been flushed down the proverbial toilet and yet again I made a decision to go with the suck.”

“I enlisted in the USMC on May 16th of 2005 and was promptly shipped to Marine Corps Recruiting Depot Parris Island. For the following months I spent doing moronic bullshit to the tune of “sir, yes sir”. Fast forward through all of the various schools, my unit check in and stop 1 day before my first deployment. 50+ hours of sitting and waiting on the tarmac for the flight to be cleared. Loading the plane and unloading and loading and unloading and loading. Then flying for 18 hours to land and off load the plane. Then you have the moronic illogical Marine Corps methodology to organization. All the junior guys, Privates through Lance Corporal were busy working their asses off bent over in the belly of the plane, unloading all of the bags for some 300 Marines, each weighing nothing less than 50lbs, and throwing them to a conveyor belt. You then load them on to the conveyor belt which then stacks them in a pile. The pile gets transitioned into a 7 ton, a very large truck. Then we off load all the bags from the 3 separate trips and place them in a pile in front of our temporary homes; tent city. All the while it is sunny and a 140 lovely degrees, a dry heat though. For 3 days we wait and play gear guard and smoke retarded amounts of cigarettes waiting and waiting. Hurry up and wait. It seemed like every 15 minutes some fucking officer would say that our plane has landed and we are ready to leave, but after the first dozen “boy-who-cried-wolf” scenarios we pretty much just sat and did nothing. It was too taxing to keep getting up and getting our shit ready to leave. Any ways, so this whole 3-
day period is a wait period. Waiting to go to Iraq. Waiting in some cases to die, get hit by an IED, spend days without sleep, patrolling for long hours with little sleep, weeks without showers or real food, or wait to sit in an air conditioned room playing video games. It all depended on how smart you were when you enlisted. By this point you could infer what direction I went.”

“So after all the nonsense which is days and weeks worth you end up in the suck. I enjoyed all of this. The long hours, the lack of sleep, the cups of coffee to keep you awake. The sound of mortars and explosions in the distance created a mellow atmosphere. The cartons and cartons of Miami cigarettes. The stale dried out cans of Copenhagen. Chai from the locals accompanied with hate from the locals. The feel of pure sweat on you for hours on end chafing and sticking and smelling. Hating life for all its worth. Loving to hate. Loving to feel pain. Loving to see misery. Your euphoria is derived from the hate of everything. You become programmed to love to hate. If you feel anything its anger, if you taste anything it’s the rage towards everything, if you see anything it is the red of blood lust towards the enemy, towards your hometown, towards civilians. You breathe just to see someone is in more pain and more misery than you and this enlivens your spirit. Knowing that others are experiencing your pain makes you hyper aware of all. You gain your energy from the degradation of everything.”

Suddenly, I Didn’t Want to Die

The United States was in a nationalistic fever following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centers on September 11, 2001. That moment left a scar on the American people that changed the way we lived our daily lives. I was not 21 years old and was at a university that was protesting the war and the presidency. I saw this attack as a call to arms for my nation, a turning point that determined the future safety of my countrymen and my country. I struggled internally as the war raged on as the body counts continued to grow and I sat idle. I decided that upon conclusion of my degree, I would enlist over commissioning in the US Marine Corps. I joined because I had a strong ideological view and felt that most young men were unwilling to defend the US in what at the time I saw as a justified war. I also knew, at least I thought, that enlisting
versus commissioning as an officer, increased the likelihood that I would be closer to the front [as if there was one] and combative missions.

My thesis title is a reference to a World War I Marine memoir by Elton Mackin. Mackin was an infantry Marine in a unit that experienced the severe hyper-violent and graphic nature of warfare in the Battle of Belleau Wood. I can only imagine what his struggle was during his conflict, but I saw a sense of strange beauty in the cyclical nature of time and felt connected to him as I read of his experience. I thought of how his thoughts, fears and courage ultimately boiled down to a notion of self-preservation.

The focus of my thesis exhibition centers on my military experiences during the war in Iraq and it is this general theme that provides conceptual coherence. I can only assume that my perspective is one shared with other veterans who have experienced warfare. However these sculptures are specific to me and I draw from my personal tribulations. Each piece is an exercise of material discovery, and I deliberately chose very different media for each work, including non-traditional materials such as dung and barbed wire. Each work is distinct, and each is intended as a reverent reflection on the loss of life resulting from warfare.

These works recall my environment and the role I played in Iraq. My experience was an intimate one, integrating and cohabitating with Iraqis from the villages I patrolled. I learned a specific type of vocabulary that speaks to that environment. The choice of material is based upon the visual vocabularies that I developed over the 15 months spent there. It is out of this communication and dialogue that I learned much of who I was as a Marine, as an artist and a person. I was a witness to violent acts against people and yet on the same days saw some of the most beautiful gestures from children and adults. It was a consistent pull and push of intense emotions that left me feeling both like an empty vessel and filled to the brim with emotion. Yet at the same time I needed to maintain a façade of strength not only for my junior Marines but for myself too; I couldn’t allow myself to succumb to weakness otherwise I would have collapsed in that environment. So it is out of these dichotomies, the ebb and flow of sentiments and feelings that I developed my practice.

I consider some but not all of my work to fall in the genre of “post-minimalism”. There is a general underlying political sensibility, although I wish to remain as neutral as possible, seeing my work as non-partisan in the political sense. After returning from war I felt like what I had been part of and fought in, was in vain. I saw the futility of war and the violent ways we kill
others, based on the principles and ideas of our political leaders. This became evident to me then and remains the case for me now. The American political party system is seemingly irrelevant. Both parties make guarantees of peace whilst sending the country into more armed conflict. I frequently turn to artists such as Eva Hesse, Joseph Beuys and Bruce Nauman for a sense of inspiration and motivation in how to develop my work. Nauman has been quoted as saying:

“Sunsets, flowers, landscapes: these kinds of things don't move me to do anything. I just want to leave them alone. My work comes out of being frustrated about the human condition. And about how people refuse to understand other people. And about how people can be cruel to each other. It's not that I think I can change that, but it's just such a frustrating part of human history.”

I struggled with similar issues while in the Middle East. I have spent much time reflecting, digesting, rethinking and analyzing what it was I was part of. I saw that war is a raw, violent act that destroys generations of individuals, striking personal histories from time, and eviscerating the collective memory*. It leaves no participating person, whether military or civilian, unscathed, along with a violent trail of destruction with consequent devastating local and international ramifications. The attempt of my research is to transcribe some of my personal stories through capturing the details and evocative anamnesis by material selection.

The gallery was set up with the intent to create a dynamic movement from the external common areas to the entrance on to the main space of the gallery. The pieces were installed in an attempt to give an overview of the war, as I saw it, from piece to piece. I wanted the viewer to have a sense of psychological depth moving from one piece to the next until the “crescendo” of the show, Usury, 2015. From the front of the gallery the viewer encounters the piece أنا أود أن أغير كل ايام الامس من فشط واحد ل يوم الافخاخ، يا تهم كي اغرير (I Would Trade One Thousand Tomorrows to Have Back a Single Yesterday), Summation. This piece is placed diagonally in the foyer of the gallery visually leading the viewer into the space. The smell of cow dung saturates the air in the entrance. As the viewer moves through the gallery they can observe Sublunary, 2015, a series of figurative sculptures constructed of paper. The figures are displayed in a fashion so that there are multi-views of the figures in various gestures. Continuing through the exhibit is a free standing structure wrapped in barbed wire with stacks of small piles of cow dung. The structure is made of steel shelving that is rusted throughout. The smell of organic material is fragrant. The last piece of Suddenly, I Didn’t Want to Die occupies on a 48’ wall. It is constructed of
6,833 personnel identification tags and 22,680 nails. It dominates the room with virtually every inch of the wall covered with the installation sculpture, *Usury*, 2015.

Each sculpture in *Suddenly I Didn’t Want to Die* is intended to be a thought provoking work derived from my experience. Catharsis drives my hand heavily in how I approach a given piece. It is more than simply an arrangement of objects collected together forming a thought; it is the transition of the objects into objects of veneration that are exalted in their own right. I maintained reverence during the construction and installation of the sculptures. With each piece I created I consciously thought of the loss of life, from the dung patties, the forming of the circular dung formations, and hanging the nails and the personal identification tags. I carefully installed the figures realizing that they were a sculptural ensemble representing the death of individuals.

Most important is the notion of transience. Temporal transience is the strongest theme within the entirety of my overall practice as well as this thesis exhibition. The idea of temporal transience only developed after years of evaluating my perspective as a combat veteran and my difficulty transitioning out of that mindset. I question and toil with the idea of transience and individual struggle I have selected ephemeral materials, processes, and installations to illustrate this idea of the temporary nature of mankind. While answers might not be fully developed out of this exhibition, I believe that I will eventually come to an answer on why and how I produce the way I do.

Anonymity is an important element within all the works. The notion of the “number” in the military is overly clichéd and doesn’t to me truly illustrate the sentiment. A number implies we are assigned something that represents who we are but I felt more anonymous than that. As Americans, from birth, we receive a number, a social security number that becomes who we are to the government; but down in the depths we recognize that we are much less than that number, we are more anonymous than that. I related to the Iraqi people in this manner. Many of the Iraqis I spoke to, (through interpreters) felt that they had been abandoned by both the Iraqi government and the American people. They were left helpless to a degree. I felt empathetic to the people; how could I not? I was human like them, and I also have felt abandoned one way or another. In my mind’s eye it was far more tragic for the Iraqis who died, were literally left anonymous. Often their bodies were found with no way to identify who they were.
The act or process of adding; the concluding argument after the presentation of a legal case

(I Would Trade One Thousand Tomorrows to Have Back a Single Yesterday), Summation, 2014 is the initial piece that references the idea of anonymity. There is a row of 9 circular shapes filled with cow dung topped with 8 panes of glass. Numerology is important to my practice, and nearly every major work of mine incorporates it. The 9 shapes reference the years that the US was involved in the war in Iraq. The US was there for 8 years 8 months, all the while there was a media presence feeding into the voyeuristic obsession of American culture. The glass panels are cut into perfect squares and carefully placed on top of the garbage bags. The panes of glass act as a separation from the object underneath, distancing the viewer from the dung. It creates a barrier shielding the viewer from the smell, while also actively reflecting the viewer’s image. This reflection is an important element playing on the idea of the spectator’s interest in the war while keeping a distance. For me, the glass with a square with a circle inset, also references the figurative form of the Vitruvian man.

The glass is set atop garbage bags that are filled with cow dung. Cow dung and animal dung has been used for millennia as a fuel source in certain cultures. Much of the Iraqi population lives in the outskirts of cities, sometimes out of reach of electricity and running water. Of the 15 villages I patrolled, none had running water, and only 2 had electricity. Most of the population in the rural countryside of Iraq relied on sheep farming and the small fields they tended. Women were up before sunrise preparing the morning meals of hobus bread, vegetables and chai. They cooked on earthen stoves fueled by what was readily available usually paper, trash and predominantly cow dung. These smells saturated the villages as we walked the streets wearing night vision goggles. They were comfortable with our presence and ignored our movements.

My first encounter with locals using cow dung was when I was on a vehicle patrol in a small village north east of Fallujah. Most of the military men supporting the mission rarely spent time separating themselves from the role of marine or soldier. They were usually plugged in to some music to pass time. I made an effort to be closer to the environment and people. I observed as much as I could, especially as this was part of my job as a scout. I noticed beautifully crafted
structures that seemed out of place. I learned later that the structures, which spiraled around were made of cow dung. The structures were fuel storage piles, akin to wood piles seen in this country. They generally stood about 6 foot wide and were about 5 foot tall. The structures varied in size, but rarely in form. One has to understand or least generally know what the environment consisted of to conclude that these were in fact beautiful. The entirety of where I patrolled and lived quite literally smelled in various ways of death, diesel, dung and burning garbage. The air was always saturated with these smells. There was filth everywhere. Children were dirty, animals were dirty and the environment was strewn with pop cans and cigarette butts. The landscape was rarely free from human waste or trash. So when walking through a village, made of mud and sticks, with garbage and foul odors everywhere, encountering these ornate structures was a beautiful experience.

These encounters impacted and influenced me after I separated from the Marines. It spurred my use of dung. Cow dung becomes a symbol for me that relates back to Iraqi women working in the hot sun while fabricating small cow dung patties. It is perhaps due to my outsider’s perspective that I assign a deeper meaning onto this material. In the casual disposable society within which the western world operates, conservation is seemingly an afterthought. In rural Iraq people have limited access to water, food, and energy (electricity) and find themselves adapting and overcoming through primitive ingenuity. Cow dung symbolizes life and fertility. It references the people, their struggle for warmth in the winter, the heat to cook, and the fertilizer to grow their crops. It represents the tenacity of the Iraqi people to adapt to the environment in which they live. Because of this, my thesis exhibition uses cow dung as a medium in 2 of the works.

Cow dung was placed into garbage bags similar in thickness and style that we used for impromptu body bags. It is this juxtaposition of cow dung as life, against the garbage bag, symbolic of death that these two exist as counterparts to one another. My experience of life and death had never been so mind altering as it was in this warzone. The last bag is left open, uncovered, as a symbol of rebirth for the Iraqi people. The 8 other bags are compressed and forced down by the glass, yet the last is free from the pressure of the glass. The lack of glass symbolizes freedom from the US media and the pressures of the American government.
Sublunary

-Belonging to this world as contrasted with a better or more spiritual one.

Seven figures, each carefully constructed from segments of newspaper, stand gaunt and disturbingly silent in the space. The pose of each figure evokes a sense of fear or dread. An unknown fate is suggested. This is a collection of figures contained within a space that is stylistically the same; however each form is individually nuanced so as to allow it to exist independently from the group. I feel grouping them together helps best illustrate the experience I am trying to evoke and reference.

During the war in Iraq, Coalition forces discovered many mass graves. There were unmarked pits with bound children and women who had been executed through shots in the back of their heads. These tragic discoveries were not isolated incidents and were continual happenings throughout the occupation of Iraq. Many of these graves were never reported upon and were left untold. The figures of my grouping are arranged so that as you walk into the space, you see all of them from different perspectives, some kneeling, and some standing. There is an opening in the middle of one of the groupings, encouraging the viewer to step forward. Each one of the figures is individualized, fabricated from blank newsprint. Newsprint void of writing symbolizes the lack of substantial media coverage. The paper is decrepit, falling apart, ephemeral looking and fragile. I wanted to push the idea of the horrific events that happened through materials that are disposable and impermanent while reinforcing the anonymity of the figures.

Usurpation

- To seize and hold (as office, place, or powers) in possession by force or without right: to seize or exercise authority or possession wrongfully

A monolithic structure stands wrapped in pristine metallic barbed wire. It dominates the space it occupies with the hyper aggressive wire tightly bound against a rusting shelving unit. Inside the framed structure resides hand shaped cow dung patties, carefully placed and stacked on one another. The structure operates such that one wants to get in close to observe what is
inside, yet at the same time it makes one reticent because of the obvious potential harm from the barbed wire.

For me, the structure symbolizes the western industrialized world. It is made of fabricated steel parts made with advanced machinery and technology. Although it represents a monolithic notion of the western world’s strength and power, it is rusted and aged referencing how historically the western world has dominated and subjugated the Middle East. The US and its allies had been involved in Iraq for many years, most recently in the early 1980’s and again in the Persian Gulf War of 1991. This shelving is a representation of remnants from our culture left behind. Contained within the steel structure and on the shelves are hand-made patties of cow dung. The dung, representative of the life and life force of Iraq, is stacked on the shelves in an orderly fashion. It is contained on the rusting shelves degrading and disintegrating over time. The juxtaposition of the rusting steel with the cow dung symbolizes the relationship of new versus old world traditions. The arrival of US and Coalition forces essentially stopped forward progress in Iraq. The coiled barbed wire around the cow dung symbolizes the violence of the US led invasion.

Usury
- The lending of money with an interest charge for its use; especially: the lending of money at exorbitant interest rates

The final piece in Suddenly, I Didn’t Want to Die, is titled Usury. The sculpture shines and shimmers with the movement of air within the room. As you move from left to right there is stagnation as the grid of reflective, flickering metal personnel identification tags transition into rigid brad nails placed into the wall. As you move in closer undulations among the tags can be observed as the personnel identification tags subtly shift in and out from the wall due to these air currents. Immediately identifiable as blank personnel identification tags, there are 6,833 of them; one for each military member killed in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. They are all positioned in the same direction with the rim of the tag facing the wall. This is opposite of how a military member would wear them, symbolizing how no governmental authority is standing behind the tags any longer. They are all intentionally left blank, reinforcing the anonymous nature of war.
The whole of the wall is representative of my experience with warfare. As it is the war I participated in it only includes the personnel identification tags from this war. The nails continue on as if there are more potentially to be added. (The number of the nails add up to well over 22,000, an arbitrary number as this was what was required to fit into the space. Had the wall been smaller or larger the nail count would have correlated. The only important and unchangeable element is the number of personnel identification tags.) This also plays on the idea that the Government has accepted losses for war and has factored them into their strategic planning. Regardless of whom is president, conflicts and wars will no doubt be fought, and the numbers will continue to be added to the death toll of US dead. I believe military members are just another part of the machine, and virtually anonymous except for a social security number.

CONCLUSION

Since completing my thesis exhibition, I frequently sit and think of the past and about my involvement in the Iraq war. I am in conflict about my position as a veteran. I am not ashamed of what I did, nor do I have guilt about decisions I, or anyone in my presence, made. What I am conflicted with is twofold; the corporatization of the war and the feeling that the Marines, soldiers, sailors and airmen became strategic placements for profit, along with the painfully high statistics of Iraqi civilian casualties.

I became aware of who was profiting from this involvement and the politicians who benefited from American troops in Iraq. It was obvious, with bases run by Halliburton and with all the radios manufactured by Raytheon. Democrats and Republicans alike played the game of war and made millions of dollars in profit\(^3\). In total over 150 members of congress benefited, by investing in companies through stock ownership. Heads of companies like Raytheon, Halliburton, General Dynamics, Boeing and Northrop Grumman, profited in the billions.

Civilian death is nearly unavoidable in war. One can look at the statistics from any war and see a general disproportion of fewer military to civilian deaths. From what I understand, that’s a calculation that sometimes needs to be made. However, my experiences lead me to believe that the loss of life in Iraq could have been mitigated by more aggressive communication and outreach measures.
Thoughts such as these greatly affected me and influenced my decision to create art. I selected events that had the largest impact on my understanding of the horrors of war. Through the creation of artworks I sought to deepen my understanding of what I had participated in. These events continue to loop repeatedly in my mind. My sculptural ideas evolved and changed radically over time as a result. As I thought about my deployments, forgotten memories surfaced, suggesting changes to my sculptures and mindset. I have focused my thoughts and put all of the energies from that into my work. I erroneously thought I had started this thesis with a neutral mindset, but through my research, I came to feel otherwise. I believe I have come to a much deeper understanding.

To the best of my abilities, I have taken care to clearly communicate my passionate investment in my work to the viewer. After I installed the sculptures in the gallery, I realized the strengths and weakness of my presentation. I considered each placement carefully. Still, other possibilities for future installations became evident during this process. For example, Sublunary took multiple arrangements of the figures to achieve what I felt was the best possible solution. Yet, ultimately, I would like to rework this piece to include hundreds of figures, filling an entire gallery, and not just a corner. I used only 7 figures because of the symbolic nature of 7 in Islam. A larger volume would have communicated more clearly the idea of the struggle and suffering of a people.

When installing Usury I struggled mostly with its presentation. This was the largest piece, with the largest investment in time. I had done various preliminary tests in my attempt to evoke the presence of death. The piece is straightforward; a visual description of the war in Iraq, but translating that into a dichotomous manner was vital. I used the military personnel identification tag as a visual cue and as a readily identifiable object. At a distance, the work had a morbidly beautiful quality. I wanted the viewer to be engulfed by thousands of them. Experiencing Usury, evoked, for me, memories of other artworks such as Rothko paintings and Christo’s Running Fence. I met with viewers and was able to discover how people understood this work. The overall perspective people had related to mass suffering and trauma. While Sublunary was about a very specific moment in Iraq, some read the figures as suggestive of female subjugation in the modern world. It was also interpreted as alluding to the terrorism of ISIS and mass executions. In one instance the sculpture Usurpation, which was in close proximity, influenced how the individual felt about Sublunary. They stated that the work was
reminiscent of Nazi Germany and the execution of Jews. To me all the interpretations I heard were appropriate.

It is only in retrospect that I have realized that I joined the Marines under a false presumption. I wanted to believe in altruism, justice and righteous government I believed that my war was helping a people suffering under tyranny. Those suffering are the families and individuals in Iraq and also the families of the military members in the Coalition. My art is my reaction to that suffering; the suffering on and off the battlefield. They send men to war, but those that make it home never leave.
Figure 1. (I Would Trade One Thousand Tomorrows to Have Back a Single Yesterday), Summation
Glass, garbage bags, cow dung
30” x 288” x 6”
Figure 2. *Sublunary*

Newsprint paper, steel

2’ x 4’ x 20’
Figure 3. *Sublunary*

Newsprint paper, steel

2’ x 4’ x 20’
Figure 4. *Sublunary*

Newsprint paper, steel

2’ x 4’ x 20’
Figure 5. *Sublunary*

Newsprint paper, steel

2’ x 4’ x 20’
Figure 6. *Sublunary*

Newsprint paper, steel

2’ x 4’ x 20’
Figure 7. *Sublunary*

Newsprint paper, steel

2’ x 4’ x 20’
Figure 8. *Usurpation*

Steel, barbed wire, cow dung

4’ x 2’ x 8’
Figure 9. *Usury*

Personnel identification tags, steel nails

168” x 4” x 576”
Figure 10. *Usury*

Personnel identification tags, steel nails

168” x 4” x 576”
Figure 11. *Usury*

Personnel identification tags, steel nails

168” x 4” x 576”
Figure 12. *Usury*

Personnel identification tags, steel nails

168” x 4” x 576”
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