

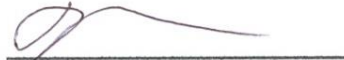
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Go With Your Eyes Open
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The long grass swirled around us. We sat cross legged on the ground taking a well-deserved break from digging. Tom had never spoken directly to me before about Vietnam. Perhaps the memories were stirred up, there in the towering green grass, like the dust now sticking to our sweaty faces. “You have to tell me,” he said between a long drag from his cigarette, “if you go anywhere... if you end up having to go overseas.”

I promised I would. Though, at the time I did not expect I would be deployed to Kandahar Air Field the following year. Tom continued on speaking vaguely, at first, about the war. As an Upper Sioux Tribal Elder, he had a nurturing way of transporting me when he spoke that felt more like a storybook than mere chit-chat. I recall that I hoped he would write a book about all the things he had done, the things he had seen. I suppose in hindsight, that is not the point of storytelling.

That day his recollections about his survival in Vietnam became less story book, and more personal and specific. There was weight growing with every word. I braced myself. His voice started to waiver...

Whatever memories haunted him so profoundly never escaped his lips that day. I waited, not wanting to break the widening silence. Taking a deep breath, he paused and ended the tale with these words I will never forget. “Wherever you go... you’re gonna have to go with your eyes open.”

Go with your eyes open. These words meant that not only should we all walk through this world wide-eyed and with a reasonable amount of caution, but to see the world as it is, for what it is. Go with your eyes open. To fully submerge oneself in the moment, to experience it wholly: the beautiful, the pristine, but also the ugly and, at times, tragic. Finally, to “go with your eyes

open” consequentially means that once you see, it cannot be unseen. I want to share what I have seen in a way that is more than simply recording events, to share the emotion, the tension, and movement. This collection is just that; stories. A mode for others to share their stories with me. It is testimony that I’ve gone and continue to consciously go with my eyes open.

There is a very simplistic theme to the art that moves me and is revealed subconsciously in what I produce. It is the human experience. It is the way we move, the way we tell stories, and the relationships we form in doing so. This is what draws me to art. It is so distinctly human and therefore can and should be made and appreciated by all of us. The movement, the stories, and the relationships are built with the fundamentals of what art could do. Art enhances the human experience and has done so since the beginning of our existence. It is a poetic and tangible way to learn about other people and cultures as well as dig deep into our own.

Working with pastels, water color, ink, acrylic and oil paint two dimensionally, most of my art work is graphite pencil and charcoal. Much of these works have elements of photorealism; tight and precise either in part or throughout the entire composition, with heavy emphasis on the subject. My later works are of deconstructed form, yet still have a firm reference to the real world. The figures in this work become impressionistic towards the edges, at times fading away completely, capturing the essence of the subject. Its crudeness exposes the art as handmade, sometimes with primitive materials or techniques, giving the piece a tactile quality.

I tend to avoid vivid color and work with a monochromatic palette. Color can be too suggestive, much like a title. Though with a monochromatic palette I do not necessarily want to imply seriousness or a sullen attitude. The visual elements reference the representational reality.

The images are derived from actual experiences resulting in organic shapes. Some of the figures seem to fade away at the edges, just like recalling the past or a dream. One holds onto a well-defined fraction while the rest is wanting.

My work consists of memories, moments taken from my travels within life and not always from my own point of view. Visually, it varies slightly from realism, expressionism, and finally a balance between the two. By utilizing the sharp focus of realism, the images are made with a photographic or even journalistic feel. All pieces from this collection are first imagined as photographs. With my artistic background primarily in photography, I was encouraged to consider composition of form, light variation, and then subject matter. It is those concerns that I bring to my work whether it be a painting or drawing. Rather than manipulating a traditional black and white photograph to have a painterly or dreamlike quality, I've chosen to use graphite and charcoal to create a photographic feel. By isolating details (as a photographer may accomplish with a shallow depth of field) I leave what remains beyond the dominant form to disintegrate or disappear altogether.

My strongest influences come not from other painters or charcoal artists, but from photographers. I relate to photojournalists, specifically the works of Margaret Bourke-White and Dorothea Lange. I adore these two artists for both their craft and courage. These woman produced some of the most stunning photographs in history while being explorers. They were living and working in sometimes horrid or dangerous conditions just to capture something intensely emotional, raw, and profoundly real. I relate my own style closely to theirs, a similar capacity for observation versus creation.

Margaret Bourke-White had an extensive career as a photojournalist which took her to some of the darkest corners of the world. She accompanied US Air Corps operations in Italy during WWII, has recorded the horrors of the Buchenwald liberation, photographed Mahatma Gandhi hours before his assassination, and revealed the faces of extreme poverty and suffering of the American South during the Great Depression. Throughout her life, Margaret Bourke-White spoke of ‘fact’ and ‘beauty’ as the basis of good pictures; and perhaps this simple affirmation is a key to her personal ethic and to her view of reality. With a belief in the sacred value of fact, no matter how distressing, she operated on the assumption that fact and beauty were supportive partners. (Brown 23) She is an artist who could not have reached deeper into the world of her subjects. Her approach was deceptively simple. She immersed herself in situations, extracted the maximum from the experience, and communicated the essence of the event through extremely succinct means- isolation of cogent details, juxtaposition of mutually reinforcing elements, and straightforward views of the subject. (Brown 23)

Dorothea Lange also used her art as a catalyst for wild experiences. “You put your camera around your neck in the morning along with your shoes, and there it is, an appendage of your body that shares your life with you. The camera is an instrument that teaches people to see without a camera.” Many can attest to that. The camera taught me to paint and to draw by trusting what I see instead of what I expect. “You force yourself to watch and to wait. You accept all the discomfort and the disharmony. Being out of your depth is a very uncomfortable thing... You force yourself onto strange streets, among strangers. It may be very hot. It may be painfully cold. It may be sandy and windy and you say, ‘What am I doing here? What drives me to do this thing?’” -Dorothea Lange.

With my endeavors over the past 8 years as an archeologist, I have held beautiful and functional works of art made thousands of years ago by people in this region and other parts of the world. As a member of the United States Air Force I have found myself in beautiful and colorful places as well as the sweltering and ugly. Ultimately, my paintings and drawings have been a way to experience, reflect, and leave my mark in the world. Each are human stories and they are real.

What drives me is the journey. I have an appetite for taking notice of things, savoring memories. To take it in, to be a wonderer. My work doesn't evoke fantasy, but evidence. This collection is, and will continue to be, just a result of seeing the world as much as footprints in the dirt. Like Dorothea Lange understood, it is uncomfortable being lost or out of one's depth. This is true of anyone, but I feel it is far more terrible to know where one will end up.

Saturate yourself with your subject and the camera will all but take you by the hand.

-Margaret Bourke White

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