

S2 Ep3: the art of war

[Intro music]

Tony Cohn: This is Sidedoor, a podcast with Smithsonian in partnership with PRX. I'm Tony Cohn.

TC: Since the earliest days of the country, American artists have chronicled the hardships of war, on the ground, as they happen. They bear witness and bring back scenes that, otherwise, would only be observed by those in combat: selfless acts of valor, battle-scarred landscapes, fallen soldiers on the front lines. They're images that we need to see... and remember.

One of the genre's earliest American pioneers, Winslow Homer, is also one of the nation's best-known painters. Many classic Winslow Homer paintings feature ocean scenes – there's often a small boat bobbing perilously on an angry ocean, with someone rowing through what look like a coin-toss' chance of survival. But very early in his career – in 1861, when he was just 25 years old, Homer found himself on the front lines of the Civil War, as something of a visual journalist. In a time before photography was used for news, magazines and newspapers relied on artists to draw the war's action.

Before the Civil War, Winslow Homer was a printer's assistant at a magazine in Boston. And he was doing the dirty work, putting other people's images into print. But Winslow was a creative guy! He needed more... And... boy, did he get it.

Eleanor Harvey: And so Winslow goes down to Virginia and he hangs out in camp. He comes down with lice, the food is terrible. He may or may not have been captured and released in the course of a day – it's a little bit fuzzy.

TC: This is Eleanor Harvey.

EH: And I'm the senior curator of 19th century American Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

TC: In 2012, Harvey put together an exhibit at the Smithsonian's American Art Museum about the Civil War and the artists it helped create.

EH: If you look at Winslow Homer's early wood engravings that he sent back on the trains back up to New York. It's all dashing, cavalry battles and people with raised sabers and people dying dramatically. And by the end of the war, it's about corpses and battlefields and it's become more sober.

TC: This later work sets a new precedent for how war is depicted.

EH: It's become more photographic in the sense that it is conveying the carnage of the war. This isn't Napoleon doing romantic things. This is a brutal war that basically is all about shrapnel bombs and missing limbs and nobody really wants to see them.

TC: As a result, Homer is in need of a workaround. Instead of shocking civilians with the brutality of the battlefields, he shows the war's effects on the faces staring into the army's campfires at night.

EH: He focused on soldiers who were homesick who really began to wonder, why am I down here? How long am I going to be here? Am I going to go home, who write letters home saying I don't have the words to describe what's just happened to me. Is this ever going to end? Am I going to survive? Will I be able to go home? What kind of country will there be?

TC: Most of Homer's scenes during the Civil War were serious: a sniper tensely sitting in a tree, a Thanksgiving meal eaten standing up with some soldiers just staring off into the distance. A lot of images show stern faced doctors treating half-dressed patients who looked really worried. But the devastation didn't stop at soldiers. He shows the landscape, almost as another casualty of the war, totally destroyed.

EH: The landscape is completely blasted. There isn't a standing tree in there. It's mud and fallen trees. And Homer uses the landscape as a way of talking about carnage. And so you're shocked at the landscape; you're shocked at the people. And Homer isn't going to let you off of that hook so you might let yourself off the hook on a human basis but you're crying over the landscape. You might not give a flip about the landscape, but you're traumatized by the people and he's got you coming and going. So it's a double slap.

TC: When Homer returned home from the war, the toll his work had taken on him was obvious to everyone around him.

EH: Homer's mother writes a letter to Homer's younger brother and basically says Winslow is back from the war. His best friends don't recognize him. He will never be the same. He's 25 years old. And, it's already clear to his mom that this has had an indelible impact on him as a person.

TC: And his work would never be the same, either. Landscapes continue to be a theme Homer explored. Small, exhausted people facing a destructive power much bigger than themselves, like the battered boats being tossed in the sea that I mentioned earlier. It's as if Homer internalized the struggle he saw in the Civil War and made it his signature style...

EH: I think that what we learn from Winslow Homer is that great art can sometimes be generated by unspeakable tragedy, as much as it is by the ambition and the desire to leave something to history that is legible outside of your own time. And the fact is when we look at Homer's images, we can put modern faces on them and they would read just as truthfully as they did 150 years ago. And to me the power of art is the ability to take you across time, outside of your own culture and speak to something elemental about what it means to be a human being.

TC: On this episode of Sidedoor, we'll visit the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery and hear from two artists featured in the current exhibit 'The Face of Battle: Americans at War, 9/11 to Now. Stories from contemporary artists whose work carries on the tradition Winslow Homer revolutionized.

But first... a quick break.

<<Pre-Roll Break>>

(Rain sound)

TC: A few weeks ago, on a very rainy Friday morning, I went over to the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. before it opened.

(Museum greeting background sound)

Taina Caragol (TA): My name is Taina Caragol, and I'm the curator of painting and sculpture, and Latino art and history at the National Portrait Gallery.

TC: Taina wanted to show me around the new "Face of Battle" exhibit for a look at how some modern American artists and journalists depict soldiers in combat areas and examining their lives once they returned home.

TA: It's a show that looks at the experience of war since 9/11 and the artistic response to it. And the work of Vincent Valdez within the exhibition is an individual reflection on the fate of his friend 2nd Lieutenant John Holt and his experience of war. And Vincent's own experience of losing his friend psychologically.

TC: Vincent Valdez is a muralist. And his portraits are big. The image hanging in the National Portrait Gallery is 42 by 93 inches... imagine a pool table hanging on the wall, but just a bit smaller.

TA: In the midst of battle, he's looking at something we don't see. Something quite ominous. Just from the look in his eyes, you can tell. In the back, you see these explosions. Some of them seem to be coming from his head in a signal of how difficult it became to adjust once he came back to the United States after battle.

Vincent Valdez: One of the things that's not apparent is that underneath that fog physically underneath the layers of paint –

TC: This is Vincent Valdez, the artist.

VV: There are portraits of houses from his neighborhood and from our neighborhood that we grew up in that are now all completely fogged over.

TC: We spoke with him by Skype from his art studio in Houston.

VV: You know, I think for me that becomes extremely important as a symbol of what the goal of most soldiers, all soldiers is you know, at the end of the day, it's to find to make your way back home.

TC: Even before Vincent met John Holt, he was always very interested in soldiers and wars...

VV: I specifically remember my dad sharing with me, as a kid, his experience of being drafted. And I remember even back then, I couldn't quite get an understanding of how somebody could be forced to be sent somewhere in a dangerous situation against their own will. You know, I would ask my father you know as a kid I would ask him pretty sincere and innocent questions like, "Well did you want to go?" And he would respond, "No I didn't." And I would ask him "Then why did you go?" "Well because I had to." "But why did you have to?"

And it sort of went back and forth you know, pretty much endlessly and because I was trying very hard to understand.

TC: Vincent and John had a normal childhood growing up together. They met when they were young, through church. They lived in the same neighborhood, on San Antonio's South Side.

VV: John was also somebody, one of those friends that even if you don't talk or cross paths for a year or longer, when you do meet up again it's like you know we were always like 10 years old again just sort of and joking and laughing and catching up.

TC: Vincent was never in the military. He's a civilian. But his best friend, Second Lieutenant John Holt did enlist.

VV: When John first enlisted, I remember that I laughed at him because growing up I had never ever seen John, actually, it was quite the opposite. Right like even as a teenager in my bedroom, I had posters of Marines and historical war photographs hanging on my wall. John had Garfield and bikini girls on his wall right? So John went to Iraq and did one tour in Iraq as a combat medic. When somebody is wounded, they will immediately call out for the medic and it's his job to try to stop bleeding and help get them evacuated as soon as possible.

TC: Over time that work took its toll on John. Even though he made it back home after his first deployment, the war came home with him.

VV: He was diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder. And the last time that I saw John, he had indicated to me that they were about to send him back home for a second tour in Afghanistan. And in you know, in all honesty against his own will. I mean he stated to me clearly that he was not ready to go back, that he did not want to go back, but because there was such a shortage and a need for medics, combat medics that he didn't have a choice in the matter. And so John succumbed to PTSD and just couldn't really deal with it. And wasn't getting the help that was necessary.

TC: Tragically, John took his own life in 2010.

VV: When I last saw John in 2009, I saw him three or four months before he passed and we were both at his mom's house and in his old room. And it looked exactly the same, and I had him dressing up in his combat gear because I was working on a series of drawings at that time about soldiers throughout history of war. And the very second I asked him about what he saw and went through over there, he felt guilty for not being able to save the lives of a lot of his buddies. And I remember looking at him and saying John, you can't. That's not your fault. You did what you could. You can't, you can't live with that guilt.

TC: That night, months before he'd take his own life, John posed for a few photos that Vincent wanted to use as a model for a project... one that, at the time, wasn't about John at all.

VV: After I saw John in person, I returned to Los Angeles and I immediately started a small ink drawing, a study I did of him. I tried to depict him in the moment that I observed him recollecting what he went through his experience as a combat medic in Iraq. And so what came out was this very extremely haunting, you know almost eerie live portrayal of John, lost in this distant gaze.

TC: Vincent says that even though his painting shows his friend John... it's a mural about all of the men and women who wear an American military uniform.

VV: John to me it becomes universal. He becomes a common man who is representative of what it is to be an American soldier whether it's right now whether it was 150 years ago. I hope that it provides a critique of the true cost of war and the costs of it on both human beings and on the existence of all of us as a society.

<<Midroll Break>>

(Museum background sound)

TC: Back at the Portrait Gallery, we check out the work of another artist. Photographer Stacy Pearsall was a combat photojournalist in the Air Force's Elite First Combat Camera squadron – a unit dedicated to documenting global military operations. She worked all around the world, including war zones like Iraq.

TA: ... and is very distinguished as one of the few female combat photographers.

TC: Pearsall was young when she enlisted -- just 17. And, she witnessed some of the Iraq War's most horrific moments. But instead of just showing the most brutal moments of the conflict, Pearsall's photography focused a lot on quiet moments that humanized the soldiers around her.

TA: What we see here in this installation is a series of photographs that document the moments in which soldiers are not fighting. And they're just living their lives while waiting to be called to combat. She talks about how war has been often described as 90% boredom, and 10% action and terror. So this is the part that is perhaps the boredom. You see them, for example, eating takeout. Or I particularly like this photograph here where you see two soldiers, completely armored, relaxing on a swing set. And you see this one here of US Staff SGT Brandon Embry embraces buddy after a combat operation in Diyala Province in Iraq.

Stacy Pearsall: They had just lost one of their men.

TC: That's Stacy Pearsall.

SP: And I think that that picture really signifies the relationship that these men had with each other, and in turn she had with me.

TC: But just because she was in the Air Force, didn't mean Pearsall was immediately embraced by the new units she showed up to photograph. She had to work to gain their trust, both in the field of combat, as well as back at the base.

SP: They've been training together for months. And so they have that camaraderie and understanding of each other. They can be predicting each other's moves. So to throw in this relative unknown entity like myself, they had to put a lot of trust and faith in my hands because they had no idea what my capabilities were. And if I was working with infantry units, as a woman, that was one of the biggest hurdles is to ensure that I was there to do my job and to do my work just as they were. My job was to take pictures of them doing their jobs. And so my best weapon I carried was my camera.

TC: Pearsall went on many high risk missions to document soldiers doing their work.

SP: So I was on a deployment to Iraq in 2003, 2004 and I was assigned to document the rebuilding of a school outside of the Baghdad airport where Saddam's wife had taught elementary school. It was used as a Baath party headquarters and it was decimated during the Shock and Awe campaign. But given that village was full of Saddam loyalists, it was important for us to go back rebuild the school and give our

best efforts to win the hearts and minds of that particular region. And they were going to finally have the grand opening and they invited a whole bunch of media and local people and it is going to be really celebration.

At the time, IEDs, known as improvised explosive devices, were becoming more prevalent. And nine times out of 10 the bomb would explode, and it would hit the last vehicle because of the trigger -- there was a delay in response. So if you want to ride in a vehicle in a convoy you wanted to be toward the front. My videographer partner and I drew straws that morning. Who's going to ride in the front. And who was going to take the rear vehicle. So I was so very lucky that I got to ride in the lead vehicle with the colonel. And even after all of my visits to the school, I had forgotten that as we pulled in with the convoy, it was a dead end. And we opened the school and everything was great. We ate cake. It was great, I photographed it. We all got back into our vehicles and I went from being the lead vehicle to the very last vehicle. And that's when the bomb detonated. I had a cervical spine and traumatic brain injury. I still hear that sound. It's a moment I don't try to actively think about.

TC: Pearsall took time off combat duty to heal. And then... she went back. Pearsall's double duty of being enlisted to take pictures in a war left her... in an ambiguous role. Was she a soldier who takes photos? Or a photographer in uniform? Pearsall tells the story of one day she was confronted with that very question when her friend Danny was hit by sniper fire...

SP: And I struggled in that moment to decide whether I was going to be a friend to him, or if I was going to be a journalist and photograph this horrific event. I put the camera to my face and I took a picture. But I was immediately struck by this sickness in my stomach and felt utterly repulsed by my very own being and, I think in that moment I knew I needed to be a friend and a soldier first. That was one of the biggest challenges of my life, and still haunts me today.

TC: Combat photography is physical and dangerous work. And it doesn't lend itself to long careers. A second IED explosion, combined with the wear and tear of carrying an 80 pound pack, day after day reaggravated her injuries. Even then, she'd take Motrin and keep going. A few months after the second IED, her unit was ambushed. In that firefight, she helped save a fellow soldier's life. And for that, she was commended for her bravery...

SP: I received a Bronze Star but it was for a culmination of actions including that particular night. It's the fourth highest medal in the United States military. And quite frankly I have always felt that I was undeserving of that medal. And I feel like we were just trying to keep each other alive. And to be really honest that the people who deserve all the recognition are the ones who didn't come home.

TC: To hear Pearsall talk about her work, she's an interesting mix of soldier -- all about her brothers and sisters in arms, not wanting recognition for herself -- and a journalist. An observer, finding those quiet moments to show people back home her fellow soldiers in a new, more human light...

SP: I think we have this idea of a soldier being invincible -- that they are our heroes. But I wanted to show people the vulnerable side and I wanted people to know that at the end of the day, they still feel and they still miss home and they long for their families. They long for the normalcy of home. And if that means taking the time to read a book, or write a letter, or to play dominoes with their friends and just have a touchstone of reality. That's what my combat portraits are about -- to bring people back to reality and the reality is there is a human being in that uniform.

----- short music bed -----

TC: In the 150 years between the Civil War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, so much about combat has changed. Where there were once cannonballs, there are now remote operated drones; guns that shot four rounds per minute now shoot nine hundred and fifty rounds per minute; and, oh yeah -- going from horses to flying machines. There is a lot that civil war soldiers wouldn't recognize on today's battlefields.

But thanks to the physical and emotional heavy lifting of artists and photographers -- who allow us witness to the experience of soldiers in combat... We know that one thing that hasn't changed: the faces of our soldiers, always hopeful for a safe return home.

----- music bed -----

TC: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast with Smithsonian, with support from PRX. The "Face of Battle: 9/11 to Now" exhibit is on display here in Washington D.C. at the National Portrait Gallery through January of 2018. If you want to see the images we've been talking about for the last twenty minutes, you can see them on our website – si.edu/sidedoor. There, you can find videos and articles that will help contextualize the stuff that you hear on the show.

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Thanks for listening.