

## Lest We Forget: Fulginiti Exhibit Tells the Stories of Wounded Vets

By *Tyler Smith*

The public's hackneyed view of the military may be that it produces regimented ranks of brainwashed automatons. Don't tell that to Michael Fay. He'll tell you that a quarter century with the Marines made him an artist.



*Joe Bonham Project founder and artist Michael Fay with works he contributed to the exhibit now on display at the Fulginiti Pavilion for Bioethics and Humanities on the Anschutz Medical Campus.*

The fruit of Fay's work and other artists is now on display at the Fulginiti Pavilion for Bioethics and Humanities on the Anschutz Medical Campus. "[The Joe Bonham Project](#)," which Fay organized, provides glimpses in watercolors, inks, oils and other media into the world of veterans recovering from the physical and emotional wounds of war.

Fay launched the project in 2011 after returning to the United States from four deployments as a combat artist embedded with units in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bahrain and Oman. He'd retired from the Marines in January 2010, but felt compelled to

tell the stories of the men and women returning from war with lost limbs, traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorders, and the challenge of adjusting to a "new normal" in vastly altered landscapes defined by hospital rooms and the lonely struggles of rehabilitation.

He and other artists began visiting military hospitals to document the lives of these wounded warriors, many of whom suffered in silence as the society for whom they sacrificed churned heedlessly on. Fay visited the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and other veterans hospitals, seeking to discover "what it means to be wounded," particularly during an age in which technological and medical advances have enabled more soldiers to survive injuries that not long ago would have killed them.



*Fay discusses another of his works, a portrait of a wounded soldier struggling to recover from the physical and psychic scars of battle.*

"Soldiers are staying alive, but without arms and legs," Fay said during an interview in the Fulginiti before the show opened April 10. "These are the kinds of things that our culture is only beginning to look at."

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Making viewers look at the wounded is at the core of the show. Its title is taken from the name of the main character in Dalton Trumbo's 1938 anti-war novel "Johnny Got His Gun," a World War I soldier reduced to a faceless physical stump by a bomb blast – but with his mind intact. Throughout the novel, Joe Bonham struggles futilely to communicate – and to show the world the reality of his situation.



*Fay with artist Steve Mumford, who also spent time documenting combat in the Middle East.*

"The soldiers we depict are the new Joe Bonhams," Fay said. "They don't want to be invisible."

**Learning to look.** Those depicted in the works of the exhibition are arrestingly visible, the subjects of artists with a fine eye for both detail and narrative. Fay credits the Marines for instilling the discipline he needed to channel his artistic talent.

"Talent without discipline is a lot of nothing," he said. He freely describes a life of excess – he's a recovering alcoholic – during years as an art major that included stints at Penn State University and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. "I found the better the school I went to, the less I went to class," he said jokingly.

In 1975, he followed in the footsteps of his father, an uncle and older cousin, and joined the Marines. "It did what I hoped it would do," he said. "It got rid of every bit of my feelings of omnipotence and manipulative behavior. You meet someone you've never met before – yourself."

He spent three years in the infantry, advancing to the rank of sergeant before returning to Penn State to complete a degree in art education in 1982 – just in time for the arrival of a major economic recession. With job prospects bleak, he made what he calls a

pragmatic decision to return to the Marine Corps, in 1983. He was assigned to avionics at Quantico Marine Base, where he learned to service and repair choppers in the Presidential Helicopter Squadron.

Later in this decade-long second stint in the Marines, Fay was assigned recruiting duty, a "high-pressure sales job" he said taught him the skills of making cold calls and pitches, serving his recruit-customers, and, most importantly, closing. The last served him particularly well later, when he presented his art to skeptical audiences, he said.

**Art and combat.** In August of 1990, the United States launched the Gulf War in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and annexation of its oil. Fay was assigned to a group of young Marines at the Marine Corps Air Station in New River, NC, who hadn't finished their training and therefore couldn't be sent to the conflict overseas. He "baby-sat" them as a non-commissioned officer until they completed training in November, then joined them when they were sent to the war. He took his sketch book along.



*Mumford's "We Could Be Heroes" looms over the north end of the exhibition.*

He knew about combat art, having grown up with table-top books on World War II and devouring the gritty illustrations of Robert Kanigher and Joe Kubert, the creators of the fictional comic-book hero Sergeant Rock, an infantry non-commissioned officer, as well as the World War II combat artist [Tom Lea](#), who covered the War in the Pacific for Life Magazine, producing starkly realistic images of soldiers in wartime.

Given these sources, Fay filled his sketch book while in the Middle East with slice-of-life images of soldiers in combat. "It was where I was," he said. "The art you create is inherent in where you find yourself." He calls the approach "witness art," an effort



to document points of time in the rush of life. He compared the process to answering the old question of whether or not a tree that falls in the woods makes noise. "We're the listeners in the woods," he said. "So much of what happens disappears."

While his work is full of life, Fay resists the term "realism" to describe it. "The realist wants to depict something exactly how it looks," he said. He calls his style "naturalist," a depiction of something real colored by the perceptions of the artist and the circumstances in which he finds himself. "We go out and interact with the world," he said, "and see what reality shares with us. Art should be a love affair with reality."



*Robert Bates's "Sergeant Eric Hunter USA at Walter Reed, 2012."*

**To the front – and beyond.** Fay's third stint with the Marines, which began in the reserves in 2000, was to have the most direct effect on the Joe Bonham Project. His sketches attracted sufficient attention to earn him a spot with the Marine Historical Society (now part of the [National Museum of the Marine Corps](#)) as a combat artist. After the terrorist attacks on the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, Fay began the series of deployments to the Middle East that produced many more works of art and ultimately led to connections with artists like Steve Mumford, who also drew inspiration for his art from time spent in war zones in the Middle East. Some of Mumford's work is on display in the Fulginiti exhibit, notably the large oil "We Could be Heroes," which dominates the north end of the gallery.

Fay's 10 years as a combat artist included fighting with the Marines in Operation Steel Curtain, a 2005 battle against Iraqi insurgents along the Euphrates River that he recounted in a 2010 "[Opinionator](#)" blog for the New York Times that included sketches

he made during the fight. Fay took a chunk of shrapnel in his non-drawing arm during the conflict.



*Victor Juhasz's "Sergeant Jason Ross USMC, 2011."*

His service produced a body of work that led to a three-part series in 2011 – again in the Times's Opinionator blog – with fellow combat artist Richard Johnson on soldiers "Still in the Fight." The series produced a [moving portrait](#), in Fay's words and pictures, of Lance Cpl. William "Kyle" Carpenter, whose face and right arm were ruined after he absorbed a grenade blast during a battle in Iraq. Among Fay's sketches of Kyle was a graphite image of the Marine's badly scarred face, completed during a visit with him at McGuire Veterans Administration Hospital in Richmond, Va. The portrait hangs in the Fulginiti exhibit.

The work of Fay and his fellow artists that became the Joe Bonham



*The Fulginiti held a reception for the Bonham exhibition at the gallery April 10.*

Project attracted the attention of New York Times writer Carol Kino, who wrote a [long article](#) in May 2012 chronicling a visit by some of the project illustrators to Walter Reed to produce sketches of wounded soldiers. The article so moved Fulginiti curator Simon Zalkind that he began a quest to bring the exhibition to campus.

**Finding the core.** The concept of detailing the stories of soldiers — human beings — still in the fight is at the core of the Fulginiti exhibit. Fay said he approached his subjects forthrightly, entering their hospital rooms, introducing himself and telling them, “‘You still have a story, and it’s one that the United States wants to forget.’ Once you start sketching, you achieve a level of intimacy with them that they have invited.”



The drawing itself, he added, helped to relieve the soldiers from the tedium of hospital life. “It provided them with an experience,” Fay said. “Physicians and phlebotomists could come and go while we talked art and rock-n-roll. Different is good.”

Ultimately, the work of Fay and his fellow artists, challenging as it can be, reminds us of the truth of the line that shadows the exhibit: “We are not our wounds.”

It’s the brainchild of Fay’s wife, Janis Albuquerque, herself a vet who went back to school to learn web design after returning from service in Afghanistan. She was working on a corporate branding project at about the time the Joe Bonham Project began to take off.

“Michael said, to me, ‘Give me a tag line for the exhibit,’” Albuquerque said. Standing in the kitchen, she came up with the memorable sentence.

“Your body may be half what it was before,” Fay said, reflecting on the line, “but your soul is as rich and as deep as it was before.”

*The Joe Bonham Project is on exhibit at the Fulginiti Pavilion for Bioethics and Humanities on the Anschutz Medical Campus through June 12. Admission is free. The pavilion will also host a Veterans Film Festival Saturdays at 6:30 p.m., featuring “The Best Years of Our Lives” (April 26); “MASH” (May 10); and “Kandahar” (May 17).*

Click [here](#) for artists’ profiles and work from the exhibit.