

The VVA Veteran

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**November/December 2005
ARTS OF WAR**

Peace At Last: The Life And Times Of Veteran Artist Ralph Sirianni

BY MARC LEEPSON

Here's what Ralph Sirianni remembers most about the day in June 1969 when he joined his 1st Marine Division unit—Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment in the boonies of I Corps. A guy named Scott Meredith “was sitting in a hole, and there were a couple of other guys in there,” Sirianni told us. “I was the new guy. I got in that hole with them, and he said to me, ‘You know all that stuff they taught you in boot camp?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ He said, ‘Forget it.’ And I thought, ‘Oh, no. Now what do I do?’”

What he did was survive a sometimes-brutal tour of duty, two more years of stateside duty, and a case of readjustment blues to become an artist of renown in his hometown—an artist who has made his name from his wide-ranging work in painting, sculpture, and drawing. Sirianni has exhibited his work—much of it influenced by his war and postwar experiences—since the early 1980s. That work includes the design and sculpture for the Western New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Buffalo; the West Seneca Vietnam Memorial in West Seneca, N.Y.; the Western New York Korean War Memorial in Buffalo; the Cheektowaga Veterans Memorial in Cheektowaga, N.Y.; and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Park in Sprague Brook, N.Y.

Sirianni, a member of VVA's Buffalo Chapter 77, had joined the Marine Corps in 1968 when he was 19 years old. When he got out four years later, he went back to Buffalo, thinking he'd return to his job at a steel mill. The company he had worked for, though, had gone out of business, so Sirianni took a series of jobs before he decided to take advantage of the GI Bill and enroll in art classes at the State University of New York at Buffalo. The former Marine received his BA in Fine Arts from UB in 1978 and his M.S. in 1992.

In 1977, he had taken a job at the Buffalo VA Medical Center to make ends meet. “In 1986, they saw that I had a degree in art and there was a position for a recreation person. I got into recreation therapy,” he said. “After years of working in that, a position was created for a creative arts therapist, and that's what I've been doing ever since.”

Outside of his nine-to-five job, though, Sirianni “is living and breathing art,” he told us. “I have a studio at home. I volunteer for the Buffalo Police Department doing police sketches. I'm called into court for high-profile cases, and my courtroom drawings have been all around the world, all over Europe, Japan, and China. I work as a creative arts therapist, and

I teach a portraits and caricature class. Pretty much every time I do something, it has something to do with art, and I love that.”

Ralph Sirianni’s artistic work has been influenced by his military service—and it has helped him work through the emotional baggage he still retains from that service. “I’m so grateful to have the gift of being able to take it from inside and put it on something outside and not just keeping it internal,” he said. “I’m really grateful that I have been able to use art as a vehicle to get some of that out of me. There was a period after I got back that I was very angry, very disillusioned. It didn’t start getting better until not too long ago. I am just starting to find some peace.”

That peace of mind is reflected in Sirianni’s latest work, a series of landscape paintings that he calls “Peaceful World.” His own backyard, Sirianni says, was the inspiration. “It is the subject for all these pieces in this show. I find peace back there. It’s a natural place and a very private place. There are times when I go back there and just listen to the birds, watch the squirrels. I don’t usually do landscapes, but I thought I would try creating landscapes and not compromise my style. I would still use that powerful stuff—that passion that comes from the Vietnam experience and from all those things that happened in my life that were negative.

I tried to tap those and do something besides violent art. I thought, let me do something nice. I’m thinking that maybe peace is starting to come in my life. I sure need it.”

Ralph Sirianni’s “Peaceful World” opened at the Virginia Weiss Gallery at Buffalo’s Empire State College October 21, running through November 23. Images from that show, along with many more examples of his work, may be seen on Sirianni’s website, www.sirianniart.com

CHICAGO EXPLORES THE WAR

From early September through mid December, five cultural institutions in Chicago have joined together in an unprecedented artistic endeavor to explore the legacy of the Vietnam War through photographic and art exhibits, film and theater presentations, and public discussions. The endeavor also included the Veterans Day dedication of the city’s new Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which was designed by Vietnam veteran Gary Tillery, at Wabash Plaza.

Entitled “Commit to Memory,” the ambitious undertaking is taking place at the Gene Siskel Film Center, the Museum of Contemporary Photography, the Pritzker Military Library, the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, and the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum (NVVAM).

NVVAM offered four special exhibits: “Trauma and Metamorphosis II,” an exhibition of works by veteran artists who have experienced PTSD; “First to Fight: the U.S. Marines in Vietnam,” more than 90 works of art by Marines and Navy Corpsmen, featuring the work of Chicago artist Michael Wilkins; “Things We Carried,” an exhibition of art, photography, and artifacts carried by Vietnam veterans in the war inspired by the Tim O’Brien novel of the same name; and “Purple Heart Exhibit,” a photographic portrait of Iraq war veterans who have been wounded in action.

The newly opened Pritzker Military Library hosted an interview on October 27 with Vietnam War Medal of Honor recipient retired Marine Corps Col. Wesley L. Fox. From September 15 to November 14, the Steppenwolf Theatre Company presented the Steven Dietz play, *Last of the Boys*, which centers on the lives of two Vietnam veterans. The Gene Siskel Film Center offered several screenings of *Winter Soldier*, a documentary that deals with the 1971 Vietnam Veterans Against the War Winter Soldier hearings in Detroit.

The Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP), which is located at Chicago’s Columbia College, presented two exhibitions: “Stages of Memory: The Vietnam War,” and

Jeff Wolin's "Inconvenient Stories: Vietnam War Veterans: Portraits and Text," from October 13-December 17. The former looks at the war through a group of Vietnamese photographers who live in the United States, Vietnam, and France, and who experienced the war first, second, and even third hand.

One of the photographers, Dinh Q. Le—who came to this country when he was nine years old in 1978, and today lives and works in Saigon—has an exhibition of his work, "Vietnam: Destination for the New Millennium," at the Asia Society in New York City through January 15. Many of Dinh Le's large, complex photographic melanges deal with the war. "Typically combining one war-era media image with an image from popular culture such as a Hollywood movie, Le creates complicated visual puzzles in which two images vie for dominance within a colorful matrix of warp and weft," noted the curator of the MoCP exhibit, Karen Irvine.

FACES AND VOICES

Jeff Wolin's work at MoCP is an exhibit of fifty recent photographs he took of Vietnam veterans, along with in-country photos of the veterans, as well as accompanying text taken from extensive interviews Wolin conducted with them. (Full disclosure: Two of the veterans whose photos are in the show served with the 527th Personnel Service Company in Qui Nhon in 1967-68: the former XO, LT Claude Cookman, and one of its former redeployment clerks, Spec5 Marc Leepson.)

An internationally acclaimed, award-winning photographer, Wolin's work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The Ruth N. Halls Professor of Fine Arts at Indiana University, Wolin also directs the university's Henry Radford Hope School of Fine Arts. He has been teaching at IU since 1980.

Wolin—a New York native who graduated from college in 1972 with a high draft number and did not serve in the military—told us that he conceived the idea for his Vietnam veterans project in 1991 when he was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in photography. But Wolin put that project on hold to work on something more pressing, a similar project with Holocaust survivors. That work became an exhibition that traveled around the world and was the subject of Wolin's 1997 book, *Written in Memory*.

"I traveled a lot with the Holocaust project and didn't get back to other work until 1998," Wolin told us in an interview. "Then in the spring of 2003, the war in Iraq was about to start and that triggered me to go back to what I saw as the 'unfinished business' of the Vietnam War." Wolin tracked down the veterans he'd photographed in 1991 and 1992 and "picked up where I left off," he said. "I started in Bloomington with local veterans and was really excited about the project the more I got into it." He then interviewed and photographed Vietnam veterans elsewhere in Indiana, before seeking out others across the country.

Wolin made many connections that led him to interview and photograph Vietnam veterans from all walks of life. "I worked with the folks at the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum [in Chicago], who sent out a mailing. I got nationwide responses," Wolin said. "I worked with Marc Levy, a former Army medic and writer, who was a one-man network. I used oral history projects, friends, acquaintances, and word-of-mouth." Wolin wound up photographing and interviewing 60 veterans; 50 appear in the Chicago show.

The night Wolin's show opened at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago the gallery held a brief ceremony featuring five of the veterans who appear in his photographs. The show itself has received interest from museums around the country. And Wolin is considering having it travel to Vietnam. There also likely will be a book of the photographs and text.

Wolin's work, said Rod Slemmons, the MoCP director, is about how veterans' "lives today

are perpetually informed by their lives then. We can talk about war in the abstract, and about how it advances or distorts American interests. But we only occasionally get to see the faces and hear the voices of the people who actually did the fighting. These people know things that those of us who weren't there have no words to describe or experiences to relate to. We can look at them and hear their stories, and even think about the whole issue profoundly, but we can never know what they know."

MOVIN' ON

There's good news and bad news on the *Movin' Out* front. The smash Broadway show that tells a Vietnam War-heavy story through the music of Billy Joel and the choreography of Twyla Tharp will have its final Broadway performance on December 11. That's the not-good news about the show, which opened in New York three years ago and has been a rousing popular and critical success.

The good news for fans of the multi-Tony-Award-winner is that the *Movin' Out* national tour has scheduled tons of performances through next summer. Take it from someone who's seen the Broadway cast and the national tour cast: both deliver tremendous shows. A list of the road show's tour dates and venues may be found at http://movingout.uvision.net/tour_feb If the show is coming to your town, contact the venue beforehand to see if they are having a special event for Vietnam veterans, special prices for veterans, or meet-the-cast opportunities.

ARTS IN BRIEF

Yusef Komunyakaa, the Pulitzer-Prize winning poet who served in the Vietnam War, recently added another notch to his literary belt in the form of his poem, "Love in the Time of War," which appeared in the September 26 issue of *The New Yorker*. In typically elliptical Komunyakaa fashion, this poem contains sentiments of widely contradictory human endeavors, lovemaking and war-making.

Query: Screaming Flea Productions is putting together a TV documentary special on "spooky or paranormal stories" from the Vietnam War. If you have a creepy war story you'd like to share, send an e-mail to Screaming Flea's Jennifer Scott at jennifer@sfpseattle.com And please mention you read about it in The VVA Veteran.

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