

# View from the art world: Processing Vietnam through art

By [Lauren D.](#)

When Pomona native Michael Aschenbrenner graduated from high school in 1967 he recalls he didn't know where Southeast Asia was. He describes himself as "totally unaware" of the war in Vietnam at the time. So when he enlisted in the army he was prepared to go to Germany and serve his time there. He wound up, however, in paratrooper school, after which he was assigned to 173rd Airborne Division in Vietnam.

By this point, Aschenbrenner said he knew what was happening in Vietnam, and he knew he had no choice but to go. It was February of 1968—in the midst of the Tet Offensive. He landed in Cam Ranh Bay and he remembers being scared to death, walking through the camp in the heat and humidity, but ultimately realizing it was relatively safe. After a week of "proficiency training"—where soldiers acclimate to the new surroundings—things changed abruptly.

"The Marines had called an air strike in by mistake on top of the 101st Air Borne Division on top of the hill, so I got re-assigned to replace people and to also—as gross as it sounds—my first duty was to find body parts that had been blown up by this bomb," Aschenbrenner said.

He ended up going from Cam Ranh Bay into the middle of combat searching for body parts within a week. He was in a mortar platoon, where he made a few good friends, one of whom helped him develop his mapping and plotting skills.

One day a long-range reconnaissance platoon arrived and said they needed people. Aschenbrenner explained that normally you couldn't volunteer for such opportunities—they needed to know your skill level and invite you. But they knew his aforementioned friend's skills, and his friend said he'd go only if Aschenbrenner did. They were both unhappy in the mortar platoon—he said it was tedious and boring ... unless you were getting shot at.

Aschenbrenner and his friend joined a unit called the 'Tiger Force Recon,' where he met a guy named Charlie who he said taught him how to survive.

"I think he was from Kentucky or Georgia, but he was one of those Southern boys that knew how to shoot, and knew how to hunt, and how to live in the wild. It was just amazing. With his help I stayed alive."

Four months or so into his stint in Vietnam, Aschenbrenner exacerbated an injury that dated back to paratrooper school. He lost his footing on a steep ridge, and slipped down about ten feet. He said his knee “swelled up like a basketball.” The medic wanted to get him out, but they were in an area where they couldn’t safely land a helicopter.

His lieutenant kept them moving until they could find a secure area. The medic helped him get his knee put together—so it wasn’t dislocated—and Aschenbrenner walked on it for two days. He refused morphine. Finally, a helicopter came in and dropped a chair. They took incoming fire while they reeled him up, and as he swung in the breeze, he hit his head on the bottom of the helicopter.

Aschenbrenner expected to get treated and return to his unit, but the first Vietnam hospital he visited sent him to a hospital in Da Nang, which sent him to a hospital in Japan. The hospital in Japan sent him to a hospital in Fort Ord. Aschenbrenner said he didn’t think he was injured too badly, but it seemed no one wanted to deal with it.

After an unsuccessful surgery in Fort Ord, he went to an orthopedic surgery hospital in San Francisco for a second surgery. Aschenbrenner said they fixed it the best they could and he went back to military duty in San Francisco.

On June 10, 1970 he got out of the military 52 days early to start college. He returned to Southern California and started at Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga, where he was offered a class in ceramics taught by an ex-Marine, [Crispin Gonzalez](#). In Gonzalez, Aschenbrenner found a sympathetic and understanding mentor.

“When I got out of the military all I wanted to do was something with my life. And prior to the military, I could have gone to college, but I didn’t want to. It didn’t even dawn on me that I should go to college.”

Throughout his undergraduate education he didn’t share much about his Vietnam experience—except when in the company of other veterans. In fact, he grew his hair and beard for two years so people would stop asking him if he was in the military, but that changed with graduate school, when he was pursuing an MFA at the University of Minnesota.

“My graduate thesis show and my paper was written on death of all things, of life, and death ... I was real interested in dance at the time, like ballet. I thought

ballet was very peaceful, very structured, very controllable ... I wrote my thesis on something I refer to as the dance of life.”

He said his advisors thought he had “totally lost it”. The sculpture department thought he was weird for using glass rather than wood. He was developing his damaged bone series—imagery of bones that are splinted and wrapped—a meditation on human and bodily fragility. The work harkened back to something he learned in Vietnam—if you get hurt, you take care of it, or you’re going to die.

Aschenbrenner started expressing more about what he went through in Vietnam, though he said his teachers thought was trying to work something out in his head.

“I was trying to be more universal and say “This is what happens in life, and if you don’t learn from our past things then it may not take us down the road we want.””

His work was very personal, something he got the sense was not good in the 1970s art world, when minimalism, and pared down imagery were valued.

His artistic pursuits brought him to Manhattan for what was supposed to be three months but turned into 15 years. There he continued to grow and refine his skills, and everything fell into place.

He continued his damaged bones series at the New York Experimental Glassblowing Workshop (now Urban Glass). His pieces were received with confusion and he realized he needed to start explaining the work.

“Over a period of time I started to be comfortable talking about all this, because none of these people were ever in the military, I don’t think anybody in New York that I know was ever in the military. So I started making these images, and I started discussing with other artists, and I started understanding enough to where I could give a lecture.”

In 1983 he took a solo show at the glassblowing workshop where he showed 200-300 pieces from the Damaged Bone series, and he also gave a lecture in upstate New York. He remembers the gasps he heard when he explained, during his presentation, that he was a soldier in Vietnam.

His gallery show got written up in the Village Voice and put both him and the glassblowing workshop on the artistic map.

Aschenbrenner said he became more comfortable talking about his war experience, but never got into gory details. It's not something he likes to talk about or hear other people talk about. In the art world his experience was received with curiosity though he thinks they saw his work as conjuring something many people want to forget: human frailty, bodily damage, and pain.

Despite the confusion his work received, and the amount of explaining he had to do, Aschenbrenner said he considers himself lucky because the grant world has been good to him. While he still lived in New York, he received a Pollock Krasner Foundation grant.

"I found out years later it's because of Jasper Johns. No one else on the panel liked my work because it's too personal, right? But Jasper Johns work is very personal, so he was the guy on the panel who really defended me and said 'No, we're gonna give this guy a grant.' So that saved me. I would have had to leave New York, I think. I was that destitute at that time."

Aschenbrenner spent 15 years in New York, before returning to Southern California. [His work has shown across the United States](#), and internationally. He has pieces in the permanent collections at LACMA, the Palm Springs Art Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to name a few. He's taught at colleges in the area, and continued to develop his work, which now include additional sculptural series, and paintings.

And while Aschenbrenner doesn't delve into the more colorful details of his time in Vietnam—he doesn't wallow in the feelings those reflections would conjure—the lessons he learned have ultimately provided guidance he's taken with him throughout his life.

"In hindsight, everything seems to be perfect, but when you're going through it, it's unknown. It's frightening really, it's just frightening. You don't know where you're going to end up. But again, taking that thought from ... back in the Tiger Force, if you keep going forward and don't stop and give up something will occur. Something will happen—and then you deal with it."