

A Painful War's Haunted Art

Beauty and outrage from the catharsis of Vietnam

Tucked away beside a Whatcom Museum staircase in the beautiful city of Bellingham, Wash., hangs a memento of the wisdom that led us into Vietnam. In an old academic painting, a blond and brave Gen. George Armstrong Custer fires his pistol at an encircling, indigenous enemy West Point never prepared him for. As if in atonement, the main galleries have been given over to "A Different War: Vietnam in Art," the first major examination of that conflict's impact on American art. Guest curator Lucy Lippard has chosen more than 100 works by antiwar artists of the times, Vietnam veterans and younger artists recycling the war as a warning about Nicaragua, or—in the case of Vietnamese émigrés—personal catharsis. Much in the exhibition is powerful and moving. Some of it is pretty good art. But a lot of it is didactic and mawkish.

John Wehrle's "Saigon Managua" (1987), for example, is a two-sided, bullet-holed portrait, housed in a TV set that's topped by a hammer and sickle and chained to a toy pistol. It instructs us that (a) the media are jingoist, (b) popular revolutions are strategic East-West games to us and (c) yesterday's Viet Cong is today's Sandinista. Perhaps accurate, but hardly subtle. From the risky past (before "China Beach's" fashionable nostalgia) comes May Stevens's "Big Daddy Paper Doll" (1968), an illustrator-cute painting of the bulletheaded title character flanked by the costumes (general, cop, executioner, butcher) of his warmonger's trade. Accompanying Wehrle's and Stevens's crisp, pamphlet editorials are several wallful of pictures whose sour color and anguished faces remind us of the hackneyed formulas of most protest art.

The point of "A Different War" is, however, more moral than esthetic. It confronts us with images that a generation's remove can't easily dismiss. Nancy Spero's "Bombs and Helicopters Series" drawings (1966-68) are a cry of outrage made more furious by



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Yesterday's Saigon, today's Managua: Wehrle's didactic TV



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

1,000-yard stare: Romero's vet

their visual economy. Michael Aschenbrenner transforms the leg wound he suffered during the Tet Offensive into the painfully beautiful "Damaged Bone Series: Chronicles 1968" (1982), a wall installation in which lyrically twisted glass bones are healed with wire, cloth and twigs. And Rina Finkelstein's acrylic likenesses (1984) of Vietnam vets with their "1,000-yard stares" are ungilded memorials to the little bits of death still lurking in the war's survivors.

Lonely protest: Lippard contends that "artists avoided social issues" during the early 1960s because pop, minimalist and conceptual art were dominant. That changed, she says, when Stevens, Spero, painters Rudolph Baranik and Leon Golub (also shown here), and a small group of others began to express indignation at U.S. policy. That their efforts were too little (and the newer work in the show too late) says less about the work's sincerity or the artists' dedication than it does about the nature of fine art. Compared to films, novels and television (whose body-count/burnt-village news coverage did more than anything to turn this country against the war), paintings and sculpture are distanced from the front. Picasso's "Guernica," for instance, did more to enhance the Museum of Modern Art than it did to stall the Luftwaffe; it returned to Spanish eyes only after Franco's death. And abstraction didn't topple in the 1970s because artists were horrified by military atrocities. It gave way to the nonpolitical neexpressionism of David

Salle and Julian Schnabel because everybody figured rummaging through art history was the new avant-garde.

Nevertheless, part of Lippard's exhibition essay tells a valuable story about those artists (including minimalists who closed their shows in protest) who took a somewhat lonely stand. The Whatcom and New York's Independent Curators, Inc., deserve thanks for originating this show and sending it to Lincoln, Mass., Evanston, Ill., Akron, Ohio, Madison, Wis., Los Angeles and Boulder, Colo. Even in the wake of all the recent Vietnam movies and TV programs, the subject makes the major art institutions and their corporate sponsors uncomfortable. Without the likes of "A Different War," contemporary art exhibitions might totally forget the troublesome past. Including Little Big Horn.

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