

Amy Jackson
Artist Statement:
Viet-Nam War Series

To begin the ten paintings for the Viet-Nam War Series for her portion of the *Viet-Nam: A Journey* exhibition, Jackson had only the trauma and emotions of her memories from the period of growing up between the years of 1964 and 1975, when the Viet-Nam War ended. Jackson's experience of the war was through watching it on TV but fearing constantly that her two elder brothers, brother-in-law and neighbor children were going to be drafted to go to Viet-Nam. Indeed, people she knew did go, and either didn't come home, or came back "not the same". Her fears were founded. Back then the footage of the war was unfiltered and she would also hear and eventually talk strategy and politics with her family, about how to win the war. The bombings and eventual napalming of her beloved jungle were very traumatic, and she identified with every element of the fighting except the "enemy" but greatly wanted the war to end.

To work through her trauma related to Viet-Nam, Jackson painted 15 Viet-Nam Jungle paintings. A fellow artist, Mau-Don Nuyen, from Viet-Nam herself, September of 2014 recognized the Viet-Nameese jungle in a showing of one of the paintings at an Art League of Germantown, Maryland member meeting. She approached Jackson, whom she had met before, and they eventually tearfully and emotionally shared their passion for expressing their experiences of Viet-Nam and the war creatively, especially through painting. Jackson suggested a collaboration and the two agreed. Jackson had already approached Craig Higgins, a Viet-Nam veteran, who wanted to exhibit a curation from his 700 or so slide fotos he had taken in Viet-Nam while serving there in a MASH unit in 1966-67. Nuyen, Higgins and Jackson formalized the collaboration in December, 2014 and Jackson began the painting series. In 2015, the group of artists was approached by Viet-Nam veteran Michael F. Walsh, and they gladly welcomed him into the group, upon seeing his photographs and website, documenting over 400 memorials to those lost in Viet-Nam around the country for the past four years.

To begin with, Jackson didn't have a plan for her paintings, rather, instinctively and intuitively began the first painting with a set palette of colors for the series, letting the colors themselves be her guide. Black for death; Red for the blood shed by all in the war across all boundaries (civilian and military); Sky Blue for peace, infinity and sky, a constant during wartime; Gray for officers and institutions, smoke and clouds; Yellow for energy and fire; Silver and Gold for money spent on the military worldwide; Cream/Titan Buff: gross domestic product/resources diverted toward the military worldwide; Earth Tones: varying races who have served in the wars, the Earth itself, from which we all spring. Please see the extended Color Code: Key to Understanding.

Each painting evolved singly from Jackson's unconscious abstractly with an initial sketch, after a great deal of reflection upon her memories and emotions about the Viet-Nam War, and its effect on herself and others. Eventually, after the third

painting, she felt what she describes as a deep scream that she could not utter, only paint. Out of this sense of deep emotion, three tiny sketches on paper emerged, and subsequently three paintings, subtitled: *Screaming Flower*, *Screaming Bird-Flower* and *Screaming Jungle Leaf*. Processing and painting these three painting did indeed provide profound emotional catharsis for Jackson, about the violence, enormous loss and tragedy of the Viet-Nam War and all wars. A widening of scope beyond the single war began to occur.

The seventh painting is derived from a sketch of a small section of another painting, *Viet-Nam Jungle VII*, from 2014, a dense patch of seeming chaos. From this dense patch, Jackson pulled sharp and meaningful shapes for *Viet-Nam War VII: Soldier's Karma*. In her mind, it depicts a soldier being dropped into the conflict, into the jungle war's unpredictability and need to react for one's survival on a split second's notice, but also to affect one's fellow soldier's welfare and the welfare of North Viet-Nameese and civilians' lives, also on a hair trigger's notice. The soldier has karma, spinning from his actions like a black boomerang from above his head, while other warlike shapes of death and blood and institutions spin and act around him in the jungle, quite independent of him. This was Jackson's sense of what the average soldier had to deal with in Viet-Nam, an almost impossible situation to survive.

By the eighth painting, subtitled *Purgatory: Grief*, a sense of grief and loss and incredible identification with the scenes of trauma and loss had transformed in Jackson. She finally allowed herself to go to Wikipedia and read about the aftermath of Viet-Nameese history post-fall of Saigon: that many many hundreds of thousands of people had died trying to leave by boat and through political assassinations, through reeducation programs – all this death on top of all the death during the war itself. She thought of Viet-Nam today, reading that the country had a somewhat free economy but very little freedom of press, and has but the one political party. She also thought of the losses in all the wars of the world, the World Wars I and II in addition, which were also seared in her memory from so many newsreels she had seen on Ted Turner's Network growing up in Georgia, simultaneous to the Viet-Nam War, with her father telling her about his service in France during WWII.

She then looks up Democracy in Wikipedia, for wasn't that what her father was fighting for? And in her wanderings about freedom and related terms in the world on Wikipedia, she finds that the Allies in WWII agreed they were fighting for the Four Freedoms:

Freedom of Speech * Freedom of Religion * Freedom from Want * Freedom from Fear

This stunned her greatly, as she thought of those freedoms in both a current local and global context and how perfect they were as starters for universal freedoms to agree upon.

She feels very strongly at this point about the role of freedom in the world, as a free person, a free woman, about the role of the United Nations, the rule of international law, international human rights. Democracy for all. The scope widens as the grief transforms into the concept about what is worth fighting for going forward. Something clarifies in her spirit about all this death, about all this war in the world over time, about peace. She realizes, as a Buddhist, as a person, that war is a choice, that peace is a choice. The series as a whole is broadened into a series about Peace after all. Peace and Freedom are somehow intertwined.

Therefore, the Viet-Nam War and the series of paintings is now seen in context, over a period of time, in the context of all wars, all loss of life, across the board. This is a healing and transformative point, for to put the Viet-Nam War in perspective was a positive sign. In college, Jackson had major studies in International Relations. Now she was able to apply these lessons to this series in a way that was useful.

The ninth and tenth paintings were now clear: *Hell on Earth: Militarization*, and *Peace on Earth: Demilitarization*. Of course, the world is not so simple. Jackson believes in a strong military defense worldwide for Hitler and ISIS types, but knows that budget priorities are heavily overextended toward the military and need to be smoothed back down toward nonmilitary investments that are much-needed worldwide. Infrastructure, education, and food production, are just a few high priority items that are in dire need of such focused investment for a more balanced peace on Earth. Jackson has long believed that the carrot of showing why democracy works is more powerful than selling arms to countries or having to stifle warfare by force. Efforts such as those by The Carter Center in promoting fair elections and eradicating diseases go much farther in her opinion than weapons programs and are far cheaper.

Hence, an atomic bomb cloud from the 1950s was outlined for the ninth painting, with a distorted rainforest canopy in the mushroom cloud cap, to symbolize that not only do we jeopardize the welfare of the people of the planet by our overuse of the military but the health of the planet itself. And the tenth planet is, simply, the Earth floating in a Prussian Blue/Mars Black universe, symbolizing the one chance we have really, to get it right.

In closing, the terror of the Viet-Nam War for Jackson as a little girl for the first ten years of her life, during which time she became a secret flower child and peace activist sitting in front of the television, unable to express herself and her passion against the war but for peace – merged with Jackson as a frustrated college student majoring in Spanish and International Relations during the Cold War of the 1980s – to the Jackson of 2015 – knowing very well something's got to give in this spiral of militarization, still a flower child, a peace activist to the core, a student always, a human being, trying to do the right thing by this journey back to Viet-Nam – for all those who served, for all those who lost their lives on any side and in the cross-fire ... for peace, ultimately.

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