artIfacs

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‘artIfaces’

by

Nicki Dean Friess

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Steven Herrnstadt, Major Professor
   Anson Call
   Chiu-Shui Chan
   Barbara Walton

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2015

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................... v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 : WHY STUFF? ........................................................................................................ 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 : ARTIST INFLUENCES—PREDECESSORS AND MENTORS ............................. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 : SOLITUDE AND WANDERING ........................................................................... 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: MEMENTOS—DIGITAL REFLECTION ................................................................. 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: GATHERING IT ALL IN—FACSIMILES ............................................................... 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6: SIMULATION AND SIMULACRA—LAYERS OF REMOVAL ............................... 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 7: PROCESS—BUILDING WITH THE DIGITAL TOOL-SET .................................. 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 8: STAGING—ARRANGING, LIGHTING, RENDERING ........................................... 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 9: WAR PROTEST—ARTIST REACTIONS TO WAR ............................................. 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 10: PTSD—ONE SOLDIER’S JOURNEY ............................................................... 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 11: UNCANNY—SHADES OF FREUD! ................................................................. 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 12: SOLDIERS’ STORIES ....................................................................................... 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 13: ARTIFACS ....................................................................................................... 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 14: VIRTUAL REALITY EXPOSURE THERAPY (VRET) .................................... 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 15: VIRTUALITY ................................................................................................... 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 16: SHARING AT THE VET CENTER ................................................................. 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 17: FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS JOURNEY ............................................... 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................... 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A: VIRTUAL ASSEMBLAGES—OIL PAINTINGS ............................................ 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B: STUFF STORIES ............................................................................................. 59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The journey to completing this MFA began more than 40 years ago when a Special Forces medic, who also happened to dabble with drawing and painting, stepped foot for the first time in Vietnam. As with every veteran who survived a war, the sights, sounds, and smells still reside within me, and have shaped the work within. Many people have provided inspiration, encouragement, and support. They include:

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To veterans and soldiers of all wars, for the sacrifices they’ve made to keep us
free.

And finally, to PTSD survivors everywhere… you are not alone.
ABSTRACT

This exploration is to learn how to use today’s digital tools to recreate my still life objects in digital 3D space so I can carry them with me in my travels. The portable drive will in a way emulate the medicine bag of sacred objects. These are my sacred objects: remains of possessions, of ancestors and family members who have passed on; Toys my children and dead wife and passed away uncles once played with, bones of animals I have chanced upon in my walks, old tools and corroded plumbing fixtures…all the debris that clutters one’s life and journey, objects that I can’t let go of. Yet also objects that bog me down, objects that cling to me as briars. They cling as memories cling. And I cannot shake them off without erasing who I am. So I shall possess them, and they shall possess me, until I die. They will always either be with me or in storage. For I need them and they need me, to exist. But I am at a stage in life (66) where I want to travel. Yet I want my objects with me. So I am recreating them as my Virtual Still Life Assemblage Studio.

A side journey also opened up as I was exploring this process. I am a veteran with chronic PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). It arose from embedded memories and sensations that were buried within my psyche while serving as a Green Beret medic in Vietnam, where I received the Bronze Star and Purple Heart. I am also an amputee as a result of injuries sustained there. PTSD casts a shadow upon my work, my life. Though after years of therapy I can escape it on occasion and enter back into the sunlight, it never strays far. It often creates a certain melancholy in the work.

I have during the process of this project decided to confront my demons directly, to look closely at the memories that haunt me, and to allow them to emerge. They too are objects of my memories. They also are my mementos. I and they need to find our pathway to live together. For the virtual world aspect of this project, I recreated a few of the more haunting images that reside within me. Also, I have begun the process of sharing this virtual experience with other veterans with PTSD as a way of acknowledging that we are not alone. And though this imagery is part of our lives, it is not our defining factor. It is just one aspect of our being. And hopefully, by participating in this virtual experience, a dialogue can be opened up, and an acknowledgment, rather than a hiding from, can emerge. And also it is hoped that others will have an opportunity to at least vicariously get a taste of what our world is like.

The title of this project is artIfacs: “art” is the creative process; “I” is the artist, the creator; “facs” is for facsimile, the replica of the original.
CHAPTER 1
WHY STUFF?

I remember walking into the painting studio at Drake University at the beginning of the semester in the early seventies. There on a table was a pile of objects arranged by Professor Jules Kirschenbaum. I nearly walked out of class. I wanted to paint something important—portraits, history, landscapes, abstract imagery, anything but this…this pile of stuff! However, it was required and so I reluctantly painted it (painting and drawing still-life objects are often a required aspect of college and university art programs). And thus began my life-long love affair with painting objects.

I soon realized the particular advantages still-life painting had to offer. The subject matter holds still (unlike people), it doesn’t change with the weather (unlike landscapes), its value doesn’t necessarily depend on the subject (such as historical paintings). For me, still life painting was more closely aligned with abstract painting (at least in my mind). When assembling an arrangement of objects, I often reached a point where the subject and context of the items little mattered, they were simply shapes, with various values, colors, textures, which could be arranged across the surface of the canvas. Through the process of painting, I learned to see the vista before me as basic forms of intertwining shapes. By a simple shifting of my head, I could alter how objects met, and create a linear network in which one edge flowed into another, then another, then another. The surface became an interlocking web of shapes, each merging into one another. Yet if I followed this intertwining faithfully, when completed an image would emerge, not necessarily a faithful reproduction of what was there, but a capturing of its essential nature. Something about this process also awakened something deep within me that harkened back to endless childhood hours spent on paint by number painting with my mother. The little shapes floating on the surface were abstract images to my young eyes, a myriad of meaningless forms floating on the surface. Yet if I faithfully dabbed the color of oil paint that corresponded to the little number resting inside each form, an image would suddenly arise, as if by magic. The picture composed itself as I simply painted shapes. Even now I just see shapes lying upon the flat surface of the canvas. Their interlocking forms also take me back to childhood days of putting puzzles together. I would be amazed at the many little pieces of rounded organic forms that would interlock with each other when the right piece was located. Looking at each piece individually, I often could not tell what was held within that tiny segment of the image. Yet I realized if I could connect all these pieces together properly a picture would emerge.
The magic has never left. Even now, when I arrange objects, a point is reached where I am simply arranging forms. As I hold an object, I rotate it around, examine it, experiment with different placements, until its image becomes a two dimensional shape of a certain color, value and texture.

After many years of working this way, I began to realize that another aspect of image making began to arise. Sometimes I like to work in a series, creating numerous variations centered around the same small group of main objects. I first became aware of this during a series of work I later titled the “Small Mannequin Series”, each featuring a wooden artist mannequin. The series emerged during a time when I was dealing with a difficult bout of PTSD relating to experiences endured during the Vietnam War. The mannequin became me, and its adventures through the various paintings paralleled in very subtle ways the inner subconscious turmoil that was plaguing me at that time.

Even as I work and create, I am often drawn to those things that are worn, used, deteriorating. Things and remnants that have lived life, that have experienced existence. (Fig. 1) “From the moment the growth process begins and before it ends, the deterioration starts, for there is some aging and decline even in youth...The sun, insects, animals, fire, rot and ice all work to make less that which chemistry, heat, pressure, time and life have worked to put together.” ¹

The interlocking fragments of our experiences and memories create an illusive image within the tapestry of our lives. (Fig. 2) Life has its time, its coming and its going. I have observed its fragility in the midst of war, even in the midst of day to day life. All is temporary. I but do my best to recreate my very small aspect of it.

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ARTIST INFLUENCES—PREDECESSORS AND MENTORS

I am influenced by artists who do unusual or obsessive things with objects. Guiseppe Arcimboldo (1527-1593) used various pieces of fruit or other natural objects to create a human face. The elements that compose his images “…are all highly detailed depictions of the real thing. The only imagination is in the way he assembled the elements”. 2 (Fig. 3) He also created paintings that on first glance look like an ordinary bowl of vegetables, yet when turned upside down become an image of a face. (Fig. 4 and 5).

Fig. 3. Guiseppe Arcimboldo, *Summer 1572*, 1572, oil on canvas, 29.4 x 22.2 in., Private Collection, Bergamo. Reproduced from Sandra Forty, *Arcimboldo* (Cobham, Surrey: Taj Books International Llp., 2011), 53.

Fig. 4, 5. Guiseppe Arcimboldo, *The Vegetable Gardener*, 1590, oil on wood, 13.7 x 9.4 in., Museo Civico Ala Ponzone, Cremona, Italy. Reproduced from Sandra Forty, *Arcimboldo* (Cobham, Surrey: Taj Books International Llp., 2011), 67.

I have always been drawn to the art of vanitas, those well-executed reminders of our mortality, often created with basic objects arranged in a way that remind us of life’s temporary and fragile nature. (Fig. 6). “Nearly all still lifes include – to a greater or less extent – the aspect of vanitas, a lament about the transience of all things.” Skulls, decaying fruit and flowers, old and worn things, indicate the passage of things with time. In this work, *Vanitas Still Life*, by the Dutch artist Pieter Claesz, an overturned wine glass further accentuates the effect. “Claesz’s metaphysical criticism concentrates on book knowledge and its futility in the face of eternity.” With simple items artists are able to express thoughts on mortality and transience, expressing the impermanence of our existence.


Another artist obsessed with objects was Ivan Albright. He felt his paintings should hold a deeper meaning than just their surface. “A painting should be a piece of philosophy – or why do it?” He also was obsessive in his way of working, sometimes spending several years off and on with a single painting. This sometimes became an issue when he moved his studio from one location to another. While working on the painting Poor Room – There is No Time, No End, No Today, No Yesterday, No Tomorrow, Only the Forever, and Forever and Forever Without End (The Window), he moved his studio from Warrenville to Chicago. Before the move he had spent a year creating an elaborate drawing on the canvas, as well as creating many sketches and diagrams to guide his work. He numbered all the objects of his still life arrangement (Fig. 7) to help him reassemble it precisely in the new studio. But it was an impossible task, and he had to apply more gesso to the canvas and start the drawing over again. He finally completed this work after several years (Fig. 8)

Fig. 7. Ivan Albright in his studio with the arrangement of objects for the painting Poor Room. Reproduced from Courtney Graham Donnell, “A Painter Am I: Ivan Albright”, in edit. Susan F. Rossen, Ivan Albright (Chicago: Chicago Art Institute, 1997), 43.

Fig. 8. Ivan Albright, Poor Room – There is No Time, No End, No Today, No Yesterday, No Tomorrow, Only the Forever, and Forever and Forever Without End (The Window), 1942-43, 1948-55, 1957-63, oil on canvas, 48 x 37 inches, The Art Institute of Chicago. Reproduced from edit. Susan F. Rossen, Ivan Albright (Chicago: Chicago Art Institute, 1997), Plate 40.


Another artist, one who continuously returned to the same objects over and over, using them for their formal qualities, rather than any particular narrative, was Giorgio Morandi (Fig. 9). “The distance which Morandi, like Cezanne, likes to place between himself and the objects aims to isolate the image from its usual context, to set it free of any practical function in order to be able to contemplate it in its pure state.” 6 As he worked on his arrangements, “Through careful and rigorous selection, he sifts, purifies, re-arranges, striving for that which is essential, which, by definition, permits neither a bit more nor a bit less.” 7 Once the objects were selected, he devoted himself to their arrangement. “First the artist moved his objects about and adjusted them on a pre-arranged surface.” He often made quick compositional sketches, then “…studied the composition in space… until a moment arrived when the composition seemed perfect…” 8 (Fig. 10)

---


One final artist under whose influence I fell would be my teacher and mentor Jules Kirschenbaum, who was a professor and chair of the art department at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. He continuously worked on his own art despite the demands of his position. He had a passionate seriousness about creating that influenced many of his students, myself included. Some of his words are included in a book by Tom Worthen, former art history professor at Drake, *Jules Kirschenbaum: The Need to Dream of Some Transcendent Meaning*. “‘I am for an art…in which what you see is just the beginning of an endless chain of allusion….I don’t know what my work means. I only know how to do it.’ Mr. Worthen went on to say that ‘At some fundamental level, his art expressed his need (as he said) ‘to dream of some transcendent meaning.’” Although he occasionally included figures, his work often was solely a variety of objects, often including skulls and bones of various kinds. (Fig. 11).


On one occasion in 1991 he was provided a grant “…of forty-two hundred dollars from Drake University to acquire anatomical models in order ‘to paint organic forms which are visually startling and have a violent emotional impact.’”¹⁰ (Fig. 12). In 1998-99 he worked on a painting, investigating once more many of the skulls from a decade before. (Fig. 13). He died from Lymphoma before completing this painting.

Fig. 12. Jules Kirschbaum, Commentary III/Body of Faith, (media, dimensions and collection not stated). Reproduced from Tom Worthen, Jules Kirschbaum: The Need to Dream of Some Transcendent Meaning (Iowa City: University of Iowa Museum of Art, 2006), 89.


All of the artists I have mentioned were collectors of stuff. They stored their items in their studios and in their homes. They each worked endless hours in the world of their studios, surrounded by their objects. I am realizing that I too am a collector. All these years and it’s just dawning on me. The still life assemblages are groupings of artifacts collected on my journey.

Fig. 14. Nicki Friess, *Debris Field*, arrangement of objects.

Fig. 15. Nicki Friess, *Debris Field*, 2013, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in.
CHAPTER 3
SOLITUDE AND WANDERING

I have often felt at home reading Thoreau’s writings in “On Solitude”, which describe a deep connection with nature during his solitary experiences. His very pores “imbibe delight” as he walks along the stony shore of the pond. In his enclave he has “a little world all to myself.” In this little world he has “…never felt lonesome.” He feels a certain “doubleness” that allows him to become “remote from myself” and become “spectator”, observing his actions and experiences without becoming enmeshed in them. He finds it “…wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time…I love to be alone”. In describing the congestion of society (even in that early day) he says “We live thick and are in each other’s way…” Then again returning to aloneness “I am no more lonely than…a single…dandelion in a pasture…” His connection to the natural world surrounding him is such that he wonders “Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?” 11

When I walk, I like to take my time, to meander around. Thoreau, writing in the chapter “Walking”, mentions a specific way of walking, to “saunter”. His definition, whether accurate or not, brings a level of richness to the word hard to find elsewhere. “I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks,—who had a genius, so to speak for sauntering:…” He described two possible origins of the word. One arose during the Middle Ages, used to refer to idle wanderers who begged for charity pretending to be “…going a la Sainte Terre,”’ off to the Holy Land, until they became nicknamed a “…Saint-Terrer, a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander”, a derogatory reference to those that were wandering about pretending to be on a quest, while just being lazy and begging. Yet Thoreau went on to say that those who truly intend to go there are “…saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean.” He also mentioned another meaning “…derived from san terre, without land or home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering.” 12 This is the saunterer I wish to become.

I have enjoyed solitude all my life. Playing alone in the snow as a child, climbing


trees and looking about, running through the grass. I had a younger brother, but, at five years younger than me, he was more annoyance than comfort. My main companion was my German shepherd dog named “Duke”. I liked riding my bike to the railroad crossing, walking through the walnut grove, climbing trees, playing in the haymow, stumbling through stalks of fresh-picked corn, wandering to the middle of the field, and realizing all the houses looked the same from this distance. At last choosing one, hoping it was correct.

So it is with life. We wander, finding ourselves in the middle of a distant and isolated field. We search the horizon, seeking anything familiar, safe. (Fig. 16). Thus we choose the landmarks to guide our journey, only occasionally finding that dangerous vista on the horizon, so enticing in its promise of adventure, we strive past (or through) the scary creatures lurking there, and at last bask in the invigorating glory of the unknown.

Fig. 16. Nicki Friess, View Toward Bagley, 2013, photograph.
This brings me to thoughts about a solitary wandering artist. Hamish Fulton is a walking artist. Art is “how you look at life” not “object production.” His works “interpret” the walking experience. The walking experience itself is the “art.” For Fulton, the art “product” is texts, photographs, books, used as a way of sharing the walking experience (Fig. 17). He played outside as a child. As I mentioned, I too played outside as a child. Also, I’ve always felt that my art is a byproduct of having a certain type of experience. Perhaps as Fulton says, the experience is the art. Fulton often created text to act as fragments of the journey that link the experience into a unit. His artifacts, especially the photographs, create the illusion of being there. On page 130 he states “It is from this material, gathered on my walk, that I am able to generate the artworks.” 13 (Fig. 18)

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“Fulton’s philosophy…is ‘to leave no trace.’ Wherever possible, the landscape must remain untouched by whomsoever walks through it.” 14 “I attempt to link art and walking. Walking can compare and connect urban life (half the world’s population live in cities) with nature, wild nature.” 15 In the book Mountain Time, there is an article by Jay Griffiths, “Hamish Fulton—Walking.” He speaks of the history of walking, and how wanderers would share their tales and stories for perhaps shelter and a bit of food. “Hamish Fulton is also a guide…who can show the way, and his gift to the viewers of his work comes in the form of a whispered invitation: walk the wild ways.” 16

Once I read of Fulton’s sensitivity for the natural landscape, and his desire to leave the wilderness untouched, I felt a need to rethink my methods of object collecting as I travel. I now realize I can do my walk as Fulton, gather photographs (as did he) and create sketches and diagrams (as did the Hudson River artists) then bring these traces back to my studio to use as raw materials for art creation. My pathway will be to collect individual remnants that I discover. I will recreate them in digital space, and within this virtual arena, this virtual stage, I will recompose them into a new arrangement. I am not interested in recreating their in situ existence, but in placing them into a foreign environment, piled together with objects they have never met before, creating a new world that synthesizes and molds them into a new entity guided softly by me, who in the end is but the hand upon the brush/stylus, the fingers upon the keyboard. The actors in the isolation of the studio will take their place upon this artificial stage and create whatever performance and experience they are destined to bring into being at this particular moment of their (perhaps several times removed) being.

16. Fulton, Mountain Time, 16
As I ponder these intertwining concepts of collecting and walking and creating, I wonder how can I unite my love of the solitary walk with my need to collect objects that are reminders or signs of my journey in a more ecological way, following the concepts of Hamish Fulton and the idea of “leave no trace”? I could, and I have in the past, journeyed into the wilderness with my easel and supplies, and painted the wilderness, as did the Hudson River painters. They entered the wilderness, collected and documented their experiences with drawings and color studies, then returned to their studios to create a final product (Fig. 15). Yet they often looked at the totality of the experience. I tend to see the fragments - a little of this, a little of that – and pull them together in a way that they were never connected in real life, creating new visual and psychological relationships. In other words, I still feel compelled to collect things from my journey, and then take them back to my studio to pile up and paint. I am a still life painter at heart.

CHAPTER 4
MEMENTOS—DIGITAL REFLECTION

Although I create my digital objects in three-dimensional space, the concept relates somewhat to an interesting experiment that was done using two dimensional digital technology. People like to collect things: pictures, objects, mementos of their life experiences. An experiment about digital collecting was recorded in 2010 in a paper titled “A saunter down memory lane: Digital reflection on personal mementos” by Vaiva Kalnikaitė and Steve Whittaker. Their abstract begins “We all collect personal mementos, treasured objects that remind us about our past.” They felt that methods of digitally archiving these items are being underutilized. They created an application called MemoryLane to aid people in collecting digital mementos. They cited studies that showed the importance of everyday objects and the benefits of active organization. (It seems it isn’t just artists that like to play with and organize their objects! - ndf) They created three areas for people to store their digital items: views themed around home (Fig. 20), people, and places.

Fig. 20. “MemoryLane interface showing the home view.”. Reproduced from Kalnikaitė, Vaiva and Steve Whittaker, “A saunter down memory lane: Digital reflection on personal mementos,” in International Journal of Human-Computer Studies 69 (2011): 299.


They could also record audio narratives to go with their objects. The participants were given a device to record photographs and audio at the same time and taught how to use it. One unusual finding was that the audio narratives weren’t very popular, with people often not liking to hear their own voices. The study analyzes in depth all the various aspects and ramifications of this form of saving digital memories. The primary area of interest for me was the connection the authors were attempting to make between collecting and organizing mementos in real life compared to doing it digitally. Although I will create 3D objects, the concept of a place for preserving digital memories relates well to what I am doing. And it also brings my thoughts back to the various artists I have mentioned, and their collections of objects. I wonder how much of their lives and history were intertwined with the objects they spent so much time with.

CHAPTER 5
GATHERING IT ALL IN: FACSIMILES

As the participants in the "A saunter down memory lane: Digital reflection on personal mementos" study, I often photograph objects I come across. As I seek new items, I am beginning to realize that I only need to own them as digital facsimiles. As I photograph the objects in situ I on occasion place a small ruler in the scene to gauge their size and proportions (Fig. 22). I create ancillary sketches to support this process, if needed. If I move the objects, I replace them as accurately as I can, back into the position I discovered them in. That way they will be there for others to enjoy. Once this information is collected I then return to my office/studio to recreate the objects in digital 3D space, modeling and texturing to enhance their sense of believability. The digital objects are then combined with the ongoing virtual collection and arranged as actors upon a virtual stage, creating the new tableau they will become part of.

Fig. 22. Nicki Friess, Ohio Driftwood Reference Photo 1, 2014, photograph.

Fig. 23. Nicki Friess, Ohio Drifter, 2014 virtual object.
CHAPTER 6
SIMULATION AND SIMULACRA—LAYERS OF REMOVAL

This process of creating virtual objects will create several layers of removal from the original object. There are the photographs and sketches, creating a 3D model based on the these, using the photo and hand painting (on the tablet) to texture the object, using the node editor to refine the material settings, linking the objects together into a scene, arranging them, adjust the lighting, rendering out the image, and creating a print from the render. I wonder about these stages of removal. My thoughts go to the writings of Jean Baudrillard in his book Simulacra and Simulation. He begins by referring to the Borges fable of a map that was created so realistically that it perfectly fit and mimicked the land which it represented. As the Empire deteriorated over time, the map too rotted away, until there were only bits and pieces of either left.  

Another passage by Baudrillard describes the “successive phases of the image:

It is the reflection of a profound reality:

It masks and denatures a profound reality;

It masks the absence of a profound reality;

It has no relation to any reality whatsoever. It is its own pure simulacrum.”

I wonder how far I have removed my objects from their original reality. When I do a painting from the final rendered version of the assemblage, what is it exactly that I am painting? Is it at best an interpretation of a simulation of a distant entity that I no longer comprehend? For after all the hours of modeling and texturing and refining these digital objects, my senses are overloaded by their virtual presence. They have long since overshadowed whatever remnants of memory once remained of the original object. While I recreate them in digital form, I realize that even just the limitations of my level of skill is a factor in further removing these digital traces from the original being. After all the stages of removal they are but a whisper of what once was. I could go back to the source (if they would still be there and intact), but it would be an endless procession of refinements that would never quite reach the reality. I would become trapped in an endless loop of seeking a reality I could never quite attain. Yet I wonder, have these


digital beings now overtaken, superseded the original reality? Are they all I have left of my excursions of discovery? Does it ultimately matter? Can there not be satisfaction in the pursuit of this illusion I find myself wrapped up in?

I would like to say that the image on the left is the actual oil can, and the one on the right is the virtual fascimile. Yet they are both symbols. Neither is the real oil can. It is elsewhere, in the actual physical world. Whether it continues its earthly existence or rots away in a junkyard somewhere is irrelevant. For in this process the only reality that remains for me is the fascimile, the symbol. It is the same for Rene Magritte’s painting, The Treachery of Images. We do not know whether the original pipe remains in existence or not. Yet this painting, this symbol, removed from the original reality, lives on. Below the image Magritte wrote “Ceci n’est pas une pipe”, French for “This is not a pipe.” About the painting he would say, “The famous pipe. How people reproached me for it! And yet, could you stuff my pipe? No, it’s just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture “This is a pipe”, I’d have been lying!”

Fig. 24. Nicki Firess, Oil Can Reference Photo 1, 2014, photograph.

Fig. 25. Nicki Firess, Oil Can, 2014, virtual object.


CHAPTER 7
PROCESS—BUILDING WITH THE DIGITAL TOOL SET

And so with all these thoughts jumbling in my mind I proceeded to work. I photograph in the RAW format, so for the initial RAW conversion I use either Adobe Lightroom or UFRaw. I use the 3D modeling program Blender and the 2D photo and image manipulation programs Photoshop, Gimp, MyPaint and Krita to do the digital segment of this work. As I proceed items may become several times removed from the original through the following stages: 1. Photograph and/or sketching; 2. Photo-manipulation; 3. Bringing the photograph as an image plane into the 3D modeling program; 4. Digitally model the object with polygons, edges, points and various tools such as arrays, Booleans, mirror; 5. Project the photographs onto the orthogonal surfaces of the object; 6. Unwrap the models to create UV maps for texturing 7. Paint the projected texture surfaces onto the model as a whole; 8. Manipulate and blend the edge seams of the textured model and adjust the textural effects on the modeled surface using the node system; 9. Combine the various unrelated objects onto the top of the virtual card table or support; 10. Adjust the lighting effects; 11. Adjust the various s rendering parameters and create a rendered image; 12. (sometimes) Do post-rendering adjustments in the compositor; 13. (sometimes) Do final post processing work in Photoshop or Gimp (this completes the monitor-ready phase of the image); 13. Size, adjust, and print the image; 14. Mat and frame the print. This creates an object multiple steps removed from its original reality. 15. Also, for a virtual experience project, import the images into a game engine (such as Unreal 4 or Unity 5). 16. Import a static mesh component for the frame of the artwork. 17. Place and light the virtual artwork in the virtual gallery.

And thus there are many layers of removal between the original object and the final product. Many of the original objects will be disposed of after their digital counterparts are created (such as old used plumbing fixtures, rusted wrenches, rotting toys, etc.). For them, the virtual recreation will be their only presence. As Beaudrillard said, the image has become “…its own pure simulacrum.”

CHAPTER 8
STAGING—ARRANGING, LIGHTING, RENDERING

The “Assemblage” file has all the objects linked into it. They float as if on a wall, arranged in a grid. They are each links to the original object files. Any changes to the original objects will also show up in the linked objects. A virtual linked card table is also in the scene. The objects are selected and grabbed one at a time. Each that is used is moved to the table and arranged in space. The view is rotated around to see how the object interacts with other objects. Without physics, the objects can poke through each other like ghosts. So they must be carefully moved, using multiple viewpoints, until they are in place.

Once all the objects for this particular assemblage have been placed, the camera and lights are adjusted. Test renders are done to check things. Then a higher resolution render is set up, and the final render is then completed. This is then saved as a high-res tiff.

In all these processes, the name of the game is SAVE SAVE SAVE! Ctrl shift S – then hit the plus key to save multiple incremental versions. Each single object will have from 50 to 200 versions, and often similar for the final assemblages. All the clutter of these multiple saved versions must be either deleted or archived. Any challenging parts (such as screws, nuts, sprockets, chains, etc.) that can be reused in other objects will be saved in the library. The same for various materials. The files need to stay in their same relative locations or all the links can be broken. There is a folder for the object textures (COLOR, BUMP, NORMAL, SPEC, etc.)

The Blender files and rendered image files are kept together so I can remember what an object looks like. The still life Blend files and rendered images are kept in their own folder, inside the Assemblage objects folder, to maintain the link connections.

Occasionally, I notice errors in an object with the modeling or texturing. I then go back to the original object to correct this. Because objects are linked they are updated automatically. I then re-render any of the assemblage images that contain this object.

These are the basic steps that go into creating these digital still life assemblages.
Now I must decide if this is enough. Do they have enough presence as a rendered image to be considered a work of art? Or do I need to create an oil painting based on the rendering? Or am I, because of my years as a traditional artist, just trying to give a legitimacy to these new “bastard” children I am creating?

Fig. 27. Nicki Friess, *Assemblage 19*. 2014. rendered 3D digital., 36 x 48 in.

Fig. 28. Nicki Friess, *Assemblage 19*. 2014. oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in.
CHAPTER 9
WAR PROTEST—ARTIST REACTIONS TO WAR

How do artists react to war? This for many becomes a pivotal event in their lives, especially if they have experienced it directly. Having been a Green Beret medic who served in Vietnam and was wounded in March, 1970, I have always felt that the work I do is constantly being overshadowed by those now distant experiences. Others in observing what I do often have mentioned feeling there is a certain sadness, a melancholy, in my imagery. Though I am an amputee from the war, my biggest struggle has been with the repercussions of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), given different names in other wars: shell shock, battle fatigue, combat neurosis.

I used to struggle to keep these memories from darkening my artwork. But it became a futile struggle, and I felt I interrupted the creative flow by trying to divert it. I have learned to accept its influence as part of life, just as the influence of PTSD on my daily activities has become part of my life. Yet a part that, with many years of therapy and reflection, I have learned to manage and accept.

During my work on this thesis, I began to realize that I could not keep this part of my life separate from the rest. It would feel too dishonest. So I decided to seek ways to incorporate my more direct reactions to long ago war experiences into the rest of the art I have been creating for this project. After completing the virtual walk through experience, I began to realize a similarity, perhaps a bit of comraderie, with other artists who have chosen at one stage of their life or another to address the concerns and suffering of warfare. There are many that come to mind, but I have decided to concentrate on just a few. One a soldier during World War I, the others, though not necessarily combatants, have each reacted in their own particular ways to the nastiness of warfare that had taken place in Spain, one reacting to the Peninsular War, involving conflict between Spain and France (as well as others), the other two reacting to the later Spanish Civil War. I will look at them chronologically.

The First is Francisco Goya, whose did a series of etchings reacting to the effects of war between France and Spain during the early 19th century. Some of these images, which were only published after his death, portray the horrible atrocities committed during times of warfare. The images each portray nude male soldiers, bound and with
limbs missing. He took a brutal look at the realities that were taking place. “... Goya, fastidiously and mercilessly, confronts us with the appalling actions and consequences of war, with unbearable precision and honesty.” There is no glorification, only suffering and nastiness. I have seen similar sights during my time at war. They are challenging, and impossible to erase. They are a part of who I am. I shall carry them with me as long as I live..

Fig. 29. Francisco Goya. This is worse, 1810-1820, etching, 15.7x20.8cm, Wikipidia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Disasters_of_War#/media/File:Prado_-_Los_Desastres_de_la_Guerra_-_No._37_-_Esto_es_peor.jpg (accessed 3-30-2015)

Fig. 30. Francisco Goya. horrific feat! With dead men, 1810-1820, (plate 39), etching, 13.8x18.7 cm., Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Disasters_of_War#/media/File:Prado_-_Los_Desastres_de_la_Guerra_-_No._39_-_Grande_haza%C3%B1a_con_muertos.jpg (accessed 3-30-2015)

An artist who served in the war and whose work was affected by his experiences was Otto Dix. “Otto Dix served as a machine-gunner during World War 1, serving in the German army (1914-1918), often sketching war scenes. “He later commented ‘War is something so animal-like: hunger, lice, slime, these crazy sounds…War was something horrible, but nonetheless something powerful…Under no circumstances could I miss it! It is necessary to see people in this unchained condition in order to know something about man’ (Kinkel, 1961; repr. In 1985 exh. Cat., p. 280).”

“‘I told myself’, he later commented, ‘that life is not colourful at all. It is much darker, quieter in its tonality, much simpler. I wanted to depict things as they really are’ (Wetzel, 1965; repr. In 1985 exh. Cat., pp. 288-9).”

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In his painting and collage work image *The Skat Players* (Fig. 35), “Dix depicts three hideously disfigured officers playing the German card game skat in a typical German cafe complete with newspapers and coatrack. The players clutch their cards with foot, mouth, and mechanical hands. Their faces and heads have devastating injuries—to see a real version of this morbid image Dix had only to step out of his studio into the street.”

Dix looked honestly at the world about him, and portrayed it with all its ugliness and disfigurement.

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Salvador Dali, a Surrealist artist, created a challenging response to war. (Fig. 36.) “In Soft construction of boiled beans (1936) surrealist Salvador Dali-like Picasso in Guemica (1937)—explores the civil war in Spain. The grotesqueness of the horrors of civil war culminates in a gargantuan creature that dominates the picture space. It appears as though this creature has dismembered itself, only to recombine in the most unspeakable mutation of the human body imaginable. It is an ‘insane’ monument to a fragmented Spain (Ross, 1990). The grotesque form in this painting induces an uneasy and alienated emotional experience due to the unknown and violent form of the creature. Also, as in Bakhtin’s Rabelais, the concept of the dismembering and recombining of the creature emphasises the instability of the twentieth century.”

“Gruesome, bizarre, and excruciatingly meticulous in technique, Salvador Dali’s paintings rank among the most compelling portrayals of the unconscious mind”

In his response to the civil war, Dali described this convulsively arresting picture as “...a vast human body breaking out into monstrous excrescences of arms and legs tearing at one another in a delirium of autostrangulation” Within this imaginative creation, he creates distorted and writhing body parts, reminiscent of visions of war.


Pablo Picasso painted Guernica as a response to the bombing of the town during the Spanish Civil War. The work did not go to Spain until after democracy was restored. This image has become an icon of protest against the ravages of war. The painting evokes a collective memory of the destruction and deaths. “Cultural memory is a loaded term, with many potential meanings; in this article I use it to refer generally to the way something originating and existing in the realm of cultural production such as a painting can operate both to transmit a ‘memory’ of an event and indeed become the ‘memory’ of the event beyond its temporal moment” Yet the work is not the event it portrays. It is a fascimile, a reproduction, of an experience. “As Andreas Huyssen puts it: ‘Representation always comes after, even though some media will try to provide us with the delusion of pure presence’ (Huyssen 1995: 2)”

30. Benjamin Hannavy Cousen, “Memory, power and place: where is Guernica?”, Journal of Romance Studies, 9.2 (Summer 2009) 47.
I too have seen war...

Fig. 38. Nicki Friess, *Napalm*, virtual object, 2015.

Fig. 39. Nicki Friess, *Split*, virtual object, 2015.
CHAPTER 10
PTSD—ONE SOLDIER’S EXPERIENCE

I am a veteran whose life is continuously overshadowed by PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). I was a Green Beret Medic who worked in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, also the tri-border area (where Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia meet), and last down in the South in the Mekong Delta area near the Cambodian border. While there, I received a Bronze Star, which was presented in a simple outdoor ceremony.

I was wounded when I stepped on an explosive booby-trap (what they call an IED this day and age). My tibia and fibula were broken, and my heel was shattered into five or six pieces. After nine months in the Army hospital at Fort Riley, Kansas, I was finally discharged, given a disability retirement from the Army, and entered once more back into “the world” to get on with my life.
After several years, a recurring staff infection in my heel caught up with me, and they had to amputate my lower left leg. After several months I recuperated from the amputation. Thanks to modern prosthetics, I was able to get back to work and life. The amputation was easy to heal from. The psychological and emotional impact of war was not. I began to realize something was terribly wrong, and finally sought treatment at the Des Moines Vet Center in the early 1980’s. I have been in and out of treatment ever since, including spending five weeks in a psychiatric treatment facility at the VA Hospital for inpatient PTSD treatment. Art has been my way of coping and surviving. Yet the uncanny shadow of PTSD haunts my work.

Fig. 41. Nicki Friess, *My Left Foot*. photograph, 1970.

Fig. 42. Nicki Friess.*Leg*. photograph. 2014.
CHAPTER 11
UNCANNY—SHADES OF FREUD!

Many elements from Sigmund Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” (“Das Unheimliche”) are reminiscent of the effects on me of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, caused by the experiencing of difficult events in the Vietnam War as a Green Beret medic) Life often feels full of uncertainty. There is always a certain sense of confusion, unpredictability. Living daily with PTSD I can attest to feelings of uncertainty, of life’s unpredictability, and feeling disoriented in the world I returned to.

In this essay Freud says “He (Jentsch) ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always be that in which one does not know where one is as it were. The better orientated in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it.”

In another passage he says “According to him (Schelling) everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light.”

“This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand Schelling’s definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light.”

“It may be true that the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it, and that everything that is uncanny fulfils this condition.”

These are reminiscent of flashbacks (sudden and intrusive, disturbing memories, often vivid and seeming real) that can evolve from repressed memories and images. They can be so powerful that the person may believe that are actually experiencing the past event. Speaking from personal experience, a flashback may occur years (or decades) after the initial traumatic event, and explode suddenly and without warning. They can be the rebirth of a memory that was so difficult that the veteran tried to keep it buried, hidden, repressed.

“Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist,...—all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them...” These were images I often was confronted with in my experiences as a combat medic.


32. Ibid. 4. 33. Ibid. 13. 34. Ibid. 15. 35. Ibid. 14.
“This is that an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes, and so on.” 36 This passage again speaks of the lines between the real and the imagined blurring. Even during the times of experiencing it war at times seemed unreal, as though watching events taking place on a movie screen, rather than unfolding before me. And his mentioning of a symbol taking over the presence of the thing it symbolizes is similar to the Beaudrillard passage covered in Chapter 6. Picasso’s painting of Guernica has in a way been such a symbol/signified shift, where Guernica (the painting) is our memory of the savage attack, overshadowing any memories of actual bombing images (except perhaps with those that survived it) while Gernika (Basque name) the actual town that was bombed, has long since healed and outgrown its tragic past.

One last thought about the word “uncanny”: In an essay titled “The Uncanny Valley” by Masahiro Mori, written in 1970 He says “I have noticed that, as robots appear more humanlike, our sense of their familiarity increases until we come to a valley. I call this relation the ‘uncanny valley.’” 37 Once their semblance of reality and familiarity passes a certain point, they become unsettling, eerie, “uncanny”.

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36. Ibid. 15.

Eric Sofge refers to this paper in an article in the web version of Popular Mechanics. “Visualized as a curve, our sense of familiarity theoretically tracks upward as we encounter increasingly human-like machines. The steep, uncanny drop-off that marks the point of too human-like becomes a valley when you include the subsequent steep rise associated with a real human being, or perfect android. Those robots unlucky enough to topple into the valley are victims of our intimate, hard-wired perception of human biology and social cues.”

For 3D character artists, the uncanny valley is an area to avoid. They sometimes try to keep their characters from being too human, staying on the back side of the “uncanny valley”, at least until the day when we can so completely and accurately model a living creature that they will seem absolutely real.

“In 2004 the ‘Uncanny Valley’ concept came to the fore again as a talking point in the CGI field during box office ‘battle royal’ between two blockbuster CGI films, Pixar’s The Incredibles and Warner Brothers’ The Polar Express. The comparison between the emotional warmth we felt for Pixar’s stylized plastic family and our uncomfortable feelings about the more accurate yet eerie characters in The Polar Express, which were described by many critics as being disturbing, was a subject for much critical debate, partly because their releases coincided (Oddey and White, 2009, p:33).”


Yet, with all this in mind, I try to jump fully into this “uncanny valley”, to imbue my characters with an unsettling eeriness, to make them reminiscent of the PTSD nightmares that awaken us from the depths of sleep. I feel that gives them a greater reality in relation to their context than they could have otherwise. For is not war itself an uncanny entity?

Fig. 45. The Polar Express - The Incredibles, from Fethi Kaba, “Hyper-Realistic Characters and the Existence of the Uncanny Valley in Animation Films”, International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2013), pp. 188-195

Fig. 46. Nicki Friess, Sentinel, virtual object, 2015
CHAPTER 12

SOLDIERS’ STORIES (Figs. 47, 48, 49, 50, virtual objects and words by Nicki Friess, 2015)

A man was playing with an antitank rocket, tossing it in the air, playing as a juggler.

Our Captain was wounded, there was a gaping hole in his chest, filled with frothy blood, gurgling. As I was trying to breathe life into him, he became cold, clammy. I can still taste his shattered teeth and jawbone.

Fig. 47. Nicki Friess, Headless, virtual object, 2015

Few things are as strange as seeing only a few teeth and jawbone left where once there was a man’s head.

A man was playing with an antitank rocket, tossing it in the air, playing as a juggler. Our Captain was wounded, there was a gaping hole in his chest, filled with frothy blood, gurgling. As I was trying to breathe life into him, he became cold, clammy. I can still taste his shattered teeth and jawbone.

Fig. 48. Nicki Friess, Dying Captain, virtual object, 2015
The man came in two pieces. They were worried it might have been friendly fire, so I had to dig through his lower torso, trying to find shrapnel to identify. I felt along his splintered pelvic bone, but I couldn’t find any pieces large enough. Finally someone came in who had seen what had happened. The man had held a grenade to his belly, pulled the pin, and blown himself up.

I stepped on an explosive booby-trap, shattering my heel, and leaving me with a chronic staff infection. They finally had to remove my leg. I asked for a spinal so I could watch. They carried my severed leg away on a silver tray.
“Welcome to My Life”. These are views of the virtual environment, entering through the gallery, walking up the hilly pathway, exploring the caves and caldera.

Fig. 51. Nicki Friess, *Courtyard*, virtual environment, 2015.

Fig. 52. Nicki Friess, *Gallery*, virtual environment, 2015.
Fig. 53. Nicki Friess, *Assemblage Table*, virtual objects, 2015.

Fig. 54. Nicki Friess, *Path Up*, virtual environment, 2015.
Fig. 55. Nicki Friess, *Faces of PTSD*, virtual environment, 2015.

Fig. 56. Nicki Friess, *Napalm*, virtual environment, 2015.
Fig. 57. Nicki Friess, *Caldera*, virtual environment, 2015.

Fig. 58. Nicki Friess, *Construction Zone*, virtual environment, 2015.
CHAPTER 14

VIRTUAL REALITY EXPOSURE THERAPY (VRET)

As a veteran with chronic PTSD due to my war experiences as a Green Beret medic in Vietnam (where I was wounded in March, 1970), I have been in and out of various treatment programs at the VA (Veterans Administration) Hospitals and Vet Centers (outreach VA sites that provide readjustment counseling). One of the most helpful treatment regimens I undertook was a process called “Prolonged Exposure Therapy”. Each week the psychologist would have me close my eyes and visualize the most difficult traumatic moment I could remember. I would then spend the next hour narrating the events I could recall. For the following week, I had to listen to those tapes every day until my next appointment. I would then repeat the process, narrating to the tape recorder, over and over. Each week more of the experience would come to the surface. Though it was extremely difficult and trying, that experienced seemed to accomplish more than anything else to help me become adjusted to the dark internal memories that had so often overwhelmed me. Though the memories are still there, and always will be, I can at least live with them and not allow them such a powerful control of my existence as they had once exerted.

The effectiveness of Prolongued Exposure Therapy is dependent upon the participant’s willingness and ability to visualize the traumatic event. For myself, the events floated to the surface. Perhaps as an artist it is easier for me to visualize. Yet for some, either because it is difficult for them, or because they try to evade any return to the traumatic situation, their ability to visualize does not develop enough to make the treatment as effective as it could be. Over the years there have been various experiments with using Virtual Reality technology to enhance the ability to visualize. With VRET, the participant either looks into a monitor, or wears the VR goggles in an HMD (head mounted display). They use either the keyboard or a game controller to move through the virtual space. There are various scenarios created in the 3D environment to closely mimic the world that was experienced during combat. As the technology progressed, the therapist became able to have very specific control over what the veteran would see, hear, smell, feel, and hear. Whether riding in a HumVee or helicopter or on foot, the therapist would use the VR technology to replicate the actual physical environment the soldier/veteran had experienced during combat.

Work in this field began in the early 1990’s. Virtual reality (VR) simulations began to be explored as a posible adjunct to provide exposure therapy to soldiers and
veterans dealing with the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. An early experiment worked with a Vietnam Veteran, the results of which were published in 1999 in a paper titled “Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy for PTSD Vietnam Veterans: A Case Study.”. It included a scenario of riding in a Huey helicopter, and also one of being in a jungle clearing. Although this experiment only involved one veteran, the results were promising. “The patient experienced a 34% decrease on clinician-rated PTSD and a 45% decrease on self-rated PTSD. Treatment gains were maintained at 6-month follow-up.”

Because “One of the most common complaints of Vietnam Veterans with PTSD is a strong emotional response to the sound of helicopters,” as part of their treatment program, the American Lakes VAMC PTSD program had provided helicopter rides to over 400 veterans. However, the cost of doing this program with thousands of veterans was prohibitive, so there began a search of ways to provide a similar experience using VR technology. The Veteran in this study was a middle class, 50 year old male who had served as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam about 26 years before the study took place. He was diagnosed with PTSD and depression, was unemployed and being treated with medication. During the sessions, he wore an HMD and headphones. There was also a bass woofer to create vibrations. All this was done to mimic the experience of being on an actual helicopter. As mentioned earlier, though this just involved one individual, the results looked promising.

At that time the technology was still rather clunky and primitive. However, over the years, the technology has steadily and significantly improved. Hardware and software are continuously improving, aided greatly by research and advances in the gaming and

Fig. 59. Virtual Vietnam scenarios (courtesy Virtually Better, www.virtuallybetter.com). (In color in Annals online.)

entertainment industries. At the current time, two of the major game engines, Unity5 and Unreal 4, are providing their technology at no charge for small scale research and Indie (independent) artists, game designers, etc. Also, a great amount of research is ongoing in various VR technologies, such as VR head mounted displays (HMD’s such as the Oculus Rift: https://www.oculus.com/), and motion sensitive game controllers (such as the Leap Motion Controller: https://www.leapmotion.com/).

Because of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the current research and treatment protocols have shifted to those environments. Both the US Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have funded various research projects in this area. “As of December 2012, the DoD’s Defense Medical Surveillance System database reported that...” active duty soldiers experiencing the highest levels of combat have 25 to 30 percent of the soldiers affected by PTSD. Also veterans receiving care at VA clinics affected by PTSD has been reported at 29 percent. Because of these statistics and the effects of warfare on the current generation of combat soldiers and veterans, “the USC Institute for Creative Technologies in 2004 developed a prototype Virtual Iraq VRET system for initial user feasibility testing” This study had three Humvee patrol scenarios, and one foot patrol scenario. They used the VR HMD’s but did no comparison tests with the effects of using regular flat screened monitors. The results were promising. “After an average of seven sessions, 45 percent of those treated no longer screened positive for PTSD, and 62 percent had reliably improved. In a small preliminary quasi-randomized controlled trial, 7 of 10 participants with PTSD showed a 30 percent or greater improvement with VR, while only 1 of 9 participants in a usual PE treatment group showed similar improvement.”

“Based on these encouraging clinical outcomes using VRET to treat combat-related PTSD and an urgent need to provide the best care for active-duty and veteran service members who increasingly report PTSD symptoms, in 2011 the US Army funded development of an updated and expanded Virtual Iraq/Afghanistan system called Bravemind.” In this system, they created more war zone scenarios and also used the game engine “Unity”. Further research will develop systems for the unique experiences of combat medics, and also for those soldiers who have experienced sexual trauma.


42. Ibid., 34.
Fig. 60. Images from 4 of the 14 scenario settings available in Bravemind, a virtual reality system for delivering prolonged exposure therapy (VRET) in cases of patients with combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). (a, b, c) A vehicleborne improvised explosive device (IED) in an Iraq city showing three customizable views: a daytime setting, an evening setting with a sandstorm, and a perspective with night-vision goggles. (d) A helicopter extraction scenario. (e) A checkpoint explosion. (f) An IED in an Afghan village.


Fig. 61. Sample Bravemind system components. (a) A clinician interface for modifying VR settings in real time to match user experiences. (b) VR head-mounted display and traditional gamepad used by a seated participant in a driving scenario. (c) Rifle-mounted mini-gamepad used in a walking scenario.

CHAPTER 15
VIRTUALITY

I began developing a virtual walk through environment as an alternative way to share my work. Originally it was just a virtual gallery with paintings displayed and lit inside it. The participant could use the keyboard or gamepad to enter and move around the gallery. I then decided to bring in some of my virtual objects themselves. I decided to create them larger than life size so a person could walk around and explore them, even climb on them at times.

Fig. 62. Nicki Friess, Gallery 1, virtual object, 2015.

Fig. 63. Nicki Friess, Spine 1, virtual object, 2015.
After that I created a large scale still life assemblage of the objects in the virtual world of Kitely and used that image as the basis for the painting Assemblage 20.

Yet it still didn’t seem quite right. I shared the work with my graduate committee chair Steven Herrnstadt. After looking at the work, he told me about observing an image (I believe it was in the movie “Avatar”) where some of the terrain was based on actual terrain on earth. I researched the various ways of replicating actual terrain in the virtual world. There are various formats, such as using heightmaps (grayscale images, where the lighter the color the higher the elevation) as well as others. I finally discovered a technique to lift the height information out of Google Earth using the program Sketchup. I brought these files into Blender so I could create a heightmap. I then used Photoshop to create a RAW file to import into the Unreal 4 game engine to use as the heightmap for the terrain. The area I chose was Mount Saint Helens, in Washington State.
At first I wasn’t sure what I was going to do with this volcanic terrain. I initially brought in the gallery and then created paths, waterways and bridges, so I could run all around the territory. But it was so large, I spent all my time running!

I decided to recreate it on a more intimate scale, with the gallery close the base of Mount Saint Helens. It felt there needed to be caves on my volcanic island, so I created holes in the terrain and made a large mesh cave in Blender, which I imported into the map. I placed two of these, one on each side. They almost seemed more like wombs that caves, but I decided to let them be what they were meant to be. I find often that art knows its own pathway much better than do I. I placed large layered and distorted faces in one cave, and various large scale still life objects in the other, surrounded by scaffolding.
I then created pathways going up the mountain, to the cave on the right, then back and up into the caldera, and at last following the pathway down and to the other cave on the left. The caldera seemed to need fire and smoke and lava! Then I had some bones that cried out to be there. The spine is a reminder of the man who committed suicide, splitting himself in two. I can still feel his pelvis and remaining spine under my fingers. The jawbone, though of an animal, is my totem from the captain who died in my arms, the captain whom I tried to breathe life into, whose shattered teeth and bloody mouth still leaves a taste in mine. They are my mementos, my memories. Though they are fascimiles of a remembered event, reminders, cues, they also feel as real to me as do the dreams and nightmares that arise from these memories. They haunt me. Yet, it seems in some strange way, that through the process of recreating them, mimicking them, looking and thinking about them intensely, I come a little closer to accepting the reality of that long ago event. I can allow those events to be part of my being without overwhelming me completely. I will never be totally at ease with them, but at least I can live with their presence a little easier than I once could.

The journey with what began as a way of recreating my still life objects, allowing them to be carried with me in a small, portable and convenient digital manner, has taken me in many directions I did not expect. It has brought me here, to this virtual project, to this recreating of soldiers and pathways and explosions, of creating these virtual talismans that I must carry with me. They are part of my being and always will be. Perhaps through this process I and they can learn to live together peacefully...or at least more so than we have in the past.
Since moving to Ohio, I have been attending weekly sessions of both individual and group counseling for my PTSD. As I became a bit more comfortable with others there, I spoke occasionally about the art I was creating, both the paintings and the digital projects. Several were interested and wanted to see what I was doing. As I reached the point of completing this prototype of a virtual environment, I finally reached a point where I felt comfortable to do so. The Oculus Rift (a virtual reality head mounted display) had quit working with this project for some reason. Even after scouring the forums, I couldn’t find an adequate solution. So I just decided to bring my laptop to the session and hook it up to the large flat screen television that was in the room. I asked if anyone wanted to use the game controller and walk through the experience, but no one did. So we turned off the lights, and I began the journey, through the gallery, along the pathways, into the caves and the caldera. Looking closely at some of the artwork, then at the mangled soldiers; listening to the audio narratives I had taped, watching and hearing the explosions taking place, seeing the dismembered bodies tossed about, and then climbing about on the scaffolding looking at the large virtual still objects.

As we sat around in the darkened room, everyone seemed quiet at first. I wasn’t sure what to expect; whether it was too graphic, or if it might not ring authentic. They would know, these other warriors; they would know...

At last some spoke, and they began to talk about the work, the things they liked or didn’t like, what memories were aroused. We talked of many things, perhaps a bit more openly, and more directly addressed some of the memories and images embedded within us. As we each get healthier and more in control of our PTSD, conversations often deal with just the day to day aspects of life. We aren’t always mired in our PTSD, even if it is a permanent companion in our lives. Yet that day it seemed, at least to me, that perhaps we reminisced about that past time a bit more than usual.

Though many things were discussed and shared, two things in particular shall always stay in my mind. One person said that when they looked at the images, it was just like their visions and nightmares. They were seeing them through my eyes in a way. Others also mentioned a familiarity of some of the images. Many times we feel we are the only one that sees those kinds of things, that is haunted by those faces and bodies and memories. There was some sense of relief in knowing that others saw them also.
Then another person asked a question which caught me by surprise. He asked, “Where in the world did you find those sounds?” I wasn’t sure what he meant at first. He kept asking: “Where did you find them? Where did you come up with them?” I finally said that they were layers of my own voice, many tracks layered on top of each other. I tried to make screams as I remember the dying made. He said that he had never heard them in the outer world before. They were the sounds that he often awoke to in the middle of a nightmare. He would realize the sounds were his own voice, screaming and saying things over and over that didn’t make any sense. But the sounds just kept coming until he was fully awake and could come out of it.

And I thought, yes, perhaps that is what this is about. Perhaps the experiences of my life are in some strange way coming together at last, congealing into what they must become. Perhaps, as an artist, as a combat medic who has been there, I can bring these things to life in some strange and unique way. I know that for me I must create. Art is my therapy, it is my salvation; it buys me freedom, at least for awhile, from intrusive thoughts which continuously try to pry their way into my psyche. And perhaps in the creating there is something emerging which perhaps is more universal than I had thought, perhaps something that can pry open those protecting doors we barricade ourselves behind, something that can unlock us, at least for a moment, that can let us feel free and safe enough to share at least brief glimpses of these demons that live within us and haunt us nightly. Perhaps that is my purpose, just opening up the dialogue a bit, just cracking open that barricaded door...

Fig. 70. Nicki Friess, *Split*, virtual object, 2015.
CHAPTER 17

FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS JOURNEY

Art is a journey. Once embarked upon, you may never be sure of where you’ll end up at. It is too easy to keep an eye steadfast upon the destination, yet miss the journey. Art knows its course better than we. It often knows where it must go, what it must become. It is difficult to let go. Our ego wants to leave our mark upon the territory. Yet it is not always meant to be so. Enjoy the journey, the process. And remember, the art product is often but a byproduct of the experience. The experience is what carries us.

This journey began as a way of recreating my still life objects in 3D virtual space. Those that have been recreated I can now carry easily in my pocket. If I have them and my laptop, I can create my Virtual Assemblages, wherever I go. With my camera and my sketchpad and my ruler I can collect objects along my travels, and yet still leave them as I found them, free. They are mine and yet not mine. I carry but their fascimile with me. Yet these virtual beings grow over time, replacing my memories of the original source. They become all that I have. And yet that is enough. Just a reminder of where I once was.

And so it is with the haunting visions and memories of war. They too are fascimiles of what once was, reminders. They are tokens, talismans, mementos. They are signs that point to a past experience, briefly, and then become beings of their own. They are enough. I treasure them and will carry them with me, wherever I may go.

Fig. 71. Nicki Friess, Holly Hock Doll, virtual object, 2012
The last few years have been spent in the digital playground, learning these new and amazing tools. Yet in the end, they are but another medium, another tool to create with. When I work, whether painting, manipulating 2D digital images, creating 3D virtual objects, or developing a virtual world within a game engine, it feels the same. It is in the doing where I feel most at home.

I have learned, especially in sharing and being honest (with myself and others) about my PTSD, that it is something I can live with, accept, and not be destroyed by, unless I choose to allow it. Life can still be full, and there can still be those happy moments in the sunshine, no matter how elusive they might be.

I will continue to create and play with and arrange the objects. There will be days when I need the smell of the turpentine and the feel of the brush as it caresses its way across the resilient canvas surface. At times building objects within that strange geometric world of points, lines and polygons will be enough. And at times I will need to step into the virtual existence of the game engine creating particle effects that do their dance, meander along pathways that disappear in the distance. They are all tools. Yet for me they are all toys. And the child within me will always want to play. Even as I know also that there will always be gremlins who hide under the bed...

Fig. 72. Nicki Friess, *Triage*, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 in., 2013.
My journey continues. As I wander, I seek to explore the world about me, as well as the world of memories within me. In each of these worlds, I will continue to collect objects and images, token and mementos. These become the fuel, the materials I create with whether upon a canvas or within the digital world. Within each realm, whether virtual or on canvas, the objects improvise to find their place. Sometimes they lay cramped together on a table, overlapping and intertwining. Sometimes they are spread about, artifacts on a pathway, meandering across a virtual terrain. Yet each, in their own way, shares a unique story… their reason for being.

YouTube links to videos I created for this thesis:


*artIfacs* (Unreal4 virtual environment): [http://youtu.be/SaPkDLz81Y0](http://youtu.be/SaPkDLz81Y0)


Fig. 73. Nicki Friess, *artIfacs Entry*, virtual environment, 2015
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX A

VIRTUAL ASSEMBLAGE—OIL PAINTING

A comparison of an oil painting to the virtual assemblage it is based on.

Fig. A1. Nicki Friess, *Assemblage 17*, 2014, 3D virtual objects.

Fig. A2. Nicki Friess, *Assemblage 17*, 2014, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in.
A comparison of an oil painting to the photograph of the arrangement of the objects it is based on.

Fig. A3. Nicki Friess, *Assemblage 22*, 2015, 3D virtual objects.

Fig. A4. Nicki Friess, *Assemblage 22*, 2015, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in..
APPENDIX B

STUFF STORIES

(a few of my virtual objects and their tales) Every object has a story to tell...

Fig. B1. Swimmer toy, metal and wood, rust and chipped paint, pull string torn away.

Fig. B2. Vicks deep blue glass reminder of the punguent vapors encased within, memories of Mother’s hands upon my chest, a sick child struggling to breathe.
Fig. B3. Troll doll guardian of the childish ways (we must cherish and maintain).

Fig. B4. Driftwood, twisting form, polished surface yet still roughened by the ride down the river.
Fig. B5. Blue wooden robot, ancient dreams of what might be.

Fig. B6. Bicycle, training wheels to ease the journey, yet how anxious we are to remove them prematurely.
Fig. B7. Fan with open cage, ready to chop away at infant fingers in a day when children were taught the meaning (and safety) of the word “No!”

Fig. B8. Trowel—smooth those seams that separate us.