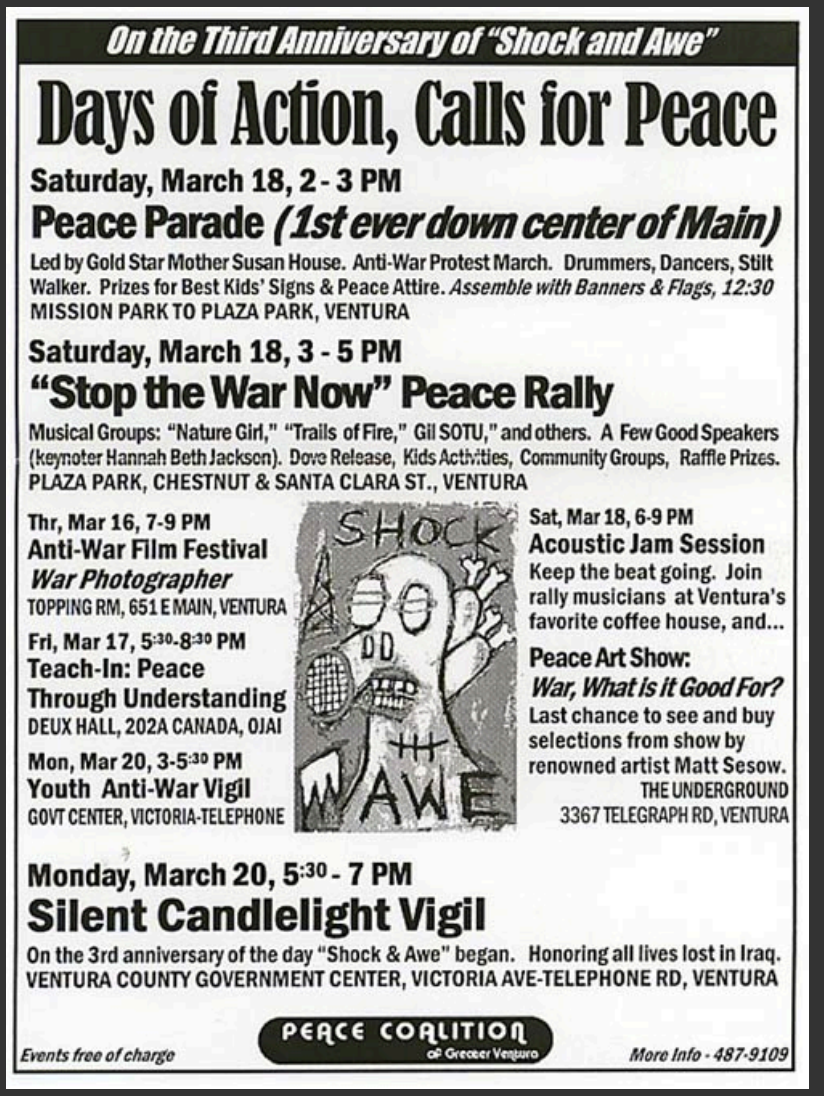
this page:

Days of Action, Calls for Peace

Ventura, California
Sesow paintings used on posters and also at art Gallery exhibition March 2003
orgainised by the Peace Coalition of Greater Ventura





VCReporter
VENTURA COUNTY'S NEWSWEEKLY

Taking it to the streets

A buffet of peace events leads up to the third anniversary of the Iraq War

~ By JOHN HOWARD ~

The art of peace

The arts have long been a vehicle used to oppose war and "Days of Action, Calls for Peace" will include two art exhibits, a musical jam session and a film festival. One art exhibit will highlight Washington, D.C. artist Matt Sesow, whose poignant graphic appears on the promotional material for the events. A dehumanized, ghostlike figure with exposed bones protruding from its limbs dominates the piece. Rather than wearing a gas mask and goggles, the creature seems to have grown them as body parts. The fractured background depicts an erupting oil well and the words "Shock and Awe," the U.S. strategy that seemed to work when Saddam's troops melted away as coalition troops approached Baghdad, but ultimately failed to stop the resistance that fights on today.

the beat

MARCH 7, 2006

The Art of War

An informal survey of war and warriors from cave paintings to the worldwide web.

BY JAMES SHANNON

Sheila Jackson stands on the corner in front of the Federal Courthouse in Greenville. It's the Wednesday afternoon rush hour as thousands of downtown workers begin their trek home. Jackson is one of a hardy band of peace activists who have been on this corner every Wednesday for the past three years to express their opposition to the war in Iraq. In recent weeks, instead of a protest sign, she has carried an 18x24" acrylic painting that depicts the leaders of the George W. Bush administration – Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld – surrounded by a maelstrom of war with the pain of the dead and dying openly displayed. The countryside is in flames that also threaten the Bill of Rights, which lays in tatters in the right foreground. Subtle it's not, but the passion on display suggests a homegrown version of Picasso's *Guernica*, a searing masterwork whose power is undiminished 70 years after it was painted.



Sheila Jackson

That resemblance turns out to be no accident. Jackson says that *Guernica* provided the inspiration for her to create this painting. Images of war and warriors have been part of the artistic lexicon for as long as there has been art, second only to myriad religions as grist for the artist's mill. Cave paintings created many thousands of years before the birth of Christ that survive today contain scenes of primitive warfare, as if any reminder was needed that man's inhumanity to man has a lengthy historical pedigree.

Long before the ancient Greeks and Romans celebrated military heroes in their sculpture and mosaics, the Egyptians elevated the warrior class. A carving from the temple of Ramses II depicts a chariot driver with horses in full gallop and a drawn bow with arrow ready to fly. Invoking the glory of combat has always been a necessary component in persuading populations to go to war.

The Art of War is an ancient Chinese book on military strategy written by Sun Tzu in the 6th century BC that is still read and admired today for the enduring truths it contains about the field of battle. We have appropriated its title for this story about actual artwork that has war as its subject in the spirit of Sun Tzu, who wrote, "It is only one who is thoroughly acquainted with the evils of war that can thoroughly understand the profitable way of carrying it on."

ALSO IN COVER STORY

- Delbert McClinton Endures
- John Pizzarelli: From Bossa Nova to the Beatles
- All You Need is Love... and Fifty Bucks

More (202)...

Art employed as propaganda in a time of war is a tradition honored by time, if nothing else. In the collection of the Greenville County Museum of Art is *Massacre at Dinant*, a painting by the American artist George Bellows that depicts the ravishing of a Belgian village at the hands of the Germans in World War I. Bellows was openly anti-war at the beginning of that conflict, but later changed his mind and enlisted. He also created a series of lithographs and paintings of the Dinant atrocities that evoked the work of Francisco de Goya from a century before. *The Third of May, 1808: The Execution of the Defenders of Madrid*, painted in 1814, depicted the slaughter of Spanish citizens by an occupying power, in this case the French.

Paintings such as these not only record the horror of war, but also provoke the nationalistic fervor of the country of origin of the victims they depict. Sometimes the intent of the artist gets lost in the images themselves. That may be the case with *Guernica*, perhaps the most famous painting by a man who was arguably the most famous artist in the world during his lifetime. Whether Picasso intended the mural to be a rallying cry against Franco or a cry of anguish for the little Basque village in Northern Spain bombed into oblivion on November 27, 1937 by Franco's Nazi allies is almost beside the point today. If the intent was to topple Franco, the painting failed miserably. In *The Shock of the New*, Robert Hughes tersely notes that it didn't shorten the Franco regime by a single day. Nonetheless, *Guernica* stands as a monument to the 1,600 civilians who perished in the world's first sustained aerial bombardment of a civilian population, as well as a pungent protest of the ultimate human folly. Or as Ernest Hemingway put it, "Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime."

However, *Guernica* did not retreat quietly into the Reina Sofia, Spain's national museum of art where it hangs today. Nelson Rockefeller had a large tapestry reproduction made of the mural, which he donated to the United Nations. It was hung at the entrance to the UN Security Council, but in January, 2003 the tapestry was covered with a large blue curtain in order to provide "an appropriate background for the cameras."

This cover-up took place before Secretary of State Colin Powell delivered the regrettable (his word) *casus belli* for the US invasion of Iraq. At the time, Maureen Dowd observed in the *New York Times*, "Mr. Powell can't very well seduce the world into bombing Iraq surrounded on camera by shrieking and mutilated women, men, children, bulls and horses."

Photography altered the art of war, bringing the horrors of the battlefield home with an immediacy that paintings, lithographs and sculpture never could. By the mid-19th century, photography was advancing by leaps and bounds. Photographers working for Mathew Brady took some 7,000 images of the American Civil War, the first conflict recorded in such excruciating detail. Even today, the photographs of the Battle of Antietam in Maryland (also known as Sharpsburg) serve as a grim reminder of September 17, 1862 - the bloodiest day in American history. The battle, which was essentially a stalemate, claimed more than 23,000 killed and wounded.

Civilian reaction to photographic images of war has consumed military planners ever since, with varying degrees of censorship imposed in an attempt to curtail the unintended consequence of letting the folks back home in on the bloody little secret. Another option involved creating images that projected the desired message. One famous example was the raising of the American flag on Mount Suribachi on a small volcanic island in the central Pacific called Iwo Jima. Four days after a massive landing of 30,000 Marines, they made it to the top of the mountain and hoisted a small American flag. The sight was so stirring that later that day, they staged the raising of a larger flag. Photographer Joe Rosenthal captured this second flag raising and won a Pulitzer Prize, and the image was later made into a sculpture by Felix W. Weldon that stands to this day. The heroic image represents a grim episode of the war in the Pacific. An estimated 21,000 Japanese died defending that wretched island, exacting a toll of 6,000 Americans killed and 20,000 wounded in the process.

Another image of war that won a Pulitzer Prize was a little more spontaneous. During the Tet offensive in the Vietnam War, Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams and a cameraman for NBC were on the streets of Saigon when they saw General Nguyen Ngoc Loan raise a pistol to the head of a captured Viet Cong prisoner and calmly pull the trigger. This became one of the most famous of many indelible images from that war, and one Adams would come to regret. Gen. Loan relocated to Virginia after the fall of Saigon and opened a pizza restaurant, but had to sell it when his identity was disclosed. Many credit – or blame - the Adams' photo with helping to turn public sentiment in the US against the war.

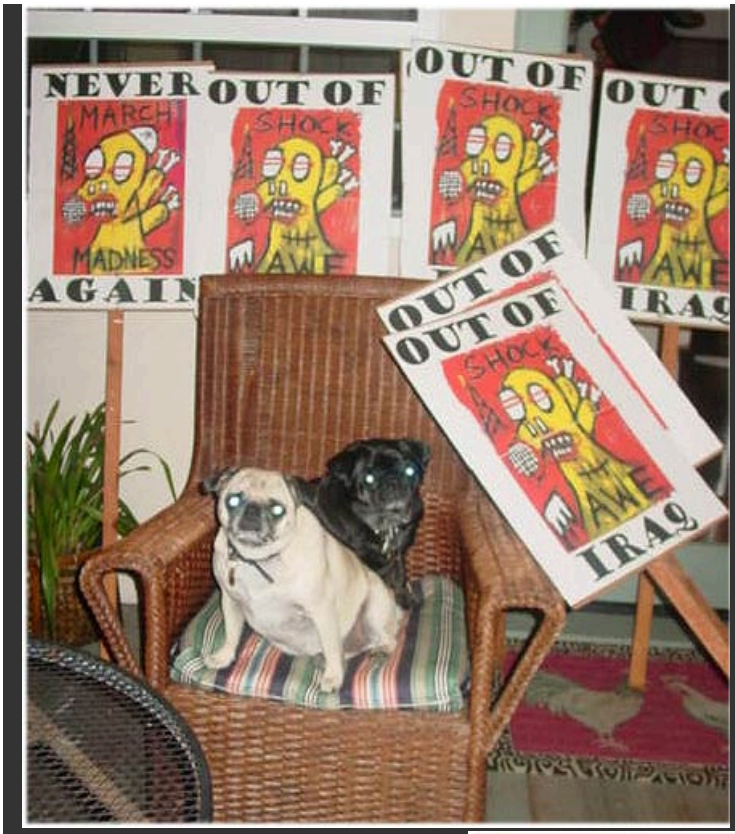
The art of war can be used to agitate for or against any particular conflict, an attribute not necessarily reflective of art but of human ambivalence either to the entanglement in question or to war itself. The speed and pervasiveness of Internet communication has infused the art of war with even more immediacy. The electronic graphic called *War President* was crafted for a weblog by a guy identified only as Joe. In no way a commercial venture, it was widely circulated in a matter of weeks. This portrait of George W. Bush is a mosaic made up of some 700 individual pictures of members of the US Armed Forces killed in the war in Iraq. The power of the work derives from multiple sources – and make no mistake, it is a powerful image indeed no matter your point of view upon encountering it.

The individual sacrifice represented by each face tears at the viewer; the sense of loss, of waste of human life almost palpable. For many, the fact these men were sent to die by others who declined to serve on the front lines in the war of their generation compounds the tragedy – and the crime of which Hemingway spoke. George W. Bush spent his portion of the Vietnam conflict in a "champagne" unit of the Texas Air National Guard reserved for sons of the rich and powerful where he knew he would never face the enemy. Even that was more than Dick Cheney managed, taking five student deferments to avoid military service in the Vietnam era because he had "other priorities." These artful dodgers confer yet another meaning on the art of war, with the names of the 58,000-plus on the Vietnam memorial who died in their place compounded by the faces staring back at us from *War President*.

The anonymous artist, the guy named Joe, turns out to be Joe Wezorek; his blog is called *American Leftist*. Wezorek understands the powerful image he created: "Given this image's inflammatory nature, I posted it with a great deal of trepidation," he writes. "I had a hard time deciding if it was the right thing to do, and I am still not sure. No, I didn't have the consent of the families of those pictured, and I apologize for any additional pain that this image causes them. That said, I must say that it is my belief that one distinguishing characteristic between art and other forms of speech is that art takes risks, and if we, as a society, value art, we must allow it more leeway than other modes of expression to incite or offend."

Finally, we consider a more traditional expression of the art of war. Matt Sesow is a 39-year-old artist working in Washington, DC whose sense of outrage at the US invasion of Iraq informs his canvasses with an explosion of passion and energy. A software engineer by profession, he began painting in 1993 and has only been a full time artist since 1997. But the quality of his work merits its inclusion in our admittedly subjective survey of the art of war. Of all the artists on the contemporary scene encountered in researching this piece, none surpass the power and burning truth of Sesow. He describes *War Call*, depicted on the cover, as "a play on words, done in reaction, in February [2003] to the call to war." It is his visceral reaction to these truths that cause the twinge in our own viscera.

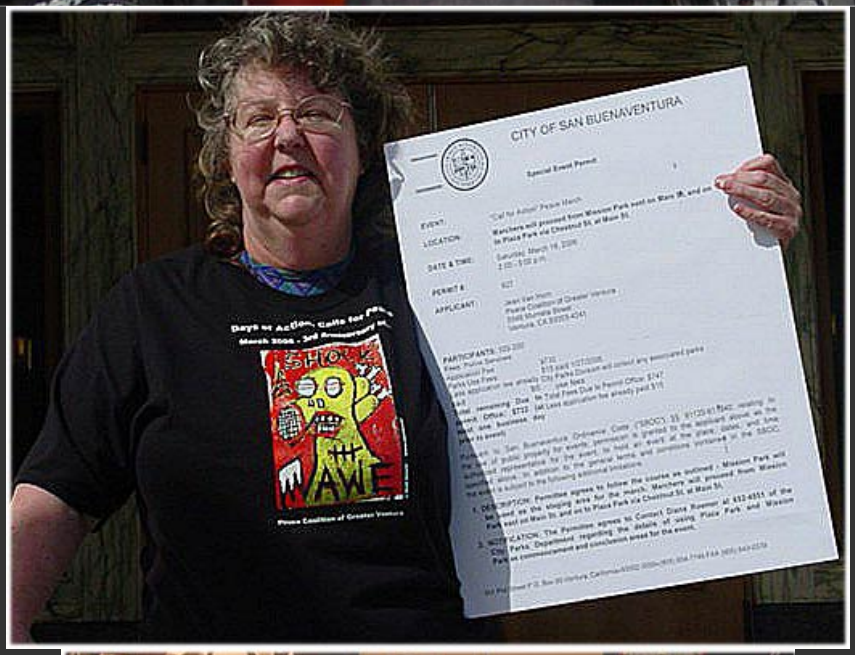
A group of more than two dozen of these images can be viewed at www.outsiderart.info/sesowwar.htm. You can take the full measure of the artist at www.sesow.com.


NEVER
OUT OF
MARCH
MADNESS
SHOCK
AWE
AGAIN
IRAQ


LIBERTY


LIBERTY


MARCH
MADNESS
SHOCK
AWE
LIBERTY


CITY OF SAN BUENAVENTURA
Special Event Permit
EVENT:
LOCATION:
DATE & TIME:
PERMIT #
APPLICANT:
PARTICIPANTS:
SHOCK
AWE
Peace Coalition of Greater Ventura




Art Show
KPFK
WAR IS NOT THE ANSWER

On the Third Anniversary of "Shock and Awe"

Days of Action, Calls for Peace

MARCH 11-20, 2006

Sun, Mar 12, 3:00-5:00 PM — **Town Hall Meeting**
Panelists Reflecting Diverse Points of View on How to End the Iraq War.
Sponsored by Ventura County for Democracy
Unitarian Universalist Church of Ventura
5654 Ralston St
Ventura

Tue, Mar 14, 6:30-10:00 PM — **Peace Action Open Mic**
Artists and Youth of All Ages: Discuss World Events with Open Hearts and Minds.
Sponsored by Arts for Action & NION Ventura
The Underground
3367 Telegraph Rd
Ventura

Wed, Mar 13, 7:30-9:30 PM — **Public Forum**
On "Building a People's Movement Against War and Racism."
Sponsored by ANSWER Ventura & ANSWER Coalition LA
The Underground
3367 Telegraph Rd
Ventura

Fri, Mar 17, 5:30-8:30 PM — **Teach-In**
"Peace Through Understanding: A Teach-In on Iraq."
Sponsored by Ojai Peace Coalition
Deux Hall
202B Canada St
Ojai

Art Show: "War, What Is It Good For?"
Art Barn
856 E Thompson Blvd (east of Ash St)
Ventura
Sat, Mar 11, 6:00-9:00 PM
Opening and Artists' Reception
Sun, Mar 12, 3:00-8:00 PM
Mon, Mar 13, 5:00-7:00 PM
Featured Guest Artist, Matt Sesow, Washington, D.C. Plus Works by some of the Ventura Area's finest Artists.
Sponsored by the Peace Coalition with the Support of Arts for Action.

Selections From: "War, What Is It Good For?"
The Underground
3367 Telegraph Rd
Tue, Mar 14, 6:00-10:00 PM
Wed, Mar 15, 7:00-9:30 PM

Art Show: "Sea Shovel"
Upfront Gallery
267 S Laurel St
Ventura
Sun, Mar 19, 1:00-2:00 PM
Artists' Lecture by Megan and Murray McMillan on their New Art Video Installation, "Sea Shovel."



Anti-War Film Festival
Sun, Mar 12, 7:00-9:00 PM
Topping Room, Foster Library
651 E Main St
Ventura
Voices in Wartime. The experience of war sharply etched through powerful images and the words of poets.

Mon, Mar 13, 7:00-9:00 PM
Unitarian Universalist Church of Ventura
5654 Ralston St
Broken Silence. A series of five films about courage, heroism, and triumph over adversities during World War II.

Thr, Mar 16, 7:00-9:00 PM
Topping Room, Foster Library
War Photographer. Portrait of world-famous war photographer (Rwanda, Bosnia, El Salvador) James Nachtwey.
Sponsored by Citizens for Peaceful Resolutions

Acoustic Jam Session
The Underground
3367 Telegraph Rd
Sat, Mar 18, 6:00-9:00 PM
Keep the Beat going after the Parade and Rally are over. Jam with Musicians from the Rally at Ventura's favorite "Anti-Corporate Coffee House."

SAT, MAR 18, 1:30-2:30 PM — **PEACE PARADE**
First-ever Iraq War Protest down the center of Main. Mission Park to Plaza Park Led by Gold Star Mother Susan House. Marching Main St at Figueroa Pl to Fir St Music. Prizes for Best Children's Signs & Peace Attire.
Assemble with Banners & Flags Promptly at 12:30 PM.
Ventura

SAT, MAR 18, 2:30-4:30 PM — **PEACE RALLY**
Musical Groups and Entertainment. A Few Good Speakers. Traditional Dove Release. Children's Activities. Fundraising Raffle.
Community Groups Invited to Set up Information Tables.
Plaza Park
Fir St & Santa Clara St,
Ventura

Mon, Mar 20, 3:00-5:30 PM — **Youth Vigil**
Youth and Student Anti-War Protest.
Sponsored by MEChA
Ventura County Government Center
Victoria Ave & Telephone Rd
Ventura

Mon, Mar 20, 5:30-7:00 PM — **Candlelight Vigil**
Silent Vigil Honoring Lives Lost in Iraq, on the 3rd anniversary of the day "Shock & Awe" began.
Sponsored by Veterans for Peace-Ventura
Ventura County Government Center
Victoria Ave & Telephone Rd
Ventura

PEACE COALITION of Greater Ventura

Major support provided by Advertising Impressions, Ventura, Matt Sesow Studio, and Unitarian Universalist Church of Ventura



CLICK HERE FOR MORE PAINTINGS...