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Why it matters: Review of the year-long AVAM solo. Text captured from the live page on October 11, 2026 (images not included).

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Shock and Awe Hits the American Visionary Art Museum

Matt Sesow's Solo Exhibit at AVAM Explores An Artist's Experience with Tragedy and Loss

By Brendan L. Smith · BmoreArt · June 20, 2016

The long, improbable journey that led self-taught D.C. artist Matt Sesow to his first solo museum exhibition began when he was 8 years old, playing on a rural grassy air strip beneath a darkening sky in the flatlands of Nebraska.

While playing a game called Spud with other children, Sesow threw a ball high in the air and reached upward to catch it while a small plane swooped silently toward the earth behind him, practicing a manual landing with its engine turned off. The 19-year-old novice pilot didn't notice Sesow, and his upstretched left arm was instantly severed above the elbow by the plane's propeller.

The local newspaper article about the accident downplays its magnitude, stating that Sesow was listed in fair condition at a nearby hospital. He underwent several painful surgeries but his left hand couldn't be reattached, and his arm ends at his left elbow. Decades later, after running track and playing high-school football, after winning a Mensa scholarship and being crowned homecoming king at the University of Tulsa, and after moving to D.C. to work as an IBM software engineer, Sesow tried painting on a lark to impress a woman at a party in 1994. Since then, he has ditched the IBM job to create art fulltime, and his stark, brutal style has attracted a wide audience, leading to exhibitions across the United States and Europe. His current solo exhibition called "Matt Sesow: Shock and Awe" features more than 150 paintings in the American Visionary Art Museum's third-floor gallery.

"This is probably the hardest show I've ever prepared for. I wanted it to be right," Sesow told BmoreArt at a museum reception on June 5. "I'm really honored to be here."

Fallen Soldiers (Iraq War 2003)

Sesow has funneled much of his grief and anger over his traumatic accident into his work. His bug-eyed animals and distorted human figures, often displaying large toothy grins or severed limbs, seem to revel in the grotesque, but a closer look reveals a shy vulnerability and sly sense of humor. The vagaries of life in this workaday world are often beset with tragedy but also by triumphs, both of the body and spirit.

Curated by AVAM founder and director Rebecca Hoffberger, Sesow's exhibition features work of both a personal and political persuasion, challenging the jingoism of U.S. foreign policy with 100 small portraits of soldiers killed during the Iraq War. Sesow's work, which invites comparisons to Jean-Michel Basquiat and Francis Bacon, features totem-like imagery with recurring themes.

On a column in the gallery, Sesow explains the icons which repeatedly appear in his work as fully formed figures or small chalkboard-like drawings floating in the periphery. Not surprisingly, an airplane represents evil as "THE GREAT AMPUTATOR," both from Sesow's personal history but also as bombers raining violence from the skies. A bottle with three X's is "the source of inspiration but also maybe a place to pain." A large scar represents one of his many

surgeries, while a bunny reveals his gentle nature. A skeletal man wearing a top hat with a dollar sign has money on his mind and is “often the gallery manager.”

Although he works with galleries, Sesow sells much of his artwork directly to buyers through social media and visits to the tiny condo he converted into a studio by ripping out the oven and dishwasher, building a loft for his bed to make room for more canvases. He splits his time there and at the condominium/studio of his wife Dana Ellyn, a fellow artist with whom he often collaborates with in joint exhibitions.

Two Halves of “Two Sides to Every Story”

One of Sesow’s most compelling works created for the AVAM show hangs on wires between two pillars, revealing paintings on both sides of the canvas. Called “Two Sides to Every Story,” one side features an angel pointing skyward and pulling the hand of a frightened, naked boy with a severed hand, offering the comfort of death over the struggles of life. A small plane floats in the sky overhead while a wind sock flutters in the distance. On the other side of the canvas, Sesow’s life unfolds in 56 vignettes representing both monumental and trivial chapters. The saga starts with an angry, drooling man crouched in front of a computer and ends with a less angry man painting a self-portrait.

“Matt Sesow: Shock and Awe” will be on display at the American Visionary Art Museum until June 4, 2017.

Brendan L. Smith is a freelance journalist, mixed-media artist, and father of two rambunctious boys in Washington, D.C.