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Art and War

A local sculptor's storefront tribute to fallen soldiers in Iraq is garnering double-takes.

"Fatalities" by Donald Shambroom. On display at at McIntyre & Moore booksote, Davis Square, Somerville, MA.

by Margaret Weigel

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Even in the dark depths of a frozen Boston winter, images of beauty and rebirth pop up in unexpected places. And sometimes these pictures are as shocking as they are attractive, particularly local artist Donald Shambroom's controversial sculptural tributes to the casualties of the Iraq war. Called "Fatalities," the exhibit is prompting double-takes from startled pedestrians, first when it was displayed for two weeks in February in the storefront windows of empty buildings on Mt. Auburn Street in Watertown, MA and now in its latest home, until March 28, 2005 in the front window of bookseller McIntyre and Moore in Davis Square, Somerville, MA.

As of early March, 2005, over 1,500 American

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servicemen and women have been killed and more than 11,000 wounded in Iraq. Although he has no immediate family or friends stationed in Iraq, the war has affected Shambroom profoundly. "For the first time, [war] was in my guts ... the political situation is sad and weighty," says Shambroom. The turning point was last spring when the broadcast of the WWII epic "Saving Private Ryan" was censored by local ABC affiliates due to the film's 'profanity.' "People don't want to be reminded of the human toll of war," Shambroom opines.

Shambroom was well-aware of the lack of images in the mainstream media that would remind Americans of the loss of life. But art is able to express the censored through abstraction. A series of twelve pieces each named for a fallen soldier, "[Fatalities](#)" is the first overtly political work Shambroom has produced. [The pieces](#) are constructed from discarded material, such as aging house plaster and shards of glass, and marked by jolts of red paint.

The work is not meant to be anti-war, stresses the artist, but rather a reminder of the violent loss of life in wartime. [In one piece](#), broken sculptural shards of concrete are marked with a blood red paint; in another, [a small wooden box](#) is filled with the detritus of a war landscape -- sand, garbage, broken glass -- and covered by a semi-transparent red glaze of paint.

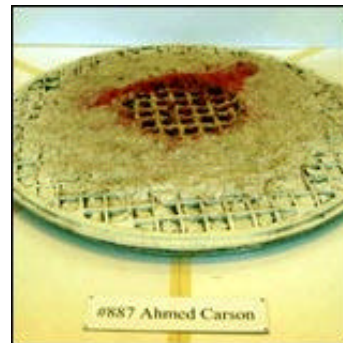
[Shambroom's earlier work](#) has been exhibited by prestigious institutions such as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the DeCordova Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. But while local galleries expressed an appreciation for the "Fatalities" series, these graphic works are not for sale. One art critic writing

for a local publication panned Shambroom's window show, condemning the work as not gallery-quality and suggested that the storefront setup came about because of the lack of gallery interest. But Shambroom says he always wanted "[Fatalities](#)" to reach an audience outside of a museum's climate-controlled, white-walled setting. Shambroom's initial plan was for "[Fatalities](#)" to grace a store window in downtown Boston during last summer's Democratic National Convention, but "all retail was locked down" for security reasons.

"[Fatalities](#)" was first shown publicly this past January at the Watertown Methodist Church during an



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antiwar event sponsored by Watertown Committee for Environmental Safety (WCES). Displayed at the back of the church, the series provoked expressions of both sadness and relief. It was hailed by an attendee as implicit "permission to think about such things as war casualties." The Justice with Peace Task Force of the WCES is credited as co-sponsoring the exhibit, although Shambroom explains that theirs is a "moral sponsorship" and extends no financial support.

After the WCES event, Shambroom spoke to Don Levy, the owner of Watertown's Delux Town Diner, about using an empty storefront window in one of his unoccupied properties to showcase "[Fatalities](#)." Levy offered the use of 609 and 613 Mt. Auburn Street, two storefronts situated in a well-trafficked commercial area undergoing renovations to convert the space to into an ice cream shop and bakery at the time. Shambroom accepted, and despite the sawdust and the frequent relocations necessitated by ongoing construction, "Fatalities" graced the empty Mt Auburn storefronts for two weeks. The workmen told Shambroom they watched pedestrians stop, initially taken aback by the unexpected display.

The rubber-necking pleases Shambroom. "Art's different on the street," he says. "It's an unsuspecting manifestation of the reminder of the human toll of war." He wants the work to provoke, to surprise, but most of all, to remind us of the young men and women who are dying every day in Iraq.

*Shambroom will give a free talk entitled "Art and War" on March 17, 2005 at 7:30 p.m. at the McIntyre & Moore bookstore in David Square, Somerville, MA. He will discuss the portrayal of war in such classic works as "All Quiet on the Western Front" and "Apocalypse Now."*

**Margaret Weigel reviews visual arts for [WBUR Online Arts](#), the 2004 Specialty Online Journalism Award-winning arts magazine of WBUR, Boston's NPR News station.**

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