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Portraits of Peace

Moraga artist tries to heal the wounds of war

By Lou Fancher



Moraga artist Mel Ahlborn

Mel Ahlborn is an American artist whose bold paintings capture the unparalleled dedication of modern day soldiers, honoring them for all time in oil on paper.

Creating *Portraits of Peace*, a collection of what will eventually be eight paintings, is keeping the Moraga artist both busy and content. Her story—how she came to be developing enormous, 5' x 5' portraits of US soldiers—is as varied as the subjects she chooses to paint.

"I knew I was an artist at age 4 or 5," Ahlborn says, settling in to a plush, pillow-filled sofa in her liv-



[painting of a soldier] Photo Mel Ahlborn

ing room. "Everything that had color or form or line, everything that was art, engaged me long past the dinner bell."

But Ahlborn, a wiz at math and science, was sent by her family and the nuns at school, on a different trajectory: "Art was not a track they would send a bright student to pursue," she says.

Instead, she wound up with a double degree in Chemistry and Classics from Tufts University. She went on to Hughes Aircraft, where she was a support engineer for the aeronautics company.

The irony of her career progression, from aerospace engineer to artist, is not lost on Ahlborn. "The job at Hughes: I had an interview opportunity and the pay was amazing," she says, in explanation. "But even when I was in college, I'd finish my organic chem labs, and I'd work on my art."

A series of events in the 1980's triggered Ahlborn's complete transformation into the artist she is today. First, her calligraphy appeared in a Getty Museum exhibit of The Stammheim Mssal, a religious service manuscript. In response, her father gave her a box of tools that had belonged to his father.

Ahlborn discovered for the first time that her family history included an artist: her grandfather had been an engraver.

"Not too long after, I was seeking to illustrate my calligraphy," Ahlborn says, "So I went to art school." There, she learned about form and figures, causing an immediate expansion in her work.

Ahlborn's hunger for "heritage," a term she equates to "lived experiences," offers the best explanation for the origins of her *Portraits of Peace* project. "I have a friend, a social worker who works with soldiers returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom and the alarming rate of suicides with that population—" she leaves the sentence dangling. "And I wanted to do a portrait of Obama, because he interested me. I'm a better American than I am a political partisan. I'm not a person who lives a double standard. I see more what unites us than what divides us," she says.

Combining these disparate impulses, Ahlborn created two large works. "I went into the studio. I went into the lab. I had Obama's Nobel speech in front of me. I was thinking, *how can I use this?*—



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'cause the material's on fire inside of me."

The reaction from studio visitors was intense: "People were seeing what I was doing and they were crying. They were moved," she says. "My goal was to cause people to pause, to reflect, to think: *I'm a part of that soldier; I'm an American too.* I realized my artwork could contribute to healing the wounds of war."

Ahlborn wrote to the Department of Defense to request pictures of a female soldier. She chose Sergeant Monica Brown, a Silver Star recipient from Lake Jackson, Texas. The painting is now complete, and Ahlborn has made arrangements for it to be donated to a Veteran's hospital in Brown's home town.

Eventually, Ahlborn plans for all eight portraits to be on display in the soldier's birthplaces. "They're the ones that help us remember we are American. I don't discount the necessity of war: freedom and democracy come with a price. But we can't forget: the soldiers, they're human."

Four of the eight paintings are finished, or nearly so, and a fifth is in the works. Of the remaining two, Ahlborn says, "I need somebody from this area. These are our local heroes. Lamorinda has soldiers we don't even know about."

To contact the artist, email mahlborn@illuminationstudio.org. To learn more about Portraits of Peace, go to <http://portraitsofpeace.wordpress.com/>.

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Lafayette Library's Successful First Year

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Kathy Merchant, President of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation Trustees (Foundation) adds, "The Library brought the community together like nothing else could. Residents feel that this is "their" library – they have ownership."

The LLLC has a close working relationship with the Foundation, a non-profit entity created to support the construction, operations, programming and funding of the LLLC. Many residents don't know that the Foundation is responsible for funding 52% of the annual operating costs – which translates into expanded library hours, funding Glenn Seaborg Learning Consortium programming and maintenance.

As part of the negotiations to get the library built, the City of Lafayette agreed to fund only the amount that they had already been paying for the original library - forever. Of course the new 30,000 square foot, state of the art library is considerably more expensive to run than the old library – that's where the Foundation fits in. The Contra Costa County library system only funds staffing for 35 hours per week, the Foundation funds the balance of the 56 hours per week that the library is open plus the revolutionary Glen Seaborg Learning Consortium.

Some pleasant surprises and challenges have greeted both Weaver and Merchant – they credit Facilities Manager Brian Long for keeping the place humming, "None of us expected what it would take

to manage a facility."

One unanticipated surprise was the volume of computer users. The new building has one of the biggest bandwidths in the County library system – but there were so many users logged on to the free wi-fi at one time they had to upgrade capacity.

According to Weaver, another big change is the Friends of the Library. They went from a cramped room in the Lafayette Community Center to a spacious organized facility at the corner of First Street and Golden Gate Way, the Friends Corner Book Shop, and from thirty volunteers to over a hundred.

"Could we deliver an audience," was a concern of Merchant, of the first of its kind in the nation Glenn Seaborg Learning Consortium - a partnership of a dozen Bay Area exemplary science, education and arts institutions. Management and administration of the Consortium is handled by the Foundation. Lamorinda residents are able to enjoy a wide array of events, courtesy of support from the Thomas J. Long Foundation, from California Shakespeare Theater and the Lawrence Hall of Science to the Oakland Zoo and the Commonwealth Club.

Merchant describes their first efforts at getting the word out as "gorilla marketing." In the ensuing months there has been a phenomenal response from the community. Just recently 550 people attended the Lamorinda Reads author event with Abraham Verghese discussing

his hugely popular book, "Cutting for Stone." Look for a regularly updated monthly calendar of events available online and on site.

The Foundation's Open Doors Open Minds is very close to its goal amount of \$4 million, helped along by substantial corporate and foundation funding. For example, a generous foundation grant from Bechtel in collaboration with the Foundation and schools supports a prototype model of a curriculum unit that can be replicated and is portable. NASA photos from outer space are the focus of the premier lesson. The plan is to have a "curriculum in a box" that fits in with existing science units to make life easier for teachers with enrichment materials and lesson plans.

Because part of the new library's mission is to assist underserved communities, the NASA exhibit and teacher curriculum boxes will travel to the Antioch Library and schools in the area. "This fits perfectly with our mission," said Weaver, "Libraries are the great equalizer."

In a nutshell, the County runs the library, the City owns the building and the Foundation takes care of Consortium programming, operations and fundraising. Don't forget the Bookmark Café, the Historical Society and the Friends Corner Book Shop - also components of the LLLC. In the library's inaugural year there has been a 300% increase in the number of users; my guess is there is 300% more to love at the new facility.

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