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Portraits of Peace Moraga artist tries to heal the wounds of war

By Lou Fancher



Moraga artist Mel Ahlborn Photo Lou Fancher

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 MIssal, 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?- '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/>.

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 living 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.



[painting of a soldier] Photo Mel Ahlborn

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