

MARY BETH HEFFERNAN

THE SOLDIER'S SKIN

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DIVISION OF VISUAL ARTS AND MEDIA STUDIES
1570 East Colorado Boulevard
Pasadena, California 91106-2003

Front Inside Cover

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THE SOLDIER’S SKIN: AN ENDLESS EDITION
at the Pasadena City College Art Gallery,
October 10 — November 17, 2007.

The exhibition is part of Art + Ideas 2007, a city-wide festival organized by
the Pasadena Arts Council around the theme of “skin.”

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Photos of the exhibition on pages 5, 20 and 21 are by Charles Jones, Tam Lai and Michael Zara, respectively.
All were taken at the Pasadena City College Art Gallery, October 2007.

Book designed by Victor Dawahare.



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Cover: Maddy, who attended High Desert Test Sites 5 with her family, holding the Owen McNamara poster,
near Joshua Tree, California, May 5, 2006. This solo poster served as an experiment that led to the exhibition
represented in this catalogue.

SAVING THEIR SKINS

The first art works by Mary Beth Heffernan that I ever saw featured creepy, startlingly sexual blobs
of skin. Those were black and white photographs, in the style of nineteenth century documentary
photos of medical specimens. Heffernan posed bits of turkey flesh that she had folded and sutured in
such a way that her pictures seemed to offer a coolly clinical presentation of a hair-raising subject:
surgically detached genitalia. In a related group of photos, she arranged turkey skin into the precise
shapes of the loincloth of Christ as depicted in historic paintings of the crucifixion by artists such as
Peter Paul Rubens and Fra Angelico. Raised Catholic, Heffernan clearly remains fascinated by the
dogma of the Word made Flesh. The sort of “Word” she investigates in her art is not limited to the
breath of God, however; her interest extends to the intersection of earthly bodies with worldly sources
of authority: the objectivity of science, the canons of art history, the cherished beliefs that sustain a
nation-state.

For *The Soldier’s Skin*, Heffernan took her camera to tattoo parlors adjacent to a Marine Corps base in
the Mojave Desert town of Twentynine Palms, in southeastern California. She concentrated on the
marines’ memorial tattoos, tributes to fallen comrades embedded in the skin of warriors who were, in
most cases, preparing to return to battle in Iraq. The tattoo designs are largely drawn from a small
stable of stock imagery: US flags, Christian crosses, Marine Corps insignias, military dog tags and a
standard tableau in which an upright rifle, bayonet thrust in the ground, stands in for a body, with a
helmet atop it and a pair of empty boots standing alongside. In Heffernan’s photos, two elements interrupt
the predictability of the tattoo drawings. First is the skin itself: inflamed, welted and emphatically fragile
in the immediate aftermath of the tattooing process. Then there are the painfully specific written
words inscribed in many of the tattoos: the name or names of the marine’s dead friends. In one
elaborate tattoo, a litany of ten suddenly dead young Americans is drawn in a wispy script that rises
like cartoon smoke, each name from an individual cartridge shell: Martinez, Stevens, Watson, Kaiser,
Hunh, Clay, Patten, Modeen, Holmason, McElveen.

Rather than exhibiting framed photos on gallery walls, Heffernan presents what she calls an “endless edition”: mass-produced posters laid in low stacks on the floor, with an invitation for viewers to reach down and freely take copies with them. Given the memorial content of the images, the stacked posters—which are otherwise reminiscent of the blocky, industrially produced forms of minimalist sculpture—inevitably suggest grave markers. By offering viewers the option of taking posters, the artist challenges her audience to reflect both publicly, in the gallery, and privately, if they take posters home, upon their relationship to these images and all they represent. Heffernan’s presentation encourages the complete range of responses from viewers, regardless of their backgrounds or political affiliations. This attitude stands in striking contrast to our current social climate, dominated by partisan antagonism, in which images related to our military dead are actively suppressed (for example, the Pentagon prohibits press photos of soldiers’ flag-draped caskets as they arrive in the US). The fact that contradictory interpretations of these images might emerge in the public space of a community college gallery, perhaps even achieve some mutual recognition there, seems to me an important feature of this project.

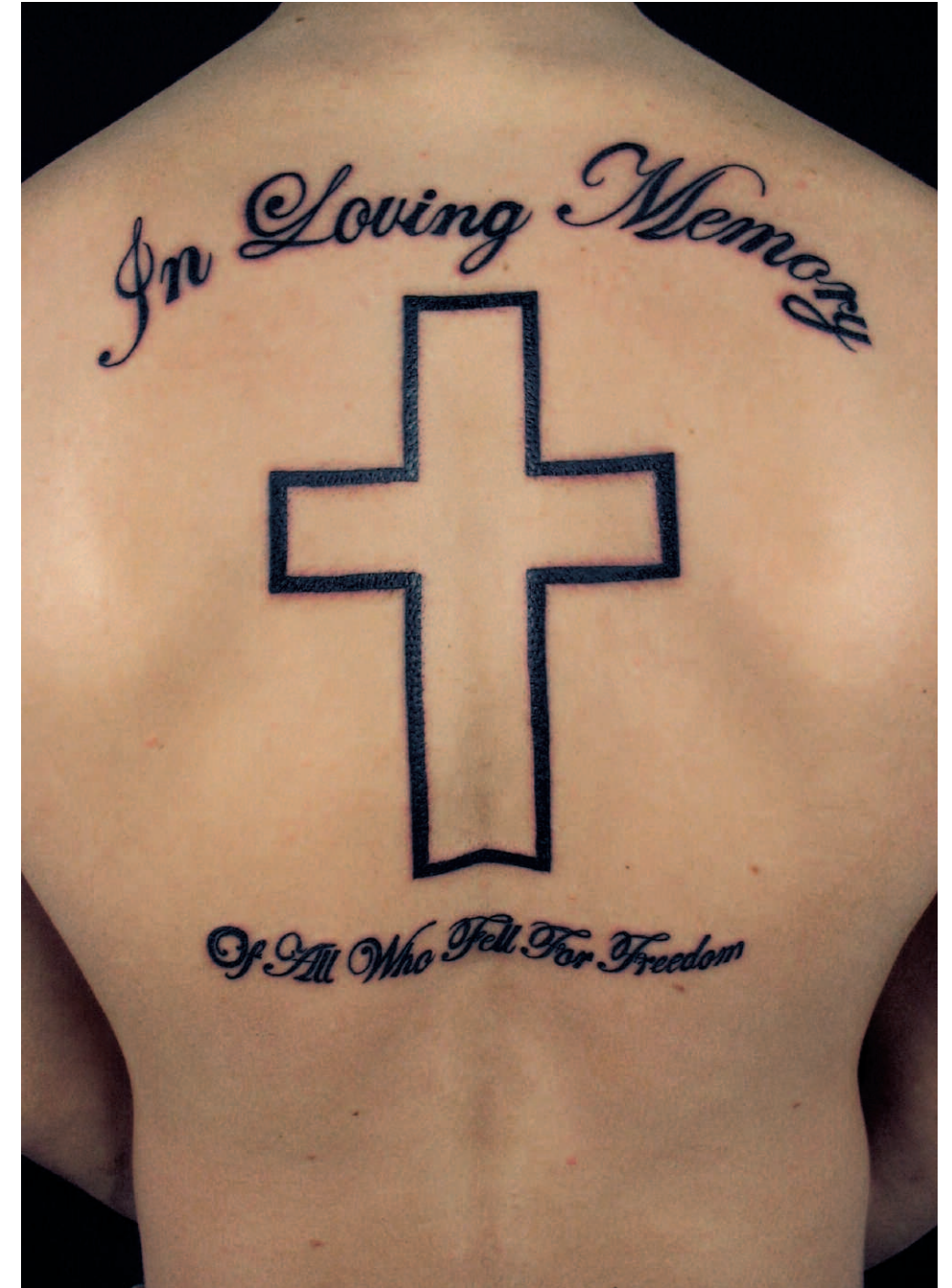
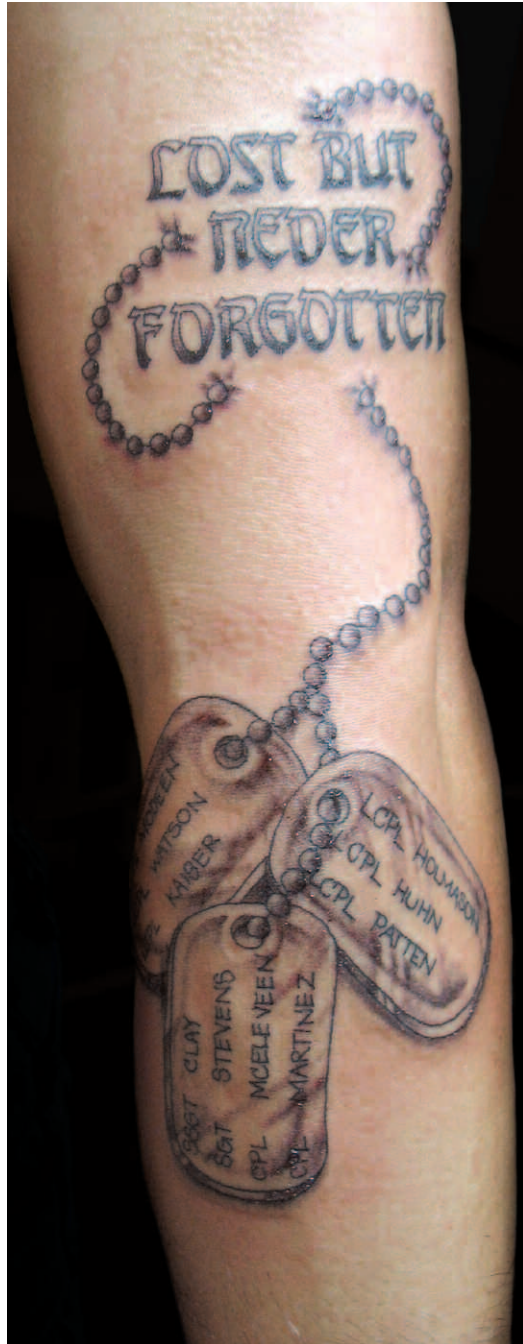
Without attempting to dictate a particular conclusion to her audience, Heffernan invites us to engage in further thought: about our personal relationships to military service, or to death; about the large political concerns these works bring up—war, nationalism, social class—and about the ways that religious and political beliefs become impressed, generation after generation, on each of our bodies.

BRIAN TUCKER | DIRECTOR, PASADENA CITY COLLEGE ART GALLERY

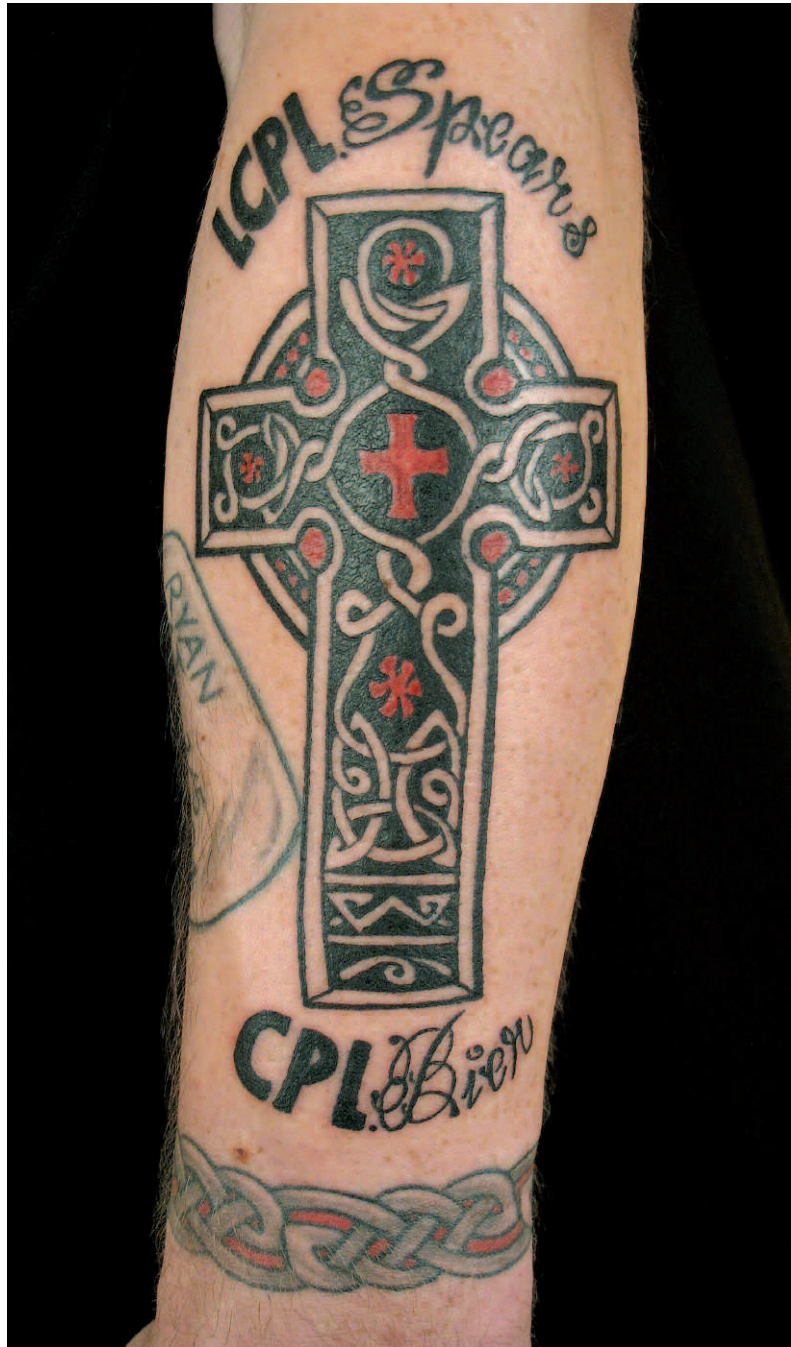
October 2007

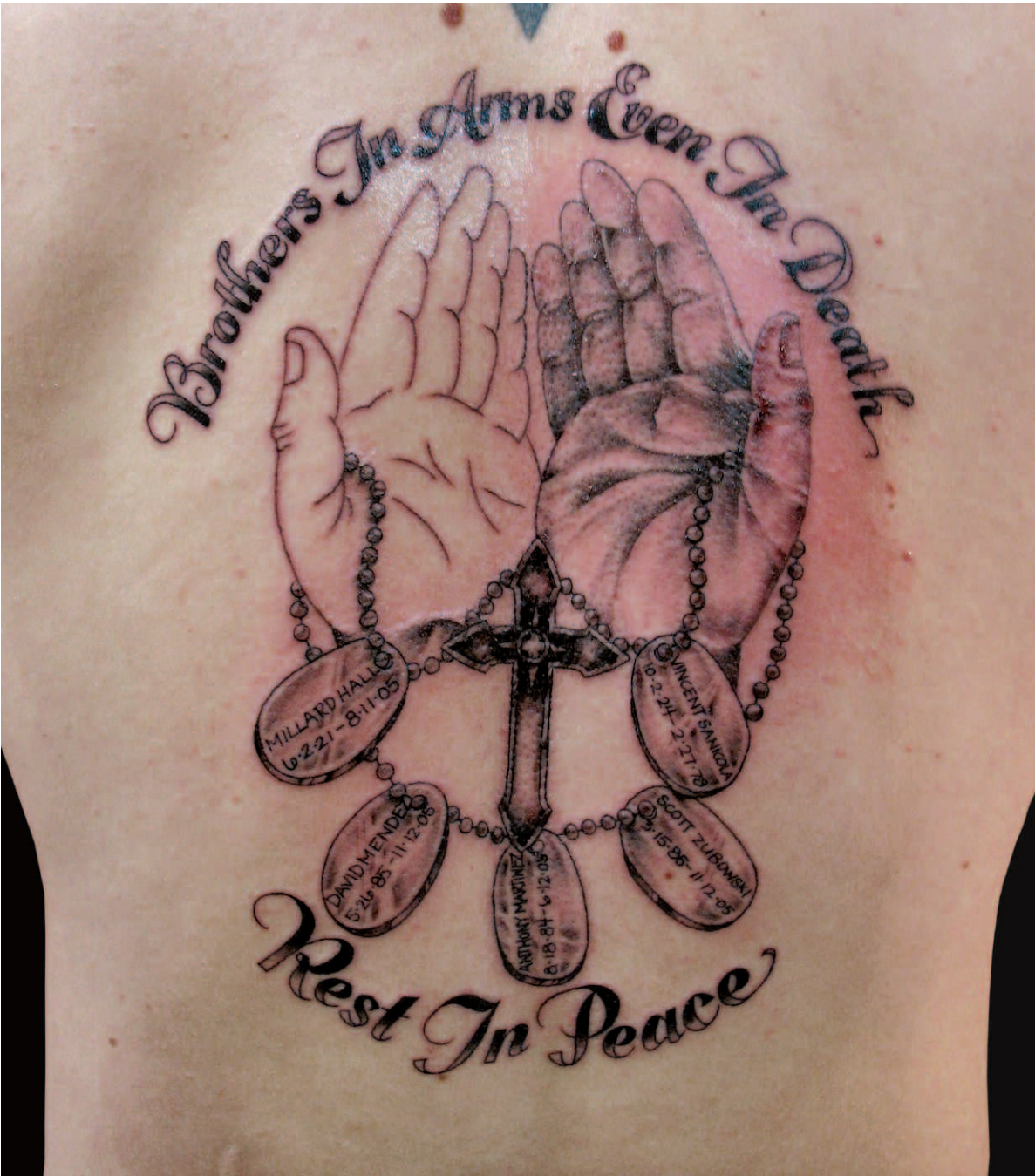












WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Unless stated otherwise, all works in *The Soldier’s Skin: An Endless Edition* are commercially printed posters in editions of unlimited quantity. All images in the show were photographed in 2006; the posters were produced in 2007. Gallery visitors were free to take copies of any of the posters.

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JESSE MARKEL, April 26, 2006. 19” x 27”. A member of the 2/7 Echo Company, Markel remembers the 2/7 Fox casualties because his birthday fell the day after the December 1st blast.

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OWEN MCNAMARA, February 6, 2006. 19” x 27”. McNamara was twenty years old when, on his second tour in Iraq, 10 of his fellow marines were killed in a booby-trapped patrol base where they were attending a promotion ceremony. During his first tour in Iraq he, too, was injured and earned a Purple Heart medal, which he inscribed as a tattoo on his upper left arm.

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KEVIN JORDAN, February 9, 2006. 10.5” x 27”. Jordan’s tattoo memorializes the same marines as Owen McNamara’s. His 10 brothers-in-arms, along with 3 other marines, were killed in a bomb-rigged former flour factory as they attended a promotion ceremony.

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JAMES DODSON, April 12, 2006. 19” x 27”. Dodson was shot in Iraq on May 1st, 2007, one year after he was photographed. Hospitalized for nearly 6 months as of this writing, he reports that he is healing well.

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KEN BATES, March 10, 2006. 19” x 27”. Bates comes from a family of marines, and his grandfather fought in the battle of Iwo Jima. He preferred this World War II icon to icons of the Iraq War.

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BRANDON JOHNSON, March 11, 2006. 19” x 27”.

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NATE REEP, May 12, 2006. 15.5” x 27”. The marines memorialized on Reep’s arm touched his life in special but ordinary ways: Wasser was the first guy to be kind to him in the Marines; Ryan was his cousin; he went through military school with Spears; he went to church with Bier.

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ANONYMOUS (from Pair A Dice Tattooz), March 16, 2006. 18.25” x 27”.

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ERIC KELLY, February 6, 2006. 12.5 x 27”. Kelly’s tattoo memorializes the same group of men as Owen McNamara’s.

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JOSHUA HALL, February 3, 2006. 24” x 27”. Hall’s dog tag tattoo memorializes his fallen marine brothers alongside his grandfather and uncle who also died at war.

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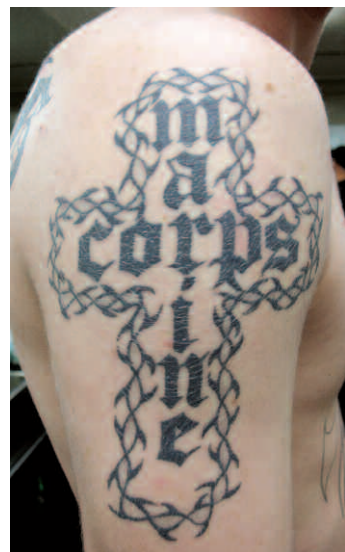
TERRELL COOK, May 5, 2006. Inkjet print, 32.4” x 26.5”. Cook was shot out of the air while leaping between rooftops during his tour in Iraq. While his body armor saved his life, he still couldn't believe that he survived the sniper's bullet. His tattoo, “You're Still Alive,” is inscribed in reverse so that when he sees himself in the mirror, he is reminded of his brush with death.

When you approach Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, the largest Marine base in the country, you see no display of the namesake palm trees or the decommissioned planes and guns that welcome you at other military bases. The town's only objects of monumental scale are found in its "Oasis of Murals," which includes an already fading celebration of the first Gulf War. Next door to the Gulf War mural is a drinking hole called “Stumps,” the short version of the base’s nickname, Twentynine Stumps. The joke is that “the Stumps” now refers not to the missing palms, but to the missing limbs of marines returning from the Iraq war.

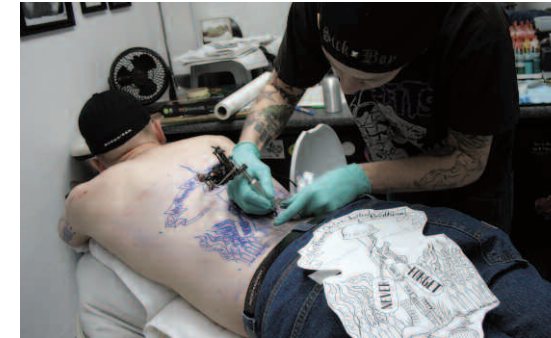


If you approach the base at night, it becomes apparent that the lion’s share of war memorializing takes place not on the sides of walls, but on a far more intimate scale. Brightly lit with fluorescent lights and smelling of disinfectant, the ten or so tattoo studios of the high desert area exude the antiseptic feeling of the clinic as much as being sirens of what modernist architect Adolf Loos famously called the “crime” of ornament. The tattoo parlors that once attracted only denizens of the underworld have been traded for respectable industry, marked by blood-borne pathogen certifications, sterilizers, reams of carefully laid out plastic and examination gloves.

For me as an observer, this scene bears an uncanny likeness to those I experienced 19 years ago as a young DWNAD (Dependent Wife, Navy Active Duty, the acronym lamely pronounced "Dwah-Nad"). Fresh out of art school, I married the boy next door, a Navy flight surgeon. He was assigned to a squadron of Marine helicopter pilots who were periodically sent to Twentynine Palms for combat maneuvers. I indulged my curiosity about the clinical setting by posing as a medical student so I could observe him cleaning out wounds, expressing nasty abscesses or—later, when he was training to be a urologist—stitching up testicles and the like. Nineteen years later, I’ve returned to Twentynine Palms, albeit no longer a DWNAD. Still, it’s another Bush, another desert war, another marine in the chair under the knife or needle, but this time it’s me who’s probing the wounds.



While getting a Marine Corps tattoo is practically a rite of basic training passage, the marine’s practice of getting memorial tattoos, sometimes even before heading off to war, is both curious and haunting. Jacques Derrida recognized in *The Politics of Friendship* that close friendship is predicated on the possibility that one friend will witness the death of the other, and therefore will become responsible to memorialize and mourn the other. Marines are fully aware of these dynamics when they design, in advance, tattoos that their friends will inscribe in the event of their deaths. The Marine Corps crown of thorns tattoo on Ray King’s arm is one of these mutually planned memorials; a tribute to his best friend who was killed while Ray was completing his senior year of high school.



I see the memorial tattoo as a ritual wounding, where pain and healing as well as the penetrating inscription are offered to the dead as memorial sacrifices. Often saying about their tattoos, “It’s the least I can do,” the marines I photographed felt a kind of communion with their dead “brothers” in their ritual suffering. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz describes the destabilizing effects that bodily injury has upon masculine ideals. She argues that wounds unravel the tight coil of masculinity, taking a body construed as upright, sealed, disciplined and impenetrable, and opening it to leaks, pain and the irregular process of healing. When twenty-year-old Owen McNamara submitted to the first of two seven-hour sessions of painful tattooing on his back, his fellow marines teased him when the pain became unbearable and he ended the session. Never mind that he earned a Purple Heart for injuries sustained on his first tour in Iraq and was still recovering from a second round of injuries from the blast that killed 10 of his Marine brothers. His willingness to endure the hours of prostrate pain and be heckled as a “wuss” was a fundamental part of the offering. Paradoxically, when a man heals, both his body and his desire to verbalize his trauma seem hardened and closed. Ultimately, the tattoo as healed icon serves to shore up the masculine ideals of toughness and impermeability to danger.

Most of all, the memorial tattoo is an attempt to assign stable meaning to an event that is beyond representation: death that is random, violent, disorienting, unfathomably gruesome. The active duty marine who memorializes his brother’s death shimmers in an uneasy present between the threat of his own death and his buddy’s past life. By scripting his mourning onto the surface of his body, the marine permanently flags his own trauma and loss; the soldier’s skin becomes a site of mourning the past and warning the future. I have attempted to build a similar instability into the *Soldier’s Skin* exhibition. By printing the images as posters, stacking them on the floor and inviting the audience to take them away, I hope to set in play the dynamics of ownership, empathy and loss.

MARY BETH HEFFERNAN





BIOGRAPHY

Mary Beth Heffernan is a Los Angeles based artist whose photographs, installations and sculpture explore the intersections of corporeality, representation and identity. Her works are included in numerous private and public collections, including the UCLA/Hammer Museum; Light Work of Syracuse, NY; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Heffernan earned an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts and was a fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York City. She is Assistant Professor of Sculpture and Photography at Occidental College in Los Angeles, CA. A mid-career survey of her work will be featured at the Kennedy Museum in Athens, Ohio in 2009.

SPECIAL THANKS

I am in debt to the tattoo studios and artists listed below. Their help and cooperation were crucial to this project. They introduced me to marines, alerted me when memorial tattoos were scheduled and welcomed me to hang out and listen to the stories that emerged during tattoo sessions. I am grateful for the hospitality they extended to me.

— Mary Beth Heffernan

CUSTOM TATTOO

Larry Mora, owner, tattoo and artist

AMERICAN MADE TATTOO

Kyle Stratton, owner and tattoo artist

PAIR A DICE TATTOOZ

Dan Kuns, owner and tattoo artist (*Anonymous* tattoo)

Victoria Kuns, co-owner

STRATA TATTOO LAB

SMOKIN’ GUNS TATTOO

THE DARK SIDE

Jeff Cooper (*Jesse Markel* and *Nate Reep* tattoos)

Jerrard Crow (*Ken Bates* tattoo)

Wayne Gauthier (*Owen McNamara* tattoo)

Jay’e Jones (*James Dodson* tattoo)

Evan Naylor

Matt Nicholson (*Eric Kelly* tattoo)

Jodean Sinner

Eddie Stacy (*Brandon Johnson* tattoo)

Jen Tolbert (*Joshua Hall* and *Kevin Jordan* tattoos)

Isaac Thompson, piercer

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