

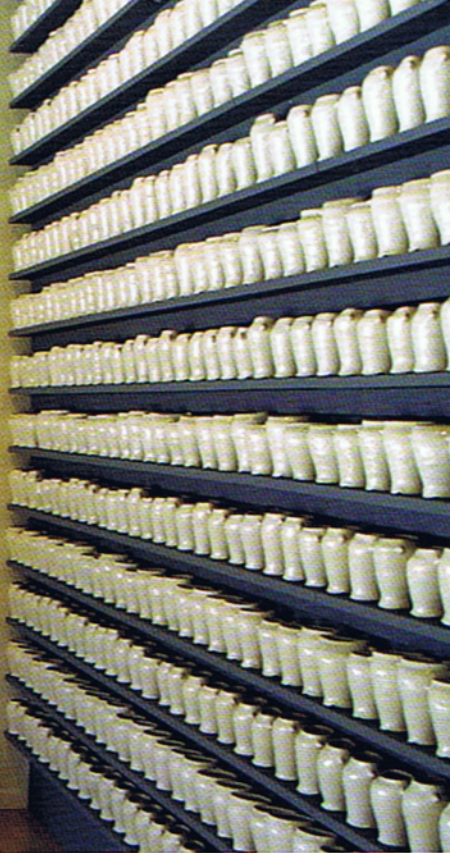
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1000 Vases, List of Names. Gallery Exhibition, Glentwood Springs, Colorado, US.

In Memory

A Reminder of Individual Sacrifice and the Cost of War

Article by Linda Hillman

ON MARCH 20, 2003, THE DAY THE US INVADED IRAQ, I WAS at Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina for a two-month concentration in ceramics. We heard little news but as misinformation was massaged into a threat-to-freedom and as that talk became a full-blown invasion of Iraq, I became angry and disheartened. I had been active in the Vietnam protests but this was different. I didn't see people taking to the streets. We seemed complacent in the face of another 'overthrow', as journalist Steven Kinzer would call our diversion from hunting Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan.

The US invasion became an occupation, which became a war and we Americans have continued to pay the price with our money, our international reputation and with human life. Indeed the Iraqis, soldiers from many countries deployed in Iraq and civilians have lost their lives in this war. Until recently, the soldiers' deaths seemed rather vague in their impact, since for so long

we were not allowed to see the body bags coming home. Artists, however, chose to show us what we were not supposed to see.

Ceramic artist Annette Roberts-Gray, with her 35 year history of making pots, reminds us of the cost of this 'war' with her compelling installation, *In Memory: A Reminder of Individual Sacrifice and the Cost of War*, which powerfully records, and protests, American death in Iraq. With her art, she channelled her frustration with the disparity between official government reports, the truth on the ground and the general failure of the media to fill in those gaps.

In 2004 she began to work on ideas for clay vessels that would honour and memorialize the American soldiers lost in the Iraq arena. As she worked to test a multitude of clays and glazes for her project, she researched each of the fallen soldiers on the Internet. She was struck by the melting pot of the names represented. When in February



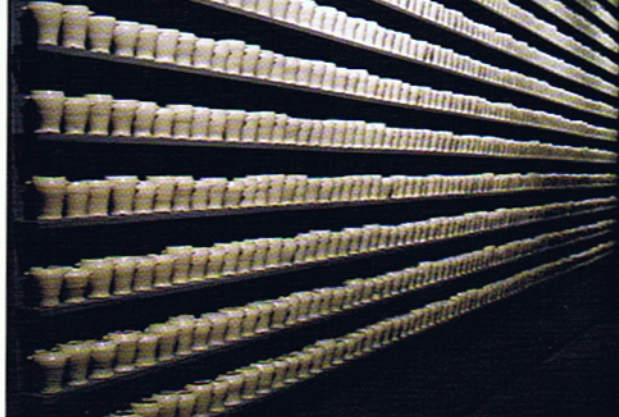
1000 Vases, List of Names. 2008. CMC Exhibition. Glenwood Springs, Colorado, US.

2005 there were 1,493 US soldiers dead, she ordered a ton of the highly translucent English grolleg porcelain clay she would use and began the work of honouring these men and women. At that time, she believed the 'war' was close to ending, that her dedication and this ton of clay would be enough to complete a memorial for every soldier.

Roberts-Gray made more than 1,000 vessels to comprise this massive installation of pieces set in straight lines on shelves, row after row, each carrying the name and age of a fallen soldier on one side and the insignia of his or her service branch and the day the soldier died embossed in to the other. The vases that honour men have pointed handles; those that honour women have curvilinear serpentine handles. The vases are individually wheel-thrown and differ slightly from one to another. Each is presented as a unique memorial, intended to honour a unique person.

It was not until late 2006 that Roberts-Gray realized that she could not keep up with the escalating death count. When it passed 3,000, she set aside her goal of making one vase for each soldier. The project, as originally conceived, was too monumental to maintain. She felt it was taking an emotional toll on her. In order to go on with the project, she decided to continue making the memorials but only at the specific request of a family whose child had fallen in Iraq. Some of the other vases have been sent to family members as well.

400 Vases, List of Names. Denver International Airport, Colorado, US.



1000 Vases, List of Names. RedLine Gallery Inaugural Show, Denver, Colorado, US.

In this way, the work took on new meaning for her: a sense of futility and metaphor. Trying to keep up with the war machine is beyond the scope of the ordinary American, or perhaps any normal person. It echoed Roberts-Gray's notion that this war was and is being executed largely outside of the consciousness or understanding of the American people.

THE INSTALLATION: SACRIFICE AT AN INCREDIBLE COST

As an installation, *In Memory* has made a number of public appearances from *The Best of Colorado Artists 2006-2007* at the Denver International Airport to the Aspen Art Museum, where in August 2008, Roberts-Gray chose the vase she had made in memory of 19 year old Marine Nick J. Palmer to represent all of the fallen soldiers in Iraq for the museum's permanent installation, *Imaginary Thing*. At the time, Roberts-Gray's only child, her 19 year old son, had strongly considered joining the Marines, eventually deciding in favour of completing college. Palmer was from Leadville, Colorado, geographically and historically similar to Aspen, the final resting place for this memorial to a fallen soldier.

The installation has received a lot of feedback. In an email to Roberts-Gray following an installation at the Snowmass Chapel in Colorado a viewer wrote, "I don't think we have the moral capacity to understand mass tragedy. If we ourselves or somebody we are close to experiences a loss, we feel it acutely but if 1,000 people whom we do not know experience a loss, we do not

In Memory. 2007. Floating Vase Installation.





In Memory: A Reminder of Individual Sacrifice and the Cost of War. 2007. Vase Installation.

feel anything. I think what you are trying to do with your art is to give us a tool to assist us with this moral deficiency."

To share the installation with a larger audience, Roberts-Gray began creating and photographing the memorial vases in 2007, primarily in outdoor and remote locations. Through her use of pattern, light and shadow and combining the simplicity of the vessels with austere landscapes, she engages the emotions of the viewer. A photo of one such installation created on a golf course near her studio in Glenwood Springs, Colorado can be read in a similar way to the grave markers at Arlington National Cemetery.

The same year, she took a small installation to Washington, DC and photographed some of the vases against the backdrop of many of the well-known US monuments and memorials. In 2008, on the fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq by US-led forces, she photographed the vases with the Statue of Liberty. Her images are on view at <http://www.memorialvases.org/>.

Most recently, curator Jenny Schlenzka selected Roberts-Gray's installation as one of six by international artists for the 24 October 2008 inaugural exhibition at RedLine, a new art space in Denver. Opening one week before the presidential elections, *Through a Glass, Darkly* referred to the political process. "A show like this is tricky," she says. "Political art can be so didactic and one-sided that it treads the thin line of being written off if the viewer is repulsed by the artist's viewpoint."

With Flags on the Mall Installation. 2007. Washington, DC.



Vase Installation. 2008. Statue of Liberty. 5th Anniversary of the Invasion of Iraq.

As a result, Schlenzka selected six artists whose work causes viewers to think about (not just react to) American politics. She was impressed by Roberts-Gray's initial urgency and commitment both to making a vase for every soldier who had died in Iraq and her sense of failure when she could not go on. It is an analogy for how the war affects people: it is too big for one person to handle and the danger is in becoming immune.

Roberts-Gray does not consider herself an activist nor does she think she was making protest ceramics. She does, however, hope that we will remember the individual toll that war takes. Like important memorials the world over (Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial being the most powerful for this writer) Roberts-Gray wants the viewer who is standing in the presence of these quiet urn-like pieces to come to his or her own decision about this war and what these soldiers' deaths mean.

Linda Hillman, an erstwhile English-as-a-second-language teacher and teacher-trainer, is now a studio potter living and working in Oak Park, Illinois, US.



Above: Signature.

Below: School Children Visit Installation.

