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A Tradition of Service

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Michael Feeney

Bachelor of the Arts in Fine Art, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 2000

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
December, 2012

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A Tradition of Service

My work consists of a collection of narrative portraits of men in my family and my wife's. I am inspired by photographs and documents from the lives of our predecessors. I admire their willingness to serve their countries and support their families. The symbolism included in these portraits is my attempt to create an homage to their lives.

The artworks are composed of layered imagery of documents and photos. I create the compositions by digitizing and filtering the images collected from each man's life. Then, I reassemble them and add color and layer brush work to add emphasis. My principle tool throughout the process has been my computer. The computer and various programs allow me to paint in the virtual environment. This has given me more control of the resulting print, and allowed me to include a higher level of detail and historical material in the image. Through these compositions I have sought to create a deeper personal connection to the men in our families.

A Tradition of Service

Introduction

When I entered college, my academic path started at the US Air Force Academy. I was a below average cadet and didn't stay there long past my first year. With the military now off the table as a career choice, I entered onto a course unknown. I felt liberated in a way, and began taking art classes at James Madison University (JMU). I had always taken art classes in high school because I enjoyed them, not because I wanted to be an artist. Now, I had a chance to really explore what I loved about art. While at JMU, I declared my major as art with a concentration in the relatively new digital graphic design curriculum. I learned how to use the computer as an art tool, and liked the control and nearly limitless possibilities, and have always planned for its involvement in my work.

After graduating from college with a degree in Fine Arts, I was unsure of where my degree would lead me. I worked as an in-house graphic designer for different companies, though purposefully never laying down roots in any one place. I had determined I would travel, and some of the skills I had already learned would help to get me a job wherever I ended up. It was during this time that I signed up as volunteer in the Peace Corps. During my two years of service, I re-connected with my love of drawing. As a volunteer, I visited different villages to give presentations on a variety of health topics. My ability to draw and create posters for my presentations to the villagers was a great asset, especially when the majority of the audience could not read. As I began drawing more, I also began drawing for enjoyment.

When I returned from my service, I worked as a substitute teacher. I was lucky enough to be hired long term as a high school art teacher, with one of my classes being computer graphics. Much had changed in Fairfax County in the ten years since I graduated from high

school. In that time, the county had built an entire art program for computer graphics. Now, I could finally see myself in the field of teaching. It was then that I began to pursue my teaching credentials, and entered Virginia Commonwealth University's Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program. I selected the focus areas of Painting and Computers in Art. The graduate level courses were my greatest help in becoming a better teacher and finding myself as an artist.

Aesthetics

I grew up with a large, old photo of a man who looked like a thin version of my father in a strange uniform. My father was a federal agent, and we would move every three years. Wherever we moved, it was hung in a place of honor in our house. When I found out it wasn't my dad, I wanted to know more about this man. As it turns out, my dad knew little of him as well, and we had in fact searched for him in several places. His name was Patrick Feeney, my great-grandfather, who had died a private in the British Army during World War I. One of my earliest memories, as a boy living in Istanbul, Turkey, was searching for the grave of this man whom my father thought was killed in the Battle at Gallipoli in 1915. This was when I first realized the honor of service, and its high cost. Every man I knew served. My cousins in America were cops and firemen, my father and every one of my friends' fathers were military or working for the American government. Public service was in my blood.

Later, when I had found my calling as a teacher, I felt this same sense of purpose. This discovery illuminated what my forefathers had gone through to offer me the freedom to make this decision on my own. My great-grandfather was killed at twenty-nine, my grandfather fought

for his country's freedom as a twenty-year-old, and so had my father. The calling to serve was strong, and I had arrived at it on my own terms thanks to these men.

I am always amazed by my predecessor's lives and sacrifices, and try to capture that in my work. As I reach the same milestones, I find I am constantly comparing myself to what they accomplished at my age. My great-grandfather joined the military to support his impoverished family. My grandfather was nineteen when he joined the military. My father was married and had a child at twenty-four while serving as a Marine. I was still very immature at that age. I know each man had more colorful lives than what I'm able to portray in my art, but men of service rarely seek recognition, let alone document it. In making my pieces, I gave a sense of each man's service through the symbols I chose to represent. My own father has never spoken of his service in the Vietnam War, and I will never ask. What I do know is he served with the Marines, and received medals and commendations. I consider it a privilege that I create and teach art for a living and believe it was hard won on the backs of those who went before me.

To honor my own forefathers, I create commemorative portraits on wood. The portraits incorporate artifacts and images culled from their lives. The images include photos of my ancestors, documents, and insignia from their service. These symbols of their service memorialize their role in the survival of their descendants.

When I begin a project, I start with the computer as a planning tool creating the different compositions and layouts. This allows me to scale and print everything precisely, and gives me a certain level of control over the final product. I then translate the digital plan to traditional printing processes like silkscreen, lithography, and other image transfer techniques. With the surface prepped and ready, I paint the ground of the support with acrylic paint, and then transfer, screen, or press the image on to the wood.

Another approach I use is inkjet printing on canvas paper. This allows me to achieve a very high level of detail. I am able to almost eliminate the element of chance when transferring the original design on the computer to the substrate. I then stretch the canvas onto a frame and seal it with spray varnish.

The tributes I have created are shrines to the memory of the men in my family. The materials reflect their families, travels, and histories. I would like the viewer to see each man as a sum of his accomplishments and as someone who has accomplished the feat of fathering the next generation. They sacrificed much to have their living histories survive. Some had more documentation, and we will never know their full story, but at least what they left behind will help us to know it wasn't an easy road to live an honorable life.

Influences

I have always considered myself an illustrator and graphic designer, and fine artist later. I can identify with the Pop Art movement because its primary figureheads were initially commercial artists by trade. The artists Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997) consciously tried to turn the art world on its head by infusing commercial art into fine art.

As I began my current body of work, I was influenced by the portrait work of Andy Warhol. In his silkscreens, he focused on the essential and recognizable elements of each person's photograph. Then, he added bold, non-naturalistic color to add emphasis. I tried this same approach of minimizing detail and adding colors that in some way represented a person's life, such as the colors of a uniform. I explored the computer as a tool, much like Warhol used the Amiga computer in 1985.

In other works, my appreciation of Roy Lichtenstein's approach is apparent. His comic-book references and graphic style were the elements that could help me in my presentations. So I began to use bold outlines and half-tone effects in my pieces.

I also pull ideas and techniques from contemporary graffiti artists Banksy (birthdate unknown -) and Shepard Fairey (1970 -). Both artists use stenciling techniques to apply their art to walls and other surfaces. Banksy revolutionized guerilla advertising and relied on stenciling to get his work up quickly and repeatedly. Fairey's famous *Hope* (2008) poster, of President Barack Obama was influential in the way he also used stenciling and simplified his palette. Both artists often use an underpainting of white spray paint with black stenciling, and later color, on top. This is the approach I have adopted in my process.

All of these artists have played a part in influencing my drawing and presentation techniques. I have used their graphic-inspired work to help make an immediate connection to my viewer.

On Wood

Much of my work is printed on wood supports or incorporated in wooden constructions. My first piece in the series of wooden boxes is *PVT Patrick Feeney* (Appendix, 1). It is about my great-grandfather who served in the British Army from the age of sixteen. He retired after fourteen years of distinguished service in 1911, only to be called up again at the outbreak of World War I (WWI). In speaking of the portrait our families shared of him, my second cousin, Michael Feeney of Ireland said,

It appeared to us as children that he was always looking down at us. He was a young man, yet there was a tinge of sadness or seriousness in his eyes...maybe this was because he was mobilized again and departing for WWI. As a very experienced soldier he would

have understood the dangers of war better than most. He was by then a happily married man with a loving wife and six children. (Feeney, 80)

It was this passage and reading the Scroll of Honor commemorating his death, that led me to recreate his portrait with the scroll as a backdrop. It was the most powerful symbol to capture his life and reflect his sacrifice.

The best way to get a clear transfer of the faded photograph, with the full tonal range of facial features intact, was to recreate it with a halftone pattern. This technique gave the image a vintage feel. I used green and golden yellow acrylic paint to represent the colors of the Irish flag at the time. Since I knew the least about my great-grandfather, I chose to make the yellow below the image more distressed and transparent, as a metaphor for a fading memory. Next, I found a wooden box at a wine store, and it reminded me of how things were shipped with care before the days of corrugated cardboard. It had a level of craftsmanship that tells you the contents were important. I chose to place a bottle of Feeney's Irish Cream, surrounded by shredded paper, in the box. The bottle's label was worn which helped to show age.

The second piece in this series is *PVT Anthony Joseph Feeney* (Appendix, 2) and is about my grandfather. He and his brother Patrick were sent to live with their maternal grandparents primarily because the family couldn't afford to feed two growing boys. After their father was killed in action in WWI, they were sent to live with their paternal grandfather. Soon after, my grandfather joined the Irish Republican Army (IRA). He then joined the Irish Free State Army after Ireland gained its independence from Great Britain in 1921. After a short time serving his newly free, yet impoverished homeland, he was on a boat to America. In America, he became a citizen and never returned to the country of his birth. Some of the aspects of his life that I chose

to represent were the ruins of his boyhood home from a picture my father and I took, his naturalization papers, and his portrait in his Irish Free State Army uniform.

In this piece, I also employed a lithography method using etching ink and polyester plates that were printed on a laser jet printer. The images created by the lithography technique were more transparent, though very detailed, which was especially helpful in recreating the lettering and design of his Certificate of Citizenship. I used an etching press to transfer the litho prints to the wooden plate, and then put down a layer of distressed white acrylic paint in the shape of the outline to act as a contrasting ground for the silkscreen of the photograph. Again, I created a more transparent, layered background to infer that he was a memory.

The final piece in this wooden box series, *LTC George Michael Feeney* (Appendix, 3), depicts my father. My father graduated from college and immediately joined the Marines. He served as a company commander in Vietnam, where he was wounded in combat. When he returned, he wanted to be a New York City cop. Instead, he entered the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, which eventually became the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). As a federal agent, he continued to serve as an officer in the Army Reserve, receiving numerous citations. I looked up to my father so much, that I even tried to join the Marines from an insert in a comic book (they gave me an iron-on patch, and told me to try again when I was eighteen). When he informed me that he would be leading operations in the war on drugs in foreign countries, I was not surprised and was proud. His jobs were always dangerous, and he was very good at surviving them. This time was much different. This time when he would be facing an enemy he didn't know, he had a family to consider. He wrote me a letter to read if he didn't come back. I understood what it felt like to have a parent in combat. He was always a strong presence in my life, even though he wasn't always around. He was the reason I worked and trained so hard. I

knew it would soon be my turn, and I couldn't let him down. In trying to capture his life of service, I chose the Purple Heart, his DEA badge, and a foreign operation patch all juxtaposed against his photo from Vietnam.

This first series inspired me. I found a subject matter and form of expression that paved the way for subsequent series. This series helped me find my artistic voice.

On Canvas

My work on canvas depicts my wife's predecessors. My first piece in the series of canvases is *CAPT Robert E. Bassler* (Appendix, 4). Captain Bassler was a brilliant engineer and the son of a German immigrant. He joined the Naval Engineers and is credited with the patent for the Aircraft Arresting Device. This is the precursor to the tailhook assembly that is used on naval aircraft carriers to slow down planes. As a plane lands on the deck, it catches a line with a hook attached to the tail of the aircraft. He was also a prolific documentarian. Some of his photographs include presidential parades and aerial photos taken from a zeppelin. When I realized the amount of information I wanted to include, I thought that a canvas print would be the only way to show the details. I wanted to explore the large format printer's abilities to capture the details of my high resolution imagery. In this piece, I have included blueprints from the patent he worked on, a photo of the zeppelin he flew in, an aerial photo of the Navy Yard which he helped engineer, and his portrait in uniform.

COL Robert E. Bassler, Jr. (Appendix, 5) was my next piece in this series. He was a graduate of West Point and went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to study rocket engineering. He worked on the Pershing II missile design while stationed in Korea. This was incredibly important work during the start of the Cold War. I imagine that the apocalyptic nature

of this work must have weighed heavily on him, which is why I chose to create a composition with religious overtones, reminiscent of a Buddhist mandala. The radial pattern around the figure's head is a repetition of missiles, and the blue Ordnance Corps insignia creates a flame-like symbol above his head. This compositional arrangement was based on paintings of Yan, the Korean god of death and the underworld who passes judgment on the dead.

My process for creating these pieces was to design the image on the computer, print on a canvas roll, and then stretch this onto a frame. I would start with the portrait itself, and digitally filter it using several layers of half toning. Then, I would arrange the elements and make color choices that best represented the individual's life of service.

The final piece in my digital canvas print series, *LTC Robert E. Bassler, III* (Appendix, 6), depicts my father in law. My father-in-law graduated from West Point, and chose to become a part of the elite Army Rangers. As an officer he commanded troops in many different posts around the world, and even taught engineering courses at West Point. After he retired from the Army, he continued working with elite units of former soldiers assessing security threats as a structural engineer. His team determines a building's structural vulnerabilities when targeted in an attack. The stylized explosion behind his portrait, the Army Corps of Engineers insignia and Master Parachutist pin are all juxtaposed with blue prints of a building he designed in the background.

In this series I knew that I would be printing on large canvases, so I was free to include a higher level of minute detail. This allowed the compositions to speak about the individuals. With more artifacts to arrange and use as inspiration, I was also able to include more symbolism giving the viewer more of a chance to explore their lives.

Mixed Media

Boyhood to Manhood (APPENDIX, 7) was my most ambitious. I planned this to be an autobiographical piece which would help me fit into my historical lineage. I knew I wanted to make a large piece and decided to use doors as my support. I began gathering imagery and creating layouts. In using spray paint to apply the color, I knew there would be challenges. I finally settled on large stencils and cut them out of contact paper which I adhered to the doors, thus preventing the small edges from lifting up from the compressed air. This resulted in a high level of detail showing the intricate halftone filter work. I prepared the surface of the doors with many layers of stain and varnish, then applied the stencils. I included in the left panel major influences in my journey to manhood. These included a photo of me in high school running in the cross country championships, playing rugby for JMU, and at the Air Force Academy holding an M-16. I included the logo I designed for the JMU rugby team (which they still use today) and the Peace Corps logo.

The text I incorporated in the piece is stylized roman numerals of milestone years in my life, and the name of our son Connor Robert Feeney. The dates correspond to each of the images including the year I graduated high school and left for the Air Force Academy (1995), the year I graduated from JMU (2000), the year I joined the Peace Corps, and the year Connor will be born (2012).

In the panel on the right-hand side, I stenciled images of my face juxtaposed with my wife's face surrounded by rays of reflective paint. Finally, I cut out a hole into which I inserted a wooden box. This box holds a digital print on canvas of a sonogram of our first child. In the last step, I attached the framing and hinged together the two doors, adding wheels on the bottom and handles on the back to help with moving the work.

All of my work has been focused on documenting my journey through discovering my personal history. It has helped me understand where I come from and who helped make me and my family. It has helped me to tell the viewer that we are each a summation of little histories, that our lives are owed to the service of our forbearers, and that we must take up the standard when those that have come before should fall, never forgetting their contribution to those who will follow.

Conclusion

Throughout the art-making process I continuously learn new techniques. As a teacher, I am constantly sharing these new techniques and ideas in the classroom. The MIS-IAR Program has had a profoundly positive effect on my teaching, and on my work. In following my muse, and recognizing our forefathers, I have found myself.

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Appendix

List of Images

- Figure 1. *PVT Patrick Feeney*, screenprint on wood, 13" x 10" x 8", 2010.
- Figure 2. *PVT Anthony Joseph Feeney*, screenprint and digital lithograph on wood, 13" x 10" x 8", 2010.
- Figure 3. *LTC George Michael Feeney*, screenprint on wood, 13" x 10" x 8", 2010.
- Figure 4. *CAPT Robert E. Bassler*, digital print on canvas, 20" x 16", 2011.
- Figure 5. *COL Robert E. Bassler, Jr.*, digital print on canvas, 20" x 16", 2011.
- Figure 6. *LTC Robert E. Bassler, III*, digital print on canvas, 20" x 16", 2011.
- Figure 7. *Boyhood to Manhood*, mixed media on wood, 82" x 56", 2012.

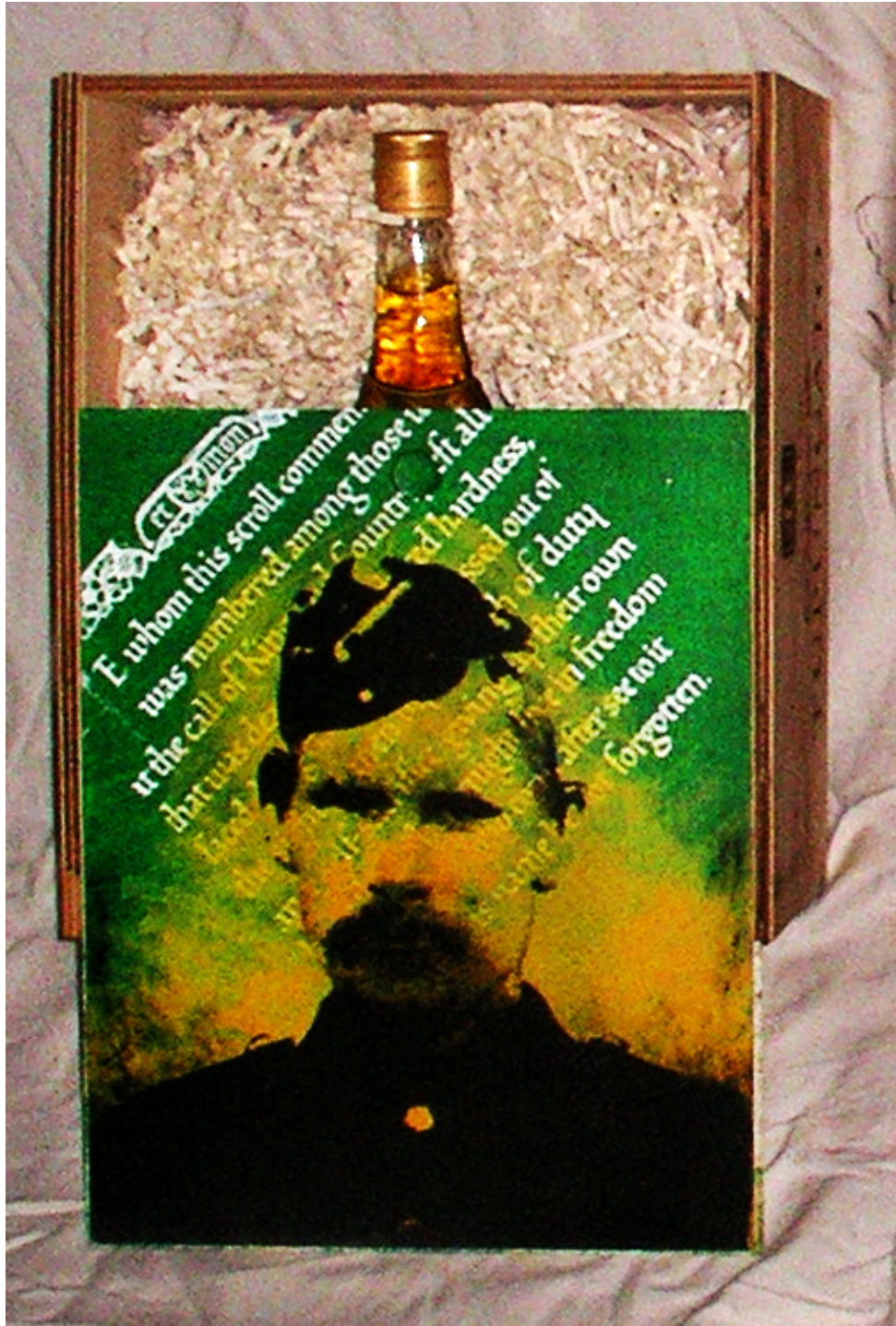


Figure 1. *PVT Patrick Feeney*, screenprint on wood, 13" x 10" x 8", 2010.



Figure 2. *PVT Anthony Joseph Feeney*, screenprint and digital lithograph on wood, 13" x 10" x 8", 2010.



Figure 3. *LTC George Michael Feeney*, screenprint on wood, 13" x 10" x 8", 2010.



Figure 4. *CAPT Robert E. Bassler*, digital print on canvas, 20" x 16", 2011.



Figure 5. *COL Robert E. Bassler, Jr.*, digital print on canvas, 20" x 16", 2011.

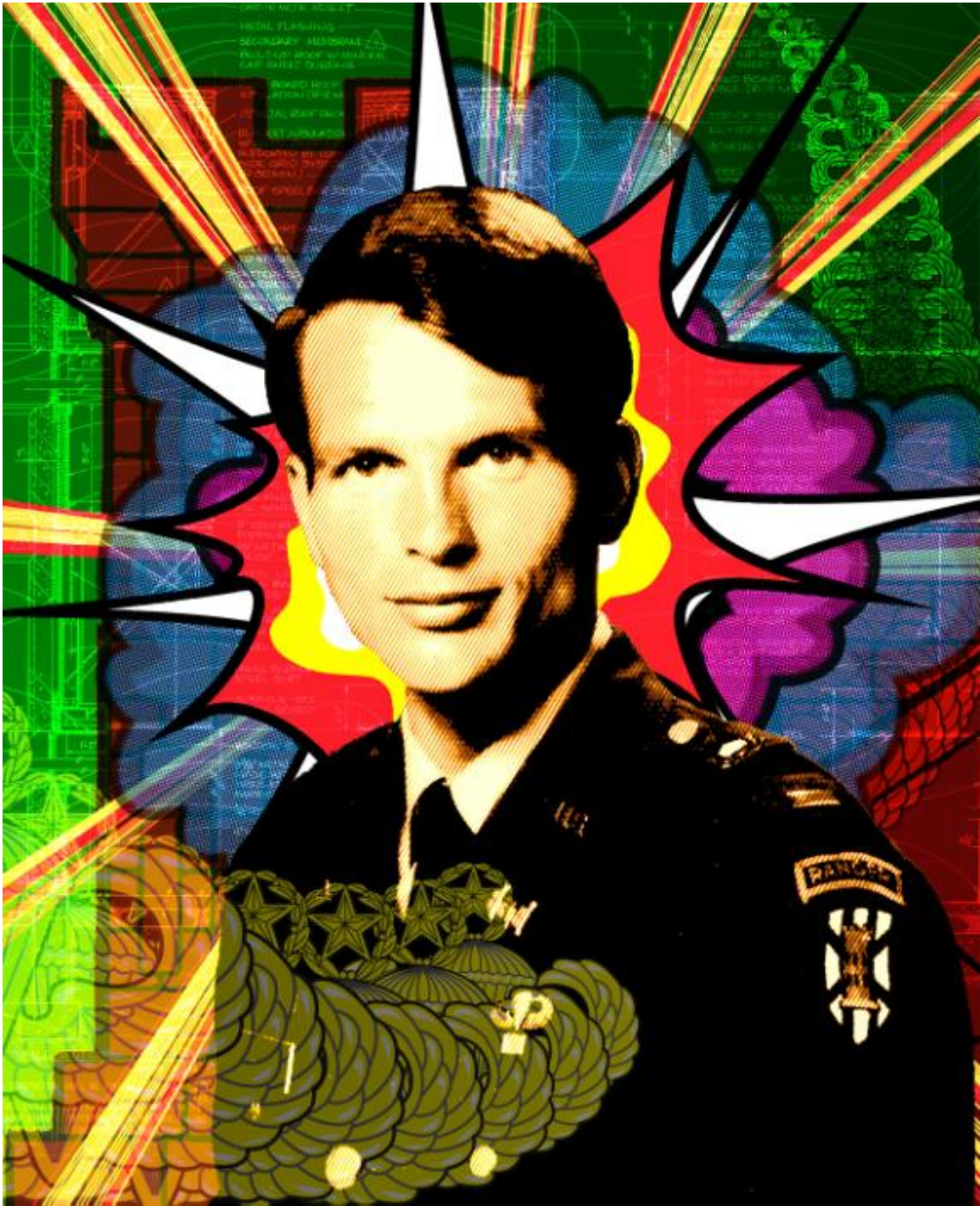


Figure 6. *LTC Robert E. Bassler, III*, digital print on canvas, 20" x 16", 2011.



Figure 7. *Boyhood to Manhood*, mixed media on wood, 82" x 56", 2012.

Michael Feeney

Education:

- 2012 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
- 2000 Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia

Teaching Licensure:

- 2007-2013 Art Education K-12 Virginia Teaching License

Teaching Experience Highlights:

- 2010-Present Fine and Performing Arts Department Chair, Mount Vernon High School, Alexandria, Virginia
- 2008-Present Art Teacher, Mount Vernon High School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Alexandria, Virginia
- 2006-2007 Long Term Substitute Art Teacher, Robert E. Lee High School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Springfield, Virginia
- 2006 Long Term Substitute Art Teacher, WT Woodson High School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, Virginia

Related Experience:

- 2010-Present National Art Honor Society Sponsor, Mount Vernon High School, Alexandria, Virginia
- 2008-Present Cross Country Coach, Mount Vernon High School, Alexandria, Virginia
- 2004-2006 Peace Corps Health Volunteer, Honduras, Central America

Professional Memberships:

- 2007-Present National Art Education Association, Northern Virginia Division, Reston, Virginia

Grants, Honors, and Awards:

- 2008 First Year Teacher of the Year Nominee, Fairfax County, Virginia
- 2008 American Legion School Award, Fairfax County, Virginia
- 2008 Mary Jane Thornton Award, Alexandria, Virginia
- 2009, 2010 Academic Booster Committee Award, Alexandria, Virginia

Exhibitions:

- 2010, 2011 Fairfax County Artist Teacher Exhibition, Fairfax County, Virginia
- 2012 *A Tradition of Service*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at the Verizon Gallery, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, Virginia