

Jim Lommasson

Selected Reviews

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Thursday - Sunday: Noon - 6PM
www.newamericanartunion.com

Jim Lommasson

“Exit Wounds -- Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming”

By Julie Sullivan

Oregonian

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The real shock of Jim Lommasson’s new exhibit “Exit Wounds” is not just his lonesome portraits of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, but the 1,500 photos by veterans that accompany them.

The images, captured by digital cameras and carried home on laptops, unroll the current wars in all their complex cinematic breadth: Santa seated in a desert flak jacket. A burned, dismembered leg. Children peering into the lens, as if to say, “Who are you?”

“Who are you?”

“This project really is about the veterans telling the public their stories,” Lommasson says of his new show at the New American Art Union.

Like many Oregonians, most of what the critically acclaimed photographer knew about the wars two years ago was the daily casualty report, personal tragedies presented as impersonally as a box score. But on long walks through North Portland with his 85-year-old dad, Lommasson started thinking deeply of the men and women fighting.

His father was wounded and won the Bronze Star in the Battle of the Bulge. But only on those walks did the senior Lommasson begin to talk fully about his war, sharing experiences with his son he’d never told anyone. Lommasson, a photographer and oral historian, wrote that it became clear his dad had “done his best to spare me and everyone else the reality of war.” Leah Nash/Special to The Oregonian”It’s really about the veterans telling the public their story.” Soon Lommasson was going to veterans’ gatherings, standing at the VFW or American Legion and state task force meetings to find men and women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Sixty years,” he says, “is way too long to keep a secret.”

Lommasson said he didn’t want to construct a political statement for or against the current wars. He wanted to listen to veterans from the Pacific Northwest who served. And so, veterans began to sit down with him. Some are loving parents; bright, ambitious students; or impassioned veteran advocates, despite their own wounds.

“I’m helping a soldier out now, which helps me heal, too,” says one man. “I got 30 seconds of my dream; I’d give my other leg to live it again.”

Others are drifting and damaged.

“I self-medicated, I drank, I got arrested five times ... DUIs.”

Lommasson originally had intended to make portraits of only the veterans, but subjects kept passing along their own captivating photos. He was so affected, he decided to include the images. He didn’t want them to be incidental, so

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he displays his portraits cut into the same 4-by-6 snapshot as the photos. What results is a procession of faces and places that raise more questions, like:

“If you knew you could die driving down this road today, what would you photograph?”

“Who should be a soldier?”

“Who can come back from that experience?”

Lommasson concludes that “the cost of war isn’t just sending people now. It’s the rest of their lives.”

A catalog of words and photos accompanies the show, with proceeds to benefit veterans and Iraqi children. Lommasson considers this his first report to the community on a book-length project.

He also invites soldiers and vets to add photos and words to the walls. He sees the exhibit as something that could travel or be staged in other spaces in other cities, an exhibit that is illuminating -- and therapeutic.

“We don’t want handouts or special treatment. All we want is for people to understand us, to give us the respect we deserve. It was really hard for me to write this, to remember all this stuff. Thank you to all who I served with. There will be none that can take your place.”

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Lords of the Ring
by Victoria Blake
The Oregonian
March 11 2005

The image Portland photographer Jim Lommasson chose for the cover of his forthcoming photography book "Shadow Boxers" shows a man reflected in a sweat-and-spit-stained mirror, his shoulders rounded and biceps curled in the recognizably taut stance of a boxer. Behind him stretch the horizontal lines of the ropes of an empty boxing ring.

This photo, one of about 30 hanging at Lommasson's New American Art Union show called "American Fight Clubs," defines the look and feel of his 9-year photo-documentary project inside American boxing gyms. Gritty, grimy and gorgeous, Lommasson's images move beyond the easy, one-sided spectacle of boxing as a blood sport and toward a multifaceted depiction of the boxing gym as a unique and beloved American institution. Visceral and quietly dramatic, the photos are more like documentary -- a lively cross-breed of art and journalism -- than fine art.

What the jukebox was to Robert Frank, who traveled America in the 1950s photographing and codifying American culture and life, the heavy bag and spit bucket is to Lommasson, who photographed the effluvia and detritus of more

than 100 gyms. Coast to coast and up to Canada, boxing gyms are places of peeling stucco, naked light bulbs and dirty mirrors, his images tell us. But they are also places of contradiction, where boxers tape their hands with the delicacy a ballerina uses to tape her feet, and where gum-ball machines coexist with broken noses.

During the years he spent on the project, Lommasson traveled to boxing gyms in 30 cities. His journey took him into the living room of boxing legend Muhammad Ali (who, Lommasson said, entertained him with magic tricks) and down the alleyways of America's most rough and tumble ZIP codes. Lommasson, a spry 54-year-old who looks more like a cruise-line passenger than a boxer, and his writing partner, Katherine Dunn, won the prestigious Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize in 2004 for their work. They also won \$10,000 in prize money.

Taken as a whole, Lommasson's pictures tell a complete story, and he has done an admirable job of editing and organizing what must have been a trailer-truck full of film. Images show serious and jaunty young boys staring from the frame, alongside images of boys hunched in gym spectator seats, their legs too short to reach the ground. In some images, old-time trainers look on as young boxers with enviable muscles spar. Nearly everybody in the photos stands a little apart from one another, just out of reach of a left hook.

The photos are black-and-white and color, depending on what the particular image required, Lommasson said. Some of the prints are grainy, dated already, while others have the brilliance and clarity of stained-glass windows. Because of this, the Union show comes off as a little fragmented, its total authority diluted just a smidgen by the variance of Jim Lommasson's approach.

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But this could hardly be called an artistic weakness. If anything, it shows Lommasson's remarkably versatile talent. There are a couple wow images. One -- the combination of a boxing mural on the wall and a boxer with a flying fist rendered fuzzy by low light -- connects the artistic and theatrical side of the sport as seen in the mural with the movement and blurred energy of the action of the punch.

Lommasson's best images make some reference to the power behind the punch, setting a diagonal line -- a dipping boxer, a recently punched bag -- against the pure verticals of the heavy bags and the horizontals of the ropes. The effect is simple and strong, endowing the diagonal with knuckle-crushing consequence of fist against leather or flesh.

And then there's Lommasson's other images, the almost tender, classical view. In one, a black-and-white close-up of a man's face partially obscured by boxing gloves, the sweat gathers on his forehead and nose tip. This image is more than a portrait of an individual; it is an exploration of a whole category of physical exertion, a close look at sweat glands and skin.

It might have been easier to go after the bright lights and big rings, but Lommasson works on a more nuanced level. His photos pull back the curtain on the gritty, grimy and ultimately elegant world of boxing, managing not to get sucker-punched by the spectacle of the sport along the way.