New Review by Larry Abbott: Surviving the Long Wars

Surviving the Long Wars: Creative Rebellion at the Ends of Empire. Chicago: Bridge Books, 2024.

The 4-day 2023 Veteran Art Triennial and Summit in Chicago, held from spring into the summer of 2023, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq, was held in various venues in Chicago. A variety of exhibitions at such venues as Newberry Library, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago Cultural Center, featured the work of over fifty artists. *Surviving the Long Wars* developed out of the summit and the exhibitions.

The editorial collective which oversaw the book, Aaron Hughes, Ronak Kapadia, Therese Quinn, Meranda Roberts, and Amber Zora, reflects various perspectives: veteran, non-veteran, feminist, Indigenous, and queer. They have put together an expansive volume that highlights the "profound connections between the two most protracted military conflicts in US history: the 'American Indian Wars' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the twenty-first century's 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT)" (1).

The roughly sixty contributors, vets and non-vets, are represented with photographs, installations, paintings, essays, poetry, and performance. There are also historical artifacts which illustrate the connections between the two "long wars." The book gives broad exposure to writers and artists who may be unfamiliar to the general reader.

There are four major sections in the book, each with a brief introduction, a poem, essays and related artwork. "Residues

and Rebellions," for example, includes contemporary work by Monte Little and Miridith Campbell, among others, that are paired with selections from *Akwesasne Notes* and *The Black Panther* newspapers from the 1970's and with Kiowa and Black Horse ledger drawings from the late 1800's. The visual correlations are made explicit with a Black Horse ledger drawing displayed with a photograph from *Notes*, gouaches by Pakistani-American Mahwish Chishty, and a 2022 ledger drawing, "Enlistment," by Marine Corps vet Darrell Wayne Fair. "Enlistment" is one panel in a series of ledger drawings depicting key events in his life. Also included in this section (and in later sections) are Miridith Campbell and Melissa Doud's contemporary take on traditional dresses. Campbell's *Marine Corps Dress—Southern Style* (2022) integrates items such as vintage Marine service buttons on tanned buckskin. Campbell served in three branches of the military and the dress reflects her service and Kiowa heritage. Her *Counting Coup* (2002) uses a Civil War cavalry coat with "Kiowa-style beadwork" replacing the epaulets. Similarly, Melissa Doud, an Army vet, created *Bullet Dress* (2016), placing 365 bullet casings on a dress made from an Army uniform. The casings replace the jingles on a powwow dance dress. (Likewise, Monty Little's poem from his chapbook *Overhang of Cumulus* reveals hidden similarities between apparent disparate images through juxtaposition, thus creating unexpected connections:

Bullet shells drop on splintered
floors to mother's
cadence in her jingle dress).

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz' essay, "Why is the United States the Most Militaristic State in History," takes a long view of American wars, while Meranda Roberts takes a close look at the major works in the exhibition.

These interrelationships are further explored in "Reckon and Reimagine," the second section. Rijin Sahakian's essay

“Embedded Horizons” focuses on the Iraq War and the work of Iraqi artists Ali Eyal and Sajjad Abbas in particular. She is critical of the barriers to the broader exposure of Iraqi art in the West. She writes that “The works of Eyal and Abbas are acts of defiance against conditions designed to force surrender. . . . But will the art world, informed by and participating with war’s image making and financial structures ever take the risk of remaking the rules of engagement?” (134). Amber Zora’s essay “Disrupting Business as Usual: Transforming Bureaucracy into Art” surveys the ways that artists “have utilized the detritus of the military machine—the mountains of bureaucratic paperwork, the ephemera, the piles of surveillance materials—to illuminate dark and forgotten aspects of militarism” (137). The artworks in “Reckon and Reimagine” exemplify her view. Gerald Sheffield, an Army vet, uses pages from the Army *Field Manual* to create *fm-05.301* (2016), which exposes “the underlying machinery of psychological warfare” (141). Other works in the section include Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani’s *Index of the Disappeared: Parasitic Archive* (2014) and Hanaa Malallah’s *She/He Has No Picture* (2019-20). The former is an installation with a huge filing cabinet behind a desk, suggesting impersonality, where everyone is just a card among thousands or millions of other cards. The latter memorializes the hundreds of victims of the bombing of the Al Amirayah shelter in 1991 by “featuring portraits of the victims crafted from burnt canvases” (142).

The third section, “Unlikely Entanglements,” focuses on “visual parallels [which] surface between artworks by civilians impacted by the US long wars and BIPOC veterans critiquing the military they once served in” (154). Laleh Khalili’s essay “Tomahawks, Chinooks, and Geronimo: Settler-Colonial Fantasies of US Navy Seals” analyzes the ways that Navy Seals, and the military generally, have adopted in various forms the names and symbols of Indigenous people. Junaid Rana’s “Life During War on Terror Time” discuss both

individual artists and the ways that art sees “things anew when before they were unseen” (209). The strength of the section lies in the art. At first glance Bassim Al Shaker’s series *Moment of Silence* (2022) appears to depict the creation of the cosmos. However, a closer look reveals “an unfamiliar sky in the minutes of silence following explosions” (159) that Al Shaker survived. “‘I saw body parts in the sky. The paintings show what the sky looked like at that time. The works describe death and loss, but also a new life after a loss’” (159). Ruth Kaneko’s *Sutured* (2023) uses remnants of her time in the Army to cover a box that connotes a sense of the futility of war. Army vet Rodney Ewing’s “Faded,” from a series on silk-screened ledger paper, *Planned Obsolescence* (2022), takes an image of Black prison laborers and superimposes an outline of wheels and gears, suggesting how the machinery of society abuses and exploits Blacks. A work from another series from 2022, *Come the Mean Times*, depicts a Black man with arms raised on the top part of the canvas; superimposed on the figure is an outline of a biplane with a naming of parts, like “elevator flap” and “right aileron.” On the bottom half of the canvas, upside down, like a mirror image, is a Native figure holding a child. Superimposed on this lower part is a map of the Trail of Tears. In this series “Ewing creates a dialogue about the harm done to Indigenous and African American peoples by the interconnected histories of colonialism and white supremacy” (186).

The first part of the fourth section, “Surviving the Long Wars Summit,” is comprised of numerous photographs of the various exhibitions, workshops, discussions, and performances that were part of the summit. There is also documentation of the Iraq War Memorial Activation, in which participants lay flowers into the waters of Lake Michigan. The section concludes with a short essay, “A Sweeter Future,” two longer essays, “’When Black People Are Free, All People Will Be Free’: Black Freedom, Indigenous Sovereignty, and the Limits of Reparations Discourse,” and “The Summit: Then and Now,” and

a conversation between Army vets Kevin Basl and Anthony Torres. Torres curated the performances in Triennial, and as he explains to Basl, his “vision was to create collaborative opportunities among performers and attendees and help build a community that would exist beyond the Triennial” (286).

Aaron Hughes’ essay in the Conclusion, “Sowing Seeds of Resistance,” discusses the life and work of White Mountain Apache artist Frederick Gokliz as a springboard to a broader consideration of the work of contemporary artists such as Monty Little, Mariam Ghani, Ruth Kaneko, and Darrell Wayne Fair. Hughes sees in these and other artists “a web of interconnected exploitation” (313). He follows this up later in the essay when he writes: “However, I believe that when veterans move away from identities solely rooted in military service and American exceptionalism and instead embrace solidarity grounded in shared experiences of exploitation, new possibilities emerge” (321). His comment reflects the theses in some of the other essays, which call for the creation of new communities.

The concluding section, “Afterword,” includes an essay by Ronak K. Kapadia, “Afterword: Meditations on Survival and Rebellion,” which examines “three defining moments” during the three years of planning for the Triennial: the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the continuing U.S. role in the Palestinian War, and the self-immolation of Aaron Bushnell in protest of that war. For Kapadia these events are intertwined and “prompt a deeper meditation on the concept of ‘surviving the long wars.’” The compelling writers and artists in the Triennial, along with dozens, if not hundreds of others in the U.S. and throughout the world, such as Indigenous artist Richard Ray Whitman and Afghanistan War veteran Henrik Andersen of Denmark, are instrumental in prompting this meditation.