

Interview with Navy Veteran and Artist Skip Rohde, by Larry Abbott

[Skip Rohde](#) was an officer in the Navy for twenty-two years, with four submarine deployments and service in Desert Shield, Desert Storm, and Bosnian peace-keeping operations in 1996. After retirement (as a Commander) he attended the University of North Carolina at Asheville and received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting in 2003. He opened a studio in Asheville and became a full-time artist. After five years of civilian life in 2008 he was tapped by the State Department to go to Iraq for eighteen months as a Program Management Advisor to manage reconstruction programs in country. He then went to Afghanistan in the fall of 2011 for a year to again help the citizenry with government and business management. While in Afghanistan as a Field Engagement Team Advisor he sketched the faces of various individuals, like merchants, local officials, and elders during meetings, which led to some eighty drawings and pastels in the *Faces of Afghanistan* series.



These works are now in the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American History. He has said about these works, *"For an artist, these people are fabulous subjects. They have wonderfully unique faces, great dignity, passion, and expressiveness."* Rohde returned to the States in 2012 to resume his career not only as an artist but as a teacher and mentor to young artists.



His oeuvre is diverse, but one of his primary interests is the human face. In addition to the Afghanistan series he has a

series of portraits of men, women, and children. To him, faces are revelatory and can uncover the truth of the person's experiences and disclose their inner lives. He feels that faces can reveal the individual's story and has noted that he draws and paints people "to tell their stories. Not mine." The Model in the Studio paintings follow up on this interest by depicting figures in various poses. The Stories and Mysteries series go in a bit of a different direction, although the human figure is still predominant. "The Three Primary Graces" references Greek mythology. "Aftermath" shows an apparently carefree young woman in a summer dress walking on a dirt path with a destroyed city in the background, while "The Conversation" is ironic in that there is no conversation portrayed. With echoes of Hopper, a woman sits in a chair in isolation, aloof from those around her. He has said about these paintings: "Stories come to me from all sorts of people and places. Sometimes they are very real: the actual people involved in the actual situation. Other times they may come from something I need to say on my own. And sometimes, I don't know where the hell they come from. But they do."

Many of these works capture a moment of human emotion that resonates beyond the canvas.

Although he feels that the works in the Twisted Tales series lack relevance, I would argue that although the paintings are a "moment in time" they are far from mere curiosities of a bygone era. Ann Coulter is still a presence in contemporary culture (for good or ill). Although the reputation of George Bush has been somewhat rehabilitated in the eyes of some, he is still responsible for the Iraq War, and the aftereffects of that war are still being felt today. I would also argue that Karl Rove's legacy of divisive campaigns is responsible for state of politics today. He is also a commentator on Fox News so his "philosophy" is not a thing of the past. And Dick Cheney? Well, avoid duck hunting with him. In "Pleasantville" and "Ma Petite Femme" the presence of guns as a normal and

essential part of American society has more bearing today, perhaps, than in 2008.

In the former work, the smiling family of dad, mom, son, and daughter (and dog) pose happily in their suburban backyard (with razor ribbon strung on the property's fence) holding M-4's. In the latter, the painting looks like an advertisement for a high-end handbag ("Fine Leather Accessories") but in place of the purse is an M-4. There is also ironic juxtaposition in some of these works. "American Style" could be a postcard image ("Let's Go!") as it depicts a snazzy red 60's coupe with a snuggling man and woman out for a cruise. In the near background, however, is a burning tank, and further back there appears to be smoke rising from a bombed-out city. Similarly, "American Acres" depicts the entry to a gated community ("A Halliburton Development") with an American flag on the massive stone wall with "No Trespassing" prominently posted on the padlocked gate. However, behind the gate is the Statue of Liberty, inaccessible, co-opted and for sale by Bush and Company to, presumably, the highest bidder.

The *Meditation on War* series is Rohde's most powerful. The eighteen paintings in the series depict various aspects of war, about some of which he says "I found that the quiet things are just as important as combat itself." Some show the effects of war on places, such as "The Wall, Gorazhde" which shows the side of a building, windows blown out, bullet holes in the bricks; in "Terminal" a bus sits by the side of the road, a derelict hulk; the lone building in the ironic "Welcome to Sarajevo" has its roof blown off. Other casualties of war are more compelling with their human subjects. "Warrior" depicts a legless veteran in his Army uniform in a wheelchair looking at the viewer. Are his eyes asking us not to look away? The human costs of war are also shown in the diptych "You Don't Understand." On the left side of the canvas, a woman (girlfriend? wife?) stands with arms

folded, looking away; on the right-hand side a seated soldier in uniform (boyfriend? husband?) also looks away.

✘ At first glance the painting might suggest irreconcilable differences with neither figure able to “see” the other. However, the soldier’s cover is in the woman’s frame, while he holds a piece of her clothing. Perhaps there is hope for mutual understanding?

“Lament” is Rohde’s most poignant piece in the series. An African-American mother cradles her dead son, still in uniform, who lies upon an American flag. Although the painting may reference the Iraq War the visual analogue to Michelangelo’s *Pieta* transcends a specific war to become more universal: a mother’s grief over her fallen son, the irreclaimable loss of life.

✘ These paintings suggest that war doesn’t end with treaties and troop withdrawals, or end with dates and tidy proclamations. Instead, a son is dead, a mother suffers, and her suffering will continue well beyond the official pronouncements about “Mission Accomplished.”

Rohde’s landscapes are at the other end of his artistic spectrum. These are usually unpeopled natural spaces of rivers, mountains, rural dirt roads, vistas, sunsets, and animals. There is a sense of calm and repose here that are counterpoints to the scenes of war and destruction, the dark irony of the *Twisted Tales*, and the anxiety and unease in numerous portraits seen in other work. “Clouds Over the French Broad River” has echoes of the Hudson River School with the billowing clouds of pink and white, while “Old Church on the Hill” recalls an earlier more peaceful time. Rohde calls these paintings “liberating,” with “usually no carefully thought-out narrative, no ulterior motive, just the enjoyment of trying to capture the essence of a particular place at a particular

time.”

This idea of particularization is important in a consideration of Rohde’s work. Whether an image be of war and its aftermath, or models in a studio, or faces, or scenes of nature, he grounds his images in a specific time and place while at the same time creating a sense of the universal.

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LARRY ABBOTT: What was your military experience and background?

SKIP ROHDE: I went to Navy OCS in late 1977. After commissioning, I spent four years as a surface warfare officer. Then I transferred to the cryptologic community and had a wide variety of assignments: surface ship and submarine deployments, field sites, and staffs afloat and ashore. I was at sea during Desert Storm and later was part of the Bosnian peacekeeping mission. I retired in late 1999 with twenty-two years of service.

ABBOTT: How did that influence your work?

ROHDE: Some of the influence was obviously in military-related subject matter I’d say the biggest influence was in how I think and in how I approach a new artwork. Twenty years of military life made me a very linear and logical thinker. The military has no time for ambiguity: it’s “make it clear and make it concise.” And that’s how I tend to think about subject matter and how to paint it. I’ve had a difficult time trying to back off that approach and give viewers more room to find their own interpretations.

ABBOTT: What are you working on currently? *A Possible Future* is scheduled for Spring 2022.

ROHDE: There are several lines of work going on right now. I have a show scheduled for spring '22 with the working title *A Possible Future*, which I think is accurate but a terrible title and I'm wide open to suggestions. The theme is what this country might be facing in the future if we don't get our collective acts together politically, economically, and ecologically. Admittedly, it's a bit of a "Debbie Downer" theme, but one I think about a lot. The show will include paintings done over many years as well as some new ones. Another line of work is that of wedding paintings. I'll talk about that more in a minute. And a third line are my figurative works, some charcoal and pastel, others oil. Those are personal works, trying to capture a specific individual's personality, or capture an emotion.

ABBOTT: What is your art training/background?

ROHDE: My parents were very supportive and enrolled me in private art lessons starting in about the sixth grade and continuing through high school. During my first time through college, back in the 70's, I was an art major for a couple of semesters, but they weren't teaching me anything and I thought artists were just weird. I got a degree in engineering and went into the Navy. I continued to take classes when I could while on active duty. After I retired, we came here so I could study art at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. I graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, with a concentration in painting, in 2003.

ABBOTT: You also do commissions and "event paintings." What is your approach to these?

ROHDE: I've always done portrait and other commissions. About four years ago, I had a lady call me up and ask if I could be the live event painter for her sister's wedding. I said absolutely, I could do that and would be happy to. Then I was immediately on Google trying to find out what the hell a "live event painter" was. I wondered if it was too cheesy or

kitschy, or if I'd even like doing it, and whether it was something I really wanted to try out. So I did a couple of trial runs, making wedding paintings based on photos that I already had of the weddings of friends and relatives. I decided it seemed like fun, so I gave it a go, and now it's an ongoing line of business. Yes, it's kitschy, but it's also a celebration of one of the biggest moments in somebody's life. If I do my job right, this will be something that will hang on their wall for years, and be handed down to their children, and then *their* children, and in a hundred years somebody might be saying "that was great-grandma and grandpa when they got married way back in 2021." That's a pretty cool thought. I do about eight or nine events a year. I turn down a lot more than that. If I do more, it will turn into a "job," and that will suck the life out of it.

ABBOTT: You seem to have great interest in the human form and faces, like in *New Works 2016-2021*. You've said they are "more than just simple figure drawings," maybe more "stories and mysteries."

ROHDE: It's all about people. I like talking with people and finding out about who they are and what they've seen and done. You can walk down the street and have no clue that you're passing people with some of the most amazing stories you'll ever come across in your life. Trying to capture some of that on paper or canvas is what really excites me. And yes, that applies to the wedding paintings, too.

ABBOTT: Related are the sketches "*Faces of Afghanistan*," which depict the people you interacted with. How did these come about?

ROHDE: In 2011, I went to Afghanistan for a year as a temporary State Department officer. I was stationed in a remote district in Kandahar Province to be a "governance advisor." And no, I don't know anything about governance. Our mission was to help the local government and businesses to

improve their capabilities to run their district and improve their lives. I was regularly in Afghan-run meetings as an observer, supposedly taking notes. Afghans have the most amazing faces. These are people who'd been in a war environment almost constantly for over thirty years, and who lived in a very difficult environment on top of that. So instead of taking notes, I'd often wind up sketching the men in the room. Sometimes I'd give the drawing to the guy I'd drawn. Maybe a little "diplomacy through art"?



ABBOTT: What were you concerned with in the *Meditation on War* series? I thought that "Lament," "Warrior," the diptych "You Don't Understand," and "Empty Boots" were extremely powerful.

ROHDE: The paintings you noted were all done around 2006-8. I started doing paintings about the Iraq conflict in 2005. This was early in the war and there was a lot of effort in trying to build up enthusiasm for going over there and kicking ass. It was "you're with us or you're against us," questioning your patriotism if you thought it was a mistake (which it was). My intent with *Meditation on War* was to say "look, if you want to go to war, here's what it means: people die or are mutilated, stuff gets destroyed, things go wrong, and it never, ever, goes to plan." The paintings were based on my own experiences in Desert Storm, Bosnia, and military life in general. "Warrior" is a man who really has lost his legs. "Lament" is based on Michelangelo's *Pieta*. Every military member who's been deployed, especially to a hot zone, has lived "You Don't Understand." "Empty Boots" were my Desert Storm boots. The individual in "Saddle Up" was a Marine sergeant in the Au Shau Valley in Vietnam in '67-68. I still add more paintings to this series whenever a particular idea comes to me.

ABBOTT: On the other end of the spectrum are the landscapes. What is your interest in these "unpeopled" spaces?

ROHDE: These are more relaxing than my people paintings. They're just paintings for the sake of painting, to capture a moment in nature, experiment with getting the effects of light while using paint, working fast while trying to get it done before the light changes and always failing. But that experience feeds back into my other paintings. So maybe it's a form of painting exercises.

ABBOTT: What was the impetus behind *Twisted Tales*? There is a bitter edge to them, like "American Style," "Pleasantville," "American Acres," "A Pachydermian Portrait," and "Ann's Slander," referencing Ann Coulter.

ROHDE: Anger and sarcasm go together, don't they? And where can you learn sarcasm better than from your military compadres? Most of those were done around 2005 when I was really angry about the country's direction. I eventually had to stop. To do those paintings, I had to get really pissed off and stay that way in order to get the emotion into the artwork. Plus, they were very much of a specific moment in time. The "Pachydermian Portrait" was about George Bush and the Iraq invasion, but Bush has been gone for years and who cares anymore? A lot of work went into each of those paintings and they aren't relevant anymore. In '06, I decided to shift to something that was more timeless, about military life in general, and that started the *Meditation on War* series. Regarding "Ann's Slander," Coulter had just published a book called *Slander* (2002) in which she said that people like me were traitors. I took that very personally, so I called her out on it in paint.

ABBOTT: Any final thoughts on your art—where it's been, where it's going.

ROHDE: I'm very fortunate to be able to do what I do. I really am. I'm trying to follow the guidance that my parents instilled in me: to leave things better than the way I found them. I'm doing some paintings that are celebrations of great

things, and some paintings that are cautionary tales, and some that are just my own impressions of the way things (or people) are. Sometimes they turn out well.