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*The Vietnam War's Legacy in Art*

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Jesse Treviño, *'Mi Vida'* (1971-73), PHOTO: GABRIEL QUINTERO VELASQUEZ

In 1966, Jesse Treviño was drafted out of art school and sent to Vietnam. In a Smithsonian oral-history interview, he recalls thinking that he might die amid sniper fire and explosions, while imagining all the things he still wanted to paint. Mr. Treviño survived, but his right hand—the one he used to paint—was injured so badly that surgeons couldn't save it. Slowly and despite great pain, he reinvented himself as an artist. Between 1971 and 1973 he painted "Mi Vida" ("My Life"), a large-scale panorama that features the face of a female schoolmate who died young, the artist's own Purple Heart medal, his hand prosthesis and a self-portrait in shades of gray.

Now "Mi Vida" has come to Washington, D.C. as part of "Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975," at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. (The exhibition opens March 15 and moves to the Minneapolis Institute of Art on Sept. 28.) Like almost every other work in the exhibition, "Mi Vida" examines the tragedy of the conflict, which took nearly 60,000 American lives. The exhibition's 58 artists or artist groups include unknowns as well as celebrated figures like Claes Oldenburg, Judy Chicago and Donald Judd. Bruce Nauman is represented by one of his signature neon signs, in which the letters WAR light up from right to left, allowing it to be read as both "war" and "raw."

Melissa Ho, the museum's curator of 20th-century art and the organizer of the exhibition, was born in 1970 and says that she "grew up in the immediate aftermath" of the war. While she knew how it divided the country, she was initially unfamiliar with the war's effect on the American art world. With "Artists Respond," she says, she wanted to do something that hasn't been done in three decades: bring together artworks created during the war itself, while it was still "open-ended, still unresolved."

Ms. Ho has organized the exhibition around themes such as "The Living Room War," a phrase attributed to essayist Michael Arlen that refers to the way violent images of the conflict made their way into U.S. homes, especially on television. "To me it was the dinnertime war," recalls artist Martha Rosler, whose work appears in this section. "I wondered, 'How do we eat dinner while watching a war! Had we no human feelings?'" she writes in the catalog.

Ms. Rosler, born in 1943, trained as an abstract painter. To protest the war, she turned to photomontages that she could distribute as fliers at demonstrations. In "Beauty Rest" (part of a series completed ca. 1967-72), Ms. Rosler repurposed magazine images to create a nightmarish montage of a room in which a boy and his parents relax on a bare mattress; the smiling father flies a model plane suggestive of military bombers. The human figures are in color, while the surrounding room is monochrome, with dilapidated blinds and curtains and a crucifix on the wall. Water seems to cover the entire floor.



Martha Rosler, 'Beauty Rest,' from the series 'House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home' (ca. 1967-72).

Photo: Martha Rosler/Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

The “Hot vs. Cool” section of the show contrasts “hot” figurative artists, who used recognizable imagery to tackle the war head-on, with “cool” minimalist or abstract artists who were impelled by the war to more direct protests. One was Mr. Oldenburg, born in 1929, who by the 1960s was already well known for his soft, oversize sculptures of consumer goods. In an antiwar protest in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic National Convention, policemen knocked him to the ground and kicked and choked him, he told art dealer Richard Feigen in a letter quoted in the book “1968: Art and Politics in Chicago.”

In response, Mr. Feigen replaced a planned Oldenburg show with a multiartist protest exhibition; Mr. Oldenburg contributed 50 small plaster “Fireplug Souvenirs,” marked “Chicago August 1968” and based on Chicago’s fire hydrants. Painted bright red, the objects might also suggest “truncated human torsos,” Ms. Ho says. Mr. Oldenburg suggested at the time that one of the mini-fireplugs be hurled through the gallery’s plate glass window to launch the exhibition.

While the fireplugs were very much in Oldenburg’s Pop style, Timothy Washington, a young artist from Los Angeles, responded to the Vietnam War with a genre favored by Renaissance painters like Michelangelo and Botticelli : a tondo or round picture, titled “IA” (1972). Mr. Washington had been classified IA for military service, making him eligible for the draft.



Timothy Washington, 'IA' (1972).  
Photo: Timothy Washington/Tilton Gallery, New York



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For this work, the artist nailed a piece of leather containing his real draft card onto an aluminum background. On the metal he etched a portrait of himself, placing his right middle finger over the leather in a gesture of defiance, while his older brother, behind him, protectively tries to stop him, art historian Katherine Markoski writes in the catalog. Mr. Washington wasn't drafted, and three years after he created the tondo, the last helicopter left the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon.