

THANK YOU

A THESIS

SUBMITTED ON THE TWENTY SEVENTH DAY OF APRIL 2015

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FINE ART

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

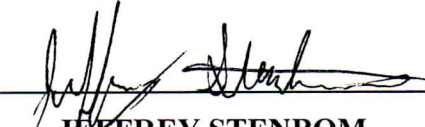
OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

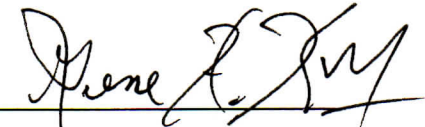
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS


BY



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Last but not least I would like to thank the men and women of the United States Armed Forces who have served or are currently serving. Your sacrifices are appreciated and will never be forgotten.

"America's fighting men and women sacrifice much to ensure that our great nation stays free. We owe a debt of gratitude to the soldiers that have paid the ultimate price for this cause, as well as for those who are blessed enough to return from the battlefield unscathed." ~ Allen Boyd

When I was a young boy I played war with my friends. It was fun and exciting. We would pretend that we were out to fight the bad guys and ultimately win. Looking back at those childhood games after serving in the United States Army for three and a half years, including deployments to Iraq and Kosovo, I had no idea what I was really playing. Playing! It is anything but playing in real war. The things veterans have seen, have done and gone through in war is something that words cannot describe. How do those who have served express what they have experienced while millions back home go on with their normal day activities oblivious to those veteran's sacrifices?

This is the driving question behind my recent works and the impetus for the thesis exhibition title *"Thank You."* With this body of work I am attempting to bring attention to the sacrifices of the men and women who have served in order to provide us with our basic freedoms every day. These freedoms are too often taken for granted. We need to have a better understanding of those individuals who have enabled us to enjoy our everyday lives. I want to encourage a better

understanding between those who have served and those who have not. I hope to raise awareness about what these brave volunteers sacrifice for us every day.

It's heard a million times a day and maybe accompanied by a handshake or a hug. While it is always appreciated, it has been uttered so many times that "Thank you for your service" often carries no more meaning than a passing nod or a courteous "hello." Veterans ought to be thanked, but not for their service, because what they do isn't about them. The all volunteer force in place in the United States today relies on men and women to step up. Without volunteers, the system would cease to function and the United States would have to rely on mandatory service, denying young men and women the choice of whether or not they serve in the military. When choosing to volunteer, service members do much more than march off to war to become heroes. They give up their personal autonomy and the ability to choose where they live. They sacrifice holidays, birthdays, and family milestones for the greater good. They postpone educational pursuits and professional careers. They strain relationships, push loved ones to the breaking point and leave memories behind every few years as their lives are uprooted and relocated. Service members forego their personal passions and hobbies for the commitment necessary to ensure that the United States has the most professional and successful fighting force in the world. They have all volunteered willingly to become part of the less than 1% of the U.S.

population currently serving in the military. Compared to the rest of the population, veterans constitute a relatively small number of people, who are often overlooked.

Rather than writing off the decision to serve with a sterile “thank you for your service” one needs to own the sentiment and make it personal. Thank a veteran for allowing you to be present for the birth of all your children. Thank a veteran for allowing you to pursue your educational goals safely without interruption. Thank a veteran for allowing you to be at home every night. Thank a veteran for allowing your career and family life to continue uninterrupted. Thank a veteran for giving you the choice to live where you choose. Thank a veteran that your loved ones can come home to you every day. Thank a veteran that you are free to pursue your passion. Thank a veteran that you don’t have to be one yourself.

The work in *Thank You* evolved from three major factors. The first factor was my struggle coping with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of my experience as a combat soldier in Iraq. Being wounded and dealing with both mental and physical pains of combat takes a toll on a person. These experiences have led me to search for passionate and creative means of exploring my emotions and personal views of the world around me. I feel art is not meant to fix problems, but to make others aware that they exist. This awareness may lead

to change or at the very least comfort and understanding through conversation. Art has given my life new purpose and has become my personal therapy. I have a new appreciation for life and how I look at it.

The second factor that influenced the development of this show was the lack of awareness of the sacrifices service members do every day to provide us with our freedoms. These sacrifices have many repercussions resulting from the duties of those that serve, such as mental illness. On April 2, 2014, another Fort Hood shooting took place. A soldier battling mental problems, shot and killed four people, including himself, and injured sixteen additional people. This event was a pivotal motivation for the content of this thesis.

The last factor was how to get my audience (98% of whom haven't served) to interact with the meaning of the exhibition and to start bridging the gap between those who have served and those who have not. I was inspired by minimalism, specifically the ways that Carl Andre pushed the boundaries of sculpture. Before him, few had imagined that sculpture could consist of ordinary, factory-finished raw materials, arranged into straightforward configurations and set directly on the ground. This placement of sculpture is critical to this exhibition and asks the viewer to interact with the work in a very different way than a painting on a wall or a sculpture on a pedestal. This interaction is

important to start making a connection between the viewer, the artwork and the ideas surrounding the work.

Endless Imprint consists of smooth organic slabs of glass spread randomly throughout the floor of the gallery. On closer investigation the viewer sees a set of footprints from combat boots on each slab in a variety positions. These imprints represent what is left behind when a soldier leaves the battlefield and the things he or she experiences during their time at war. These experiences remain with them forever although their footprints are left behind.

After the viewer has time to observe the work, I encourage them to step onto the glass slabs. At first, most are understandably reluctant given that it is rare to be able to touch artwork, let alone step on it. However, with enough reassurance that the glass will not break, they eventually engage. This interaction is important and allows the viewer a more intimate and personal read of the work. They can actually walk in the steps of those who have served, and possibly start to bridge the gap in awareness.

To Those Who Have is a memorial to a group of veterans that paid the ultimate sacrifice for their country. Some of these individuals left for conflict, while others left to maintain peace, but none of them returned home alive. We need to give thanks to these veterans. In tribute, a pair of large cast glass dog tags hangs from the ceiling ominously lit in a back gallery room. The two dog

tags hang alone like shields. They have no information on them; no name or serial number. They are simply blank, representing anyone who has served.

The war in Afghanistan is the longest combat operation in United States history. Many stressors face the troops that have been involved in conflict. A high percentage of service members are at risk for death or injury. They may see others hurt or killed; they may have to kill or wound others. They are on alert around the clock. These and other factors can increase their chances of having post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental health problems.

In *Everlasting Impact* the viewer gazes on a large glass box sitting on a pedestal in a gallery room by itself. The box contains cast glass combat boots sitting on a bed of spent brass bullet casings. The mirrored glass causes the image of the boots and casings to repeat in a never ending spectacle that fills the empty room. The geometric repetition is reminiscent of soldiers in formation. The spent brass is meant to represent conflict, while the ghostly boots symbolize the unseen struggle of endless soldiers. Post-traumatic stress disorder can linger and haunt a soldier, hiding in the shadows like a ghost. Countless service members suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, although it isn't readily visible.

The death toll of our military personnel during a particular conflict is often the most visible and disturbing representation of the human cost of war.

However, another group of veterans, more numerous than those who were killed in combat, are the men and women who return home alive, but not whole. Their sacrifice did not take away their lives, but it may have taken away their hearing, sight, or even their ability to walk or reach. The young children of these veterans will not have a mom or a dad who can pick them up when they reach upward because the wounds of warfare have robbed them of these abilities. We need to give thanks to these veterans.

A majority of veterans who served this nation did not sustain permanent physical or mental injury. While they will never be exactly the same, they show no visible evidence of ever having served and return with the ability to effortlessly function as productive citizens. They are able to pick up their toddlers, run behind the bikes of their children, and enjoy other normal life activities that could easily be taken for granted. Not every soldier went to the battlefield; not everyone came under attack. However, one should not be deceived by this as all service members make a significant sacrifice whether or not they experienced direct combat.

During their time of service, our men and women in the military yield many of their own liberties and rights. While our constitution recognizes the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, these individuals surrender many aspects of those rights to maintain the freedoms we enjoy. Unable to

pursue their hobbies, favorite activities or normal family life while in uniform, they possess little in the way of personal liberty or autonomy. Their superiors instruct them when and where to go. Their lives are not their own. While relatively few have paid the ultimate sacrifice, each soldier recognizes that his life is in the hands of his commanding officer. If that officer instructs him to take a hill that was being pounded with enemy fire, he does not have the option to turn to that individual and say, "But that is dangerous" or "I might get wounded" or "I might die!" Although he may not lose his life that day, that service member has to completely surrender control of his life for a period of time. If he dies, it would be because he laid down his life for his country. He chooses to obey without regard for the cost. The living veteran may not return bearing visible scars, and may not have a grave marker as a memorial, but he nevertheless gives significantly for our country.

In *Freedoms Threads* the viewer encounters a large American flag hanging from the middle of the gallery in muted colors. The bottom of the flag hangs at a height of about 6 feet from the ground. On closer investigation of the piece the viewer can see that it is woven from worn combat uniforms of service members. The uniforms span 75 years of United States military history, beginning with the classic World War II uniform and ending with the ACU (army combat uniform), the standard combat uniform currently issued to United States Army members.

The United States flag is a symbol of our country and the freedoms that we have. These freedoms are created and protected by the men and women who serve in the military.

The most noticeable absence in this thesis exhibition is what the exhibit is really about: the service members themselves.

No accurate count exists of the number of American service members who have perished in combat since the nation's birth. It is estimated that the number exceeds 1.3 million. Beginning with the War for Independence through the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, they fought and fell in fields, on beaches, and in cities and villages on five continents.

We cannot know all those who died in defense of our freedoms, however, those service members who live amongst us, as well as those who live on in our memories, deserve our heartfelt gratitude. We must recognize their sacrifices and always remember that we owe them a never ending "Thank you!"

"The truth cannot be ignored. Today, most Americans are not directly touched by war. As a consequence, not all Americans may fully grasp the depths of sacrifice, the profound costs, which are made in our name. Let us never forget to always remember."

~ Barack Obama

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Biography

Jeffrey Stenbom is MFA Graduate student at Tulane University in New Orleans, LA. He has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors including Dedalus Foundation Master of Fine Arts Fellowship Nominee, Outstanding Student Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award Nominee and has been a Niche Awards Finalist in 2013 and 2015. Stenbom exhibits his work and delivers guest artist lectures nationally. He received his BFA in glass and a BS in art education from the University of Wisconsin – River Falls. Currently Stenbom is in his final year of his MFA degree which he will finish in May of 2015.



Endless Imprint

2015

Kiln-cast glass

Varying sizes from 49 x 17 x 1 to 29 x 13 x 1 inches

1 of 10



Endless Imprint

2015

Kiln-cast glass

Varying sizes from 49 x 17 x 1 to 29 x 13 x 1 inches

2 of 10



Endless Imprint

2015

Kiln-cast glass

Varying sizes from 49 x 17 x 1 to 29 x 13 x 1 inches

3 of 10



Endless Imprint

2015

Kiln-cast glass

Varying sizes from 49 x 17 x 1 to 29 x 13 x 1 inches

4 of 10



Endless Imprint

2015

Kiln-cast glass

Varying sizes from 49 x 17 x 1 to 29 x 13 x 1 inches

5 of 10



To Those Who Have

2015

Kiln-cast glass, acrylic, vinyl-coated steel cable

140 x 16 x 16 inches



To Those Who Have
(Detail)



Everlasting Impact
2015
Kiln-cast glass, brass, one-way glass
24 x 24 x 24 inches



Everlasting Impact

2015

Kiln-cast glass, brass, one-way glass

24 x 24 x 24 inches

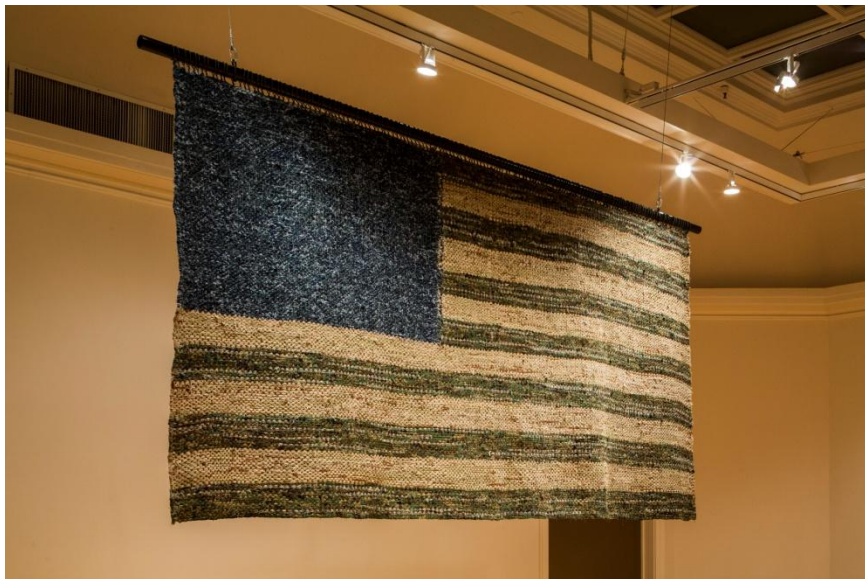


Everlasting Impact

(Detail)



Everlasting Impact
(Detail)



Freedom's Threads

2015

Worn United States Military uniforms, parachute cord, steel

70 x 144 x 2 inches



Freedom's Threads
(Detail)



Freedom's Threads
(Detail)



Freedom's Threads
(Detail)



Freedom's Threads
(Detail)



Gallery Shot Front



Gallery Shot Left



Gallery Shot Right