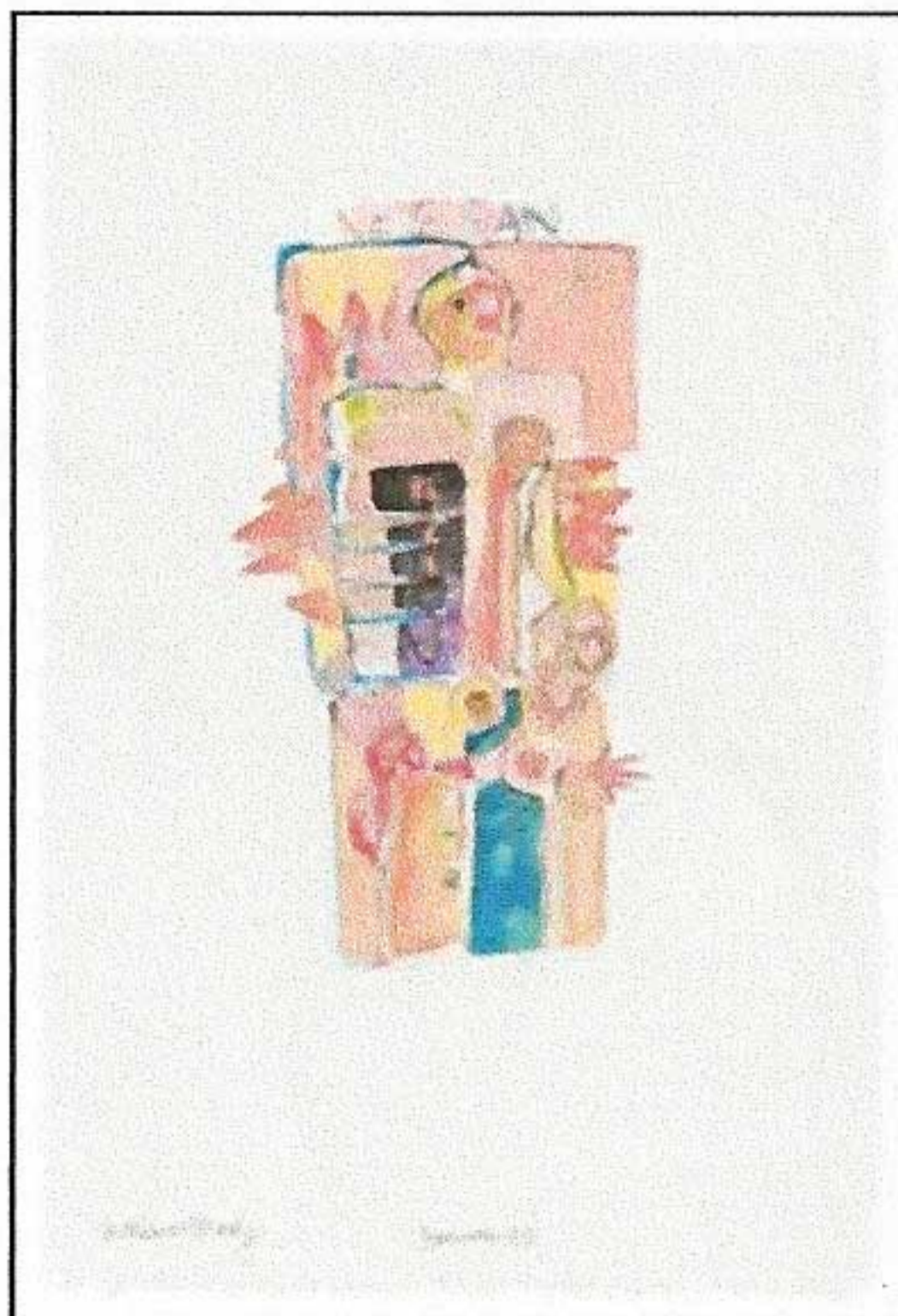


Daily Gazette article

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<http://www.dailygazette.com/>
See HTML Version of article**Painter Ransom takes fresh look at Civil War photos by Matthew Brady** By Bill Buell

"Veteran," a watercolor by John Ransom Phillips, is part of "Ransoming Mathew Brady: Re-Imagining the Civil War" at the Albany Institute of History & Art, through Oct. 3.

ALBANY — Much like Civil War photographer Mathew Brady, John Ransom Phillips says his art looks to examine the truth more fully.

A collection of Phillips' work, titled "Ransoming Mathew Brady: Re-Imagining the Civil War," will be on display at the Albany Institute of History & Art beginning Saturday and running through Oct. 3.

A total of 25 works, ranging from large-scale oil paintings to smaller watercolors, make up the exhibit, which seems much more about art than it is history. Civil War buffs looking for realism should be forewarned; those looking for a more spiritual approach that highlights imagery and interpretation can take note.

Raising questions

"My paintings are contemporary, not only in media and in execution, but also in content," said Phillips. "I raise questions about what is true, I raise questions about celebrity and authorship, and to what degree anything we do is autobiographical."

Along with his artwork, copies of Phillips' collaboration with historian Alan Trachtenberg, an essay on Brady's career accompanied by Phillips' images, will also be available at the institute. In the text, Trachtenberg examines Brady's practice of staging his stark Civil War photographs long after the battle was over.

'Ransoming Mathew Brady: Re-Imagining the Civil War'

WHAT: Recent Paintings by John Ransom Phillips

WHERE: Albany Institute of History & Art, 125 Washington Ave. Albany

WHEN: Saturday through Oct. 3.
Hours: 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday; noon to 5 p.m. Sunday

MORE INFO: 463-4478 or www.albanyinstitute.org

"As a recorder of this enormously important event in our history, I have always been fascinated by Brady," said Phillips. "Originally we were told that these photographs were displayed as honest and true, as faithful records of what actually happened, and then we learned that the bodies were re-arranged and that fake guns made out of wood were used."

While many later scholars were upset with Brady's method, Phillips doesn't hold it against him.

"I find it very human what he did, and I'm less and less disappointed in him the more I look at it," he said. "For him, he wanted it to be more truthful than the picture he was looking at when he got to the battlefield. Guns and shoes were the first things taken off dead soldiers after a battle. He wanted to elevate the war, to show the sacrifice the dead were making. He wasn't doing anything in a casual manner. He was showing the heroism of the dead. All of what he did was not done in any falsity. He did it to render the truth more fully."

A California native who has lived in New York City for most of the past 25 years, Phillips' work has been on display at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., and the David and Alfred Smart Museum in Chicago, as well as museums in Buenos Aires and Cairo. He has taught at the New School in New York City, the University of Chicago, Read College in Portland, Ore., and the University of California at Berkeley.

"I was always drawing when I was young to express myself, and when I didn't like what I saw I developed my own world," said Phillips, who went to Vienna, Austria, when he was 15 to begin studying art. "I realized early what I wanted to do. I wanted to paint. I taught quite a lot and enjoyed it, but then I reached a point where I didn't have to."

Delving into Brady

That gave him more time to delve into characters like Brady.

"There's never been anything as horrific as the Civil War in this country, and looking into Brady I'm aware of this profound sense of fear he must have felt with all the disruption that surrounded him on the battlefield," said Phillips.

"I think we both share the same quality of feeling uncomfortable in any kind of chaotic situation. I think he tried to bring that out in his images. I also think he wouldn't be comfortable today where we tend to show everything."

His own interpretation of Brady's work wasn't enough for Phillips. He thought it was necessary to have a trained historian like Trachtenberg, a retired professor of English and American Studies at Yale University, add his own take.

"He is the premiere historian on American photography in the country," Phillips said of Trachtenberg.

"Reading one of his books forced me to re-examine what I was doing and how I viewed Brady. In this book process he has become a mentor to me, and I'm grateful he was interested in helping me take a 21st century look at Brady."

Along with his exhibit at the Albany Institute, Phillips has about 25 of his images on display at the Opalka Gallery on the campus of the Sage College of Albany. That exhibit runs through July 25.