

A blue-tinted photograph of a battlefield. In the foreground, there are numerous sandbags and military equipment. In the background, a monument with a statue on top is visible, surrounded by trees and a few people. The overall scene is somber and historical.

A GREAT BATTLEFIELD

WILLIAM BLAKE

FRONT COVER:

Marines portraying casualties at the High Water Mark during one of the three versions of Pickett's Charge at 1922 Marine maneuvers.

BACK COVER:

Harris & Ewing, photographer. *Marines during reenactment of Pickett's Charge at the battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.* Pennsylvania United States Gettysburg, 1922. [July] Photograph. www.loc.gov.

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A GREAT BATTLEFIELD

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WILLIAM BLAKE, WINSLOW HOMER, AND THE LONG CIVIL WAR

BY: SARAH BURNS



Washington Crossing the Delaware | Emanuel Leutze | 1851



Sharpshooter | Winslow Homer | 1863

How to paint the war: this was the urgent question contemporary artists, critics, and viewers grappled with during and after the years of bloody and bitter conflict between North and South. Critics complained that for the most part, American painters seemed to continue on just as they had during the antebellum decades, favoring untarnished landscapes and entertaining scenes of daily life over renderings of heroic or tragic exploits on the battlefield. In fact, a significant number of artists *did* paint incidents of the war, but their efforts for the most part fell flat.

As many have noted, European-style “history painting”—meaning those commandingly large, dramatic, and idealized spectacles of

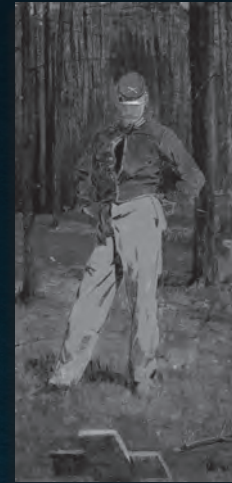
victorious battles and their heroes—had failed to gain much traction in the antebellum United States. Indeed, during the Civil War itself, Emanuel Leutze’s monumental history painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (exhibited at the 1864 Metropolitan Fair in New York) prompted one writer to dismiss the work as “a striking representation of the school that is dying out.” Some, however, particularly the critic Eugene Benson, had a different and more challenging perspective on the subject. American historical art, Benson argued, should be “art that shall become historical, not art that is intended to be so.” Historical art, in other words, was contemporary art.

Benson's friend Winslow Homer was one of the few who rose to that challenge. Already an up-and-coming observer of the American scene for popular illustrated magazines, Homer traveled three times to the battlefield as an artist-reporter for *Harper's Weekly* and composed lively and often humorous scenes of camp life derived from sketches he made on the spot. Ambitious to become a full-fledged artist, he translated a number of his Civil War drawings and illustrations into easel paintings. Some sustained the relatively lighthearted mood of the artist's graphic

and haunting impact. In November 1865, he exhibited *Veteran in a New Field*, in which a demobilized soldier, back to the viewer, army jacket and canteen lying nearby, toils at mowing down a wall of golden wheat under a clear blue sky, his scythe evoking that of the Grim Reaper. In the same year, Homer created *Trooper Meditating beside a Grave*, portraying another anonymous soldier, still in uniform, standing in a forest and gazing down at a wooden cross marking the burial place of some unknown, perhaps a comrade. We have no access to this soldier's



The Veteran in a New Field | Winslow Homer | 1865



Trooper Meditating Beside a Grave | Winslow Homer | 1865

output, but others ventured deeply into the severity of the war's toll on people and nature alike.

The Sharpshooter, Homer's very first effort in that line, set the tone. Unlike conventional history paintings, it is intimate in scale, propelling us into close proximity with the anonymous shooter taking a bead on an unseen target from a precarious pine-tree perch. Much later, Homer revealed the horror he had felt in observing the actions of Union sharpshooters: to him they were, in essence, murderers. It was not until the war's end, though, that Homer began to reckon with its profound

thoughts, but his partially unbuttoned jacket reveals a dark void suggestive of sadness—or emptiness.

In none of these works did Homer depict actual violence, yet the sense of it is inescapable. We see no explicit carnage in *Prisoners from the Front*, either. Instead, Homer encoded the war's savagery in the lifeless landscape of shattered tree trunks, extending as far as we can see on the battlefield where Brigadier General Francis Channing Barlow confronts three Confederate captives. The first, a dashing cavalier, glares defiantly at his captor; the other two—a tattered old man and a youth wearing a hat

perforated by bullet holes—look on apprehensively. Behind, the troops and their horses quietly stand; there is a slight breeze, but otherwise all is still. What will happen next? Of course in hindsight—even in 1866—the ultimate outcome of the war is written into history. But in Homer’s telling, that history has not come to an end: it is ongoing.

Thus, Homer’s paintings seem not to belong only to the past but to live in the present. The artist’s genius lay in his refusal to deliver

viewer to consider what led up to this moment, and asks us to ponder the cost of victory.

William Blake’s paintings in “A Great Battlefield” channel the spirit of Winslow Homer’s war imagery into our own contemporary world. Hardly imitations, and much more than echoes, Blake’s portrayals, muted and grave, prompt us to dwell on the long-ago war that has yet to release its hold on memory and imagination. Blake modeled his



Prisoners from the Front | Winslow Homer | 1866



Blake with Marines at Gettysburg | Anthony Coplan | 2020

easy, or any, narrative closure. Instead, his Civil War works induce us, compel us, even, to contemplate the ambiguous meaning or meanings the artist inscribed in his tableaux of the war. The *Veteran in a New Field* is an unknown quantity; we cannot even see his face. What did he do in the old field, the battlefield? What happened to him? Is he a hero? Or, like *The Sharpshooter*, is he, or was he, a murderer? Does he bear the burden of some indelible trauma precipitated by the disasters of war? What does he remember, and what is he trying to forget? What does his future hold? So too does *Prisoners from the Front* leave us hanging: there is confrontation but no resolution. Homer instead prompts the

representations of the 1922 Marines’ reenactment of Pickett’s Charge on the US Marine Corps Historical Company’s reenactment of that reenactment in 2020. Thus, these scenes take place at several removes from the Civil War—a fact the artist does not attempt to obfuscate. We see commemorative monuments in the distance; the men’s uniforms date from the early twentieth century; the Marine posing as a corpse in *Good Friday* wears a wristwatch. Yet Blake’s renderings bring the conflict vividly before us, not as bloody battles but as stilled moments for somber reflection. The Civil War haunts us to this day: its long shadow has not lifted from the land. ■



MARINES AT GETTYSBURG

BY: GySgt THOMAS WILLIAMS

Every American is familiar with the iconic battle fought in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, during the American Civil War. Some are even aware that two Marine officers and the “Presidents Own” Marine Band accompanied President Abraham Lincoln to Gettysburg in November 1863 to dedicate the National Cemetery there. However, few people are aware of the long-term relationship the Marine Corps has had with the historic site. Although Marines did not participate in the 1863 battle, 59 years later they would re-create many of its epic engagements. In 1922 Col. Smedley Butler would march the garrison of Marines from Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia to the hallowed fields of Gettysburg. Conducted as a training exercise, but more importantly to raise public opinion and awareness, the Marines would travel to the National Battlefield and reenact many aspects of the original battle. Ultimately over 100,000 spectators would come to witness this monumental event, including the President of the United States.

The summer of 1922 was a busy one for the Marines at Quantico. The Marine Corps East Coast Expeditionary Force was preparing for their annual maneuvers. Aware of the favorable publicity generated by the 1921 maneuvers conducted on the Wilderness battlefield, Brigadier General Smedley Butler was determined that the 1922 Gettysburg outing would exceed all expectations. With politicians in Washington again looking to eliminate the Marine Corps, President Warren Harding was persuaded to attend, guaranteeing national press attention.

The 5th and 6th Marines left Quantico for Washington, DC by barge on the morning of June 19, 1922. The 10th Marines, accompanied by tanks and motor transport units traveled overland to join the infantry at a tent camp erected on Haines Point and named Camp Lejeune. That evening the Marines passed in review for the President, marking the first time since the Civil War that troops had paraded on the grounds of the White House.

The combined force advanced toward Gettysburg in easy stages, stopping for successive nights in Bethesda, Gaithersburg, Ridgeville, Frederick, and Thurmont. The veteran 5th and 6th Marines, covered with dust from their march from Thurmont, arrived on the Gettysburg field midday on June 26. The infantry was preceded by the elements of the Motor Transport Corps, the Signal Corps, a Naval Medical Detachment, and the Military Police. They advanced to their camp south-southwest of town, between Confederate Ave. and Emmitsburg Pike [Road], suitably named Camp Harding.

Unfortunately, the 26th was marred by a tragic event that cast a pall over the entire exercise. While maneuvering over the Marine camp in the company of three other aircraft, the plane of Captain George Hamilton suddenly nosed over, slipped into a tail spin and crashed on the farm of William Johns, near Steinwehr Avenue. Captain Hamilton was killed on impact while his mechanic, Gunnery Sergeant George Martin died



on the way to the hospital. Captain Hamilton was a well-liked and courageous officer, especially known for his heroism in France during World War One, receiving many medals and honors, chief among them being the Distinguished Service Cross. He saw service at Belleau Wood, Soisson, St. Mihiel, Champagne, and the Meuse-Argonne, where he commanded two battalions of the 5th Marines.

While only 5,500 Marines made the march from Quantico, they were packing or carrying sufficient equipment and supplies to equip a 20,000-man division. Skeletonized companies of 88 men were carrying all the ammunition, range finders and technical gear required for a 140-man company. Each company was carrying the 20,000 rounds of small arms ammunition necessary for the multiple exercises planned for the Marines 10-day stay in Gettysburg. For the first time a small, two-wheeled cart was used, allowing two men to move the packs and gear of their entire squad.

The next four days were busy ones. The aviation section established a flying base, the planes being carefully examined by their mechanics; everyone determined that the crash of June 26th would not be repeated. The Air Wing was planning a night “bombing” attack on their own airfield near the camp, dropping flares rather than bombs. The defense was to be provided by four, blank-firing 3-inch anti-aircraft guns assisted by three sound gathering and ranging devices and a battery of searchlights. These



sound gathering and ranging devices, developed during the First World War, enabled their operators to determine the position and altitude of the approaching aircraft by their engine noises. This information would then be telephoned to the anti-aircraft guns located adjacent to the airfield.

The infantry and artillery conducted maneuvers; the troops toured the battlefield by truck each with a battlefield guide and all hands turned-to for the rehearsal of Pickett’s Charge. On the evening of the 26th the Quantico Post Band arrived from Richmond, Virginia, where they were detailed to provide music for the Confederate Veterans Reunion. The Quantico Band combined with the other three bands (presumably the bands of the 5th, 6th and 10th Marines) to give evening concerts. A recreation tent was established a short distance from the Virginia State monument for these concerts as well as an evening moving picture show. The public was invited to attend both activities free of charge.

The Marines began their actual maneuvers on June 28th. One battalion each from the 5th and 6th Marines participated in what was termed a “fence problem” in the vicinity of the High Water Mark. The problem consisted of one battalion entrenched in the defense, while the other was detailed to assault the position and take it in approved Marine Corps fashion. Umpires were appointed to monitor and critique the exercise, commenting on the methods and shortcomings of the attack, also in approved Marine Corps fashion.



President Harding and his entourage, including Major-General John Lejeune and General of the Armies John Pershing, arrived on July 1st 1922, watching the first “reenactment” of Pickett’s famous charge. Marching shoulder to shoulder, the 5th and 6th Marines marched across the mile of open ground between their camp and Cemetery Ridge. The 10th Marine’s guns, acting as both union and Confederate batteries, fired salvos across the field, creating huge clouds of smoke that shrouded the advancing infantry. Civil War veterans, among the more than 100,000 spectators watching the event, applauded the accuracy of the spectacle. Sunday, July 2nd was a day of rest for the Marines. The charge was again reenacted on July 3rd.

The grand charges over the Gettysburg Battlefield concluded on July 4th, 1922, when the Marines attacked across over the same ground, this time using all the current weapons at their disposal—tanks, aircraft, and machine guns—to demonstrate how the modern (1922) Marine Corps would assault General Meade’s position. This assault was preceded by a blank-fire artillery barrage by the 10th Marines, this time firing from a position 2,000 yards behind Seminary Ridge. This day’s events drew a crowd exceeding 125,000, including various foreign military observers, notably Major-General Haraguchi of the Imperial Japanese Army. As an added attraction, planes from the air wing shot down a condemned, hydrogen-filled observation balloon.



The Marines were more than ready to break camp on July 6th, the previous day’s rain having turned their camp into a sea of mud. They retraced their route to Washington, DC, again passing in review for the President and finally returned to Quantico. The 1922 summer maneuvers proved to be a notable success, providing both officers and men with realistic training in the lean, post-war years. Captain John Craige, aide to the Commandant, commented on the considerable benefits, both training and public relations that were gained from the exercise:

“In the field of attracting the favorable notice of the Nation to the activities of the Marine Corps, equal success was achieved. Several thousand columns of newspaper clippings have been received at Headquarters, cut from the papers of cities all over the country, from Maine to California, and articles in magazines are still making their appearance, dealing with the march and the exercises at Gettysburg. On the day following the President’s visit to Camp Harding at Gettysburg, newspapers all over the country carried front-page stories on the demonstration in his honor and, thereafter, illustrated pages, rotogravure sections, illustrated magazines and the like were filled with pictures of the doings of Marines, while moving pictures of the exercises appeared on the program of every one of the great weekly moving-picture concerns.” ■

IMAGE CREDITS: Harris & Ewing, photographer. *Marines during reenactment of Pickett’s Charge at the battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.* Pennsylvania United States Gettysburg, 1922. [July] Photograph. www.loc.gov.



AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

INTERVIEWED BY: JASON PATTERSON

Jason Patterson met William Blake in Champaign, IL, Jason's hometown, when William was studying at the University of Illinois. William was a regular customer at Art Coop, the local art supply store, where Jason was an employee. They quickly bonded over their shared interests in art and history.

In the spring and early summer of 2022 they discussed William's new series of work, *A Great Battlefield*:

JP: We live in a time when the invention of photography is almost 200 years old. Within our society and culture, taking pictures digitally is now the ironclad standard when it comes to how we collectively make visual representations of each other. Painting, as a primary way to create visual representations of people, has long passed. So today, in the 21st century, when we paint and draw representational artwork, there must be more to it conceptually. So for you, in your practice as an artist, why is it important for you to oil paint? Conceptually, why is oil painting the best vehicle for your ideas?

WB: Because people have pushed around mud to make images for at least 40,000 years, painting is in constant dialogue with the past. Reading a painting is a mimetic encounter, I think especially for us painters. When viewing a painting, we attempt to dissect the moves made, put ourselves in the position of the painter, to see what they saw... like that painter did with the paintings around them. A painting is a gesture to the past and the future in that way—Manet made his balcony painting in dialogue with Goya and Magritte. His painting was a response to Goya and knowing his

painting was to last, it was also a call to future painters. Though it doesn't have to be that linear or visible.

I have an attachment to painters like Winslow Homer, I embody him at American Civil War battle reenactments. There's something similar that happens when reenacting and honestly more direct when painting what I paint. Reenactment uses the body to connect to the past and so does painting, more than photography at least. I think that's why it's important to me.

JP: In your work you wonderfully make references to old master paintings. Winslow Homer is a main subject in this project. We see him beautifully celebrated in the forefront of this series. But along with Homer, can you also talk about the other old masters referenced in this new work?

WB: There are always some Catholic sympathies in my paintings, either because of the resurrection/embodiment metaphors in reenactment or the fact that my first deep encounters with art were at church. So, I'm looking a lot at the Spanish and Italian painters.

I was thinking directly of Pontormo's Deposition for the painting High Water Mark. I love his figures and the gesture of Christ's hand being held. I made a series of paintings after participating in a reenactment at Gettysburg which had Clara Barton checking the pulse of a man during his leg amputation. I liked this idea of searching for the liveness in reenactment and brought that into how I saw the Pontormo painting- that they were checking Christ's pulse, always questioning his liveness.

Manet's Civil War lithograph is another reference. The first images I



saw of the Marines playing dead in the 1922 reenactment made me think of the lithograph.

Manet also held my attention because he painted the Battle of Cherbourg, had a stint with the French Navy, and fought in the National Guard during the initial siege of Paris. I thought it was fitting because the next time a German army approached Paris it was engaged by the US Marine Corps at the Battle of Belleau Wood. A battle that helped shape the identity of the Corps and had some of its veterans participate in the 1922 reenactment.

I also love the paintings of Thayer, Beaux, Whistler, Chase, and Julian Scott so there's some of that in there as well.

JP: I did not know about the Manet litho! Is your painting only a reference to that or is it a reference to that and the matador painting? I'm guessing it's both. So my question is: In your answer do you think you could acknowledge both works by Manet? I'm thinking a lot of the readers will see this painting and their minds will go straight to the matador and, like me, they may not know about the litho.

WB: For sure, I imagine that the litho was drawn onsite as he ventured back into Paris but the image has its DNA in the dead toreador painting, which he lifted from a painting thought to be by Velasquez. I see a progression from the playful theatrics of his early paintings in the mid 1860's, to the political heaviness of the execution of Maximilian and then culminating with these lithographs. You can kind of feel it. There's a different sentiment between the litho and the toreador painting even though it's a very similar image.

So the painting Good Friday attempts to hold both those sentiments, it's somber and weighted but it's also a Marine playing dress-up, playing dead.

JP: As you know, both of our practices have a lot of similarities. We're both history painters and we both deal in portraiture. Also, I think race and our American history of white supremacy, are always resonant on both of our artwork. Mine may be a bit more direct.

So here I have a few questions: In another conversation you mentioned as a kid you had an obsession with Robert E. Lee. Obviously that interest has evolved and matured, but could you talk on how that strong interest came about and existed with you as a kid and then how you think and feel about the Confederate General today.

WB: It might be a bit strange to have favorite generals, but as a kid that's what it was. I had a list, top one being Gen. Benjamin Grierson, but yes, the Grey Fox was up there. I imagine it had to do with the way Shelby Foote spoke about him, the way Martin Sheen portrayed him, and the respect he garnered from those he fought. Some folks love Darth Vader and I was into Lee.

Like everything, as you grow up the context becomes larger and you can see the successful strategy of Chancellorsville, see the benefits of not micromanaging, and also to not idolize a traitorous slave holder who used his skills for a cause of white supremacy.

JP: Generally, in your practice, how do you try to acknowledge, reference or represent our history of race?

WB: Like you said, we're history painters, figurative painters. Painting



a figure is not neutral. Obviously, a white painter painting another white figure is just as much about race as if there's folks of color in those positions. It's hard to speak in generalities, I don't have the overarching project that someone like Kerry James Marshall has, so I try to rely on my own sensibilities.

When choosing reenactors, I try my best to have that come organically. The paintings come from a collaborative process and for some reenactors, racial justice is at the forefront of their portrayal and others it's not as much. I want to be critical enough to not cause harm but also to not be so didactic. Some of Homer's images do this very well and some not so much.

JP: You'll have to remind me of what exactly you said, but the last time we chatted, you mentioned (if I remember correctly) that in the original 1922 Gettysburg Marine Corp reenactors didn't exactly shy away from presenting the Confederates in a positive, honorable or triumphant way. Am I remembering that correctly? In any case, can you speak on how our troubled legacy concerning race is present in this new series?

WB: Yeah, I'd say a month before he viewed the reenactment at Gettysburg, President Harding gave a speech at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial, where he celebrated Lincoln, not as the great emancipator but simply the man who kept the union intact, "...he [Lincoln] doubtless believed in its [slavery's] ultimate abolition through the developing conscience of the American people, but he would have been the last man in the republic to resort to arms to effect its abolition. Emancipation was a means to the great end—maintained union and nationality."

Other than for members of the Grand Army of the Republic, the ceremony was segregated. The only Black speaker was censored before calling it a mockery; the Chicago Defender started a boycott of the memorial.

1922 was only three years after the Red Summer, one year after the massacre in Tulsa, and three years away from the largest Klan march in Washington.

So when the Marine Corps (only white men at the time) stepped onto the battlefield to reenact Pickett's Charge, I would say the sentiments were closer to that of the Lost Cause. Like water to fish, that's what they were swimming in. For me, the paintings Union and Palm Sunday acknowledges those sentiments.

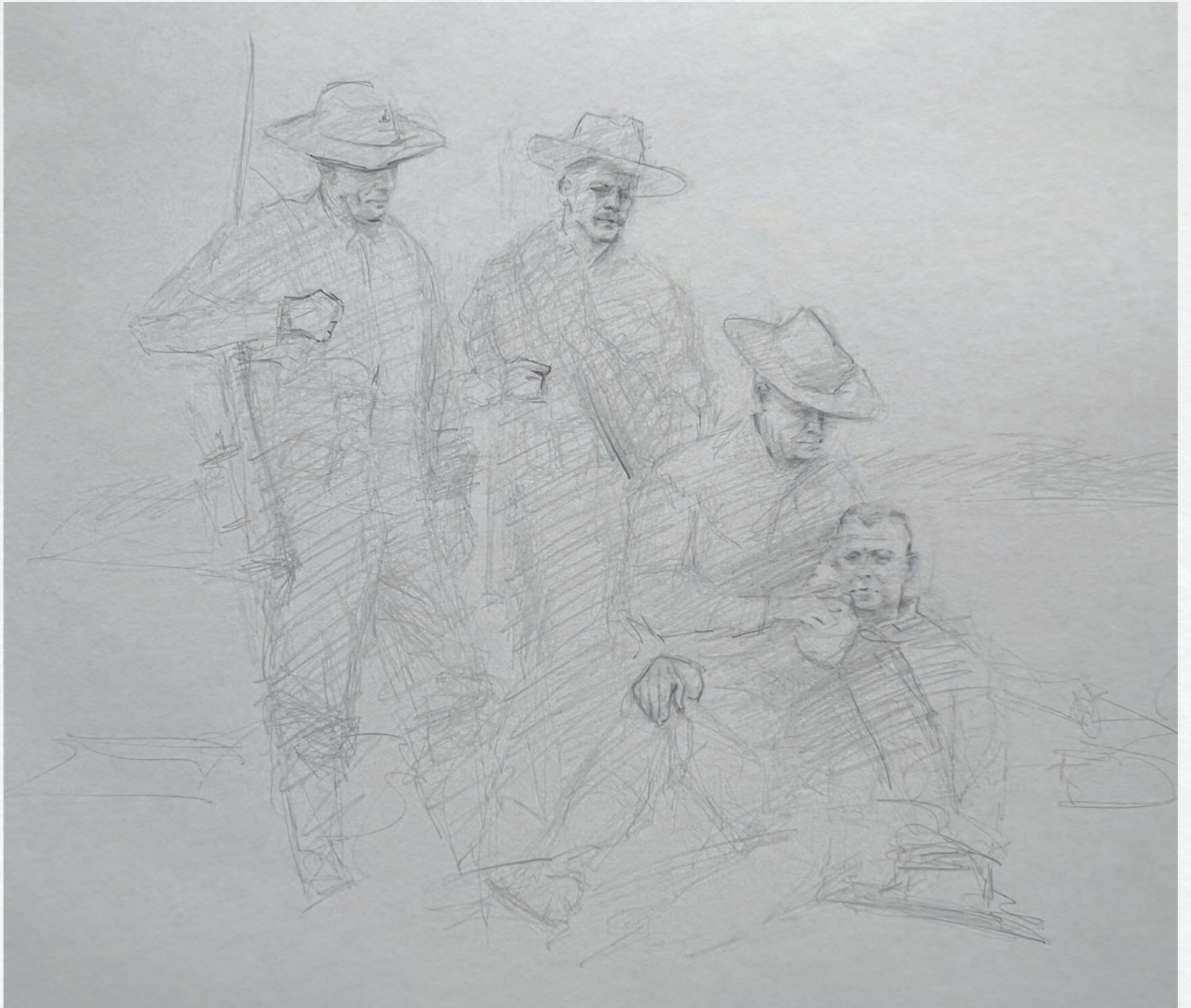
It's a hundred years after the reenactment, and I think it's worth thinking about what that battlefield means to me today. Gettysburg has been used as a microcosm of the US since the battle... the whitewashing of the Blue and Gray reunions, the Civil Rights/Cold War battles during the centennial celebrations, militia groups on the lookout for Antifa, someone with a BLM t-shirt being escorted out of the National Cemetery. It's all there for me.

I think that's why I look to reenactment so much; it's always changing even if it's recursive. The battle didn't change, just how we understand it. ■

IMAGE CREDITS (LEFT TO RIGHT): *Majas on a Balcony*; Goya (Francisco de Goya y Lucientes); 1800–1810 (detail) | *The Balcony*; Edouard Manet; 1868–1869 (detail) | *Perspective II, Manet's Balcony*; René Magritte; 1950 | *The Deposition from the Cross*; Jacopo Pontormo; 1528 (detail) | *Finding a Pulse*; William Blake; 2018 | *Civil War (Guerre Civile)*; Edouard Manet; 1871–73, published 1874 | *The Dead Toreador*; Edouard Manet; probably 1864 (detail) | *President Harding snaped at the dedication ceremonies of the Lincoln Memorial today*, 1922 May 30; Photograph (detail). www.loc.gov.

DRAWINGS

- 15 WOUNDED MARINE
BEING GIVEN A DRINK
FROM A CANTEEN
graphite on paper | 2022
- 16 STUDY OF A MARINE
charcoal and white chalk on toned paper | 2022





PLATES

- 18 PALM SUNDAY
- 20 UNION
- 22 GOOD FRIDAY
- 24 A GREAT BATTLEFIELD
- 26 SHARPSHOOTER
- 28 HIGH WATER MARK
- 30 OLD FIELD

PALM SUNDAY
oil on linen | 36" x 24" | 2022



UNION

oil on linen | 24" x 36" | 2022



GOOD FRIDAY

oil on linen | 24" x 48" | 2022



A GREAT BATTLEFIELD

oil on linen | 60" x 35" | 2022



SHARPSHOOTER
oil on linen | 16" x 20" | 2022



HIGH WATER MARK

oil on linen | 48" x 60" | 2022



OLD FIELD

oil on linen | 12" x 24" | 2022



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

SARAH BURNS

WILLIAM BLAKE, WINSLOW HOMER, AND THE LONG CIVIL WAR



Sarah Burns (Ph.D., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) is Professor Emeritus of Art History, Indiana University, Bloomington. Her publications include

Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America (1996), *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (2004), and *The Emphatically Queer Career of Artist Perkins Harnly and His Bohemian Friends* (2021). She has also authored numerous essays and articles on American art and artists in journals and exhibition catalogues. She is always happiest when thinking and writing about anything pertaining to Winslow Homer, her number one, all-time great nineteenth-century American painter.

GySgt THOMAS WILLIAMS

MARINES AT GETTYSBURG



GySgt Thomas Williams, a former U.S. Marine Corps Drill Instructor, Firefighter, and veteran of the Vietnam War and numerous Marine Corps deployments, has spent his

life in military and public service, teaching, and historical education, contributing over fifty years of service and support to the Marine Corps and the American people. GySgt Williams is the Director of the United States Marine Corps Historical Company and has become one of the principle specialists in Marine Corps material culture. He has worked with such agencies as the National Park Service, the United States Marine Corps History and Museums Division, the United States Army Center of Military History, The United States Marine Corps Heritage Foundation, and numerous National Trust and State Park sites, as well as the film industry.

JASON PATTERSON

INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST



Jason Patterson is an African American history based artist working in portraiture, the recreation of historical documents, and the designing and fabrication of stylized

frames to house his work. Patterson lives and works in Chestertown on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, where he works with students at Washington College, advising art students as well as students within the college's Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience. His current work is focused on the Black history of Maryland's Eastern Shore, and has been supported by Chesapeake Heartland: An African American Humanities Project.



WILLIAM BLAKE

Photography | Dave Wilson | Studio Ambrotype



GALLERY
VICTOR ARMENDARIZ