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Annette Roberts-Gray: peace of pottery

Glenwood artist honors fallen soldiers
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Glenwood Springs artist Annette Roberts-Gray with her ceramic installation, "In Honor, In Memory: A Reminder of Individual Sacrifice and the Cost of War," showing at the CMC Gallery in Glenwood. (Stewart Oksenhorn/The Aspen Times)



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In Honor, In Memory: A Reminder of Individual Sacrifice and the Cost of War is on display at the CMC Gallery in Glenwood.

GLENWOOD SPRINGS — When Annette Roberts-Gray heard George W. Bush announce the end to major combat operations in Iraq, five years ago this month, she believed her president. So when she began her project two years later, to make a ceramic vase for each American soldier killed in the war, she also believed she'd have a good shot at completing it. The toll of U.S. military deaths would fade away, and she really would be able to make one vase — in austere white, stamped with the soldier's name, date of death and branch of the military in which he or she served — for each of the fallen.

The project was born out of angry disbelief. Roberts-Gray had not, for the most part, used her art to political ends, focusing instead on functional pottery. The invasion, and then occupation of Iraq, however, seeped into her art. At a two-person show at the CMC Gallery in Glenwood, she included a piece, "9 For Every One," that featured one tall vase surrounded by nine smaller ones; the inspiration was the statistic she read that for every U.S. soldier killed in Iraq, another nine were wounded. Other pots in that exhibit were stuffed with pieces of paper, on which were written additional statistics related to war.

"I was just incredibly frustrated," said Roberts-Gray, a gentle and calm 54-year-old mother of a 19-year-old son, who has lived in Glenwood Springs most of the years since 1981. "I couldn't believe that we were invading Iraq. I couldn't understand why. It didn't seem like those of us opposing it, in any way, had any influence at all. It was so sad that people were being sent there."

Roberts-Gray found additional layers to her frustration: the disparity between official government reports and the truth on the ground, and the general failure of the media to fill in those gaps. "I felt we'd been duped. By the media as well. They were led by the Bush administration," she said.

Roberts-Gray channeled her emotion into sympathy for the dead, and compassion for their families. "I felt they really needed to be honored in a special way," she said. She took months in preparation for the project, picking out the color and shape of the vases, and how best to imprint information on them. In 2005, she was ready to make the pieces, and ordered 2,000 pounds of clay.

"I thought, Oh, that'll be enough. I thought the end was in sight," she said.

About a year and a half ago, Roberts-Gray realized she couldn't keep up with the death count, as it passed 3,000. She abandoned her ambition to make a vase for each soldier, and began contemplating how she could continue the project in some other form. She decided she would make installations of the vases — which by then were approaching 1,500 — and photograph the installations.

When her brother visited from Michigan, she took the opportunity to haul the vases — those that she has not given away to surviving family members who have requested the work — to the Great Sand Dunes. Later, she took them to a sandbar near Salida. But those locations, she found, lacked meaning, so she began thinking of more dramatic settings for the installations. So last year, she started bringing some of the vases to Washington, D.C., where she made an exhibition near the Washington Monument and the Capitol Building; and to New York, near the Statue of Liberty, and made photographs of the scenes. Near her home in West Glenwood, she also made an installation on a golf course, whose green lawns, she thought, made a satisfactory representation of Arlington National Cemetery.

The installation, titled "In Honor, In Memory: A Reminder of Individual Sacrifice and the Cost of War," is showing through June 6 at the CMC Gallery in Glenwood Springs. The exhibit features more than a thousand vases and several photographs of the vases as they have been assembled around the nation. Also included is the 2004 book, "Last Letters Home," published by Life, that profiles 14 U.S. soldiers who died in Iraq. Roberts-Gray was struck by the fact that she recognized every one of the people profiled; she had made a vase for each of them.



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"I always had this thought of lining them up," said Roberts-Gray, whose photos of the vases suggest a vast graveyard. "I love this artist, Andy Goldsworthy, and I've been influenced by his use of pattern and light and shadow. I like to arrange things too."

Roberts-Gray will also have a small installation for the Memorial Day service at the Snowmass Chapel on Monday, May 26. The project has also been exhibited, in various sizes and forms, at Denver International Airport and at Aspen's Red Brick Center for the Arts. Roberts-Gray is currently pushing to create an installation for the Democratic National Convention, coming to Denver in August.

Roberts-Gray is still making her vases — but only at the specific request of a family. (She has been accepting donations, but does not charge the families for the work.) As the project has taken its turn, from a commitment to honor each soldier to the realization that the scope of that undertaking was not feasible, the work has taken on new meaning. There is an added sense of futility in the art: trying to keep up with the war machine is beyond the scope of the ordinary American — or perhaps even any person. It echoes Roberts-Gray's notion that this war is being executed largely outside of the consciousness of the American public.

"I was kind of sad. I still feel sad about it. I'd still like to finish them. But there just doesn't seem to be an end to it," said Roberts-Gray of the project. The Glenwood exhibit features a list of all U.S. military personnel killed in Iraq; the list has grown by several dozen since being installed last month. "What I really want to do is keep this in the public eye. This invasion and occupation is so foreign to us, in our daily lives. It's not like World War II, when everybody had their Victory Garden. We don't feel it in our everyday lives. If we were experiencing here what the people in Iraq are experiencing, there's no way we'd put up with it. It seems so callous to me that we've created this situation, and don't seem to care."

A native of Salt Lake City, Roberts-Gray became interested in ceramics during her college years, at Western New Mexico University. She moved to Glenwood Springs in 1981, and took a job as a clinician with Planned Parenthood. In 1986, realizing she had not done much traveling, she took seven months to roam the globe. Upon her return to Colorado, she met Andrew, who had an MFA from the University of Wisconsin. After the two married, Andrew told Annette that he thought every artist should spend time in New York, so the couple moved East for several years. Both painted extensively while in New York, and Andrew's job with the Guggenheim Museum allowed them free access to the city's museums, a perk they utilized to the hilt.

The couple returned to Glenwood in 1993, and Roberts-Gray returned to Planned Parenthood. She also returned to pottery, of the functional variety. "It's so rewarding to make something useful, and have someone enjoy it," she said of her work back then.

Early this decade, plans were approved to turn the old Wulfsohn Ranch in West Glenwood into a shopping center, anchored by a Target store. Glenwood's Main Street Gallery organized a group show focusing on the transformation. Roberts-Gray's contribution was "Pre-Target Pottery," a series of cups stamped with that phrase. She also put a notice in the gallery window that any of the pieces that were not purchased would be smashed. It was her awakening as a provocateur.

"It was an analogy: People didn't value something till they see they're going to lose it," said Roberts-Gray, who did indeed see a spike in sales after her warning went up. "People knew there would be a limited time these would be around." And she did break the remaining pots into pieces — and buried the shards where the new shopping center was being built."

Roberts-Gray is at work on a commissioned dinner set. It's functional work — but she can't help getting a statement into the work. Each piece is stamped "Not Made in China," or "These Are Not From Wal-Mart."

Roberts-Gray still hears occasionally from the surviving family members of a U.S. soldier who has lost his life in Iraq. She is happy to make contact with them, happy to honor the deceased with a vase. But even in this, she finds herself having to scale back.

"I'd get way too involved, spend way too much time," she said. "Some of the soldiers have extensive blogs. I'd go on there and read and get to feel like I knew them a little more. But I had to quit doing that for my sanity."

<i>Annette Roberts-Gray's In Honor, In Memory: A Reminder of Individual Sacrifice and the Cost of War shows through June 6 at the CMC Gallery in Glenwood Springs.</i>

There will also be a showing of pieces from In Honor, In Memory on Monday, May 26 at the Snowmass Chapel.</i>

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