

**Phantom Thoughts, Surreal Dreams:  
A Journey Through Organizational Dysfunction**

By

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Visual Arts  
and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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Abstract:

The sculpture for my Master of Fine Arts exhibition represents some of the memories resulting from nearly thirty years of military service, and is inspired by observations of absurd, ironic and haunting experiences. My art interprets and repurposes imagery found in military heraldry, weapons systems, and the mundane in order to create a visual narrative. It is partially inspired by dysfunctional units, toxic leadership and lack of soldier care, which is still found all too often in military organizations. The methods and materials used to unify the works and to convey meaning to the viewer consist primarily of cast bronze, cement, the olive drab color of many elements, and the repetition of the phrase “Front Toward Enemy”, thereby rhetorically questioning just who the enemy is.

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**Phantom Thoughts, Surreal Dreams:  
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My art represents certain memories of nearly thirty years of military service. The heraldry represents dysfunctional units, toxic leadership and lack of soldier care still sometimes found in military organizations. Several methods and materials are used to unify the works and to convey meaning to the viewer. The three main sculptures are cast bronze and cement. The material signifies the strength, permanence and enduring qualities of military service, while still showing various imperfections. Another element is the olive drab color, so prevalent in the army, and found throughout the work. The final element is the phrase “Front Toward Enemy” found on the 84 anti-personnel mines used in the show and repeated on the shirt of the central figure. The preponderance of this phrase is meant to cause the viewer to question just exactly who and where the enemy is (Fig. 1).

Like many others, I served within dysfunctional organizations throughout my military career. As I progressed through the ranks, it became apparent that in some organizations, individuals were favored primarily for their proclivity to support the command structure without question or criticism. This system is not unique in the military, corporations, academic, or even social organizations. In an effort to address dysfunctional organizations and toxic leadership in the military, I wanted my work to reflect these experiences through critical observation, without condemning the Institution as a whole. To do this I avoided using realistic or overtly political imagery. I also wanted to utilize the constructive energy of sculpture as a means to create works which express these moments of absurdity and irony. While this is basically a personal narrative, I felt it was important for the work have a universal quality. I wanted each piece to grab the

attention of the viewer because it invoked similar memories, or because it inspired a genuine interest in finding out the meaning. I therefore avoided specific representational portraits of people, and instead focused on military themed vignettes and objects.



Figure 1

Preeminent within the hierarchy of my work is the piece titled “Unconventional Warhead”. It represents the personification of the Individual who stands apart from the crowd. Many military commanders doctrinally value intelligence and initiative by their subordinates, but in execution prefer those who execute the missions without question or reservation.

This figure represents a universal military stereotype and exudes a sense of resignation of one who is duty bound to execute his orders. The surface texture is covered with holes and represents the scars of battle received over time. But these are not the scars of traumatic combat injuries or wounds; instead, they are the marks of an inner struggle against personality and institutional dysfunction (Fig. 2). I used the figure’s shirt, with the phrase “Front Toward Enemy”, and the outdated headgear with the preposterous ornamentation of a Valkyrie riding a rubber chicken to frame the absurdity begotten through ridiculous, and often unrealistic expectations of organizations.

The entire figure is placed on top of a tall, thin cement pedestal. The slight, graceful curve at the base is countered by the cold, hard angular verticality, indicating restraint, just as regulations and military protocol work to restrain individual expression. The shape of the pedestal is also reminiscent of construction commonly found in eastern European military facilities. It specifically takes its inspiration from elements found in the fence posts of both Soviet era military bases, and Nazi concentration camps. These same posts often surround current military bases and serve to not only protect those assigned to units stationed there, but also to keep them in a controlled physical location (Fig. 3).



Figure 2



Figure 3

“Unless Authorized” pays homage to a simple article of headgear, much valued by soldiers, and often maligned by leaders. Hat, Sun, Army Combat Uniform, Type IV is the official nomenclature of a boonie hat, which have been in army inventory for over half a century.

It is regularly issued to troops in all but the coldest climates but is rarely authorized for daily wear outside of field conditions, “unless authorized by the local commander” (Fig. 4).

Senior Leaders tend to have a common dislike of the hat, in part due to its ability to take on unique and non-standard appearances. The construction of the hat prohibits a uniform appearance under any condition, including whether or not altered by the wearer, and is therefore often deemed to “unmilitary” for regular wear, even in extreme heat. Soldiers wear the hat any time they believe they can get away with it. Wearing a boonie hat without authorization is a way for soldiers to “buck” the system and express their individuality.



Figure 4

In “Unless Authorized”, the boonie hat rests on a large, angular, cement structure, with many faces and formal architectural elements. Its shape is reminiscent of the massive concrete



anti-aircraft structures built in Berlin in World War II, commonly called Flak Towers (Fig. 5). The overall size imparts undue importance to the simplicity of the boonie hat and distances the viewer from the intended informality of the object instead becoming the object. Instead the object shows the institutional struggle (authorization) against the desire for individuality. On the back side of the structure are two niches. Placed in each niche is an oversize cartridge, or bullet, made of steel pipe and cast bronze. These add a deadly serious element for those not familiar with the significance of a boonie hat (Fig. 6).



Figure 6



Figure 7

On the front of the sculpture is a crest consisting of an African shield and a stylized sunflower (Fig. 8). It reflects innumerable military unit crests but with elements unique to my specific experiences. The purpose of a unit crest is to instill a sense of pride and identity into a unit. It instills a sense of life to organizations. A military unit effectively becomes the family of all who serve within it. The symbology of the unit as represented by its crest and allows its

leaders to tell the history of this family, to build loyalty and to instill pride within its members, perpetuating its existence into the future.<sup>1</sup> What happens when there is a breakdown in the identification of a soldier with the organizational family? Often a soldier will come into conflict with the organization or individuals within the organizational for reasons of bias, discrimination or personal animosity. There is often little recourse except to wait out either the tenure of an individual, or of the time assigned to a unit. Most individuals soldier through and move on with their career in other units or exit the service. Some may rebel, and suffer the consequences commiserate with their offense. Still others manage to make their own way regardless the situation of favorable or unfavorable environments within a unit. They create their own path through the networks of relationships and hierarchy of organizations.



Figure 8

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tioh.hqda.pentagon.mil/Catalog/HeraldryIntro.aspx>

The shield and sunflower are my response to not quite belonging within an organization. While deployed I experienced an unusual amount of autonomy in my responsibilities. I was constantly travelling alone or in small teams to perform missions in remote locations. This freedom resulted in irregular contact with my higher headquarters. I became like an outsider looking in, not really feeling part of the unit, though still under its control. I felt like a random, or even rogue, element of the established hierarchy, performing my duties while gradually reinforcing my independence, often to the chagrin of senior officers. The shield and sunflower combined elements from the crests of two units with which I was served. This became my own unofficial crest, signifying the unique experience of this time of my life, and has since served almost as a brand to mark my art work.

“To the Regiment” is also created using visual elements taken from crests of units in which I have served, but serves more as a salute to the honor and pride of the two regiments I spent most of my time in. Both served in the Philippines at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have bolo knives incorporated as part of their crests. I utilize the knives visually, crossing them, blades up, meaning ready for action. Each bolo knife represents one of my old regiments (Fig. 9). The dichotomy between the shield and sunflower, and the crossed bolo knives, is reminiscent of the struggles many have with their own family groups. Often proud and comforting, sometimes strained and alienated, this imagery encompasses a range of emotions, and a lifetime of memories.



Figure 9

The history and traditions of the military as represented by unit crests play a large role in influencing people to volunteer to serve. Likewise, military weapons and equipment have drawn the interest of young people eager to serve their country. Often used in advertisements, the latest, most technologically advanced vehicles and weapons systems are ready made recruiting advertisements. However, reality often does not live up to hype. “Big Boys Toys” is an armored tricycle, pulling an antiquated cannon (Fig. 10). This piece is appealing in an innocent sort of way, attractive to young people and appearing playful and fun. This belies its implied purpose.



Figure 10

The sheer weight and welded steel construction of the tricycle and cannon comments on armored military vehicles used in battle. Its playful look deceives the viewer as to its intended use. It was also designed to be nonsensical in response to congressional appropriations and procurement meddling of various weapons systems in the past. Though generally considered to be the best armed military in the world, the U.S. has not been without its controversies and ironies, such as training for mounted maneuver warfare using golf carts on fairways.<sup>2</sup>

The canon was hand carved in Styrofoam and cast directly in aluminum. It is an outdated weapon meant to represent the constant need to and cost in maintaining a modern military force.

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<sup>2</sup> Fontenot, Gregory. "The First Infantry Division and the U.S. Army Transformed." 2017, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, pg. 55.

Construction of the tricycle is welded steel pipe and steel plate, found wheels, and a repurposed tractor seat. The tricycle is fully operational. It can be pedaled and steered by a rider. It is heavy and difficult to gain forward momentum, similar to many military vehicles. The tricycle and canon are painted olive drab, but with some rust showing through in certain areas, invoking a sense of age and use. The bumper numbers are those of an actual vehicle I spent several years with during my first army assignment.

The unifying element of the olive drab paint is most prevalent in the “High Cost, Low Cost.” This work involves multiple elements and methods and comes closest to being and installation. It perhaps is also the most somber of the works. Central to the piece is a large, dark green metal chest, commonly found in the military. In it is placed two ammo boxes, a painted plaster replica of a claymore anti-personnel mine, and a cast aluminum foot, bolted to a short drive shaft. On top of the chest are three more claymores and a cast iron shield and sunflower emblem, as found on the pedestal of “Unless Authorized”. On the wall above the chest is a cast aluminum grouping of what appears to be deteriorating claymores. The chest and wall piece represent the connection between the purpose of the military and some of the resulting damage inflicted by its actions (Fig. 11).



Figure 11

On either side of the chest are 84 individual plaster claymore mines, representing the year I enlisted in the Army. This work pulls the viewer back into the space, while simultaneously blocking the corners of the room and focusing attention on the other pieces. The cumbersome, unrealistic prosthetic leg may suggest a relationship to the damage inflicted by mines, but also the ability to adapt and overcome trauma. The grim content of “High Cost, Low Cost” provides an important reminder of the deadly serious business of military service.

“Twenty Year Letter” by contrast, is the most freeing of the pieces presented. It is a cast bronze figure of an older man, wearing a helmet and goggles, similar to “Unconventional Warhead”, riding a surfboard with one hand for balance and the other holding up his shorts. The sculpture again incorporates cement but is smaller and more compact than the other two. Its shape is similar to the tank obstacles known as “dragon’s teeth”. The figure is riding his board

over the top of the dragon's teeth with the back portion of the pedestal forming the wave propelling the figure forward (Fig. 12).



Figure 12

Soldiers continually plan and talk about what they will do after they leave the service. It helps pass time, and represents a hope for the future, even in troubled moments. Many never get to see their dreams fulfilled, yet they are as real as the moment in which they are spoken. After twenty years of service, a service member receives a “twenty year letter,” which documents their eligibility for retired pay. A sense of relief often accompanies receipt of the letter, signifying a certain level of security which has been attained. This work represents the



sense of freedom gained after years of service, while the hat and goggles remind us we can never really let go of all we have been through, keeping us tied irrevocably to our past history, our failures, and our accomplishments.

## Gallery



Detail, "Unconventional Warhead". Bronze, cement, 16" x 16" x 96".



Detail, back.



Detail, shirt.



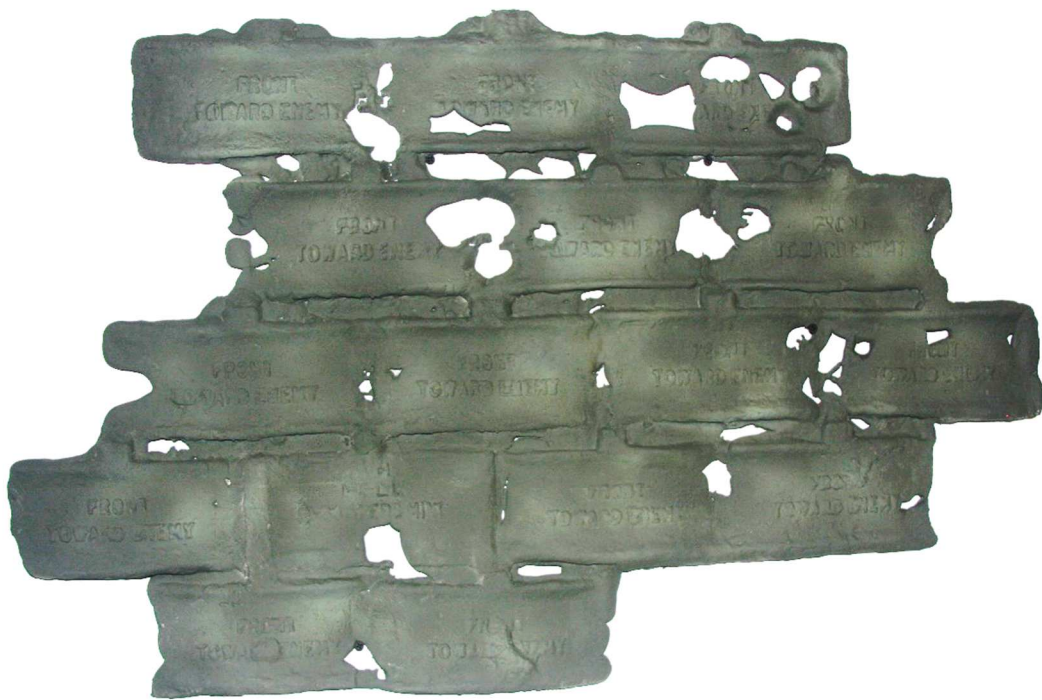
"Unless Authorized". Bronze, Steel, Cement, 32" x 48" x 58".



Detail, Cartridge. Steel, Bronze, 4.5" x 15"



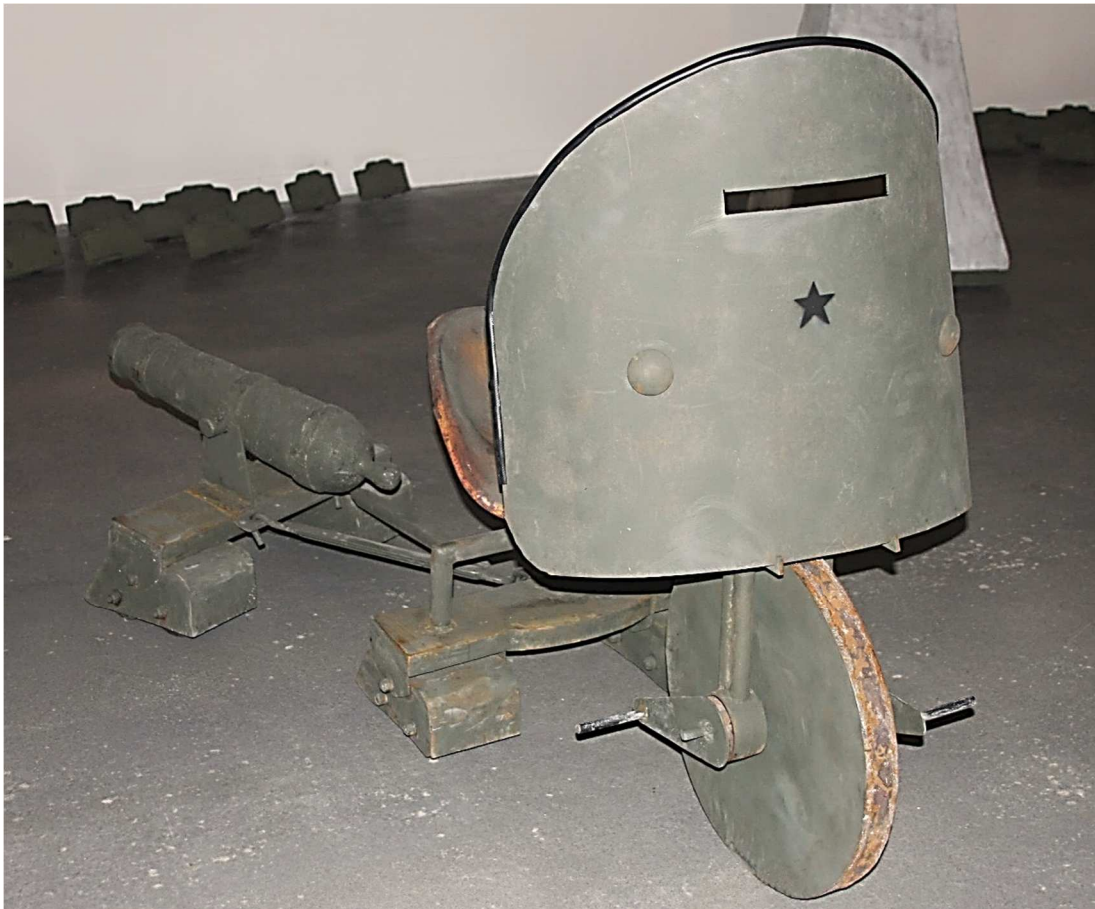
Detail, "High Cost, Low Cost". Aluminum, Found Objects.



Detail, "High Cost, Low Cost". Aluminum, 36" x 24"



Detail, Claymore Mines. Plaster, 9" x 5" each

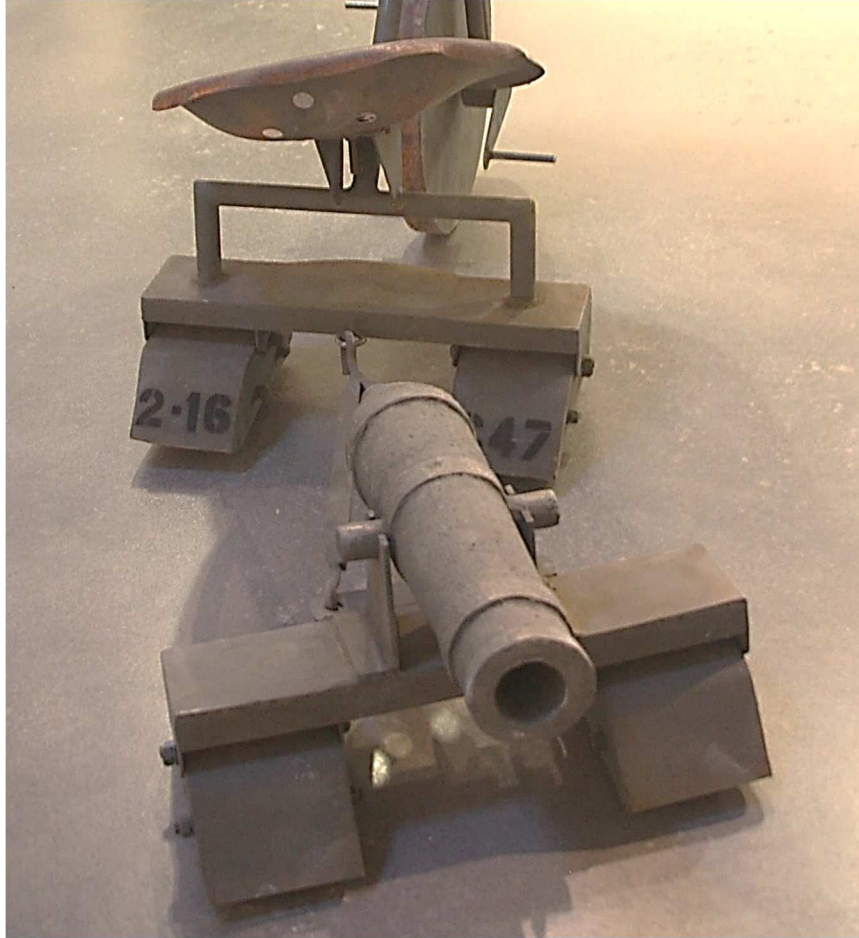


"Big Boys Toys", Steel, Aluminum, Found Objects, 28" x 84" x 48"

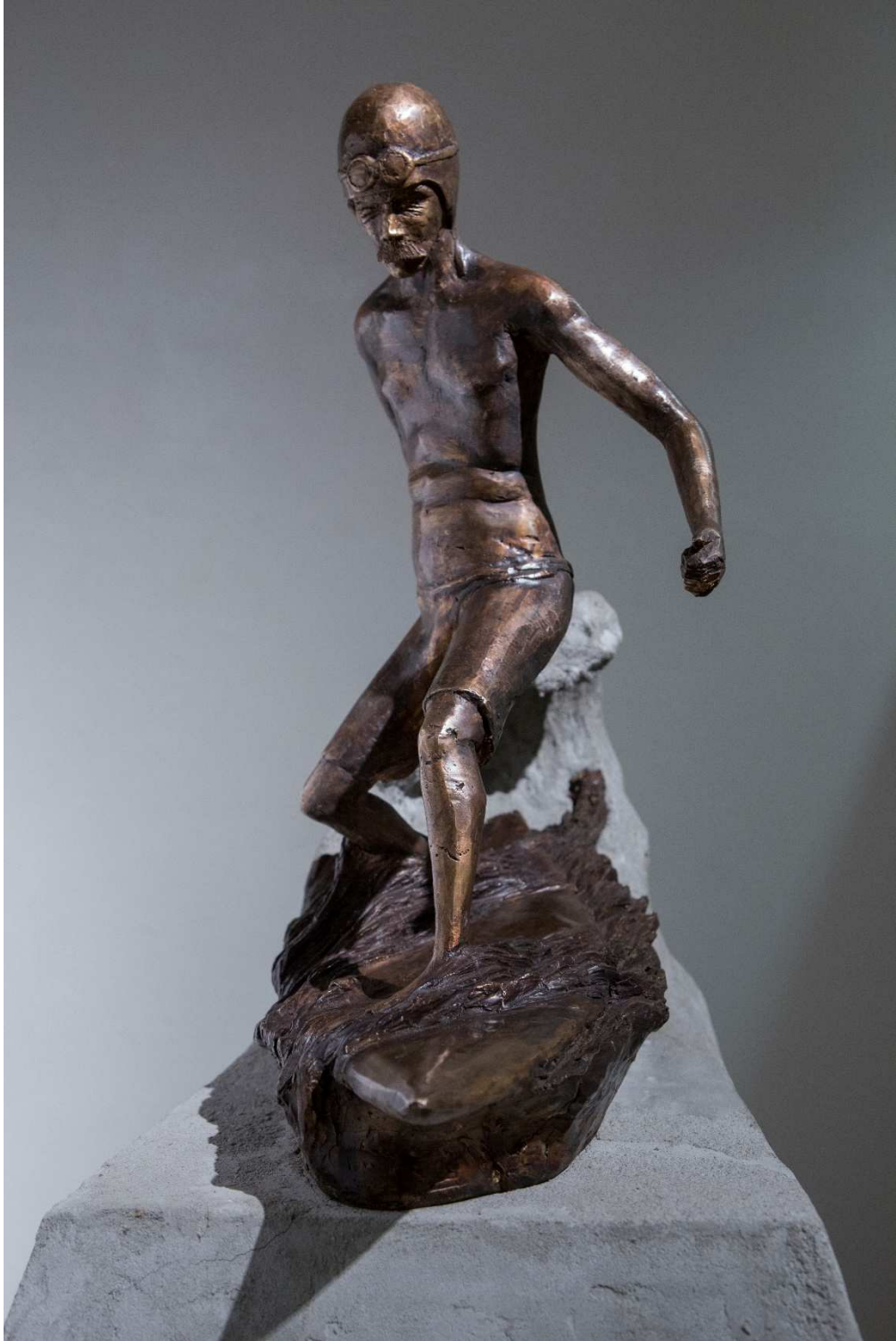




Detail, View from rear.



Detail, Cannon.



Detail, "Twenty Year Letter". Bronze, Cement, 32" x 48" x 54"



Detail, Side view.