



Schultz, Robert and Binh Danh. War Memoranda: Photography, Walt Whitman, and Renewal (Poetry and Visual Art Exhibition) [review]

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ROBERT SCHULTZ and BINH DANH. *War Memoranda: Photography, Walt Whitman, and Renewal*. Poetry and Visual Art Exhibition, Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, Virginia. February 7-May 23, 2015; Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester, August 21-October 16, 2016.

In Part 6 of “Song of Myself,” Walt Whitman suddenly perceives the grass to be the “uttering tongues” of all those whose dying feeds the living. While the phrase “uttering tongues” alludes to speech, it gestures more broadly to the communicative impulse at the heart of words and images. After all, Whitman does name the grass a “uniform hieroglyph.” Though Whitman’s visual poetics and interest in the visual arts predate, or, more accurately perhaps, foreshadow, widespread Modernist poetic interest in the visual arts and verbal-visual collaboration, one hundred and sixty years after the initial publication of *Leaves of Grass*, a twenty-first-century poet and a visual artist have collaborated with Whitman to produce *War Memoranda: Photography, Walt Whitman, and Renewal*, a word and image exhibition that opened in February 2015 at the Taubman Museum of Art in Roanoke, Virginia. By commingling their verbal and visual arts through collaboration and appropriation of materials past and present, photographer Binh Danh and poet Robert Schultz have produced in *War Memoranda* a variety of texts, ranging from broadsides to artists’ books to the gallery installation, that both memorialize and interrogate the process by which we create shared meaning and memory. As *memoranda*, these texts proclaim themselves to be notes for the future, gathering for us “uttering tongues” of the past, including Whitman’s own *Memoranda During the War*, into a collective present.

From August 21 through October 16, 2016, *War Memoranda: Photography, Walt Whitman, and Renewal* will show at the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester. Gallery exhibitions are not often read as *texts*, but in this review, I want to consider how the literal space of the gallery, which is filled with original poetry and art as well as appropriations of historical poetry and art, can be read as a cohesive text in order to offer a conceptual understanding of the project as a whole. In order to do so, I will describe broadly the space of the gallery exhibition while delving into several individual pairings

of poetry and visual art to offer insight into the collaborative impulse at the center of the exhibition.

A verbal-visual collaboration such as *War Memoranda* resists the neat categories into which word and image, author and artist, past and present, are often divided. By insisting on the continuum, Danh (a California-based artist whose work is exhibited in galleries across the country) and Schultz (author of three books of poetry and John P. Fishwick Professor of English at Roanoke College) not only argue for the need to discover Whitman's "interior history" of war, which he posits in *Memoranda During the War* is so often obscured by the impulse to record "facts," but also for a recursive, interpenetrating approach to enacting that discovery. They extend their collaboration beyond themselves to join with the seemingly long dead—both Whitman and the many named and unnamed men and women who appear in the Library of Congress's Liljenquist collection of Civil War photography, leafprints of which anchor *War Memoranda*. They use the flesh of leaves, whose living veins connect the gossamer human story, as both medium and message; photographs from the present and past are reproduced on actual leaves using a chlorophyll printing process, while the trope of leaves weaves through Schultz's poetry. Whitman quotations are placed strategically along the gallery walls, and through the combined effect of this gathering, leaves become a metaphor not only for the cycles of human life, but for the recording of that life.

War Memoranda is the work of the body rendering the invisible visible. The artifacts in this exhibition remind viewers that the past is always the material of our present. The revived images of the long dead, the material art that purposefully calls attention to its own materiality—and to the labor of the hands on those materials—insist upon life's cycles. While the living leaves communicate the recurrence of time, the processes and forms employed by Danh and Schultz highlight the physicality of memory, just as Whitman's leaves of grass stand as physical representations of past lives. Danh uses daguerreotype and cyanotype printing processes, some of the earliest photographic technologies, to render images of the present that themselves recall the past—reconstructed Civil War battlefields, current memorials to wars past, and the faces of twenty-first-century

students as they contemplate Whitman's nineteenth-century poetry. At the same time, Danh and Schultz use the chlorophyll printing process and living leaves to recreate images from the past, giving new body to the dead whose images are housed in the Liljenquist collection. Similarly, Schultz makes use of traditional poetic forms—the ghazal, the triolet, the ballad, terza rima—all of which use multiple processes of repetition, to make new stories from the past, and creates his own form in the poem “Gettysburg” to instantiate the process by which history remains present.

It is perhaps fitting, given Whitman's interest in notions of unity and “harmonious relations,” that a poet and artist have chosen to work together to continue building on his work. Schultz and Danh present themselves as co-authors of *War Memoranda* and many of the leaf-prints, blurring the distinction between “writer” and “artist.” Naming their work after a recognizable Whitman title further announces the collaborative nature of their project. In this way, they subtly reject the notion of the “solitary genius,” while at the same time obscuring the division often imposed between word and image. This synthesis, this rejection of categories, which Whitman championed in section 16 of “Song of Myself,” becomes visible in one of the most fully collaborative artifacts in the *War Memoranda* exhibition: Danh's daguerreotype rendering of Schultz's poem “Amulet” (see Figure 1). Both the poem and the daguerreotype originated in shared artistic experience. During the spring and fall of 2009, when Danh was in residency at Hollins College and Washington and Lee University, he and Schultz spent time together discussing Whitman, nineteenth-century photography, and the Civil War. Out of these intense conversations came a series of daguerreotypes and poems in forms that play upon the reflective qualities inherent in each medium, including the ghazal form in which “Amulet” is written. Danh's daguerreotype of “Amulet” fuses word and image, highlighting the collaboration by obscuring authorship and positioning word and image as united. The intensive back-and-forth influence of Danh on Schultz and Schultz on Danh can be seen in the way the poem as daguerreotype reflects—literally and figuratively—the process of its creation.

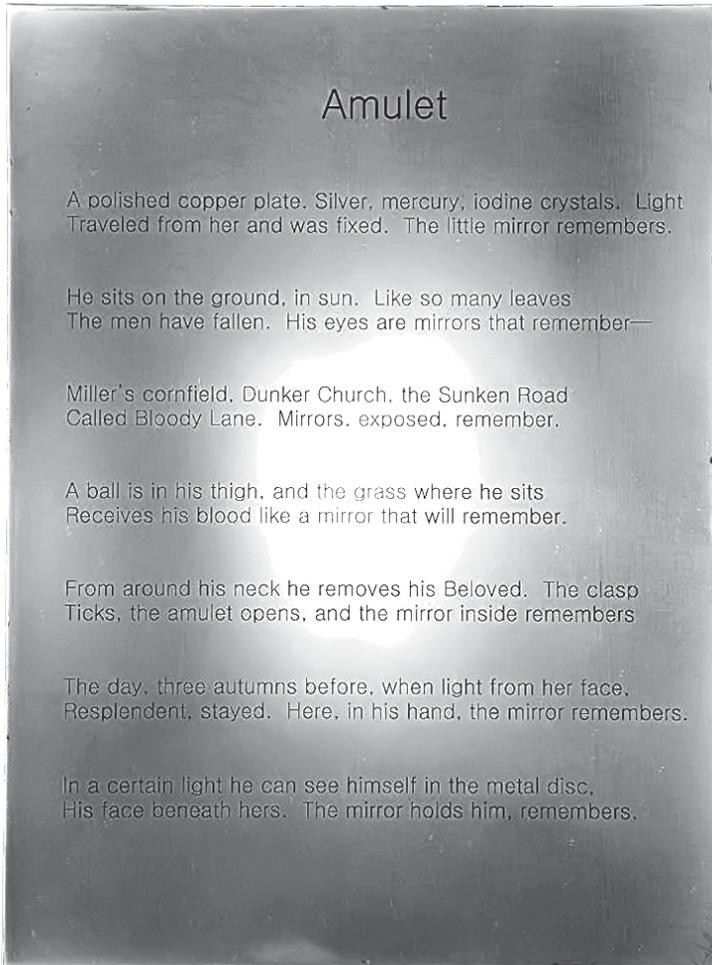


Figure 1. Binh Danh & Robert Schultz: “Amulet” by Robert Schultz of Salem, Va., 2010, Daguerreotype (15.75 x 12.5 x 1.25 inches). Permission of the artists.

“Amulet” is, to borrow a word from Whitman, a “glimpse” into a life, which, though never “fully convey’d to the future,” is nonetheless rendered visible through art. The ghazal form in which “Amulet” is written traditionally calls for each couplet to be autonomous, yet linked by refrain, which can be seen as a verbal instantiation of the daguerreotype process, as each requires, and invites, the discovery of meaning via a repetitious development of image that accrues over

time and across space. Each couplet of the ghazal reaches back to the past to propel it, repeatedly, into new life in the present, just as in the daguerreotype process, during which an image captured in the past develops into the present through exposure to mercury fumes. The cyclical process of repetition structures the whole of *War Memoranda*, allowing Danh and Schultz to reveal the veins that connect and feed the small moments of the past that develop into our present. Moments fixed in resin, copper, mercury, language, or memory fill the space of the gallery, and as viewers spend time connecting each to each, they generate the present by regenerating the past.

Regenerative cycles are also recalled in the installation of the exhibition, which moves viewers through precise groupings of verbal and visual elements that yoke together disparate wars into a communal reflection on the past. Whitman presides over the entirety, and is especially visible in the enlarged cyanotype of Schultz's hand resting on the title page of *Leaves of Grass* that viewers encounter about midway through the exhibition. Conceptually, Whitman's assertion that, "the real war will never get in the books," provides insight into the choices of materials, process, and form in *War Memoranda*:

The actual soldier of 1862-'65, North and South, with all his ways, his incredible dauntlessness, habits, practices, tastes, language, his fierce friendship, his appetite, rankness, his superb strength and animality, lawless gait, and a hundred unnamed lights and shades of camp, I say, will never be written.

The flesh of leaves, the past alive in the present, cycles of repetition and regeneration—these allow viewers access to a history that cannot be written. Wall text from Whitman appears throughout, running like the veins of leaves, a life-giving connective tissue.

All of the exhibition's wars and all of its faces—northern and southern, black and white, long gone and living—are juxtaposed in the inner circles. Civil War and Vietnam leafprints and a daguerreotype sequence of the Lafayette Hillside Memorial (a living memorial to soldiers killed in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars that is curated by volunteers in Lafayette, California) face and reflect one another across time and space. Nature's abiding leaves in "Song of Ourselves," Danh's daguerreotype sequence that interprets "Song of Myself," help

to bridge the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, allowing all of the memorial elements of the exhibition to assert their simultaneity. Moving from a slave ship daguerreotype and Whitman's "Song of Myself" lines about a runaway slave to "Green Man," which appropriates Whitman's leaves in a "jungle war," to "witness" leaves themselves (leaves from trees that are known to have stood on battlefields during the Civil War) and a leafprint of former slaves, viewers traverse the verbal-visual text as it revivifies the women and men whose lives and deaths are so often forgotten. We are asked to witness them, to remember them, to remember that they lived, and live on in us. As Whitman says, we are to look for them in the grass that is renewed each spring. Leafprints of Whitman, produced by Schultz in collaboration with Danh, dot the landscape of the exhibit, like the quotations from Whitman, allowing his body and words to stand ever present as witness to this gallery of witness (see Figure 2).

A closer look at one particular pairing of poem and visual art, contextualized within the world of Whitman that presides over the exhibition, will help give the flavor of the intricate connections that constitute the exhibition. In "Passage to India" Whitman celebrates the past:

The Past—the dark unfathom'd retrospect!
The teeming gulf—the sleepers and the shadows!
The past—the infinite greatness of the past!
For what is the present after all but a growth out of the past?

This celebration of the past and acknowledgement that the past is always part of our present can be seen in Schultz's poem "Gettysburg," which is paired with a cyanotype of the memorial at Gettysburg to which the poem ekphrastically responds (see Figure 3). The cyanotype printing process, like the daguerreotype process, was developed early in the history of photography, and as the daguerreotype might be considered especially suited to inviting contemporary viewers to recall the past because of its recognizability as an historical photographic process, the same is true for the cyanotype printing process.



Figure 2. Binh Danh & Robert Schultz: Walt Whitman, 1887, in Camden House hosta leaf, 2011, Chlorophyll print and resin (14.5 x 11.5 x 1.25 inches). Permission of the artists. This leaf came from a plant in the back garden at Whitman's Camden, New Jersey, house. The image of Whitman was developed on the leaf in the back window of Schultz's car as he drove from New Jersey home to Virginia. Whitman would likely approve of his visage developing in the sunlight filtering through the window of a car traveling 70 miles per hour down the great land bridge that is I-95.

While Danh's contemporary images made with nineteenth-century techniques assert the influence of the past on the present, the poem "Gettysburg" asks how the aftermath of war and death might be

synthesized by memory into memorial. The body of Schultz's poem, prefaced by Whitman's statement that "the real war will never get in the books," follows:

But the real books will always be filled with leaves,
And real leaves have always grown from the dead,
So the dead will always return in the books.

The dead, beloved, continue to speak in the leaves,
And the leaves of the book continue to green with the dead,
And the bronze leaves of the great book lie still
 beneath the copse of trees.



Figure 3. Binh Danh: Robert Schultz reading "Delia's Tears" by Molly Rogers, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 2011, Cyanotype (18.75 x 26.5 x 1.5 inches). Permission of the artist.

Having immersed himself in historical poetic forms, Schultz now creates his own form, a variant played upon yet another historical form, the pantoum, to make concrete the process of regenerating private history and making it public. In the first of two tercets, Schultz establishes a pattern in which the first line ends on the word *leaves*, the second line ends on *dead*, and the third line ends on *book*. In the second stanza, the first and second lines are similar to their first-stanza counterparts, both in terms of diction and meaning; however, the

second stanza's first and second lines introduce the word *continue* as well as two new verbs, *speak* and *green*, which subtly regenerate the poem's opening lines. A less subtle regeneration occurs between line three of stanza one and line three of stanza two, which suggests that the process of remembering must be made public. The last line of the second stanza contains a book that contains the dead, just as in the last line of the first stanza, but in the second stanza the book takes the form of a literal memorial—"the bronze leaves of the great book[.]" Curiously, this bronze book, this public memorial, seems less alive than the books at the end of stanza one in which the "dead will always return." The great bronze book "lie[s] still beneath the copse of trees." This book lies still, not because it is not alive, but because it asks us to remember these particular dead, on this particular page, just as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial asks us to read and remember specific names of men and women killed in that war. There are books in general, which always contain the dead—the past worlds and words of their authors and readers—and the bronze book memorial at Gettysburg, which contains the specific dead to be remembered publicly at a battle site. *Still* may also imply *continuing*, and so we are reminded that our memory of these dead must also be enduring.

The enduring memory of the faces viewers encounter in *War Memoranda* recalls some of Whitman's most powerful words: "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence, . . . / Who knows but I am enjoying this? Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?" In the faces of the war dead, viewers may see their own, for "distance avails not, and place avails not..." The verbal-visual collaboration of *War Memoranda* has prodded reconsideration of the impact of the past on the present, of the materiality of memory, and of the necessity for memorial. On this final wall it also prods us to reconsider our own roles as makers of meaning. Like Schultz and Danh and Whitman, we might learn and invent new processes of thinking and creating in order to contribute to the communal process of memorializing our shared histories. Whitman's phrase "uttering

tongues” is a vivid description of the collaboration required to make meaning. *War Memoranda* invites us to join our uttering tongues to that collaboration.

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WALT WHITMAN. *Drum Taps: The Complete Civil War Poems*. Introduction by James McPherson. Kennebunkport, ME: Cider Mill Press, 2015. 213 pp.

WALT WHITMAN. *Drum-Taps: The Complete 1865 Edition*, ed. Lawrence Kramer. New York: New York Review of Books, 2015. xxiv + 170 pp.

Two stand-alone editions of Walt Whitman’s 1865 *Drum-Taps* hit bookshelves in 2015 beside a score of books commemorating the sesquicentennial of General Robert E. Lee’s surrender and the end of the Civil War—an anniversary coinciding with the birthday of Whitman’s war poetry collection. Both editions of *Drum-Taps* stand apart from the majority of those other books, celebrating one of the few collections of Civil War poetry written by an eye-witness. Cider Mill Press’s *Drum Taps: The Complete Civil War Poems* offers a visceral experience, integrating the poems with full-color and black-and-white historical images of battlefields, hospitals, and veterans. The result is a collage attempting to present Whitman’s poetry as documentation—eye-witness testimony to the bravery of soldiers and the savagery of war, with a special emphasis on the “eye.” *Drum-Taps: The Complete 1865 Edition*, published by the press of the *New York Review of Books*, is a text-only paperback, about one-third smaller in dimensions than Cider Mill’s version, with a back cover declaring this edition to be “a revelation, allowing one of Whitman’s greatest achievements to appear again in all its troubling glory.” The books differ dramatically not only in appearance but, more importantly, in the editorial approaches to the source material.