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### CONVERSATIONS WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS: KEN HRUBY, SCULPTOR LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT

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#### Video Description

Second in a series entitled *Conversations with Contemporary Artists* that highlights current Cape Ann artists, this presentation features sculptor and combat veteran Ken Hruby speaking about his work with an accompanying slide show. An alum and, at that time, instructor at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Hruby lives in Gloucester, and his artwork reflects experiences

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throughout his life that include his time as an undergraduate at West Point and multiple tours in Vietnam and Korea. His slide show incorporates works that are currently in the Cape Ann Museum permanent collection as well as temporary gallery installations and commissioned pieces. While humorously questioning his decision to go to art school after his military career ended, Hruby reveals through his sculpture and dialogue about its underlying themes the unique ability to lend a voice to those parts of the human experience that are often the most difficult to communicate.

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### Subject list

Ken Hruby	Conversations with Contemporary Artists
Henry Reed	U.S. Military Academy at West Point
Billy Collins	Vietnam War
Joe Garland	Korean War
Jonathan Shay	Gulf War
Paul Fussell	School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

**Hruby sculptures:** Juggernaut, Minefields of Memory, Free-fall, Uneasy Pieces, Armoured, Fun Couple Number One, Steel Jockstrap, Hyperbole, Surrounded, Insight, In Memoriam, Defoliant Camouflage, Spirit Mender, DEROS Minus One, Reminiscences, The Most Uncertain Trumpet, Migration Eastward, Mortar Mortar, Bivouac Perspective, Fire Fight and VFW, Collateral Damage

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### Transcript

00:10

My name is Linda Marshall. I am the director of programs at the Museum. And thank you for joining us this afternoon. Today the Museum is presenting the second in a series of programs entitled, "Conversations with Contemporary Artists." And these highlight the current work of Cape Ann artists within a variety of media. And we are very pleased to have sculptor Ken Hruby with us today to present the second talk in this series for 2008. Ken graduated from West Point and spent 21 years as a professional infantry officer with tours of duty in Korea and Vietnam. When his military career ended, he entered the Museum School at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and that's where he teaches currently. He does maintain a studio in Boston, and he and his wife Billie are longtime residents of East Gloucester.

Ken's work has been shown in numerous group and solo shows on the East Coast, and is included in several private and public collections, including the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum in Chicago, and also here at the Cape Ann Museum. His first solo show, *Mustering Out*, and subsequent shows, *Juggernaut*, *Minefields of Memory*, and *Free-fall* were all selected by the Boston Globe as best gallery events for the years 1989, 1995, 1997 and 1999. And he was also the recipient of a New England Foundation for the Arts sculpture grant in 1995. The Museum presented Ken's exhibition, *Tour of Duty*, in 2001. And we do have copies of the exhibition catalog available up in the shop if you're interested. We are also very pleased that three works from Ken's 1986 series, *Uneasy Pieces*, were cast this year for the Museum's permanent collection. And those are on view in the sculpture garden. The titles of those works are *Uneasy Crown*, *Uneasy Chair* and *Uneasy Piece*. So thank you so much for joining us this afternoon. And won't you please join me in welcoming Ken Hruby. *Clapping*.

02:36

**Ken Hruby:** I'm amazed that you're here. There's a lot of competition outside. And I have to say that if I were not giving this talk, I would not be here. I congratulate you on your decision-making for whatever reason. I would like this to be a dialogue. I don't have any intention of lecturing. I will show you work and try to give you some insight into what inspired it, as arcane as it might be. I've had a lot of experiences that are completely out of the realm of most civilians' experience and those of us who are combat veterans have a lot of difficulty trying to communicate sometimes with civilians because there's no common ground or sharing part of this so I fortunately had an outlet in the art, I could take the experiences that had been deep, deeply buried and suppressed and move on.

I left the military with a couple of options to go on into the civilian consulting community. They would have been quite lucrative for me. The Grumman Corporation wanted me to sell Gatling guns to the Arabs 26 years ago, and I reflect on the decision that I made not to do that. Honeywell and Computer Science Corporation offered me some very nice and very sweet positions. But I, somehow, for reasons that I'm still reexamining, decided that I wanted to go to art school to do something more creative with the second half of my life than I had done with the first half. So I did that and found some kind of refuge in the welding shop at the Museum School. This was a safe haven for me. And I could deal with strictly formal issues in abstract welded steel sculpture without having to mess with politics or deal with any of the autobiographical issues that were deeply imprinted on me as a result of my service.

So let me start with some of the... I'll give you an opportunity to make some connections visually yourselves. But I used a lot of military icons. You'll see helmets and boots a lot. And I've tried to transform them so that they are more than what they appear to be. There is a backstory behind every one of these pieces of work. And it's the backstories in some cases are more elaborate than you want to hear or I will go into, but I hope that again, this can be a dialogue.

05:53

The first piece I started out on was when I went to see Oliver Stone's movie, *Platoon*. And that was a cathartic experience for me because it gave me an opportunity to discover that it was okay to deal with this stuff. And this was the first piece that ensued from that. These are dog tags, they are made, not out of dog tag material. They're made out of three-eighth inch or half inch steel stock, and they're 11 inches by 5 ½ inches and they weigh about 22 pounds. I made them this heavy because they represented the burden that those of us who were deployable carried when we got on an airplane to go off on some mission somewhere. My daughter Melissa used to hide my dog tags – I kept them hanging on the bedside lamp – and she used to hide them because she knew that I couldn't go anywhere without them. And she would hide them from me when I was about to go off on a deployment and so this whole idea that the dog tag represented a burden for us. I tried to create this really heavy duty version of that, and subsequently discovered that there were these identity thieves out there who wanted my Social Security number so I have had this under wraps ever since then, so please don't copy that down anywhere.

7:28

The idea of armor, and this is a piece called *Armoured*, the French spelling of loving, and this is forged with copper rivets. It articulates, which is not without help, but it is articulating and this was a piece that I obsessed over. I did find that I could go into the welding shop and completely transcend. It's something that some of you who are artists understand that it is a state that is difficult to describe, and I would disappear in there for 5-6-7 hours and be completely unaware of my discomfort, my fatigue, my bladder, my hunger, and emerge exhausted but quite delighted with what had come out.

8:37

This is part of *Fun Couple Number One* and *Steel Jockstrap*. This is the second part of *Fun Couple Number One* (a steel brassiere). And this was the first piece that I did that had any social commentary. I had an early fascination from puberty with brassieres. And part of that I think was because I could never get the damn things undone. And that may be a reason I went to engineering school. I'm not sure but I always considered the brassiere to be an implement of torture invented by males and foisted on the female. So I made this piece and it's difficult to see but there's a hinge here in the front. And there's a haspin hinge and a lock on the back. So anyway, that's the social commentary number one, and this is *Fun Couple Number Two*. It's about eight and a half, nine feet tall. And the male component of this is even taller at about 11 feet. This is a piece called *Hyperbole* and it was the beginning of my first phallic phase. It was here in the Museum, up in that little room off the big gallery up there. And one of the critics said that the sophomoric nature of this represented an opportunity to see how far I had come, and I, I understood it, but...it's actually a little more complex than it shows here; it's more three dimensional than it shows.

10:32

I then... went through my Calder phase, I think every welded-steel sculptor goes through a phase where they want to...to play with springs and stuff like that. So this was an opportunity to see

what happens when you take color and add it to a three dimensional form; it completely transforms it, and I am a first class chromo-phobe, I have to say. Color just scares the crap out of me, because I don't know what it does. I don't know how to handle it. I don't know how it works together. So I just picked primary colors and, and splash them on. I don't use much color because of that. I'm trying to... work my way into color. But what can I say? I'm very, very right-brained about, I mean left-brained about color, and I think it'll be ever thus.

A very small piece called *Surrounded*. This is what we euphemistically say, "in the collection of the artist," along with lots of other things that are still in the collection of the artist in my front yard.

Audience member: How large is it?

Hruby: It is quite small. It's only about 18-20 inches high.

Audience member: Can you describe a little more what it represents?

Hruby: Probably not.

11:59

Hruby: I was dealing strictly with formal issues here. And one of the things that we used to be able to do at school was to take the class out to scrap yards and let everybody pick out what they wanted, what forms that they found were appealing and attractive and, you know, "talked" to them. So I went out to scrap yards and found things like these art forms, arches and kind of circular things. And I began to play with strictly the formal elements of this. I didn't have any preconceived idea when I began, I didn't want it to stand up. So it stands on a triangular base. And being an engineer, I know that three points still determine a plane. And so this was going to be pretty stable. And we'll get to a little bit more of that later on. So anyway, I there's no hidden meanings here at all.

Audience member: It's very beautiful.

Hruby: Well, thank you. Thank you...that's a very nice compliment.

13:05

Hruby: This is actually a found piece, this outer shell here is cast iron. And it's one of ...those protective devices they use in an archway on the sides so that people don't, their wheels don't bump into the underlying bricks and cause the arch to fall. And I found it abandoned and decided that I was going to do something with it. It weighs about 120 pounds, unfortunately, and I don't move it around much. I put inside of it a whole series of layered key holes. And if you align this thing upright, you can look from one key hole into another one into a third. So it was just an exercise in futility. But again, it's only about two feet tall, two and a half feet max, but it is a heavy dude. It sits on two springs. There is this arc that comes out on the front on this side and

another one on the other side. So it really is bouncy if you get it going. And then inertia takes over.

So...I got an assignment in school to look at Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. And we were asked to take an image from this...something from it and begin to make a sculpture from it. And I found an image that I liked and proceeded to play with it and ended up doing about 24-25 of these uneasy pieces. This is a steel version of what is out in the courtyard. And I essentially was dealing with a mask that I wanted to elevate up off the ground to make this steel appear a bit lighter than steel normally does. And I was examining how it meets the ground plain. And I, I echo this and all 26 of these pieces, three of which are outside, and I'll show you some of those later. This is one of them in situ. This is *Uneasy Chair*, I think.

15:20

Here's a detail of some of the welding and decision-making that I went into, I tried to do things like add what I would call molding, I can't think of another... word for it around the edges to give some additional depth to the steel. And the other thing I deliberately did was I, I used lines of steel to draw the viewer around so that it became a real three dimensional issue instead of a frontal, 2-D element, a 2-D experience. So it was... I didn't I didn't show you any of the welds but you don't really care about those things.

These are the three pieces that are out front — *Uneasy Crown*, *Uneasy Chair* and *Uneasy Piece*. There...they all stand up pretty well surprisingly. This was actually student work that was done and I still think... they're complex enough visually so that they hold up. And I compliment Judith, for her generosity in funding these things. I think it transforms the whole courtyard out there from a 19th century experience to something beyond that. And I told her that I was the only these are the only pieces out there that don't look like a mermaid....

Audience member: What's the material?

Hruby: It's ...Well these are these are cast bronze, but the originals were welded steel. The patina on this is silver foil that has been applied to the steel and then a complex chemical process ensued when I put a copper saturated pickle on it, if that means anything. And I got that kind of golden colored copper that has changed over the years. But the piece that's out there now has got a regular hot patina on it.

17:34

Okay, so then I went to see *Platoon*, and then I began to deal with other issues. Back in the '60s, we had a real problem with hair. And when you get to be 60, you're going to have a problem with hair for sure. I've got hair sprouting all over and I can't figure out how to tame it. But back then it was a matter of your relationship with authority was how you dealt with your hair, and the army promulgated a regulation that my brother read to me from the Pentagon while I was out at Fort Hood. Actually, this was in 1971. And the regulation, and I quote this now, said that "sideburns had to terminate in a horizontal line that could extend no lower than the bottom

edge of a pencil when inserted in the ear orifice.” Okay, so I get this telephone message – my brother reading this to me and I just couldn't contain myself. I just pictured all these drill sergeants going around with number two Dixon, Ticonderoga pencils, and poking the men, these guys' ear orifices to measure their sideburns. The problem was they had to have an objective standard because otherwise it was so subjective. Well, your hair's too long. You know, it's doesn't meet the reg. well, so they had to, they had to promulgate that kind of regulation.

The relationship of hair of a soldier to his ability to fight, it was quite specious. There was no connection at all. And the bottom part of this one, and it's a bigger piece than I show you here, but I show you the details, had to do with body count in Vietnam.

The body count in Vietnam became this other specious measurement by which the military bureaucracy determined their success. How many did your unit kill today? And some units unfortunately decided they had to have physical evidence, so they would cut the ears off of the enemy dead; and some units, again rather barbarically took those ears and put them on dog tag chains and around their neck, so *Pocketknife Dog Tag Cane* and some rather desiccated ears here. These were cast from former friends of mine all of whom went to the west coast after this casting experience.

20:10

Nineteen of these things...it was the beginning of sort of one of the irony explorations that I've been doing throughout my artistic career. And those are Dixon Ticonderoga number two pencils, by the way.

*Showing slide of a helmet:* I used the helmet as a, as a surrogate. And I was concerned having been stereotyped as a West Pointer, having been stereotyped as a Vietnam vet, that everybody who found out that information knew me, and they knew all they needed to know about me. So this was my little rebellion against that. So I took this steel pot, and I... sort of provided opportunities to see inside there. This thing is 360, of course, but there's some... musical notation. There's some engineering notation, there's some circuitry. There was a sardine can opener key on this thing from the other angle. There was a piece of red lace from, I think it was a brassiere, but I'm not sure. And I... showed this to somebody the other day, which is still again in the collection of the artist, I might add. And she looked at it and said, “Oh, I see. You're a cross-dresser.” *Laughter.* I guess you could interpret it (that way).

21:51

The interesting thing about this piece is that it's got legs. My nephew is the commander of the Wounded Warrior brigade down at Walter Reed and invited me to come down and talk to the to the OT guys and the PT guys in some of the wounded warriors. Traumatic brain injury is a real problem as a result of this current fiasco we're engaged in and the IEDs and TBI are almost invisible wounds. They don't show up. But concussive wounds are extremely traumatic. And one of the things that happens in a concussive wound is the brain swells. What they're doing in the field now is they're cutting a slot open in the skull, removing the bone and allowing the brain to

expand into that void, so that it doesn't get traumatized by the expansion. They then take that piece of bone and they slip it under the abdomen, under the skin, so it remains viable. And then, when everything has stabilized, they replace it back in the skull. I've got lots of stories about this, but I won't go into.., but at any rate, I had done this piece in 1989, I think, and here in 2008, 20 years almost later, it's.. I mean, it could be interpreted in the same light, particularly with this cut here.

Audience member: What's the name of this piece?

23:29

Hruby: *Insight*. I can't remember if it was *Insight One* or *Insight Two*, I did another insight piece, trying to be insightful about all this stuff.

The piece on the left is, I carved an M-16. This is the traditional military unit - a memorial, the casualty's boots, his rifle and his helmet here.

I carved this out of poplar. I had it metallized with an arc metal spraying technique. And it... had its place as it started in the genre of the work I was doing. This is an empty Jim Beam whiskey bottle. And as you may have heard, the expression an empty whiskey bottle is a dead soldier. And so I displayed these two pieces in tandem because the imagery from the *In Memoriam* piece and the imagery from the dead soldier piece were just too close and too similar. So the title of this piece was *In Memoriam, Just Another Dead Soldier*.

24:53

And I, I'll show you this piece later on. This is the installation that was here at the Cape Ann Museum. Here's another helmet (showing slide). I had this fantasy that we would issue helmets to the troops in basic training with flowerpots embedded around them. And we would give them seeds in basic training so they could grow their own camouflage. And all of the seeds that we gave them were seeds of comestible plants – parsley, and oregano and basil and stuff like that. And this tall one here is a pot plant. Those of you who were in the military know that a helmet is also called the pot, the steel pot. So here I have a pot in a pot...never mind. I displayed this piece at West Point back in 1991. And it was on exhibit at Ike Hall for, I think, five months, and there wasn't a single person on the West Point staff that identified that as a pot plant. I think you can find some comfort in that. I thought it was a little ironic, but maybe not. Maybe it's...

26:17

The other piece here is *Organic Camouflage, Defoliant Camouflage*, sorry. One of the things we did in Vietnam, is we sprayed Agent Orange and the defoliant all over the place. And there's another side to this story... on the theory that if we killed the vegetation, we could see the Vietcong and the Viet Minh and the North Vietnamese Army guys coming down from the Ho Chi Minh trail. Well, they were a little bit smarter than we thought they were because what they did is they changed their uniforms and they changed the camouflage on their helmets – I mean, who would have thought that?



So the *Defoliant Camouflage*...these two pieces in tandem, the helmet becomes the surrogate. This is just October foliage.

*Spirit Mender*... I also used the stretcher litter. I was medevacked from Vietnam with a whole series of mysterious oriental diseases and got stacked into the medevac plane – which there's a piece about that later on – but the stretcher became another part of my sculptural vocabulary along with the helmet. And these individual helmets here are cast in one layer thin of casting plaster that you can see light through, and I did that deliberately because I wanted to deal with the issue of the really thin line between life and death, and so that this represents, of course, the spirit.

28:08

Supporting all of these five helmets are little tiny litters.

Audience member: What does the framing do?

Hruby: I'm sorry?... The framing is the stretchers. There are four stretcher handles, the rods that...you can see – let me go back one – you can see these are the feet of the stretcher and I took the... stretch, the canvas out and just used the rods with the legs on them and attached them to – one more back – to this little... tiny stretcher that I had actually fabricated.

Audience member: Incredible....the two go together so well!

Hruby: Well, that was the point.

29:02

*DEROS Minus One*: The DEROS is the date of estimated rotation from overseas and it's this magic date for anybody who is deployed. It's normally one year from your arrival in country and DEROS minus one, of course, would be the day before you were due to catch the Big Bird, and I... you know by then you are... you shot your wad, so to speak; you have... given everything out, and your boots are lead. You couldn't take another step. And so I did this piece; again, I fabricated the litter. I made the boots out of lead – lead sheeting – and one of them spills out, deliberately. I was... there's a lot that... that was a meaningful... arrangement.

30:10

*Reminiscences*. Again, I laid boots on top of these two columns of footprints, basically. I had concluded that I had been in Korea, Vietnam, and places in between, and if I had... cast my footprints in all the places I'd been, then I could stack them all up. And I would have this big totem, which would be a memorial to where I'd been. I mean, go figure. So I did it. And there it is. It's about six... It's actually my height. I used to be 5'11", and I'm now 5'10". And the doctor said, I wore it off from the bottom, being a jogger, and I think I actually wore it off the middle. But at any rate, so it's a little taller than I am now. Gaiters in here. This is all done out of Felt and rubber and soles and wood. And I think that's about it. *Reminiscences*.

31:17

*The Juggernaut.* *The Juggernaut* is about nine and a half feet in diameter. It sits up on a ramp here that's poised ready to spring and do a lot of damage downstream. I did this piece in response to my Vietnam experience, but I think it still applied... It applied in 1991 during the first Gulf War and applies during this war. Once we get started, it rolls and rolls and it's almost unstoppable. And that's what the meaning of the word is.

Audience member: What is a juggernaut?

Hruby: A juggernaut is in fact a large, I want to say shrine to Vishnu, an Indian God. They are principally in the big temples in India, but during the high holy days, they put these large shrines on carts with great big wooden wheels, and it takes about 20 or 30 men to pull these things through the small villages around India. And in the fascination, and sometimes religious delirium that goes on with some people who are highly spiritual, they get carried away and they fall in front of.... they fall in front of the cart, and they can't stop it. I mean, it truly is ... this is where inertia really works, or doesn't work. So that's the meaning of the word and it's been turned into the English word that means the unstoppable phenomenon, so that's the juggernaut.

I'm in the process now of making a maquette of this with desert boots on the rim instead of combat boots.

Audience member: What is that made of?

33:14

Hruby: Combat boots, and wood and steel, and it weighs about 300 pounds and it's in the collection of the artist. If you've got a big living room, I've got a... deal for you.

Audience member: Does the ramp come with it?

Hruby: You want the ramp, man, I got the ramp.

Audience member: Where is the collection of the artist, that you keep referring to?

Hruby: It's in my studio.... it's in Boston.

Audience member: Do you take it out?

Hruby: Take what out?

Audience member: The collection...does it travel?

Hruby: No, no it's ...it's too big, and it's basically storage.

Audience member: Well, you must have a big studio.

Hruby: It's getting smaller... as I, you know, as more stuff doesn't sell...my workspace starts to constrain.

34:12

One of the ironies about going to West Point was the fact that they wanted us to... wear two hats. They wanted us to be, you know... to be able to eat with the Queen, on one hand, and to go out and kill on the other hand. So we had this...strange and very bizarre education system that tried to cater to both of those things. We had bayonet drill where we do the high point crossover and vertical butt stroke series and all of that other stuff that was... Yeahrr, you know, go out there and kill, kill, kill – like the Alice's Restaurant piece, Group W Bench. And the other part of it was they gave us ballroom dancing lessons. And I was always struck by the irony that we would go into this big column hall in our suntans and we would dance with each other because then there were no women in the academy. And we traded places leading, by the way. And we would have dance lessons from these lovely good smelling women from the Arthur Murray dance studio up from New York. And we'd finish our dance lessons, change into fatigues and go on into the bayonet pits. The notation for both of these activities was exactly the same. It was, it was dance notation, just like this (pointing to the sculpture on the screen).

When you looked in the field manual, on the right hand side here – I didn't, I only brought one image to this – but it's in mud. It's really cement fondue, but our boot prints for the vertical butt stroke series, melding into the three-quarter time waltz here on the left. So this was a circular installation, and one of the first times I began to play with space like this. Hanging above this, were photographs taken from the *Life Magazine* series about our beast barracks.

36:19

*Pointing to the next sculpture on screen:* The deification of the athlete is here in gold post. I was and still am concerned about where the athlete stands in this culture, as opposed to the economics professor or other folks, the artist also. I went out and I gathered up athletic equipment from high schools around the area, all of which was beaten up and battered, and repaired. And then I constructed this gold post out of the individual elements. There is a circle of paint chips down here that represent decay and decadence. And every one of these pieces has got some gold foil on it, or gold leaf, and it stands about 11 feet high, I suppose, maybe 12. And it's an attempt to sort of imitate the gesture of the *The Nike of Samothrace*. That is in the Louvre – *The Winged Victory*. I couldn't find a bigger shoulder pad, so...

37:33

*Bringing up the next sculpture on screen:* I was a musician. I played the trumpet back in high school and did some other stuff since then. So I did a whole series about musical instruments and the war. This is a piece... and I did this piece at the first Gulf War. I do not quote scripture frequently. But somewhere back in – I can't even remember...where it is – it says that if the

trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will heed the call to battle? And this was my response to the first Gulf War because I thought the trumpet made a very uncertain sound. And this is called *The Most Uncertain Trumpet*. Difficult. I mean, you can see obviously that it doesn't know where it's blowing. I went around to the music schools in Boston, and there are many, and gathered up from their repair department as many of the spare parts as I could, and re-formatted them along with some plumbing parts.

38:38

*Bringing up the next slide and sculpture image:* This is a muted bugle form. And the three bullets here are, of course, for the three rounds fired at the military funeral.

*Next slide:* This is an instrument for war and peace...carved with purple heart where the stock. All of this is hand formed and part of it's been obtained from outside sources, but this of course is still in the collection of the artist.

*Next slide:* This is *Migration Eastward*. This was when I referred to earlier about being medevacked. These are...stretcher handles that I cut apart and reformed in the form of a spine with a butt in the mid- back and the head up here. And then I overlay on top of them lead sheeting.

*Next slide:* This is a piece called *Mortar, Mortar*. I did a "Boy's Toys" series, and you know, the bigger the boy, the bigger the toy, kind of thing. This... is made out of cement fondue, something I came up with about 20 years ago, and I formed all this out of oak, and did all this steel work. And this is also in the collection of the artist.

40:22

*Next slide:* When I was at West Point, I sat in an English class and we had a...poem that they asked us to read and I'm going to read it to you now. Now picture me... I've finished with beast barracks and I'm sitting in English class, I've had all that hard military training, weapons training, bayonet training, all of that, and I sit down and I read *Naming of Parts*.

"Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday, we had daily cleaning. Tomorrow morning we shall have what to do after firing. But today, today we have naming of parts. Japonica glistens like coral, and all of the neighboring gardens and today, we have naming of parts. This is the lower swing, sling swivel, and this is the upper sling swivel. Those you will see when you are giving your slings. This is the piling swivel, which in this case, you have not got. Branches hold the gardens in their silent eloquent gestures, which in this case, we have not got. This is the safety catch, which is always released, which is always released with an easy flick of the thumb. Please do not let me see anyone using his finger. You can do this quite easily if you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see them using their finger. This you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this is to open the breach. As you see, we can slide it rapidly backwards and forwards. We call this easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards the early bees are assaulting and fumbling with the flowers. We call this easing the

spring, with a capital “S”. They call it easing the spring — it is perfectly easy if you have any strength in your thumb, like the bolt and the breach and the cocking piece and the point of balance, which in our case, we have not got. And the almond blossom, silent in all the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards. For today we have naming of parts.

42:44

Henry Reed wrote this along with two other parts of a poem called *The Lessons of War*. And so I'm sitting in the English class at West Point having just completed the dismantling and reassembly of the M16 rifle, or the M01 rifle in those days. And I thought God, you know, this is a guy who got it. He... he isn't...he didn't buy into the whole thing. He could name the parts, but he really was living two lives. He was on one hand watching the bees. And in one of the other verses of this poem, he's watching a couple make love over there while he's supposed to be judging the distance across the field. So I... this stuck with me all those years, and I decided that I had to do a piece about naming of parts. And this is what ensued. I was an advisor in Vietnam, and we took them rifles and we taught them how to assemble and disassemble these weapons by using these groundsheets, these tablecloths. So you'll see that there it is in English. There it is in Vietnamese. And when I did this piece, we were also providing weapons to the Contras in El Salvador and Guatemala in Nicaragua. So it's in Spanish also. The next version of this is also in Arabic. The last time I showed it was just at the beginning of the last Gulf War, so I included the Arabic in it.

44:27

*Showing the next slide:* Okay, this is my second phallic phase. This is a piece called *Short-Arm Inspection*. And if you know anybody who is a veteran who is over 60 years old, they will smirk when you mention a short-arm inspection to them. The military had to have some way to objectively judge leaders, leadership qualities, and so they...measured how many of your troops took out bonds and how many participated in the army emergency relief, and how many of them had what we used to call venereal diseases, but which are now called STDs. And, I mean, the, the relationship between these two things always eluded me, but they had an inspection that they, the surprise inspection for the troops in the barracks where they would come in at four in the morning with the medical staff, and they would have the troops stand on their foot lockers. And they would be forced to milk down their genitalia to see if there was any discharge, if there was you went on sick call and got put on report. What an incredible invasion of privacy. What an absolutely ridiculous measurement of leadership qualities. I never did make it but I did a piece about it. And I did, there are nine of these individual elements. This was the full installation. *Next slide:* This is a partial installation. I tried to do these so that you could see it as if the wall had come down right through the front and cut the feet off. I also tried to deal with all of the clichés about male genitalia — brass balls, hot rocks, family jewels — all of those things I threw into this piece.

46:20

And the other part about the piece that was interesting was they were all gimbaled. All of these elements here were put on... I made gimbals for them, so that they literally rocked and rolled. If

you came in and smacked these brass balls down here, and they would get going back and forth, then the gun would go back and forth in two directions. So there were two degrees of freedom. And I came into the gallery one day and the woman who was sitting in the gallery had gone...she had gone through and underneath all of them, she had given them all a good whack, and they were all gesticulating when I came in.

Here's the detail of the cover piece. All of this stuff is hand-made, hand-fabricated. The flaccid pistol barrels were really plumbing parts, but don't tell anybody. And this was... this is *Sniper*. They all had names and they all have footlockers with their names and numbers on them.

47:29

*Showing the next slide: Minefields of Memory.* This is the installation that was here at Cape Ann Museum, in this configuration. These three minefields, minefields — I discovered when I did this piece that my memories of being in Vietnam were older than I was when I was there. So that....and they were starting to fade and crack. And, you know...what part of this was really true, and how much of it was exaggerated or forgotten.

So anyway, I did this piece about mindfulness and memory, and there's an abrasive in here, that's very... has a glister to it. These are steel fragments, and this is ... white rice. And all of these crutches — they're not really crutches, they're sculptures, but they appear like crutches — they danced above the minefields. And each of these fields, roiled, there was motion underneath them that caused, in the case of the white rice that looked like maggots actually crawling in there, and there was ...this low undercut sound. There were magnets underneath here, not maggots, magnets. And they rose up and down. They caused the steel elements to flare when they got to the surface, and this one also roiled.

This is one of the elements. This piece is also in the collection of the artist. Very complicated engineering, very complicated to set up, lots of motors.

49:25

This is another complex piece that called *Free-fall*. Vietnam was the first war that the American public participated in vicariously through television. And I had...I dealt with that quite a bit because everybody... I'm sorry, not everybody, but many of my friends thought again that they knew what was going on because they watched TV. And their experience was limited to that. I did this piece of about parachuting. I was a paratrooper, and I decided I was going to use that as a vehicle to talk about vicarious participation. And I went out and I did a sky-dive and had a videographer photograph me and the horizon and the parachutes and everything from above. And then I integrated that footage in with combat training films. And I did five individual three-minute vignettes. And they were shown on these screens that were attached to these parachutes that rose and fell in the gallery. They would very slowly rise, and when they got to the top, they would hesitate as I used to do, in the door, before I jumped, and then plunge out and come down. I made these little islands of white rice underneath because I feared that some spectator would come in and be unaware of the fact he was about to get poked on. So, a very

complicated piece engineering-wise. Everything else about it seemed to work. And if you if you saw the Cape Ann show... yes?

Audience member: I just find that reminded me... I grew up near the Boardwalk at Coney Island.

Hruby: You're going to have to speak up.

Audience member: Oh, I grew up near the boardwalk at Coney Island. They used to have the parachute jump, which I did almost daily every summer.

51:27

Hruby: Yeah, They've got one of those at Fort Benning, at \_\_\_\_\_ (?) school. It's a great experience. One of them is on cable, and three of them are free-fall. So...

Here's another shot. I also mixed in with the moving parachutes, chutes that had memorabilia. On this particular one, this is a prosthetic from a fellow Red Reader who was sort of a mentor of mine, and just coincidentally my brother's father in law, but he lost a leg in Normandy as a regimental commander, and when he died, his family gave me his prosthetic and said, do something with this. And so I did, I included it.

52:20

*Showing next slide:* I did an outdoor installation down at Duxbury called *Bivouac Perspective*. Again, this was in response to the Gulf War, and in response to the idea that the war is going to go on into infinity. So what I did was I, I made 36 pup tents of regular rip-stop nylon, but I diminished the scale in sequence so that the initial one here is about three and a half feet high. And the one down here in the back is about six inches high. And I'll show you another angle. The whole idea was to... screw with your perspective and your vanishing point. I am going to try to install this on Good Harbor Beach on Veterans Day. I've just gone through the inventory to make sure I've got all the pegs and everything.

Here's another shot of it dead on, dead center. And it does look like it really recedes into the way distant vanishing point. But in fact, it's only 25 feet away. And this is from the backside. So I, I'm guilty of manipulation.

Audience member: Did you set these all up yourself?

Hruby: Oh, yes. And let me tell you, let me tell you – Do you know how many times you have to squat in order to do this? My thighs, and I'm in pretty good shape, my thighs absolutely killed me for about a week after this. There are probably 400, 500 squats involved in this thing. And you're very astute to see that. I'm going to have help this next time. I'm going to get...

Here's the autumn version. I mean, how can you resist this? And here it is in winter.

54:22

So the art-historical, military historical context of this is there, I suppose.

Well, this was the really interesting thing for me, because this is what it looked like before I set it up. Now here I am. I'm an engineer. I'm making stuff like *Juggernaut*. And I suddenly discover lightweight construction and tensile structures. I mean, how dumb is that, and how long, I mean, for taking so long to figure it out. I mean, here's the pegs here, here's the post poles, and there's the rolled up tents and there's pegs and there's the lines. And these bright colored things were just lines to lay out the whole thing. So that's why I was in the infantry, I guess.

55:12

*Showing the next slide:* I'm going to quickly go through the pictures of this. This is *Fire Fight*.

*Showing the next slide:* This was *The VFW*.

Every... I had five targets in this exhibition, and I'll show you a video of this. And every target got to spend one day in the gallery being shot at by these machine guns and, and when the day was over, when the tour of duty was over, they came back to the states they got discharged from the army, and then they got to hang out with their buddies at the VFW. Okay, so they've...all been imprinted and I will, let me go into... let me show you the video first.

56:01

This may not kick off right, but okay, gang. Hang on. Oh, that's, that's my granddaughter. You weren't supposed to do that.

Okay, here we go.

Video of the exhibit installation plays for about five minutes.

1:01:15

The restless intellect for me is (that) I learned something up to the point where it solves the problem that I need to solve. And then I, I lose interest in it. So I did the video, I...did the editing, I did the whole thing. And you know, I'm not interested in video anymore. I mean, I suppose I could get back into it, but I'd rather begin to explore other things.

Audience member: I think what is remarkable is your translation of the military experience through your art, and I wish you could travel all over the country with this, especially to veterans.

Hruby: I, that would be, that would be fun. I would love to do that if I had some funding. I am one of the mentors to the Wounded Warrior brigade if they come to the Boston area and are in need of assistance... but I'm teaching, so I have I have trouble springing loose from that. And not that teaching pays that much. But...



Audience member: You need grants.

Hruby: I need a grant, yeah.

Audience member: Are you connected at all to the Court Street veteran's group, in Boston?

Hruby: Yeah...Oh, no...I know where they are, but I don't...

Audience member: I should think they'd love to come visit your studio.

1:02:46

Hruby: It's, it's something to consider. I'm open to almost anything. So I, the video part of this was sort of a way to keep this installation that probably will never, ever see the light of day again because it was so incredibly complex. I literally babysat it for all of the opening hours that it was there, and did a lot of maintenance off-hours. Bad engineering, I suppose. But it was all, I mean, it was all done specifically for the, for that installation and then it's, again, in the collection of the artist.

Audience member: Where was it installed?

Hruby: It was installed up there at the Chapel Gallery in West Newton.

Audience member: Was the exhibit the effects of the... spring or was the spring part of what people could observe, when they went in? The shooting?

Hruby: Oh, it was part... When you walked in you triggered a motion sensor...that started that relay – that...little aqua-colored thing – that was the sewer pipe. And from the sewer pipe, I made the relays so that as it rotated, those screws touched electrical switches that caused the guns to fire. Electrical hydraulic solenoids is what they were. And they're the same thing as in your home heating furnace. Right? Go figure.

1:04:08

So whenever anybody walked in, it started?

Hruby: It started. And the audio part of it was the battle of the sexes. I had to make another layer on top of it and we were going blah, blah, blah at each other in the same sequence that the guns were firing. So that was another layer that you picked up in the gallery and it didn't really show up on the video too much but, it's okay. It was a minor part of it.

Audience member: But so did you put up new tar(get) ...figures?

Hruby: Every day, every day. So... here's my thought. I was going to be an entrepreneur. Every day, five new targets went off. They all got imprinted with a different pattern, spatter pattern

and everything. I signed them dutifully every day, five days a week, five targets per day, five weeks – 125. I was gonna make a mint on this thing. I was going to sell them for 100 bucks. Not one, not one, target sold. Go figure.

So...another lost opportunity. So it's one of the reasons I question my intelligence sometimes. I went in the infantry. I then became a sculptor. And now I become a teacher, Jesus, what's wrong with me? I, I really wonder where my entrepreneurial drive is, but it's, it's not there.

1:05:37

*Collateral Damage.* You saw the ground cover, the cloth in the video? Well, I rolled that up when the show was over, let it dry out, rolled it up, stuck it in my studio. And about three years later, I unrolled it and I discovered this stuff. And I wish I could take credit for it; well, I guess I can take credit for it because I invented the machine guns that fire the food coloring that imprinted all this stuff. But some of these are, are just really quite haunting. Some more than others. Some of them look like satellite shots of topographic features. And this one's my favorite in terms of ...

Audience member: Are those sections of the canvas?

Hruby: No, this was drop cloths. I mean, I put... background paper down on the floor, and this is what came out. So it was, this is a bonus. Again, this is in the collection of the artist, if anybody's interested. I made some Iris prints of these. And I've got a couple of nibbles on them.

1:06:56

*Showing the next slide and sculpture:* I want to ... This is ...my last issue here to talk about today. The whole world of sculpture is changing rather quickly. And I, one of the things I teach at the Museum School is digital modeling, using a sophisticated CAD computer-aided design program.

I was approached by a former classmate of mine who was an advisor in Vietnam and who told me this story. He said that he had taken his battalion out right in near Bu Prang which is out on the Cambodian border, where they still use elephants as a sort of beast of burden. They moved trees with them and, but they're right there on the Cambodian border. It's kind of veldt-like country, lots of grass, not a lot of deep jungle or anything. And he said he was just taking his battalion out of their area, and he heard a helicopter land and he heard an explosion. And then he heard another explosion and called up to find out from the CP what was going on. And apparently two Air Force captains who were on their last day in Vietnam, decided that they wanted to see the elephants.

1:08:17

And you may know that there is an expression about "I've seen the elephant." Have you, any of you heard that? During the Civil War, the... infantry men or the soldiers who had been in combat, used the expression that, you know, I have seen the elephant and nothing else could surprise me. Meaning they'd been in combat and they knew what it was all about. So there's a double entendre here, and these guys came out to see the elephant and they, they stepped off their

helicopter into an abandoned French minefield. And both of them were badly injured. A Vietnamese sergeant saw these two American captains and he went in the minefield to retrieve them and he stepped on a mine. The regimental advisor, a major, he saw these three guys out there in the minefield and he went out, and he stepped on a mine. So we got four wounded troops out there in the field. And John Purdy, my former roommate, said he got his battalion turned around, and he got back to the minefield. And nobody was doing anything. And he went into a state which we call “berserk-ing”. It's a state that Jonathan Shay talks about in *Achilles in Vietnam*, if you want to do any further research. You lose all sight of your own personal danger. Your horizon focuses down on what you've got to do, and he dropped his web gear and he went out and he retrieved all three, all four of these guys from the minefield, and laid them out and called in the medevac, and everything. Three of the four died before they got evacuated. The American major was the only one to survive. Well, he told me this story. And he said, I'd like to commission you to do a very small, little modest memorial for me so I can remember this day, because to me, it was a day when I rose to the occasion. And yeah, right. I mean, God, this is the kind of stuff they give Medals of Honor out for.

1:10:31

And so I went into...did a lot of research. And I, I read Jonathan Shay, and I read lots of medical stuff and researched the basis for which one goes into this state. And it's principally the adrenaline that gets pumped. So I looked at the adrenaline molecule as something that was tangible. I didn't want to be too literal about this process. I didn't want to give him something that told a real story, or was a linear narrative. So I tried to step back a number of degrees, and I found the adrenaline molecule on the internet - God bless the Internet - and did some abstractions of it. I created this epicentric form, to represent the mine explosion. And, you know, added in the details down here and took lots of liberties with the molecular structure here. And the real irony here is that, in my West Point class, there were 582 people in chemistry, and I was 582<sup>nd</sup> in chemistry, so the audacity of moi, even pretending to know anything about molecular structure is beyond the pale. So this was what I created in the computer. I, when I got it finished, I made an email, and I created the file, and I sent it off to a group that does rapid prototyping, they generated this thing on a 3d printer. It's made out of something like cornstarch with a poly resin hardener in it. And this is what came back. And I then took it to the foundry. And this is what the final product is, that we patinated it. It is about eight inches by five inches and about a quarter or an inch and a half deep in depth.

*Audience member question, unintelligible.*

1:12:45

The purpose of me telling you this is to show you where things are going in... this industry. The process of generating this design was time consuming because it was back and forth of getting approval from him. And the process of sending it out to Arizona to have the prototype done was 72 hours. And it came back to me in rapid prototype form. And it took a week to have it cast and it was in the mail. Just like that. So, this is what's happening.

Audience member: What was his response?

Hruby: I'm sorry. Oh, he was absolutely delighted. In fact, he was speechless for about a month. And I worried that I didn't...And he... just said he couldn't come up with the words. So he's beyond excited. And in fact, he wants to hire me to go back to Vietnam with him as a guide and interpreter because he wants to go back to Bu Prang and to the scene of the crime. So that may or may not be in the works. We're talking seriously about it though. So I went back in 2003 for the first time in near 40 years and spent five weeks there... and it was absolutely a totally positive experience in every regard.

So listen, you guys are crazy to be in here on such a nice day. But you've been a very, very sweet attentive audience. And I thank you very much. Any questions?

1:14:23

Audience member: Have you had reactions from other vets, or particularly people about PTSD when they've seen these?

Hruby: For some reason, very few veterans haunt the galleries. I can understand why, and I can understand why they're not interested in conjuring up... I've had some guys come in when I had, when I was with the Boston sculptors. I had some folks come in and say, you know, I was a leader. I was with the Marines, but very few of them.

Before I actually close down here, I came across this, that I showed you, *Minefields of Memory*. Billy Collins, whom you may know had been the poet laureate of this great nation a number of years ago, wrote a piece called *Forgetfulness*. And I want to leave you with it, because it is a little bit of Zeitgeist, certainly, in my case. He called it literary amnesia.

“The name of the author is the first to go, followed obediently by the title, the plot, the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel, which suddenly has become one that you've never read, never even heard of. As if one by one, the memories you used to harbor decide to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain, to a little fishing village where there are no phones. Long ago, you kissed the names of the Nine Muses goodbye, and watched the quadratic equation packets bag. And now, and even now, as you memorize the orders of the planets, something else is slipping away. A state flower, perhaps, the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay. Whatever it is, that you are struggling to remember, is not poised on the tip of your tongue. Not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen. It has floated away down the dark mythological river whose name begins with an L as far as you can remember. Well on your way to a location to oblivion where you will join those who have even forgotten how to swim, and how to ride a bicycle. No wonder you rise in the middle of the night to look up the dates of a famous battle, in a book on war. No wonder the moon in the windows seems to have drifted out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.

*Forgetfulness*, Billy Collins.

Yes, sir.

1:17:18

Audience member: I was in Southeast Asia as a civilian advisor for six years, and I have pretty serious PTSD. And I've been in and out of various groups with non-vets because I'm not a vet, I don't have a chance to deal with the VA. But what's interesting is whenever I talk to guys who were there at the same or similar times, most of these guys did one tour. And they can remember every detail of that one tour, and I can't remember anything. And whenever I try to, I just kind of implode on myself. And I did that, and then I was in Latin America with the same group for another six years. And the issue of memory that what you just read. I asked Jonathan Shay, like, 10 years ago, 15 years ago when I first met him, about that, and he somehow rather didn't connect with that. And I've had a lot of troubled people in intelligence associations and military associations. It's just a very strange thing to completely lose all the details. And most of the language stuff is all just somewhere else and whenever I try to deal with it, because I'm going through some stuff, it just turns into bad dreams, to say the least. But all just like peripheral, no...there's no memory of it.

This piece is just amazing. It's just beautiful, thanks.

1:19:53

Hruby: Thank you. You're almost the opposite of the classic adrenaline-pumped, hypersensitivity issue that the troops experienced. You know I can, a smell will trigger a whole host of memories, as we know olfactory stimulation does that. But in your case to have it vacated is... Audience member: Almost 30 years... it was 30 years I was doing that.

Hruby: Have you got any access to para-VA activities?

Audience member: Oh yeah, Para-VA activities...that's good.

Hruby: Well, thank you I, I tried to.... Paul Fussell, whom you may know was the guy who wrote the *Great War and Modern Memory* and a bunch of other books about his experience in World War Two, teaches at Princeton, as a professor emeritus there now, said that in his book on combat, I think it was, that the, the journal entry, the diary entry, the difference between that and a reminiscence, is the difference between looking at the sun at high noon, and looking at the sun at sunset. And I love that analogy, because this idea of the filter of time, and the filter of the atmosphere has always been very poetic to me. And all of my stuff is sort of with that filter of, you come back after 30 years, 20 years and start making art about it. And it's filtered by that time.

1:21:45

Audience member: I shouldn't be saying this, the guy who should be saying this is Joe Garland. He happened to give me an advance copy of his book, which is going to be out on Veterans Day,

called *Unknown Soldiers*, which is his memoir of his experience with an infantry unit year in World War Two, which has been 65 years in the making. It took a conversation with Jonathan Shay for him to be able to finish the book, because he had blocked his own experience in the war, from the narrative, which was the history of the unit he was with. And so this ties right into what you've been saying that he says, in fact, that it was a PTSD experience he didn't recognize he had, and it took him 65 years – or whenever he met Shea, which wasn't so long ago – and read *Achilles in Vietnam*, and realized that he was blocking his experience out because he had the classic feeling that because he hadn't died with the friends he was writing about that he somehow let them down.

1:22:51

And the other piece of it was another belated part, somewhat, which ties into something else you mentioned earlier, the metaphor of the helmet. He was wounded in southern France, but bizarre, more of an accident than immediate enemy action. But it was enemy action, he was wounded and he was medevacked back to Italy. It happened to be his first ride on an airplane in his life, but that's neither here nor there. Somehow he lost his helmet on the flight. And for years thereafter, he felt somehow the loss of his helmet related to his not going back into combat after he'd been repaired and recovered, and was kept in Rome and not sent back, but then went back into combat again. So this was in there, and he brought it all back with this. I wish he was in the audience. You'd have a good dialogue.

1:23:40

Linda Marshall: Oh, yeah. I wanted to mention that the Museum is hosting a book launch on Veterans Day, at 7:00 p, when the book comes out. This has all just come about recently, so there will be more information about that in the paper.

Hruby: Are you going to do that on Veteran's Day?

Marshall: On Veteran's Day, at 7:00 pm.

Hruby: I'll have to hurry with my installation.

Audience member: You certainly want to get out of here so I'll be brief. But I just want to come back to your hard work and say that your talk and your slides reminded me how much I respect and love your work. And I think that because of all the metaphorical depth you put into it, one of the things that it does for me is, though it's rooted in Vietnam, it always transcends Vietnam and addresses the bigger issue of war and what we do to our soldiers. And it's just been incredibly moving listening to you, so thank you, and I want to thank the museum as well.

1:24:49

Hruby: Thank you. I, I tried to approach it from the, the idea that I was trying to write a poem instead of an editorial, and I wanted it to be as open to interpretation as possible, as many

interpretations as possible and not specifically, about only just one thing. So, that's what I tried to do.

Audience member: It's really successful.

Hruby: Thank you.

Audience member: Ken, I don't know if this man is videoing or making a movie (Hruby: He is), but this would be incredible in many directions. Not just here, but for any veteran's group or any college or any museum, I think would be extremely interested in this.

Hruby: We may have a best seller here. Maybe we could make some money.

Audience member: You have something here with this marvelous lecture and slide show, in every way.

Audience member: It will get it out of the studio.

Hruby: Yeah, the collection of the artist, remember.

1:25:51

Audience member: Have you ever exhibited at the Addison Gallery in Andover?

Hruby: I have not. Do you have friends there?

Audience member: Well, I think this is the sort of thing they are interested in. They'll be reopening after a major renovation in about a year.

Hruby: Well, go talk to your friends. And all this stuff is in my studio ready to go. I got... I even have the PDF file for the catalogs.

Audience member: Some of this video could be sent to California and museums there. This is a real winner. It truly is.

Hruby: Well, I get my copy, so go with it.

Listen, you guys are great to come on such a nice day. So go out and enjoy the rest of Saturday before the sun sets.