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Conveying Horror and Heroism for World War I Memorial

Bronx sculptor Sabin Howard is half of a team selected to create a national memorial in Washington



In his Bronx studio, Sabin Howard photographs actors—Zach Libresco, Paul-Emile Cendron and Marissa Mayer—dressed in period costume, one of the first steps in creating a sculpture for a national World War I memorial. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **THOMAS MACMILLAN**

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In a Bronx artist's studio crowded with classical statues of nude men and women, a bandaged soldier stumbled into the arms of a field nurse.

“That’s better,” said sculptor Sabin Howard. “The negative space is activating.”

He snapped iPhone photos as he directed the movements of the actors in period costume, circa 1918, looking for the perfect pose for his ambitious assignment: a national memorial to commemorate the horror and heroism of World War I.

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Mr. Howard is half of a team selected by the U.S. World War One Centennial Commission to create the memorial, planned for

Washington, D.C.'s Pershing Park, one block from the White House and just off the Mall. The commission hopes to have the privately funded project, expected to cost as much as \$50 million, completed in time for the 100th anniversary of the end of the war, Nov. 11, 2018.

While the commission has chosen the design team and approved a concept, final plans are still subject to review by four federal agencies, said Edwin Fountain, the commission's vice chairman.



Howard creates sketches from composites of photos taken of actors in World War I-era costumes. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Mr. Howard, 53 years old, is collaborating with Joe Weishaar, a 26-year-old architect from Arkansas. Mr. Weishaar impressed judges in the commission's international design competition with his plan for a memorial site that includes a reflecting pool and huge bas-relief wall.

Mr. Howard is charged with designing and sculpting the 10½-foot-tall, 75-foot-long wall, which will depict one soldier's passage through the nightmares of war. Mr. Weishaar said it would be one of the largest bronze sculptures in the world.

It will also be Mr. Howard's most ambitious project, an emotionally raw departure from the refined, traditional work on which he has built his 33-year career.

"Up to this point, I was doing strict classical sculpture," Mr. Howard said. He has spent thousands of hours perfecting his craft, learning from the books of Leonardo da Vinci, understanding how muscles spiral around bones, and creating perfect human forms in works bearing titles like "Apollo" and "Aphrodite."

It was that virtuosity that prompted Mr. Weishaar to ask Mr. Howard to collaborate. "When I got to his website, I just knew he was the one I wanted to work with," Mr. Weishaar said. "There's a level of craft there that has completely disappeared from American sculpture and drawing schools."



A composite Mr. Howard made from multiple iPhone photos. PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Howard said he immediately seized the chance to work on the memorial, but quickly realized he would need to adjust his approach: The idealized figures he had been making weren't appropriate for his new subject.

"I've got to make it so people go there and they walk away and in their heads are like, 'Oh my God'—an emotional, visceral response," he said. "I'm not going to do that with the general public if I'm doing my esoteric, classical, Michelangelo, Hellenistic standing male nude."

He began looking at works from German expressionism, a movement that flowered not long before the war and peaked in the years immediately after; they



A sketch of a composite. PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

seemed to convey the sense of anxiety he needed.

“How do you take that feeling and present it through what I do, which is basically modern classicism, and get a similar result from people...make them feel a bit queasy or on

edge?” he said.

He also began working with live models in a new way, directing a handful of actors in World War I-era military and nurse uniforms to act out infantry charges and battlefield medical care. He asks the actors to move in slow motion, taking photos as he refines their movements to find gestures that are dynamic and emotionally evocative.



Actress Madeleine Maggio, dressed as a World War I nurse, poses for a photo in Mr. Howard's Bronx studio.

PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

He then combines the photos to create a panoramic composition. Next is a drawing in pencil, with further adjustments to the forms. Then he will sculpt a model and finally the full-size relief in clay, to be cast in bronze.

The finished product will be a visual narrative to be viewed from left to right, a composition Mr. Howard is calling “A Soldier’s Journey.”

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Mr. Howard said he sees the composition like a Shakespeare play of multiple acts, expressing the grim reality of war while leaving room for hope and redemption. The soldier will journey from the arms of his family, through the brutality of battle, past figures representing death and madness, into the care of a nurse, and finally return home forever changed.

“There’s a fine line between glorifying war and glorifying the people involved in war,” said Mr. Weishaar. “We’re trying to do the latter.”

Mr. Fountain said the composition must be beautiful but not maudlin, gritty but not shocking. “It’s a challenge to tie all those strands all together.”

‘I’ve got to make it so people go there and they walk away and in their heads are like, “Oh my God”—an emotional, visceral response.’

—Sculptor Sabin Howard

“You will feel the mud and blood and the sweat and the tears,” Mr. Weishaar promised. “Our memorial is going to say, ‘This is what freedom costs.’”

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