



COVER: *Minefields of Memory*, 1997, mixed media installation, variable dimensions

Tour of Duty
SCULPTURE BY
Ken Hruby

CAPE ANN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
June 23 through October 20, 2001



Juggernaut, 1995
Wood, boots, steel
102" x 102" x 36"

Foreword

Exploring the work of Cape Ann artists has always been at the heart of the Cape Ann Historical Association's mission. In the past, many if not most of our artists focused on landscapes, and the connection to Cape Ann was obvious. But we are intensely interested in all of Cape Ann's artists and their work.

Ken Hruby is an important part of the mix. This exhibition attests to the quality of Hruby's vision and the sculpture he creates, bringing together for the first time his work from 15 years as a sculptor. The exhibition also reflects the vitality of today's artists — on Cape Ann and beyond.

Now a resident of Gloucester, Hruby has been places that most of us will never go. He 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 School of the Museum of Fine Arts, where he now teaches, and began the process of reexamining his years as a soldier.

In *Tour of Duty*, Hruby brings his experiences home and presents them in powerful, compelling sculpture. He takes on the uneasy relationship that exists between the military and the society it serves, even the civilians it recruits. His years as a soldier give him the experience of an insider. It is his artist's eye and sensibility, however, which make him eloquent.

We are grateful to all of the people who have helped to make this exhibition possible, especially the lenders who have allowed their pieces of sculpture to be included. Deepest thanks are reserved for Ken Hruby, who has devoted much of the past year to preparation for the show. And, on behalf of the Association's Board of Managers, we warmly acknowledge the support of the Cape Ann Historical Association members who are the vital center of all Museum activities.

Harold Bell
PRESIDENT

Judith McCulloch
DIRECTOR

CAPE ANN HISTORICAL MUSEUM

Conflict and Resolution in the Art of Ken Hruby

By Carl Belz

He learned that suffering and freedom have their limits and that those limits are very near together...and that when he had put on tight dancing shoes he had suffered just as he did now when he walked with bare feet that were covered with sores — his footgear having long since fallen to pieces... After the second day's march, Pierre, having examined his feet by the campfire, thought it would be impossible to walk on them; but when everybody got up he went along, limping, and, when he had warmed up, walked without feeling the pain, though at night his feet were more terrible to look at than before. However, he did not look at them now, but thought of other things.

—Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

As an infantryman feet rapidly moved to the top of the list of things that really mattered. Feet were the source of my mobility, and ultimately they were what distinguished us “grunts” from the rest of the Armed Forces: we stood on our feet to fight. We were trained in the most primal way to kill the enemy. Kill or be killed they told us...But there was another side to this coin that no one had prepared me for...the duality of our training to become “an officer and a gentleman” ...[by learning]...ballroom dancing...As a class we learned, often in the same afternoon, the vertical butt-stroke series and the tango, the high-port crossover and the cha-cha-cha.

—Ken Hruby, *Dancing and Fighting*

Reminiscences, 1995

Lead, wood, felt, leather

60" x 12" x 14"



With a 1961 diploma from the United States Military Academy and a record of twenty-one years' service that included tours of duty in Korea and Vietnam, Ken Hruby knows what he's taking about when it comes to feet and footgear, yet it took him a while to allow that knowledge to become part of his art once he'd begun study at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in the early 1980s. Maybe he started by thinking of other things. Maybe thoughts of feet and footgear, order and repetition, laying minefields and jumping from planes — maybe Korea and Vietnam — were to be avoided at all costs. Maybe art represented a purer, higher calling, and maybe that's why he initially practiced it by making welded and abstract steel sculptures.

For our part, maybe we can understand that first impulse. The service academies represented honored traditions when Hruby went to West Point in 1957 — as an athlete, he must have been especially proud when Army's Pete Dawkins won the Heisman Trophy in 1958 — but political debate in the two decades he then spent in the Armed

Forces, the 60s and 70s, rendered those traditions problematic and deeply wounded them. Many of us remember those days when our soldiers were looked upon with disdain and jeered — were even, like a friend of my own, spit upon when they returned to the States — and I'm sure Hruby remembers them as vividly and painfully as anyone. Acutely aware of the baggage he carried as a former military man and of the separateness it created between him and the overwhelming majority of his fellow students at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, he understandably started with abstract, welded steel sculpture — because the only baggage it carried was essentially *artistic*, not *political*. So, he at first told his colleagues he'd been a management consultant, for he clearly sought *union* with his community and rightly felt it could be jeopardized if his past life were known.

As Tolstoy says in describing his heroine Natasha's grief over the death of her young brother during the Napoleonic invasion of Russia in 1812,

A spiritual wound produced by a rending of the spiritual body is like a physical



Uneasy Throne, 1986

Steel, 26" x 16" x 10"

wound and, strange as it may seem, just as a deep wound may heal and its edges join, physical and spiritual wounds alike can yet heal completely only as the result of a vital force from within...Natasha's wound healed in that way...She did not know and would not have believed it, but beneath the layer of slime that covered her soul and seemed to her impenetrable, delicate young shoots of grass were already sprouting, which taking root would so cover with their living verdure the grief that weighed her down that it would soon no longer be seen or noticed. The wound had begun to heal from within.

So it was in America in the aftermath of the 60s and 70s and the Vietnam War. Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* remained contentious through the early 1980s, but the wounds it recalled it also helped to heal. Hruby's development as an artist likewise attests to this unfolding process. He was inspired by Oliver Stone's Academy Award-winning *Platoon* (1986) to construct a work based on the soldier's dog tags, and by the

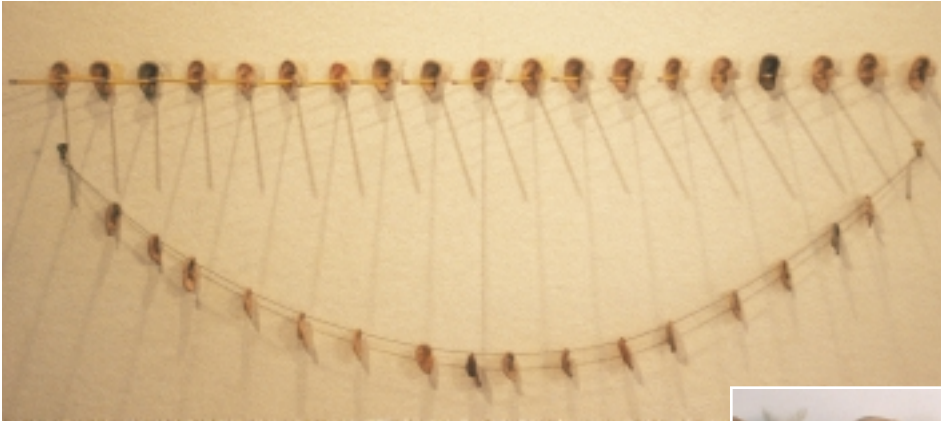
close of the decade he had totally redirected his art to the task of dealing with his personal military experience — in the hope, as I see it, of resolving the lingering internal conflicts and ironies natural to that experience by lodging it in sculptural objects and installations that would be not *merely* personal.



Equalizer, 1988

Steel, lead, ball chain

29" x 7" x 1"



*Army Regulation 670-1
(Grooming)*, 1988
Latex and pencils,
30" x 77" x 8"
(detail below)

The internal conflicts and ironies regarding Vietnam are clear enough, and Tolstoy can be said to have envisioned them a century earlier:

Let us imagine two men who have come out to fight a duel with rapiers according to all the rules of the art of fencing. The fencing has gone on for some time; suddenly one of the combatants, feeling himself wounded and understanding the matter is no joke, throws down his rapier, and seizing the first cudgel that comes to hand begins to brandish it. Then let us imagine that the combatant who so sensibly employed the best and simplest means to attain his end was at the same time influenced by traditions of chivalry and, desiring to conceal the facts of the case, insisted that he had



gained his victory with the rapier according to all the rules of art. One can imagine what confusion and obscurity would result from such an account of the duel.

So, Hruby makes a sculpture — *Army Regulation 670-1 (Grooming)* — consisting of latex casts of human ears, some with pencils protruding from them, others hanging naked on a chain — that refers to both the allowable length of soldiers' sideburns and the anatomical fragments they brought back

to camp as evidence of the number of Vietnamese they'd killed. So, also, he makes another — *Fix Bayonets, Let's Dance* — juxtaposing the disciplined footsteps required of the cadet who will become an officer and a gentleman. And another — *Reminiscences* — comprised of stacks of boot soles once crisp and ready for action but now weary and dysfunctional (“...totems to our lives,” the artist drolly calls them). And another — *Juggernaut* — comprised of the boots themselves arranged on a massive wheel symbolizing blind and destructive



devotion (“Being swept up in a war that makes no sense from the beginning and even less as it progresses...” in Hruby’s words). And another — *Short Arm Inspection* — incorporating limp penis/pistol barrels and footlockers, a reminder of the surprise predawn examinations for venereal disease of the officers-and-gentlemen-to-be. And another — *Instrument for War and Peace (NEA Meets NRA)* — combining parts of guns and musical instruments, a call to arms and to laying them down as well as a reference to Pentagon expansion while the National Endowment for the Arts is slashed. And another — *Goldpost* — incorporating athletic gear into a rocket-like totem that recalls, as Pat Hoy has pointed out, General Douglas MacArthur’s “...fields of friendly strife [on which] are sown the seeds that on

Fix Bayonets, Let's Dance, 1995

Parquet, cement, xerograph

Variable dimensions

Juggernaut, 1995 (upper left)



Short Arm Inspection, 1993
Mixed media installation
Variable dimensions (detail)

other fields on other days will bear the fruits of victory.” And another — *Minefields of Memory* — dealing with the explosives Hruby was ordered to lay in Korea in 1962 and then remove in 1969, thereby restoring the land’s utility, but was forced to abandon the mission because the earth and its deadly contents had shifted while he was on duty elsewhere.

And the list goes on, like the long gray line of his predecessors, many of whose portraits hung in the ballroom at West Point where Cadet Hruby learned not only the tango but an abiding respect for the achievements of those who went before — and probably an understanding of their failures as well. As he’s written in *Dancing and Fighting*,

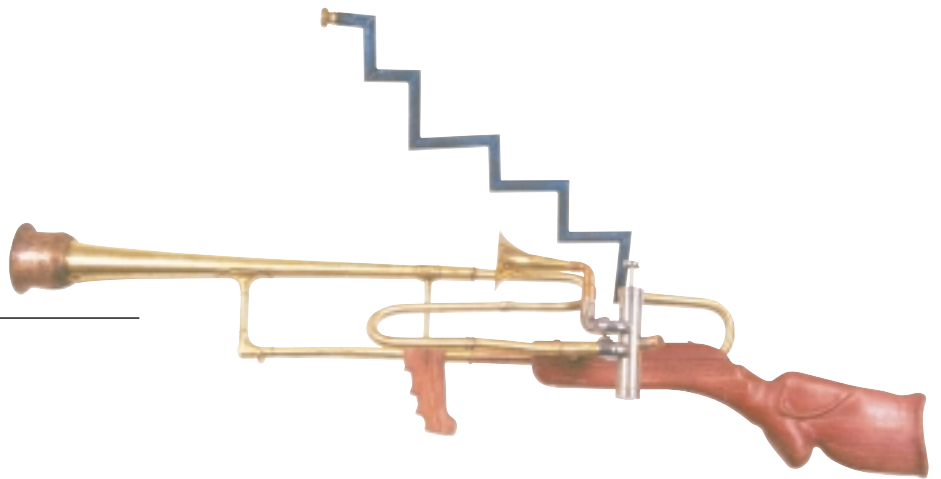
Our steps and turns, our skips and twirls were done under the stern stares of former dancers and graduates, all heroes for one reason or another, all frozen in gilt-framed portraits and bronze bas-reliefs hung salon style on every vertical surface of the hall. We paid attention. We learned our steps well. We were surrounded, after all, and we didn’t want to screw up in full view of U. S. Grant or Wm. T. Sherman. Theirs was not leadership by example now: it was leadership by aura.

But Ken Hruby’s is not an art of irony, nor is his vision conflicted. The conflict and irony are inherent in his subject matter, and his relationship to both is clearly empathetic, even agonizing, more about the problematics

Instrument for War and Peace
(*NEA meets NRA*), 1991

Found objects, plumbing parts,
purple heart, copper

49" x 22" x 8"



of modern experience than tongue-in-cheek ambiguity. Which is why I say the art is personal but not *merely* personal — because it is born of first-hand knowledge that feels not like the artist's *alone*. In consistently referencing *others*, be they dancers or fighters, then or now, the art is shaped via the acknowledgment of a *community*, be it the military or the nation, past or present, seen from within and with its conflicts and ironies laid bare. Those conflicts and ironies thus become his and ours alike, and in this resides the work's human embrace.

Such an art generally confronts us first with its subject matter, allowing the impression that formal considerations are secondary to issues of content. The impression is common in response to art that is socially or politically

motivated, especially when its subject concerns pain and suffering and death — when its subject is the AIDS pandemic, for instance, or the Holocaust, or the Vietnam War. How could it be otherwise? Talking about formal issues in the face of work that provokes the impulse to turn away seems to trivialize it; when asked, “Do you like it?,” we feel the question is unseemly. Accordingly, much social and political art of the past two decades appears only minimally formalist, even artless with respect, say, to its space and color and composition — as though it is comprised of blunt facts that required no arrangement, like minimal art itself. This tendency informs many of Rauschenberg's sculptures: helmets and boot soles are stacked into columns, footgear is lined up to march, even the severed ears of *Army Regulation 670-1* are presented in an orderly row, and in each case



we find ourselves thinking of military discipline and regimentation, of those who wore the boots and left their footprints, of the victims and the victimized, of all those memories, rather than of aesthetic decisions — content rather than form.

Formal concerns nonetheless affect the power of those stacks and rows that seem at first merely repetitive and *non*-composed, urging us, if we think about it, to acknowledge in turn that the artist chose to make them *that* way rather than some other — in order to make them more credible and visually appealing. And I believe art's history plays a role in this. In looking at the crutches and their dancing shadows in *Minifields of Memory*, for instance, I can't help thinking of the spikes and lances in Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* and Velasquez's *Surrender of Breda*, breathtaking rows and repetitions that perhaps Hruby, too, remembered. He's personally acknowledged that he had in

Goldpost, 1987

Assemblage, 115" x 30" x 22"

mind the *Nike of Samothrace* while constructing *Goldpost*, saying he wanted some of its “majesty,” and in *Free Fall* he enlists the music of Beethoven, Mozart, and Satie toward the same goal of joining past form with present-day content.

Free Fall is Hruby’s most recent installation, a commentary on the experience of being in

Free Fall, 1999

Kinetic video installation
Parachutes, electronics, video,
motors, mechanics, memorabilia

Variable dimensions



a war and watching a war on television, and on the unsettling and paradoxical way in which terror and beauty can entwine. We are presented with small parachutes that crank to the ceiling and then descend, a boot hanging from one, a prosthesis from another, and, from the others, television sets on which are displayed films of men jumping from planes and descending to the ground, free yet vulnerable, their lives at risk, their parachutes filling the sky like drifting clouds while ethereal music fills the air around them, and



we marvel at the sight — yet we shudder in the same moment.

Tolstoy would have understood. When Prince Andrew, who is one of the heroes in *War and Peace*, falls wounded at the Battle of Austerlitz and is left for dead, the prose turns elegiac:

Above him there was now nothing but the sky — the lofty sky, not clear yet still immeasurably lofty, with gray clouds gliding slowly across it. “How quiet, peaceful, and solemn,” thought Prince Andrew, “not at all as...we ran, shouting and fighting...How was it I did not see that lofty sky before? And how happy I am to have found it at last! Yes! All is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky...there is nothing but quiet and peace. Thank God...”

DEROS Minus One, 1988

Lead, oak, canvas

17" x 13" x 35"



Migration Eastward, 1987

Lead, oak, steel

36" x 56" x 14"

Elegiac, too, are the images and sounds employed in *Free Fall*, the formal components that wrench at the subject of men going into battle. Form and content. You can't have one without the other, for they are invariably necessary to one another, however unassuming, even invisible or natural, one or the other appears in any given instance, and Hruby, who knows his Tolstoy, understands this as well. I've said his approach to his subject matter possesses a human embrace, which it surely does, but his approach to shaping that subject matter into art — his

approach, that is, to formal issues — is equally embracing, for he knows those concerns are no less meaningful than the subjects themselves.

And what, you ask, do the meanings of those formal concerns amount to? I say in response that Ken Hruby's rows and lines and regimentation amount to an artistic voice whose strength dwells not in expressionistic shouts and screams but in reticent rhythms and repetitions — the voice is thus dignified and, as such, is as humanly embracing as the subjects of its inspiration. The voice and the subject, the form and the content, become one.

Carl Belz is Director Emeritus at the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University and managing editor of *Art New England* magazine.

About the Artist

Ken Hruby was born at a cavalry post in the Black Hills of South Dakota and spent an adventure-filled childhood as an Army brat at a number of posts and camps in the mid-west and on the west coast. Family travel included tours in Japan and Germany. He graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1961 with an infantry commission.

During the following 21 years of active duty, he served in a variety of command and staff positions including a tour of duty as advisor

to infantry and Ranger battalions in Vietnam and two combat tours on the demilitarized zone in Korea.

When he retired from the military, he attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where he focused on sculpture and received a prestigious Traveling Scholars Award.

His work has been shown in numerous group and solo shows on the east coast and in Paris. He is represented in private and public collections, including the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum in Chicago.

His first solo show *Mustering Out* and three recent shows — *Juggernaut*, *Minifields of Memory*, and *Free Fall* — were selected by *The Boston Globe* as “Best Gallery Events” for the years in which they were presented.

He teaches at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, maintains a studio in Boston and lives in Gloucester, Massachusetts.



Ken Hruby in his studio, working on *Free Fall*.
Photograph by Ricardo Barros Photographs Inc.
