

Catharsis

Glenna Goodacre reflects on the healing process of the Vietnam Women's Memorial

By Denise Kusel



AP/Wide World Photos/Greg Gibson.

DIANE CARLSON EVANS, CREATOR OF THE VIETNAM WOMEN'S MEMORIAL PROJECT, LEFT, HUGS FELLOW VIETNAM VETERANS DURING THE DEDICATION CEREMONY FOR GLENNA GOODACRE'S SCULPTURE, NOVEMBER 11, 1993, IN WASHINGTON, DC.

The dignity of art bristling with power and a graceful ability to heal was never more evident than on that blustery Veterans Day in November 1993. The place was Washington, DC, and the focus was sculptor Glenna Goodacre, who pulled the cord releasing the shroud around the Vietnam Women's Memorial.

The journey to place the heroic-size bronze depicting three Vietnam-era women caring for a wounded soldier at its final resting place on the National Mall, just yards from "The Wall," Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, was an arduous one. But

Approximately 11,000 American military women were stationed in Vietnam during the war. Nearly all of them volunteered. They were the youngest, most inexperienced group of medical personnel ever to serve in wartime. By 1967, almost all military nurses who went to Vietnam did so shortly after graduation.

once the project was conceived by former Army nurse Diane Carlson Evans, there was something about the Vietnam Women's Memorial project that grabbed the imagination and never let go.

For the thousands of men and women across the country who

turned out to see the sculpture on its 28-city, 8,000-mile whistle-stop tour through the country's heartland, viewing the sculpture was a catharsis and healing, a time to slice through the decades of silence.

For a long time, after I got back, I thought maybe I wasn't even there.

It was so unreal. I came home, and there was no one I could talk to about what I had seen. My friends who stayed at home had no idea of the horror. In one year, I had left behind my youth and innocence. —Former Army nurse viewing the statue in Lubbock, TX.

OVERLEAF: THE VIETNAM WOMEN'S MEMORIAL, BRONZE, H 92, NATIONAL COLLECTION, WASHINGTON, DC. "Beyond the purpose of honoring the women who served during the Vietnam War, the bronze is designed to be true sculpture in the round," writes Goodacre. "The triangular composition of four figures is interesting from all sides, with the standing woman at the apex visually uplifting the entire piece."

"I strived to join the figures into a mass creating a solid statement without the interruption of negative spaces. Too, the women who served worked closely together. In this memorial their closeness is exemplified by the proximity of the figures themselves. Sandbags provided the 'furniture' of war, and I've included them to form a natural base, connect the figures and add volume to the sculpture."

"The surface is textured and details of uniforms minimized to direct the viewer's eye to the expressive hands and faces. References as to who the figures are and what their roles were are intentionally vague, creating opportunities for interpretation for each viewer."

BELOW: THE KNEELING NURSE IN THE REAR OF THE SCULPTURE IS OFTEN IDENTIFIED AS THE "HEART" OF THE PIECE.



Photo by Gregory Staley.

Glenna Goodacre sits at a massive desk in the anteroom of her Santa Fe, NM, studio. Nearly five months have gone by since the dedication of the memorial, and this morning she's not exactly dressed for handling clay.

"I haven't really gotten back to work," she admits. "It's not a let-down that I feel, it's not that at all. And these days, I don't think about the project as much. I mean, I have six commissions I need to be working on right now. Plus I have a one-woman show in the summer of 1995...."

She pauses. "You know what I learned? I learned more tolerance, that's what. I'm just amazed at how many lives the sculpture did change."

She gazes absentmindedly into the next room where administrative assistant Dan Anthony is wrapping a small bronze for shipping. The working portion of the 18-foot-high studio is flanked by two 12-foot French doors that allow large sculptures to be moved in and out. But today, Goodacre is not working. As she collects her thoughts, her fingers reach out to straighten small stacks of paper on the desk. "I had no idea this many people ... this many women ... would stop and see it," she says in her flat West Texas drawl.

"So many things surprised me. Every ceremony, every face, Washington, DC, three trips to the White House. The

letters I've received from people all over the country. The faces ... there are hundreds of people I will never forget. I am just so proud and in awe of how many lives were touched...."

Her voice trails off and her fingers stop dancing on the papers. As if she has caught herself in a revealing

reverie, she quickly changes the subject. "You know, my name was a clue on one of those television game shows. Can you imagine that? I'm getting to be famous."

For the 53-year-old artist, this particular sculpture was a high point in a career that's been peppered with successful nuggets.

Medical personnel dealt with extraordinary injuries inflicted by weapons specifically designed to maim and maim. Over 58,000 soldiers died in Vietnam; 350,000 were wounded. Many Vietnam women veterans never told their friends, colleagues or even loved ones about their tour of duty. Although most were there to save lives, they received the same hostile treatment as returning combat soldiers.

Beneath a 50-foot American flag draped over a glass wall in the Mall of America in Bloomington, MN, a man dressed in fatigues pushes his wheelchair to the sculpture and grasps the hand of one of the bronze figures. He bows his head.

This is the first time the statue has been removed from the Federal Express truck, which was specially equipped with a rolling bed and bifold doors so the sculpture may be viewed from all sides.

"I spent a year in anger during the design-approval process in Washington," Goodacre says. "A year in rage. I had lost control of my work. I was the Big Bitch of the West. But you have to get over it. And the end result was worth the grueling process."

Last fall in Santa Fe, while sharing a podium with photographer Barbara Van Cleve, Goodacre talked

Photo by Peter Vitale.



Photo by Daniel Anthony.

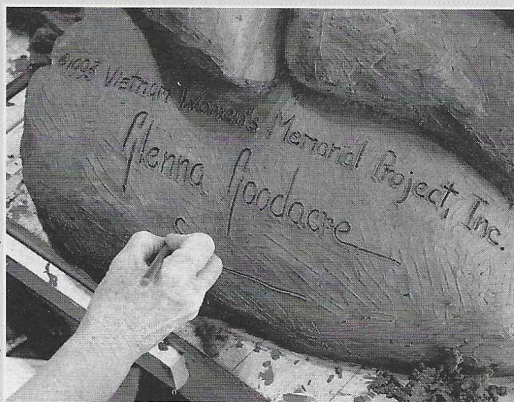


Photo by Daniel Anthony.

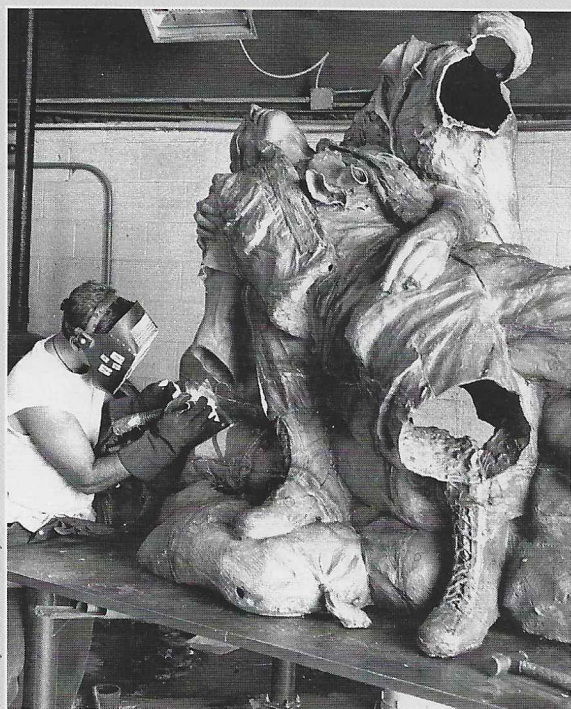
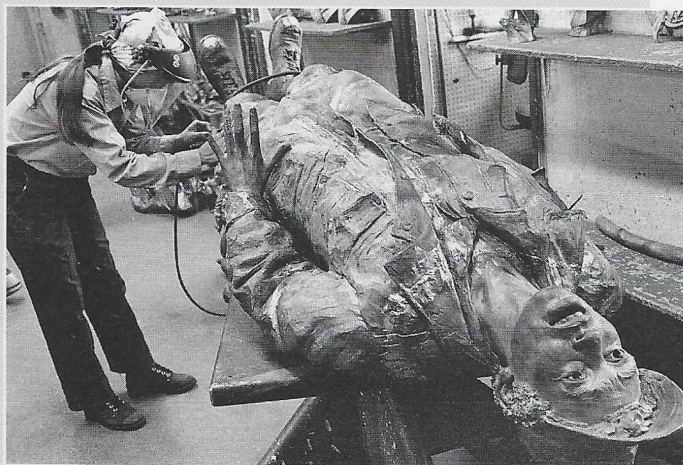


Photo by Daniel Anthony.



GOODACRE PUTS THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON THE CLAY ORIGINAL FOR THE BRONZE AND SIGNS IT BEFORE MOLDS ARE TAKEN FOR CASTING AT ART CASTINGS OF COLORADO, LOVELAND. WELDER CHRIS BUFORD AT ART CASTINGS ASSEMBLES THE 55 SECTIONS OF THE BRONZE BEFORE METAL CHASER JEANNE TOUSSAINT TEXTURIZES A WELD FOR THE STANDING FIGURE.

about the special pressure of creating public art during a program sponsored by Judy Chicago's Through the Flower Society. "You have to remember that the work doesn't belong to you," she said. "You are being paid for it, but it isn't yours. I gave up my copyright to the project. These are times when someone else is making the decisions."

This decision wasn't made all at

once, and even after it was made, it was changed and changed again. In the fall of 1990, the Vietnam Women's Memorial group launched an open design competition, eventually drawing 317 entries. Goodacre's original design for the monument was not the initial choice.

"I was runner-up!" Goodacre says with a touch of gleeful irony in her voice. "That should be a word to aspiring artists: Don't give up on

the competitions. Second place can rise again! And never say you've already done your best work."

She smiles reflectively. "I put a lot of myself into that piece. I still remember the butterflies in my stomach the day I signed it. I'll probably never do another piece that means so much.... There were thousands of people who needed this as a catharsis. People wrote poetry to it. They composed songs



AP/Wide World Photos/Greg Gibson.

A VIETNAM VETERAN PLACES A MEDAL ON THE MEMORIAL DURING THE DEDICATION CEREMONY. THE STATUE WAS DEDICATED TO SAY FOR ALL TIME THAT WOMEN SUFFERED DURING THE CONTROVERSIAL VIETNAM WAR.

for it. They stood there and cried and placed valued objects and flowers on it. They touched it.”

In Baltimore, a Navy chaplain arrives to deliver the invocation. He stops suddenly. “Something told me to turn around and look at the statue. I hadn’t seen it before, and when I did, I felt a hot, white light move all the way down my spine. I saw my son up there. That soldier, that wounded soldier, that was my Buddy. That was my son. He never came home.”

“There is a healing that people can identify with in this bronze,” Goodacre says. “I left interpretation open enough so that people can read into it what they want. My intention was that it not all be spelled out.”

At the dedication on November 11, Goodacre, flanked by military brass and Vice President Al Gore, stood on the stage and explained that the statue intentionally did not reveal insignia nor branch of service but instead was a tribute to every

Because of Vietnamese guerrilla tactics, many women were in the midst of the conflict. There was no front, no such thing as “safe behind our lines.” Many were wounded; most spent time in bunkers during attacks. Eight military women died in Vietnam and are listed on The Wall.

woman. The echoes of *Stars and Stripes Forever* were still reverberating in the crisp afternoon. “There is no rank,” she said, talking about each of the three women depicted in the work. “The woman who is

cradling the wounded soldier across her lap is the nurse. I purposely covered the top of the soldier’s face so he would be anonymous.

“The standing woman is looking up for help ... looking for a medevac helicopter. Or perhaps looking for help from God. The kneeling woman many vets think of as the heart and soul of the piece. Women have looked at it and said, ‘That was me. That’s how I felt.’”

Minutes later, by the time Goodacre fully understood the immensity of what she had accomplished, and while looking at the 7-foot, 8-inch bronze, her voice broke as she was swept up in the moment. “This has been a phenomenal experience for me. To think my hands can shape



the clay that heals the heart. I'm proud of my sculpture."

This memorial has given me a sense of peace ... a sense of great joy. It also gives me the incentive to continue to reach out to my sisters and brothers who have not quite reached that place of peace. —Former Red Cross volunteer viewing the statue in Pentagon City, VA.

The war the women fought in Vietnam was different from the one fought by the men. It was insidious. It didn't explode with action. It crept into the consciousness. It imploded in the psyche. There are no names on the Vietnam Women's Memorial, but the 2,000-pound sculpture vibrates with raw emotion. It never fails to evoke tears.

"The night after the dedication,

I went back to see the statue," Goodacre relates. "I wanted to see it by myself, without all the crowds. I wanted to see how it looked. But even at midnight, there were still people standing there and looking at it. I was amazed. A woman walked up to me and said, 'Now, I can come home.'"

Goodacre reaches down to pet her golden retriever, Tesuque. "You know, I and my assistants didn't stop the project abruptly. We had worked on the piece so long that once it was gone from the middle of the floor where we molded it in the studio, we missed it. Looking back, I don't have a derogatory thing to say

Glenna Goodacre discovered the heart of a nation in the process of creating the VIETNAM WOMEN'S MEMORIAL. Seldom does an artist have the opportunity to be involved in an artwork that means so much to so many people. As Goodacre says, "To think my hands can shape the clay that heals the heart." She's rightly proud of a work that makes visible a memory while shaping the perception of that memory for future generations. -- Susan Hallsten McGarry, July 1994 Editor's Perspective.

about the three years it consumed. From a sculptor's standpoint, to get everything done and to just pull that drape.... "My advice to young sculptors is don't sit on your laurels, which I'm ashamed I've been doing for a few months. It's time to get back to work."

PHOTOS COURTESY THE ARTIST AND AP WIRE SERVICE.