World in a Jar: War and Trauma

Robert Hirsch

Iowa

To learn more about this project and other works visit:
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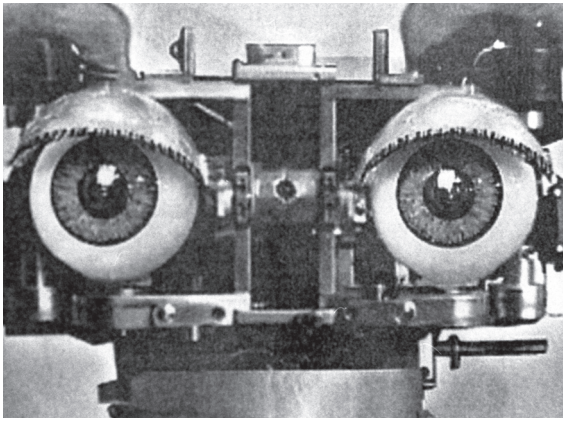
Book design by Molly Jarboe



Good Evening,

I want to thank Darrell Taylor and Tim Dooley for this opportunity to present and talk about ***World in Jar: War & Trauma*** here at Northern Iowa University. As my installation is here for you to see, I am going to tell you about the key concepts, themes, and driving forces that have contributed to the making of this work in hopes you may universalize some of what I relate as you interpret this project. Accompanying my talk is a QuickTime video of the installation as presented at Big Orbit Gallery in Buffalo, NY, and a PowerPoint presentation of selected individual images, and a few studio and project construction shots. I will take questions after my talk.

World in a Jar: War & Trauma has allowed me to personalize an impossibly large theme by dislocating the specifics in favor of the general. It is built on my interest in historical research and what history and images can and cannot teach us. It has given me the pretext to retrieve and re-examine history, collect books and pictures that intrigue me, and to reinterpret these images. Ultimately working on this project became a personalized history of trauma and stupidity.

Plagiarist or Transformer

By making representations of representations I tackle issues of originality and reproduction. Fresh ideas come from re-contextualizing the past. Our society's intellectual heritage is built on a culture of transformative art - one of borrowing, sharing, reborrowing, and retransforming - the full range of ways new art builds on and emerges from the old. In music one can hear how Scott Joplin borrows from W.C. Handy, George Gershwin borrows from Joplin, Igor Stravinsky and Miles Davis from Gershwin, Aaron Copland from Stravinsky and Davis, and now movie composer John Williams from Copland. Consider one of our cultural icons: *Steamboat Willie*, the 1928 Walt Disney cartoon that introduced Mickey Mouse. *Steamboat Willie* borrowed from, and played off of, Buster Keaton's 1928 silent film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, which itself borrowed from a 1910 song, *Steamboat Bill*. Disney snatched creativity from the culture around him, mixed that with his own talent, and then imprinted that mixture into the character of our culture. Select an art form and you will find this 1-2-3 combination of snatch, mix, and imprint. Originality is ***not*** the prime factor, ***effectiveness*** is.

In this project most of the photographs were made from other photographs, as well as from drawings, paintings, and prints. The recycling process allows me to engage in an historical dialogue with other times, places, and makers. I see myself as a ***transformer***, actively distilling and/or subverting a subject into what I consider to be its core visual values. Photography is a process of copying something that already exists. We have come to rely upon the copy, from the Xerox to digital imaging, to widen our experiences and knowledge. When I make

pictures I engage in the same thought process, whether I am in the field photographing the landscape or in the studio re-photographing a half-tone reproduction. Through photographic means I subtract the unnecessary information and arrive at my visual statement. It is an artistic application of Ockham's razor - the principal that: "Nothing should be multiplied beyond necessity." Through this course of selection, re-photographing - including re-photographing my own pictures - and editing, I transform the images and in turn they transform me.

My intention is to ***evoke*** an inner state of consciousness and grapple with a subject beyond its external structure. This approach can be likened to the Japanese concept of ***shashin***, which says that something is only true when it integrates the outer appearance with the inner makeup of a subject. What matters is a picture's potential to become something else, not what it initially represents. Herman Melville referred to the surface view of reality as "a pasteboard mask." This mask hides an intuitive world of the "***thing in itself***," an idea that delves into the interior panorama of the world. Life is not a straightforward, smooth continuum with pointed delineations. Walking at sundown one observes the day does not have an abrupt border with the night. Rather it is a complex progression, filled with counterpoints, subtlety, and false appearances.

Although Photoshop has become a verb, people still want to believe their own eyes, even when they are aware they are only seeing pixels. By the mid-twentieth century, Henri Cartier-Bresson's "Decisive Moment" had become the gold standard of fixed 35mm film truth, but now there is no reason why we can't have a hundred dynamic decisive digital moments. Just because something is created or remains in flux doesn't mean it isn't true. Ultimately what we refer to, as The Truth is where myth commingles with fact to form a reality, which is why allegory is a favorite vehicle for moral, political, and spiritual messages.

Background Influences

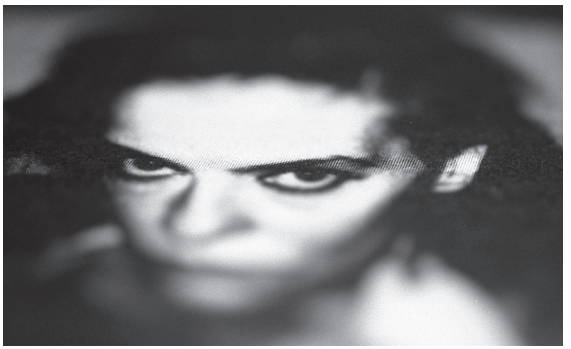
Illness

At the age of five I contacted Rheumatic Fever and was deathly ill for months. I recall lying in bed at night crying because I thought I was going to die. I realized that there were things my parents could not do to help me and how alone we are in the world. It made me accurately aware of my mortality at a young age and I lost

my childlike sense of indestructibility.

Religious Training

Due to the after effects of Rheumatic Fever I spent a number of winters with my mother's parents in Miami Beach. My grandfather was very religious and I went to Hebrew school three times a week including Saturdays. But I didn't feel like one of God's children and challenged the teachings and the Old Testament stories. Eventually I was Bar Mitzvahed, officially making me a man, which ironically empowered me to drop out of the Temple. I don't believe in an afterlife, but I do try to treat others as I wish to be treated - for in the end we all merge into the void.



Standardization: Coloring Within the Lines

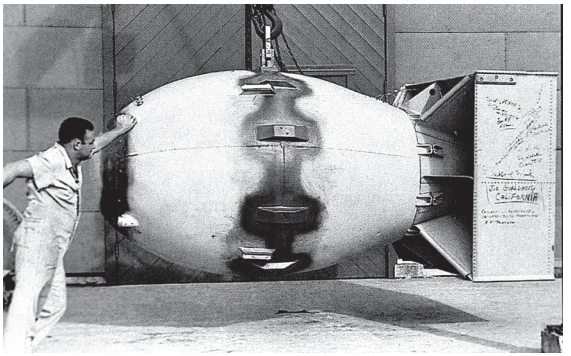
My earliest recollection of Iowa is from the third grade when I took my first standard examination, the Iowa Test, which I randomly filled in so I could get back to drawing my *Teddy the Bear* cartoon strip for our mimeographed class newspaper. When the results came back I was informed I would have to repeat the third grade and sent to what is now called a Special Education class. The experts didn't seem to notice my contrarian nature or diagnose my real disability, which is a minor form of dyslexia that causes me to invert numbers and letters. With the help of my mother, I learned to read and spell by memorizing every word I encountered. Other such experiences with the Cooter Job Placement Test, the PSAT, and SAT taught me that factory-style school is about standardization and did not value my spirit or measure my particular native intelligence.

A short time ago Bates College in Maine released 20-year study of their student performance and found the graduation rate of students who got into Bates without submitting their SAT scores is 86.7 while the graduation rate for those who did is 86.6. This indicates standardized tests are not predictive of student accomplishment and, in some cases, is what a statistician would call a false negative. That is, the test seems to suggest students *cannot* do good work when in fact they can. The Bates experience indicates that such tests create artificial standards and are better at *limiting* opportunity than at predicting success. While they may measure what students have learned, they are poor predictors of one's ability to learn and regulate opportunities for those who think in imaginative ways, which affects many artists.

The American Civil War

My father was a native Floridian and like many Southerners he was obsessed with the Civil War. In the summer our family took road trips from NY through the South. We visited major Civil War battlefields and rummaged through endless antique and pawnshops as my father searched for firearms and memorabilia. Before gun laws became strict my father, who was a Lifetime member of the National Rifle Association (NRA), had at least 50 nineteenth century guns on display in our house, including a blunderbuss. Our chief father/son activity was target shooting. In our TV room my father had a reprint of the 1911 *Photographic History of the*

Civil War edited by Francis Miller. I spent much time looking at the thousands of photographs in this 5-volume collection, which I now have and used in making this project.



The Bomb

Growing up during the Atomic Age and the Cold War, the threat of nuclear terror made me an existentialist before I knew there was such a word. In elementary school we would go into the hallway in front of our lockers, get down on our knees, and put our hands over our heads as we heard the bomb doors being closed and locked. In the movies, I watched the nuclear anxiety of *Godzilla* (1954), who was created as a result of atomic testing. Next came the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis that took the country to the brink of nuclear war. *Life* magazine showed photos of people building and stocking fall out shelters as well as arming themselves so they could shoot unwanted visitors. My wife's father built and stocked such a shelter for their family. During the last big series of above ground nuclear tests in the early 1960s, there was so much strontium 90 in the environment that milk was no longer served with our school lunches. In 1963 it was estimated that the effects of a Russian attack on 70 US urban areas would kill 93% of the Jewish population, compared with 65% of Catholics and 33% of Protestants, because Jews lived in urban centers. These events led me to attend Ban the Bomb rallies. Later, in the early 1980s, when I lived in Texas I was involved with an anti-nuclear group that filed Freedom of Information suits against Pantex, the final assembly point of our nuclear weapons. Eventually every plaintiff lost his or her job and left Texas.

The Holocaust

In 1961 I was 12 years old as I watched the Adolf Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem on TV with my mother's father whose family had vanished up the chimneys. I was stunned into complete silence. My family never talked about it. I knew that my father had left college to enlist in the U.S. Army Air Corp *before* Pearl Harbor and spent 5 years in military service during World War II, but I had no perception of the enormity of the atrocities that the Nazis had systematically perpetrated. I was beyond shocked. I could not comprehend killing entire groups of people based upon the accident of birth and wondered how anyone could believe in a god that allowed such things to happen. Then to top it off I saw photographs from the concentration camps. I felt as if I had been punched in the stomach. I had never seen anything like those photographs before or since and they left an indelible streak of anxiety upon my psyche. The trauma of those events that occurred before my birth continues to echo within me today. My head was split open. Clearly everything I had been told about the world was wrong.

Thirty years ago I began making images dealing with the Holocaust, but I never exhibited them. As a member of "the hinge-generation" between experience and memory of the Holocaust, I did not want to see myself as a victim of victims, damaged by calamities that were committed on someone else and was uncomfortable with the notion of being a proxy witness. I was concerned

my work might sensationalize and trivialize what had happened, or didn't communicate anything new, and/or put me in the role of an after-the-fact victim with voyeuristic tendencies. I don't believe that actual trauma can be transmitted across generations, but a wounded spirit can be passed on. Eventually, I concluded the Holocaust itself would die if only the survivors and eyewitnesses were allowed maintain their monopoly as the only legitimate spokespeople. I decided too much emphasis was placed on the appearance of the real. As the memory of the Holocaust fades it is essential for artists to find new ways to remember it, as language is not adequate to express such abominations. The failure to explore this territory with innovative means is akin to a belated Nazi victory.

Civil Rights Movement

The rude awakening of the Holocaust sensitized me to the 1960s Civil Rights struggle. My parents refused to let their barely 14-year old boy get on a bus and attend the 1963 March on Washington, but I did ***small acts***, such as not eating lunch and giving that money to "Snick" (The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee). The images of white officials turning dogs and fire hoses on peaceful demonstrators reverberated within me. I cut these photographs out of magazines and montaged them on my bedroom wall. I couldn't believe this was America, especially when the bodies of three voter registration workers - James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were found buried in an earthen dam 6 weeks after they went missing during the 1964 Freedom Summer in Mississippi. Although it has taken 40 years the recent photograph of a 79-year old former Ku Klux Klan leader and part-time preacher before the dock of justice for one of the most heinous crimes of the civil rights era is belated good news, for the only way to stop bullies is to confront them. The battleground of good and evil is within us and so is the ability to do something about it. When demons attack one must fight or be mowed down. The act of facing and unmasking cruelty is itself a victory over evil.

My Beginnings as a Photographer

My fascination with images got me involved in my father's modest basement darkroom. When I was in junior high school my father gave me a couple of quick processing lessons. Being an erratic student, I was sent for vocational counseling during which time an astute counselor asked if I ever considered becoming a photographer. The idea of a career in photography had not occurred to me. I began

pursuing this revelation and for the first time I had a clear life direction. A sympathetic art teacher allowed me to set-up a darkroom and carry out independent photography projects instead of following the art curriculum.

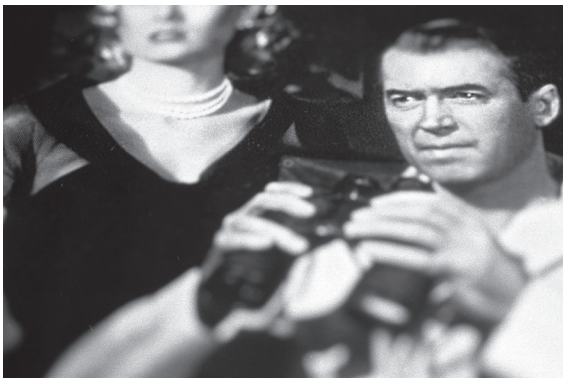
I started thinking about which college I should attend. The guidance experts said Rochester Institute of Technology was the place to go for photography and so I decided it was the one for me, but I did not have the grades to get in. I put together a portfolio, flew there for an interview, and convinced them to accept me. The experience taught me the importance of commitment and discipline in regards to reaching personal goals.

Vietnam

I became aware of Vietnam in junior high school and looked at photographs of the war every week in *Life* and *Newsweek* magazines that my family subscribed too. Initially I felt very patriotic. I read about the Domino Theory and thought it sounded prudent to stop the Communists before they took over Southeast Asia. My ideas began to change when I saw photographs of a Buddhist monk who set himself on fire. I found it impenetrably disturbing that a person would protest a war by burning himself alive. My imagination failed, as these images of a burning man didn't jive with my notions of fighting the good fight.

I went to my first anti-war rally in New York's Central Park in 1965. By the time I graduated high school I was regularly photographing at these protests. During the summer of 1967 I was actively involved in anti-war activities because I thought the US government had not been honest about our involvement in Vietnam. In 1971 I

was drafted. I arranged to become a Landed Immigrant in Toronto, Canada, but managed to get 1Y deferment, being declared: "mentally unfit" for military service. Three years later I was accepted into the Peace Corp, but was denied final admission because of my so-called military record. Now when I hear calls for pre-emptive military action I think of what Nazi Reich Marshall Hermann Goering said during his Nuremberg War Trial: "People can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism, and exposing the country to greater danger."



TV & Movies

As a kid I collected comic books, watched endless hours of TV cartoons and was enthralled by TV programs such as *Superman*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Roy Rogers and Dale Evans* and *Sky King*, which I imitated in play. In the days before VCRs and DVDs, I liked to watch the *Million Dollar Movie*, which showed films such as *Frankenstein* (1931) and *King Kong* (1933), twice a day for a week, thereby letting me memorize the scenes that depicted what it was like to be treated as an outcast from society.

Alternative Culture

In 1967 I visited San Francisco and briefly experienced the "Summer of Love." The sensational media portrayal of the hippies had very little to do the actual alternative ideas that a few people were trying to implement and whose unconventional values I related too. Unfortunately, the net effect of this spotlight was to corrupt and co-op the movement. Nevertheless, I was relived to know there were people such as myself questing for a different kind of life. Within the next few years I made a series of cross-country and trans-Canada road trips during which I photographed extensively, resulting in two hand-made artists' books and my first installation (1970) – a giant snapshot album that rapped around free-standing gallery walls.

Death

In popular American culture Arnold Schwarzenegger machine-guns hundreds of bad guys and audiences cheer. Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2003) treats death as a comic book experience. But on a personal level we as a society are reluctant to discuss or clearly look at death. We put off doing things we should do or want to do because we believe we will have a future in which to do them. We ignore that death might come this evening and that what is important is what we do in the meantime. I think it is necessary to consciously make the decision about when to look at things that are upsetting and when to look away because maturity comes from the threat of mortality. Holding my dog Koko as the vet "put her to sleep," hearing her cry out as unconsciousness over took her, and watching her life force vanish. Photographing my father on his deathbed. We are motivated by death. Death makes us realize that we only have a short time to prove that our existence was

worthwhile. By contemplating such deaths I try to figure out how to lead my life. We want the world to be a nice place, but tend to ignore the dark side of the human character that allows us to cheat, lie, steal, be cruel, cold-blooded, and murder. Without such pressures we would not plan, utilize wisdom, nor exercise care.

The Origin of the Jar

The idea for containing photographs in a bottle came in response to a 9/11 exhibition for which I submitted a photograph of figure crouching under a waterfall in Iceland (the cover of the catalog). The image was digitally printed twice with a black field surrounding it and placed inside a peanut butter jar that I filled with ashes. This spurred me to action as I was supposed to have been in lower Manhattan at a meeting the morning of September 11, 2001, but had decided not to attend. I began collecting images of the events, determining the key visual elements that spoke to me, and experimenting with methods to emphasize these essentials in my reinterpretation.

Montage: An Open Narrative

Traditional narratives alleviate the distress of inconclusiveness and from the dread of the meaningless. *World in a Jar* is a free-form montage that confronts this notion by presenting an archive of what I want to remember, how I chose to remember it, without attaching a fixed ending. Each jar is a building block for a new structure. This flexible configuration makes this a perpetual work in progress, recreating itself each time it is installed. This variable constellation, without a precise map, permits each photograph to not only present its own split-second historical reference, but also the history of the images surrounding it. As there is no bolted arrangement, each time the jars are installed new meanings emerge, acknowledging how we are ruled by our subjectivity.

Although we are psychologically primed to desire resolving conclusions, endings are paradoxical and we are simultaneously inclined to doubt, mistrust, reject and even fear them. Closed endings define and disappoint, gratify and frustrate. They confer meaning and confirm the structure of what has come before. But closure also kills off the pleasure of open-ended experiences snaps us out of the dream, and clamps order on unresolved happenings. An unending tale, such as this, plays to the sense that art can stand outside of time. Endings remind us of our own finality. In an era without absolute truth, there is only varying degrees of ambiguity that we sometimes call art.

The Power of Images

The power of images is not always a force for good. Terrorists recognize this power and purposely create and distribute abominable images that make what is cruel in their hearts even crueler in order to intimidate and impose their will upon others. Reportedly, the current top selling bootleg DVD in Baghdad is of a man being beheaded with a knife. In our own country the defining moment of the Iraq invasion has shifted from the posed toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein to the sadistic amateur snapshots made in Abu Ghraib Prison. Nevertheless, the net result of such hideous pictures inculcates the work with compassion.

A significant ingredient that makes these photographs remarkable is ***empathy*** for it is empathy that provides us with an opening – an initial pathway for cognitive and emotional understanding of a subject. More importantly the value of a photograph is not limited to its depiction of subjects and feelings akin to those in our life. An engaging image contains within it the capacity to sensitize and stimulate our latent exploratory senses. Such photographs assert ideas and perceptions that we recognize as our own, but could not have given concrete form to without having first seen those images. However, I don't think that images alone can bring about social change. Reflecting on the recent presidential election, I am reminded of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Art has the capacity to make us aware and to draw us in, but then there is much work to do.

The Double Image & The Uncanny

Photography is about seeing double. A photograph becomes a stand-in for the original. The photographic process reveals our cultural quest for copies, from the simulacra of Las Vegas to art forgeries. In the catalog essay for this project, Gary Nickard discusses Otto Rank's *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1925), in which the uncanny – that is the seemingly intense sensation of the supernatural, strange, unfamiliar, weird, and unsettling – arises from the doubling of reality in the form of ghosts, reflections, shadows, and twins, and how this eerie idea can include photography. In one sense, a photograph is a shadow or reflection that is formed by a lens and captured onto light-sensitive material. If a photograph can be identified as a category of Rank's "double," then it can also serve as an example of the "uncanny." Rank suggests that originally the double functioned as an "energetic denial of the

power of death." Each jar contains a double photographic ghost, a shadow returning from the past – a reflection of death and destruction that has come to haunt the present as a frightening doppelgänger. In Camera Lucida (1981) Roland Barthes concluded that the relationship of the photograph to the double, its confusion with reality and time, constitute an uncanny concern with death. Thus it is precisely due to the direct and real connection between the subject and its image – the certainty of an existence within the past – that photography becomes inextricably bound with death.

Evil

Philosophers have wrestled with defining the nature of Evil without much success. This is because evil threatens human reason by challenging our hope that the world makes sense. We understand people who commit evil for personal gain, but often evil is carried out for dim and frivolous motives that place passing personal fulfillment over the long-term misery of others to whom one has a social responsibility. Think of the California man who recently set off a train crash by parking his SUV on the railroad tracks in an unsuccessful suicide attempt, resulting in the deaths of a dozen people on the train. What about the Christian fundamentalists

waiting for the Rapture, like former Reagan Secretary of the Interior James Watts, who welcomed environmental destruction as a sign of the coming apocalypse? Evil begins on an individual level. People commit evil deeds within the scope available to them, making the most of their opportunities and doing what they think they can get away with.

Natural Evil

Evil can occur naturally. In the old flood myths, things happened because humans behaved badly; their morality was tied to their destiny. The Great Lisbon earthquake, fire, and tsunami of 1755 killed 60,000 people and came to represent evil in European art and literature. But now we no longer think in terms of natural evil. After listening to the media discussions about the Asian subcontinent tsunami, which took 150,000 lives, I have the impression that there is no meaning, just nature's wild, amoral, random and incomprehensible lottery. It is as blind Gloucester says in *King Lear*: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport."

Human Evil

Today we view evil in terms of human cruelty with Auschwitz as its extreme manifestation.

Whether expressed in theological or secular terms, evil poses a problem about our world's intelligibility. It makes no difference if it is Bosnia, Cambodia, the Middle East, Rwanda, or the Sudan, evil confronts philosophy with fundamental questions: What makes ordinary clerks and teachers carry out treacherous and unspeakable acts? Can there be meaning in a world where innocents suffer? Can belief in divine power or human progress survive a cataloging of evil? Is evil profound or banal? Are the people who oversee these policies dunces or sinister geniuses? And as Theodore Adorno wrote in 1949: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," thus anticipating the problem artists faced not only after World War II, but also Vietnam, and now 9/11, and the War on Terror.

Moral Evil

Traditional philosophers, such as Hegel, sought to shield the Creator of a world that contained evil. Inescapably, such efforts -- combined with those of literary figures like Alexander Pope, Voltaire, and de Sade -- eroded the belief in God's benevolence, power, and significance, until Nietzsche finally claimed God was dead. They also generated the distinction between natural and moral evil that we now take for granted. In terms of Western philosophy's response to the Holocaust as an ultimate moral evil, there are two basic and contradictory responses. One, that can be traced to Rousseau, insists that moral principles demand we make evil comprehensible. The other, having its origins with Voltaire, insists that morality demands that we do not. On the other hand, in

the Himalayan tradition, many Yogis believe there is no such thing as Evil, seeing it as a form of ignorance and false belief. I would like to adopt this philosophy, but thus far I remain too attached and hotheaded to do so.

At the moment the best I can do is embrace the alternative to blind belief, which is not unbelief, but a different kind of belief - one that accepts uncertainty and encourages us to respect others whom we do not understand. In our complex world, wisdom is recognizing how much we don't know so that we can keep the future open. I see no reason for evil; it just is and I search for ways to reduce the suffering it produces. What is truly evil is allowing pain, suffering, loss, and humiliation, to continue when it could have been, but was not, prevented.

After Effects

People have remarked that working with such images must be incredibly depressing, but just as darkness is another shade of light, this state of mind can be a powerful creator when used to commune your own soul. Darkness can bring a silent calm that restores our mental, physical, and spiritual well being. But often compelling art is the result of tears. Regardless, it is better to confront this aspect of human nature than to ignore it. Some expect the abstract concept of future artistic achievement will bring Happiness. I think this is a fallacy that leads to disappointment. Happiness comes from making tangible decisions to do things that fulfill us in the here and now.

Towards this end, I have undertaken a daily formal mediation practice for the purpose of bringing more clarity and focus into my life. The keys are self-discipline and persistence, which is the habit of paying attention to become more aware and gain mastery over one's internal states. It is important for me to acknowledge the past, but to focus on the present, for much of my contentment comes from being fully engaged in thinking, making, and writing about the visual world. It is what the ancient Israelites called ***hochma*** - the science of the heart - the capacity to see, to feel and then to act as if the future depended on you.

In this direction, I use my bottled images to be socialized again. Not in the ways of my original community, but into another environment with different values that are better suited to my nature. The act of looking has been and continues to be at the center of my transformation. When I look at pictures, like those in *World in a Jar*, I feel compelled to use my creative energy to change the only thing I can in this world – myself. For when we are through changing we are through.