

Oregon Life



Local artist shows breadth of work in two exhibits — one in Salem, and one in New York

TAKING A STAND

Abby Luschei
Salem Statesman Journal
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In less than 24-hours, Matthew Boulay traveled 3,000 miles for his art.

The former marine has two shows going on at the same time, one in Salem, the other in New York City.

"They are very different shows," he said. "One is very political, and the other is meant to unite us in remembering soldiers who were killed."

Both exhibits focus on current events, but "I Am A No" is the first time Boulay has concentrated on politics in his art.

He tends to focus on war.

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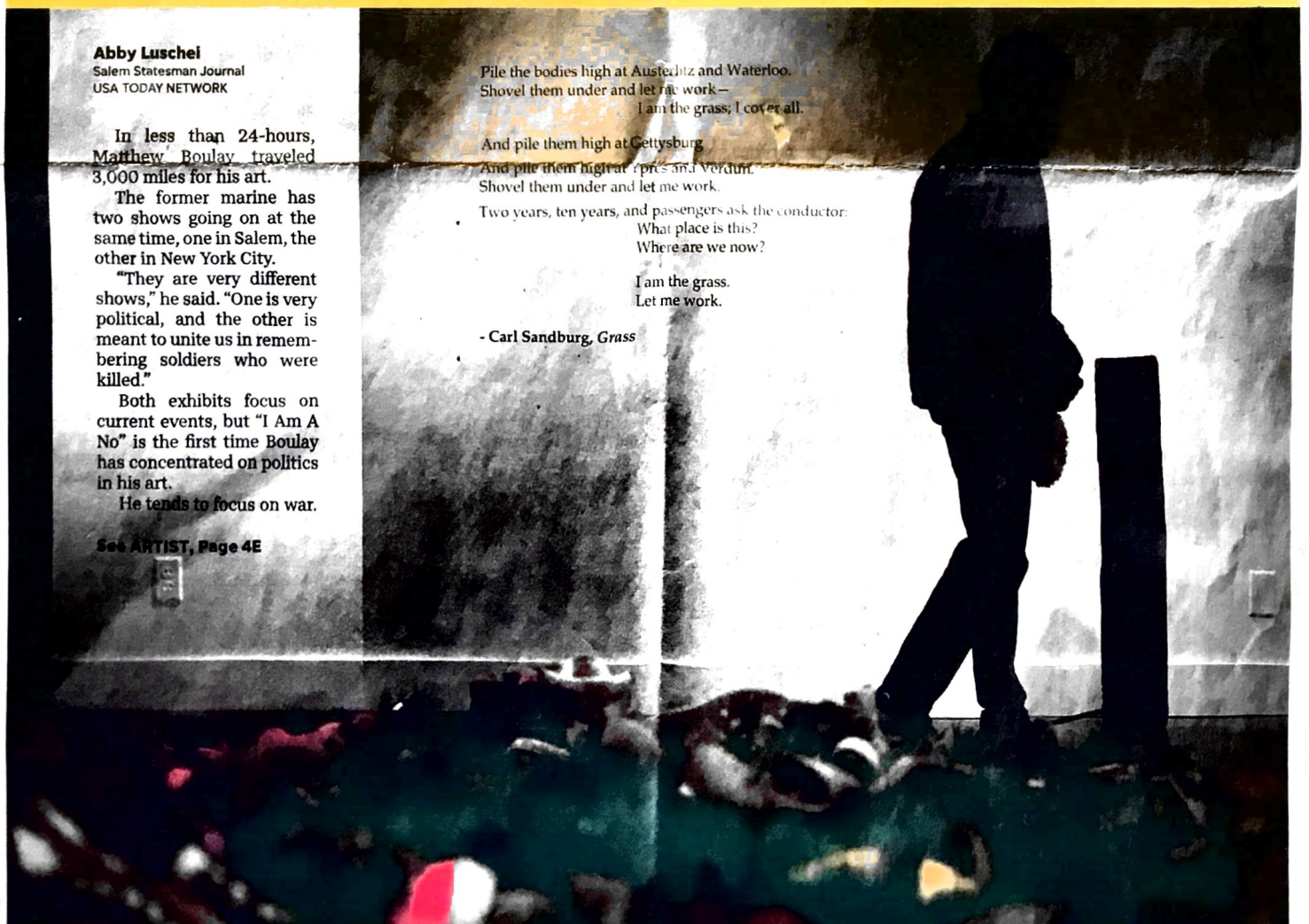
Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work —
I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Vicksburg and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.

Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?

I am the grass.
Let me work.

- Carl Sandburg, *Grass*



Above: Jo Hockenull, an artist and volunteer with the Salem Art Association Annex, views the "Combat Grass" installation by Matthew Boulay and poem "Grass" by WWI veteran Carl Sandburg at the Salem Art Association. Top: Artist Matthew Boulay is seen in his home studio in Salem. PHOTOS BY ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Artist

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A way to cope

Boulay, a Salem native, dabbled in art most of his life but was never serious about painting before going to war.

After returning from Iraq in September 2003, he was frustrated, angry and confused.

To ease his mind, he began to read World War I poetry. That poetry led him to explore World War I paintings, which resonated with him deeply.

Five years ago, he began creating paintings and installations. Channeling his feelings through his work, he said, has been "remarkably satisfying" for him.

World War I death notifications reproduced on paper milled from uniforms of soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are often placed underneath his paint.

The notifications read, "Dear Sir or Madam: Deeply regret to inform you that your son/brother/husband/father is officially reported killed in action."

Boulay creates a raw, rugged aesthetic that matches his concept.

His exhibitions are intentionally flawed. The wood that borders each piece is splintered. He uses clay and paint to create rough surfaces.

"It is a way of showing that the materials are real, the experience is real, and it is not polished and not meant to be pretty as it is meant to be authentic," he said.

'Combat Grass'

Boulay's Salem exhibition, "Combat Grass," is meant to serve as a reminder of the 160 female soldiers who lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The installation is a field of grass covering women's combat boots and other shoes.

It is an interactive display, and visitors are encouraged to spread grass seed and water the field.

The poem "Grass" by Carl Sandburg is displayed on the back wall, describing how battlefields eventually turn into fields of grass.

"The grass is a metaphor for the passage of time," Boulay said. "We are healing the wounds of war with the passing of time, but we are also forgetting those who served."

Boulay will stop watering the grass near the end of the exhibit, around Feb. 3. The grass will die, representing the cycle of life and death.

Chemeketa Community College displayed a smaller-scale version of "Combat Grass" a few years ago. Boulay noticed at both exhibits, people experienced it differently. Children threw grass seed, laughing and having fun, while veterans wept.

'I Am A No'

Boulay's New York exhibition, "I Am A No," is an installation of placards of varying sizes, color and shape, with the



Grass grows out of shoes in the "Combat Grass" installation by Matthew Boulay in Salem. ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

If you go

What: "Combat Grass" is an interactive art installation about women who have died in combat.

When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays and noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, exhibit runs through Feb. 18

Where: Salem Art Association, Bush Barn Art Center Annex, 600 Mission St. SE, Salem

Cost: Free

words "I Am A No." Each placard represents a percent of the electorate that did not vote for President Donald Trump. In all, Boulay made 54 placards; 17 of them are being shown in New York.

The opening reception at Dacia Gallery was held Jan. 20, the anniversary of President Trump's inauguration.

Boulay's inspiration stemmed from placards that striking sanitation workers used during a 1968 demonstration in Memphis, Tennessee. Each one read, "I am a Man."

"It is the evolution from 'I am a Man' to 'I am a No' in the sense of pushing back on Trump's view of the world," he said.

"Matthew has a lot to say," Lee Vasu, owner of Dacia Gallery, said. "I really like his work in general."

Vasu said that guests received Boulay's art well and the gallery even stayed open an hour longer the night of the reception.

"What you really want is first something that you are happy with, and second, it is almost a bonus for others to look at it," Boulay said.

Reach out to Abby Luschei at aluschei@statesmanjournal.com or call 503-399-6747 regarding all things entertainment. Follow her on Twitter @abbyluschei or like her Facebook page www.facebook.com/luscheiabby.



Boulay's "I Am A No" exhibit in New York has pieces like this one that feature World War I death notifications reproduced on paper milled from uniforms of soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL



Boulay's exhibit "I Am A No" is displayed at Dacia Gallery in New York City. DACIA GALLERY