South Dakota State University
Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange

Alumni Publications | SDSU Alumni

2009

US Army Soldier-Artists in Vietnam (CAT IV, 15 August to 31 December, 1967)

James Pollock
South Dakota State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/alumni_pubs

 Part of the American Studies Commons, Military History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
Pollock, James, "US Army Soldier-Artists in Vietnam (CAT IV, 15 August to 31 December, 1967)" (2009). *Alumni Publications*. 1.
http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/alumni_pubs/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the SDSU Alumni at Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Alumni Publications by an authorized administrator of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact michael.biondo@sdstate.edu.

Essay by James Pollock
US Army Soldier-Artists in Vietnam
(CAT IV, 15 August to 31 December, 1967)

First appeared in
War, Literature & the Arts:
An International Journal of the Humanities
Volume 21, 2009
ISSN: 1046-6967

Because WLA is published using government funds,
the material published is "public domain."

Founded in 1989, WLA is indexed in *The American Humanities Index*, *Literary Criticism Register*, the *MLA American Periodical Verse*, and the *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature* and is a member journal of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals and the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses

War, Literature & the Arts:
An International Journal of the Humanities
Department of English & Fine Arts
United States Air Force Academy
2354 Fairchild Drive, Suite 6D-149
Colorado Springs, Colorado

Donald Anderson, Editor
email: editor@wlajournal.com
http://www.WLAjournal.com
Phone: 719.333.3930

JIM POLLOCK

US Army Soldier-Artists in Vietnam

From August 1966 through 1970 the US Army sent teams of artists into Vietnam to record their experiences as soldier artists. In 1967, Private First Class Jim Pollock was sent to Vietnam as a soldier artist on US Army Vietnam Combat Art Team IV from Aug. 15 to Dec. 31 1967.

Joining the Combat Art Program

In 1967, I was a postal clerk for APO 96231, a mini post office on Camp Ames, an army base in a remote area north of Taejon, Korea. As a draftee, I was happy to be in Korea instead of Vietnam. At the time I was never sure about the base's mission, but later I learned the base stored nuclear weapons. One day Sergeant Brooks stepped up to mail something. He said, "Pollock, I hear you are an artist... you might be interested in this." He handed me a copy of *Stars and Stripes* and pointed out an article about the army looking for artists to participate in the US Army Vietnam Combat Art Program.

I applied, but my command moved slowly. I kept calling. Finally, they processed my application. A few weeks later I was on my way to Vietnam as a soldier-artist on Combat Art Team IV. My friends at Camp Ames thought I was irrational by volunteering to go to Vietnam when I was safe in Korea.

I was assigned with the Command Historian, Headquarters, US Army, Vietnam at Long Bien. This was before Tet and Long Bien was considered a safe base. Our team's wooden barracks were open with no protection from the enemy. We were fortunate to have electricity, tables, chairs, fans, bunk beds, and our prized possession: a refrigerator where we kept a large jug of water. Cold water was a real treat when we returned from our trips to the field. Our cots occupied one third of the barracks, the rest was studio.

HQ explained the risks. They suggested we travel in pairs. They asked us not "to place ourselves in danger needlessly." Sometimes they sent us suggestions of units to visit. Most of the time we visited the suggested units, but once on the move we could change our mind and go wherever we wanted. Some units would give us a detailed briefing before we joined their patrol or field operations. Others would almost ignore us.

We had open Category Z Air and Military Travel orders, which meant we could hitch a ride anywhere in Vietnam. It was a letter-sized sheet of paper with written and signed orders. We usually just walked up to a pilot or someone in charge and flashed the orders. We guarded these papers closely—if we lost them it would have been difficult trying to explain why we were hitchhiking around Vietnam.

Normally, we would visit a unit for 1-4 days. If the unit was on patrol, tramping through rice paddies and jungle, that is what we did. If they were handing out soap to Vietnamese locals, that is what we did.

On Patrol

One time, I hitched a ride from Da Nang to the 196th Light Infantry Brigade base on a Huey that had bullet holes in the metal floor. I put my helmet over the bullet holes and sat on it. Not so much for protection, but to cover up the reminder. One of crew members said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you." "Why?" I asked. "Well," he said, "if a VC happened to get lucky and a bullet did come through the floor you would be better off with a clean wound than if it hit that helmet and shattered." His answer didn't make any sense or difference to me.

Both side doors were open and no one was strapped in. When the helicopter made turns you could see the ground; the centrifugal force held us in. The helicopter skimmed the tree tops to thwart VC pot shots. I wondered which was more dangerous, a lucky shot or hitting a tree.

The public information officer, Gonzales, met me and showed me my bunk. I had a canteen, camera, sketchbook, some personal items, and a .45 caliber pistol. Gonzales said I would need a poncho so he helped me round one up.

The next day we boarded a Huey, and the flight turned out to be a recon run which did not stop in the field. Two radio officers sat on the floor of the helicopter reading maps and looking out as they radioed ground units. I surveyed the terrain I would be floundering around in shortly. Rice paddies and villages emblazoned the plains, valleys, and mountains. Craters and pock marks from artillery, mortar, and bomb strikes scarred the landscape. Swirling lines formed by the tracks of armored personnel carriers were visible. I noted in my journal "it must be difficult to convince people we are trying to help them when we tear up their rice paddies with heavy tracked war machines. The Vietnamese farmers must be disheartened to find their industrious laboring blown up by a bomb."

A different Huey took us to "hill 270" a coordinating position for field units. To counter the heat the platoon had individual shades with towels, ponchos, and anything else available. We stayed on "hill 270" for 2 hours, then a resupply helicopter landed. Gonzales and I climbed in, and we watched the soldiers trying to protect their makeshift sun shades as the wind blast from the Huey's rotors kicked up dust.

Soon the chopper hovered about two feet above a rice paddy in the middle of the jungle. Gonzales jumped out first and I followed. Mud and water was up to our knees as we waded back to solid ground.

First Lieutenant Huish welcomed us as his soldiers took supplies off the hovering craft. "Our conveniences aren't very good, but our hospitality is," he said. "You must be the PIO boys, and have I ever got a story for you, come on."

We reached a clearing where three soldiers stood guard over a group of Vietnamese children. They looked very young as they sat chattering to each other not seeming to mind being prisoners. There were eighteen Vietnamese kids, between the ages of six and sixteen.

"Maybe this is a story for you, but it's a big problem for me," said Huish. "What am I going to do with them? If I turn them loose they may be VC sympathizers and give the location of our camp. If I don't turn them loose it means we will have to feed them and stand guard over them which means extra c-rats and extra men." The lieutenant looked at the kids, "I've decided to keep them with us tonight."

Gonzales said I would have to make myself a tent using my poncho. I had never made a tent with a poncho. It took a while, but I finally got the stakes and poncho arranged in such a manner I could get under it. I was proud of how it turned out, and was sure it was going to be comfortable while protecting me the rain. It started to pour, and it wasn't long before I realized I had a problem, water was gushing along the ground into my tent.

Gonzales started laughing and said "you didn't dig a trench around your tent. You need a trench to drain the water away." I dug a trench. It worked, and the rain continued. By morning the rain stopped but everything I had was soaked. From this experience I learned to carry my sketchbooks in plastic bags.

The kids were still chattering in the morning. The lieutenant had found some candy bars and along with the c-rations the kids seemed to be having a good time. After feeding them and breaking camp, he let them go. I stayed with the platoon until the next helicopter came in. I felt a sting of guilt as Gonzales and I climbed into the resupply craft and headed back to base. I could leave the heat, mud, bugs, and rain for more comfortable surroundings while these new field friends I had made had to stay.

The men on this patrol unit would be sweeping the jungle for days at a time, with maybe a few days break, then back into the jungle. It wasn't fair that I could leave.

This is no joke

One night while on patrol with the 199th Light Infantry Brigade in September of 1967 I nearly became a victim of fratricide. The patrol was using a new fangled, high-tech piece of equipment called a night vision starlight scope. Supposedly the unit cost $10,000. I'm not sure what our end objective was, but we were wandering around in the jungle in the middle of the night taking turns looking for VC through this scope.

Things were going fine when suddenly three gunships, one flying low with a bright spotlight and the other two a bit higher, flew slowly over our position. The lieutenant told the radio operator to contact the gunships. He told the rest of us to hit the ground and get up against rice paddy ridges.

The radio operator was unable to make contact. The gunships made another pass, and by this time I was lying in fear crunched up against a dirt ridge. The lieutenant and the radio operator were still trying to make contact when the gunships dropped even lower on a third pass.

"This is it," the lieutenant shouted, "everyone down as low as you can get against any dirt bank you can find." But, the gunships didn't fire; instead, they made a circle and came in a fourth time. Just as I thought the gunships were going to shoot they pulled up, shut their lights off, and flew away.

The way it was told to me was that there was a combination of mistakes. Apparently we had wandered into an area where we weren't expected to be. Our patrol couldn't make contact with the gunships because protocol required our

radio operator to contact a central command location which in turn would contact the gunships letting them know we were friendly.

Evidently, the central command operator was not paying attention. Luckily, he picked up the radio at the last minute, and passed our desperate calls to the gunships.

Randall

I'm sure all of the artists have a story to tell. Steve Randall—from CAT VII—was with a patrol unit, from the 199th LIB, when they got ambushed. He had to drop his art tools, camera, and journal to help the unit defend itself. Just before they got ambushed a photographer on the patrol suggested he and Steve switch places.

Steve said, "The ammo bearer for the machine gun had gone forward to recover wounded. The gunner was working hard to fire and keep his ammo belt straight at the same time so I grabbed the bag and started pulling the belt out and handing it over. They brought back three wounded in ponchos. One of them was the photographer. The LT called in artillery and air strikes. Cobras came in from behind us and fired across our position. I tried to crawl inside my helmet."

Steve did a batik depicting his experience feeding ammo into a machine gun.

Haunting images

We were waiting for a helicopter from Ton Son Nhut to Long Bien. About 1:00 am the soldier at the desk said, "Hit the deck, the chopper coming in has room for live bodies."

I could hear the distinctive plop, plop, plop of a distant helicopter. Dust flew as it landed. I grabbed my gear, ran out to the pad and jumped in the Huey. My teammates, Lopez and Moody, did the same. A pilot, co-pilot, door gunner and, carrier were on board. Immediately the engine revved up and the chopper started to lift off. Picking us up seemed to be the only reason they had landed.

As I scrambled to situate myself in the center of the floor I realized why the duty soldier had said "they have room for live bodies." Plastic sacks, about the shape and size of sleeping bags, piled on top of each other stretched across the floor. I don't know how many bags there were, but there was a lot.

The smell inside the chopper was sickening. Body bags. Blood, or some other liquid, covered part of the helicopter's grated metal floor. The carrier mumbled something about not being careful when loading the body-bags. One bag had been punctured.

Moving faster and faster the chopper lunged forward as it lifted from the pad. The doors were wide open, the night air flowed freely through the helicopter, and still the smell lingered.

We didn't strap ourselves in, we just huddled together, back to back, knees drawn to our chest, in the center of the floor. We were situated so we could all see out the open doors of the helicopter. I watched the organized lights of Ton Son Nhut runway give way to the unorganized lights of Saigon. Far off on the horizon, continuous flashes of light contrasted the black sky: bright bursts of light from flares, bombs, mortars, and artillery.

The clatter of the rotor blades rang in my ears. The carrier didn't say anything, neither did we.

I looked past my feet where the plastic bags held dead bodies. Yesterday, the occupants of these bags were vibrant, enthusiastic young soldiers. It was hot, yet chills ran up and down my body. Who were they? I didn't ask who they were, or where, or how they had been killed. Not my relatives. In my family, I was the only one in the service, but they were someone's relatives, someone's father, brother, son or cousin. Maybe even someone's mother, sister or daughter. Still, I cared. I knew in my heart they were my relatives, they were my brothers and I cared.

Before the chopper settled on the Long Bien landing pad, I leaped out to solid ground. I wanted out of that chopper.

About 2:30 am the MPs delivered us at the door of our barracks. I didn't even wash. I was tired and depressed. That image and odor of stacked body bags will never leave me.

About the art

The idea of rotating teams of young soldier-artists from a variety of backgrounds and experiences through Vietnam was innovative. What was even more remarkable is that these soldier-artists were encouraged to freely express and interpret their individual experience in their own distinct styles. The artists responded enthusiastically to their artistic free reign, and the resulting products were wide-ranging and comprehensive.

Styles and media used were as diverse as the artists themselves, some chose detailed literal images while others preferred expressive almost abstract explosions striving to replicate the horrors of war. Certainly, a lasting legacy of the army's soldier art program is that it helped bring military art into the modern era.

For subject matter, my heart was with the ordinary soldier, and I tried to interpret honestly day-to-day experiences of the soldier as I saw and experienced them. I was

logistically limited to sketching media such as pen and ink, pencil, and watercolor while in the field. Pen and ink and watercolor were already my favorites, so this worked out rather well.

It rained a lot in Vietnam and I wrapped my sketchbook in plastic to protect it from moisture. When working in the studio I expanded my media to gouache, acrylic, and oil.

Some themes, however, must be universal. One of the pieces I did was a 1st Infantry Division soldier receiving a field haircut. At the time I thought it unusual for a soldier to be getting a haircut in the middle of the jungle, so I sketched the scene and later made a watercolor and ink painting it. Recently an Englishman, in contact with North Vietnamese soldier-artists, sent me a copy of a drawing. This drawing, by a Viet Cong soldier-artist, portrays a North Vietnamese soldier getting a field haircut.

I feel that each soldier art team is like a block of a quilt and each artist on each team produced a distinct individual pattern that contributed to that particular block. While each block and each pattern can be considered a work of art in itself, it is when blocks are stitched together and we see the entire blanket that a new work of art reveals itself. This new work of art becomes greater in significance than the sum of its pieces, so it is with these nine soldier art teams. Finding and stitching these pieces together into a comprehensive overview of the army's soldier art program is what I've tried to do.

We turned all the studies, sketches, and finished work we completed as soldier artists into the US Army Center of Military History. They are included in the permanent Army Art Collection in Washington DC. From time to time the army sponsors exhibits from their collection. One piece, by Vietnam Combat Artist Gary Porter (CAT II), was on loan to the Pentagon when it was destroyed during the Sept. 11, 2001 attack on the Pentagon.

It wasn't until the late 1990s, when I started doing research on the program, that I began to realize how groundbreaking and unusual this program was in terms of war art. In 1996, I posted information on the internet about the US Army Vietnam Combat Art Program and samples of art work in the army collection I had done as a soldier artist. I began to get responses and inquiries about my experience.

From Oct 2000 to Jan 2001, the Indianapolis Art Center featured an exhibit called the *Art of Combat, Artists and the Vietnam War Then and Now* which featured the art produced by Army Vietnam Combat Art Teams. And on July 15, 2003 at the US Library of Congress, I presented the first public presentation about

the program in the context of the individual artists, their particular teams, and time frames.

Combat Art Team Members

CAT I, 15 Aug - 15 Dec 1966—Roger A. Blum (Stillwell, KS), Robert C. Knight (Newark, NJ), Ronald E. Pepin (East Harford, CT), Paul Rickert (Philadelphia, PA), Felix R. Sanchez (Fort Madison, IA), John O. Wehrle (Dallas, TX), and supervisor—Frank M. Sherman.

CAT II, 15 Oct 1966 - 15 Feb 1967—Augustine G. Acuna (Monterey, CA), Alexander A. Bogdanovich (Chicago, IL), Theodore E. Drendel (Naperville, IL), David M. Lavender (Houston, TX), Gary W. Porter (El Cajon, CA), and supervisor—Carolyn M. O'Brien.

CAT III, 16 Feb - 17 June 1967—Michael R. Crook (Sierre Madre, CA), Dennis O. McGee (Castro Valley, CA), Robert T. Myers (White Sands Missile Range, NM), Kenneth J. Scowcroft (Manassas, VA), Stephen H. Sheldon (Los Angeles, CA), and supervisor—C. Bruce Smyser.

CAT IV, 15 Aug - 31 Dec 1967—Samuel E. Alexander (Philadelphia, MS), Daniel T. Lopez (Fresno, CA), Burdell Moody (Mesa, AZ), James R. Pollock (Pollock, SD), Ronald A. Wilson (Alhambra, CA), and technical supervisor—Frank M. Thomas.

CAT V, 1 Nov 1967 - 15 March 1968—Warren W. Buchanan (Kansas City, MO), Philip V. Garner (Dearborn, MI), Phillip W. Jones (Greensboro, NC), Don R. Schol (Denton, TX), John R. Strong (Kanehoe, HI), and technical supervisor—Frank M. Thomas.

CAT VI 1 Feb - 15 June 1968—Robert T. Coleman (Grand Rapids, MI), David N. Fairrington (Oakland, CA), John D. Kurtz IV (Wilmington, DE), Kenneth T. McDaniel (Paris, TN), Michael P. Pala (Bridgeport, CT).

CAT VII, 15 Aug - 31 Dec 1968—Brian H. Clark (Huntington, NY), William E. Flaherty Jr. (Louisville, KY), William C. Harrington (Terre Haute, IN), Barry W. Johnston (Huntsville, AL), Stephen H. Randall (De Moines, IA), and supervisor—Fitzallen N. Yow.

CAT VIII, 1 Feb - 15 June 1969—Edward J. Bowen (Carona Del Mar, CA), James R. Drake (Colorado Springs, CO), Roman Rakowsky (Cleveland, OH), Victory V. Reynolds (Idaho Falls, ID), Thomas B. Schubert (Chicago, IL), and supervisor—Fred B. Engel.

CAT IX, 1 Sept 1969 - 14 Jan 1970—David E. Graves (Lawrence, KS), James S. Hardy (Coronado, CA), William R. Hoettels (San Antonio, TX), Bruce N. Rigby (Dekalb, IL), Craig L. Stewart (Laurel, MD), and supervisor—Edward C. Williams.

Acknowledgment: Thanks and appreciation to the US Army Center of Military History and Army Art Curator Rénee Klish for providing assistance and digital images.

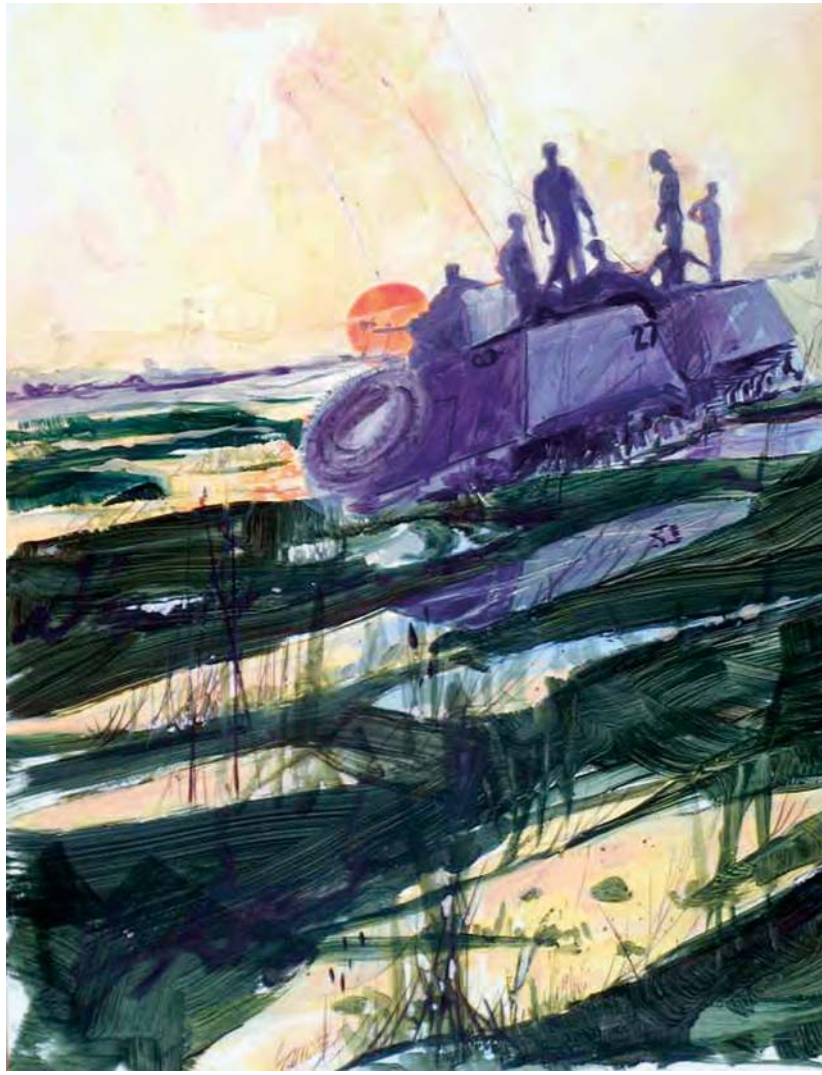
JIM POLLOCK lives in South Dakota. You may visit his website at http://pie.midco.net/jpollock/index.html



Roger A. Blum 1966



Roger A. Blum 1966



Felix R. Sanchez 1966



Robert T. Coleman 1968



John O. Wehrle 1966



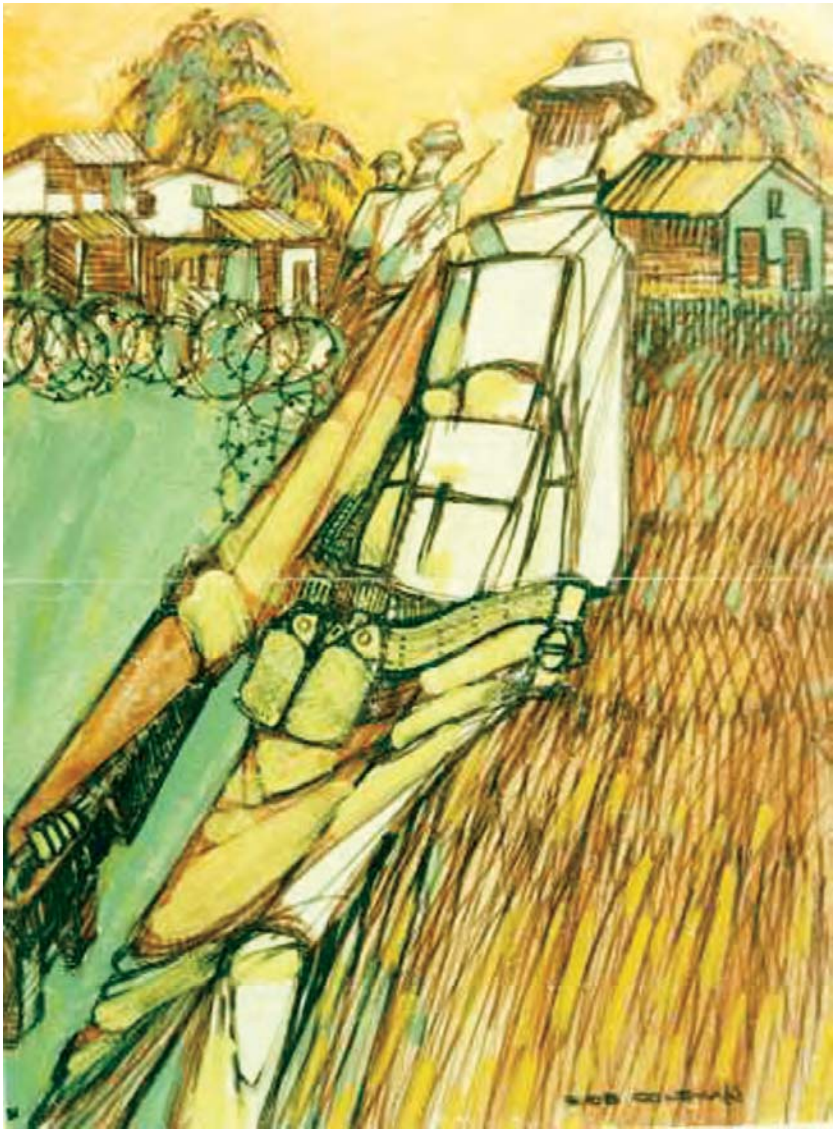
Alexander A. Bogdanovich 1966



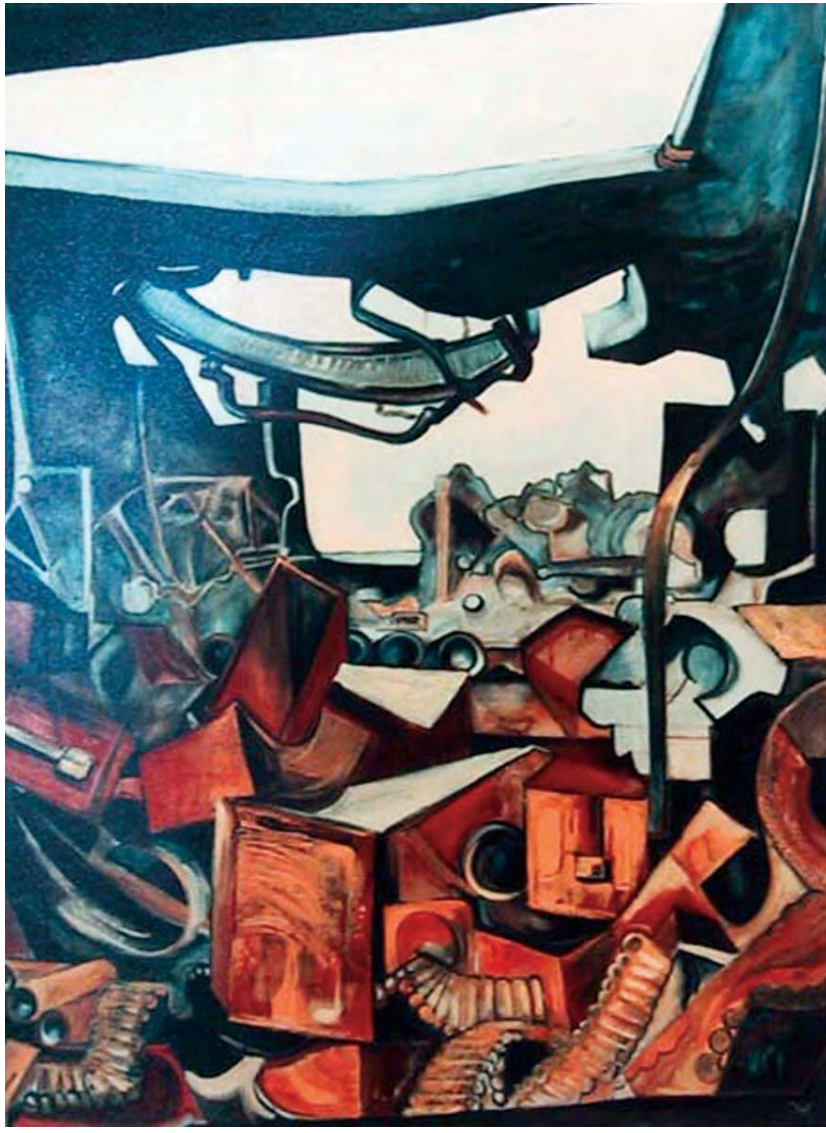
David M. Lavender 1966



Ronald A. Wilson 1967



Robert T. Coleman 1968



William C. Harrington 1968



Stephen H. Randall 1968



Stephen H. Randall 1968



James R. Pollock 1967



James R. Pollock 1967



James R. Pollock 1967



James R. Pollock 1967



James R. Pollock 1967



James R. Pollock 1967