

## ARTS COMMENTARY

## 'These quiet pictures': Suzanne Opton's soldier portraits



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The typical image of a soldier – when we're allowed to see any at all, these days – usually shows him or her loaded down with equipment, weapon in hand, ready for action.

And they always, always, have their game face on.

Suzanne Opton's photographs of soldiers are something quite different: individual, oversized color portraits of soldiers in repose. Instead of the typical, upright pose, their heads are horizontal, resting on a surface. Often they're staring off into the distance, or their eyes are closed.

The images are powerful, so compelling, it's difficult to look away.

"It's an unusual way of seeing a face, so that takes us by surprise," Suzanne Opton says, speaking over the phone from her New York studio. "It's kind of an intimate way of looking at somebody. [It's like] someone opposite you on a pillow. You see your lover that way, you see your children that way. You don't see your colleagues that way.

"You see people you're intimate with in that position, so that allows us a kind of intimacy to these people who we normally have very little access to, because they're normally so encumbered with gear, that we have no idea who they are, really. It's surprising to see an intimate view of a person you know is a soldier."

The portraits have been exhibited in galleries across the country, as well as transformed into public art, on billboards.

The billboards show one photo, with the word SOLDIER in large, capital letters, and a Web site address: www.SoldiersFace.com. The billboard also contains the title of the portrait, which is the word Soldier, then the soldier's last name, then the number of days they've served in Iraq and/or Afghanistan.

"When they're large, when they're billboards, or they're large in a gallery, they're very intimate, because they're so close," Opton says. "They're very big. In the gallery, they're 41 inches by 52 inches, so they look kind of like the head of a fallen statue, which is part of the idea.

"I think it's kind of a woman's view of a male world. Yes, they are very action-oriented, there are a lot of heroics. This kind of brings it all to a quieter level. They're very quiet, I think."

She displayed the portraits on multiple billboards in Syracuse, N.Y. in 2006, and then on one in Denver during the Democratic National Convention. Five billboards were supposed to go up earlier this month in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn., but a week before the Republican Convention began, the billboard company, CBS Outdoor, cancelled the contract.

"They cancelled them so late that we weren't able to arrange much else," Opton says, though she was able to finally get another billboard in another Minneapolis location on Sept. 3.

"Their final reasoning was that they thought they looked dead. That a motorist driving by would be surprised that they looked dead."

It's surprising that they cancelled them, considering what's allowed on other billboards, Opton says.

"They're very sexual, some of them are violent. They're for films or fashion,

but they can be very violent or sexual or provocative. And that seems to be OK. But yet, this is not OK.

"The problem is, they own a huge amount of billboards. So much of America is now conglomerates. You think that they would have some responsibility to the public.

"They didn't quite understand that it was art. I kept telling them that, but they didn't quite get it. Billboards have been used by artists quite a bit in the past, but it's not the usual use of a billboard. A billboard is normally used for an advertisement. We weren't advertising anything."

The five Minnesota billboards would've been seen by an estimated 2.8 million people.

"It's not a political statement," Opton says of the images. "It's a political topic. It's not a partisan statement, certainly."

The idea for the project came when the portraitist began wondering how the war was affecting soldiers, and how their experiences might be expressed on their faces.

"I think that there are times in all our lives that we will always remember," she says, "either little events or big events that will shape us. And certainly going to war is one of those. And I had a son who would've been of draft age, at the time, and I thought, 'If he went to war, how would this affect his life? How would he adjust to this? How would this change him?'"

"That's really what I wanted to see. That's why I took these quiet pictures. Because I thought that maybe you could see this on somebody's face, some trace of what they had been through, what they'd done.

"And surely that's a big issue with soldiers. All these thousands of soldiers are coming back, and it's not easy, coming back from war. It's not easy for them, it's not easy for their families, it's not easy for the community. So I think that's in part what the photographs refer to, this return.

"And these were not any soldiers, these were soldiers who had recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan. They hadn't been at a desk job.

"I thought, who are these young soldiers who volunteer? I just wanted to see who they were."

Opton approached various Army bases, but Fort Drum, in upstate New York, was the only one that yes. Opton shot portraits of over 90 soldiers, using two large format cameras. First she took a traditional black and white portrait, with the soldier standing. Then, she asked each soldier to place his or her head on the table.

"The person puts their head down, and everyone puts their head down different," Opton says. "So the camera has to be adjusted for focus, sharpness, and the lighting is adjusted each time, so it can take a while. And during that time, it's quiet, and one's mind can wander.

"I didn't talk to people while we were doing that. Photographers have different ways of making portraits. I'm often interested in this quieter view of a person.

"When you trip the shutter, that's the moment that you [as the artist] choose. There's a lot that goes on before that moment. Photography can be kind of a collaborative process, where people bring their face to the camera, they present themselves to the camera, in the way they want to be seen. But ultimately, the photographer is the one who trips the shutter. You do, what? Wait and watch.

"Other people shoot differently. They



PHOTO COURTESY SUZANNE OPTON

Artist Suzanne Opton has photographed soldiers between tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. This portrait is identified as "Soldier Claxton: 120 days Afghanistan."

shoot-shoot-shoot. If you're shooting with a smaller camera, you're not waiting for anything, you're sort of capturing something that's on the move. That's a whole other thing."

And in those quiet moments, Opton captured something ineffable. The portraits are compelling, drawing you in. You try to read the looks on their faces: what are they thinking? What are they feeling? What have they seen and experienced in war?

"Most of the feedback has been very positive, but some people are offended," Opton says. "They're disturbed that they look vulnerable. Some think they look dead. But mostly, it's been very positive."

The portraits are mysterious, the soldiers' faces as enigmatic as Mona Lisa's smile.

"We really don't know what they are thinking," Opton says.

"They're very tender pictures, actually."

Opton also took photos of the soldiers with their wives and families, and also with their colleagues. Some soldiers balked at being photographed with other soldiers.

"Men never want to touch each other, that's for sure," Opton says. "Some of them said, 'I'm not touching another guy.' But they are very close. Who else has somebody who's gonna die for them? That's why I did that, because of the sense of the camaraderie; this love between soldiers is just incredible to me. I photographed them with their families, and their other family is their comrades. I thought that was appropriate."

Almost all the soldiers Opton took portraits of were redeployed.

"The titles of the images say how many days they were in Iraq, and Afghanistan, but I think almost all of them I met after their first tour of duty," the photographer says. "And of course they go back, two, three, four times."

She's thought about trying to go back and shoot the same soldiers again, after their additional tours of duty. If she could find them, she would like to shoot more portraits of them, she says.

Opton also went to Jordan to make portraits of displaced Iraqis.

"I thought, 'If you look at these soldiers as kind of victims of war, who are the victims on the other side?' And those victims are the Iraqis who had to flee their home."

It was a fascinating experience, she

says.

"All the people were very kind to me. They were very suspicious in the first place and said, 'Why are you doing this?' And I said, 'Well, we count the American dead and see pictures of battles, and really, we have no idea who the middle-class Iraqis are, who had to flee.'

"It's like you and me. If you've grown up, you have a professional life and a family, and one day, you receive a threat and it's too much. You lock your door and hire a car, pack one bag, and that's it, you never go back. I mean, that's shocking to go through that. And then they're in Jordan illegally, and they don't know where to go from there. Nobody wants them. No other country.

"These are middle-class, professional people that I photographed. There again, they're not our normal view of refugees in rags, living in tents. These are people who look like middle-class people. They're all professional people, and they have a very uncertain future. Their entire lives have been uprooted and changed forever. It was very interesting."

Opton has plans for more soldier billboards in other cities. There will be three in Houston, one in Atlanta, and two in Miami some time this month. Though she usually has a gallery showing in conjunction with the billboards, she was unable to find a sponsor in Miami.

"These particular images really work as billboards," she says. "There's a reason for them to be so big. So that was just lucky that I had those images that worked in that way. As an artist, you have an inkling, and you follow your nose, and you follow a leap into the black. And it sort of develops, like anything in life. It's the same way as having a family. You have a family, you don't know what's going to happen, how it's going to turn out. Life is like that. That's what's interesting about it.

"I think that photography is a license to go where you don't belong," Opton says. "That's what photographers do: Photographers go some place that they're curious about. It's not that I know so much about soldiers, or I know so much about Iraqis. I'm no expert. I just know about people. So what people see in the photographs is what they bring themselves.

"I do hope that people see the billboards and consider the situation of soldiers. I was hoping that the billboards would stir discussion of art and soldiering, both." ■