



James Gill, *Will Williams*, 2009



Inkjet print, 40 x 30 in.

Madeleine Doran Endowment Fund purchase, 2010.19

I have something that can't be cured. I have to cope with it and I cope with it by taking the hate that I had and trying to use it in a way that's positive. I think what I'm doing is positive.

—Will Williams¹

¹ Doug Moe, "Madison vet's struggle with Vietnam captured in 'The Good Soldier'," [Wisconsin State Journal](#) (October 27, 2009)



Artist Biography

James Gill (American, b. 1955) is a portrait, editorial, and fine art photographer based in Madison, Wisconsin. He has worked with many local organizations, including Wisconsin Public Television, Madison Opera, and the UW-Foundation, and his editorial photography has appeared in the regional magazine *Wisconsin Trails* and more recently in the Madison weekly *Isthmus*. In addition, his photography has been published further afield, in periodicals like the *New York Times* and *People* magazine.

Gill's portraiture has resulted in portfolios featuring Native Americans (*Wisconsin Tribal Histories*) and Wisconsin veterans of World War II, Vietnam, and the Korean military conflict. In addition, the May 2006 issue of *Wisconsin Trails* featured a selection of his portraits of veterans who served in World War II. About thirty of his photographs of Vietnam veterans, including his portrait of Will Williams, appeared in the exhibition *Back in the World: Portraits of Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans*, on view at the Chazen Museum of Art in 2009.



Location

Will Williams is currently installed at the Chazen Museum in the Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 17. To view this work in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

Visual Description

The photograph *Will Williams* is an inkjet print created in 2009 by the artist James Gill. The large photograph measures forty by thirty inches and depicts a portrait of an African American man named Will Williams. The image shows the subject from the neck up and he looks straight at the camera. The fact that he is not smiling makes him appear stoic. A graying mustache and goatee coupled with a deep wrinkle across the bridge of his nose reveal some information about his age. Williams wears a black shirt and black cloth beret with a leather or faux leather rim. The beret has some fabric wear along its left rim which suggests it is old or might be worn frequently. It is decorated with military insignia in the form of seven metal pins and one fabric patch. Sewn to the front center of the beret, the fabric patch contains the logo of the National League of POW/MIA Families. The circular logo is gold and features a black silhouette of a person with a watchtower and a barbed wire fence in the background. The phrase "you are not forgotten" is written in capital letters and embroidered underneath the circular logo. To the left of the POW/MIA patch sits a small rectangular pin. This pin contains a gold silhouette of an animal resembling a wolf with its mouth open. The phrase "nec aspera terrent" appears in gold beneath the wolf. Above this pin, is a gold chevron-shaped pin and to the left sit a pair of yellow bar-shaped pins. These matching yellow pins have red and green stripes and the number sixty-six in red sits atop the bar of at least one pin. In the photograph to the right of the POW/MIA Families patch is a pin featuring a green and red ribbon. Below this is a circular white pin with black design featuring a dove and black text that begins "Veterans;" the remainder of the text is obscured by the angle of the photograph and can't be read. Behind this is yet another white circular pin, slightly larger than the less, that is nearly completely obscured by the angle of the photograph, though there is some red printing on it. The backdrop behind the subject is gray. The light behind the subject is composed so that the upper two corners are darker and the area behind the subject is lighter, creating a haloed affect around his head.



Content and Context

I did a lot of soul searching, and it [went] back to my [Seminole] grandmother, who taught me about lovin' all people, that we are all part of this circle. And the part that really hit me was that when I would look at some of the stuff that I had done, that I'd hear other GIs using the [racial slurs] that I used, I saw where there was no difference than what was happening to me in Mississippi.

—Will Williams ²

James Gill's portrait of Vietnam veteran William B. Williams presents a man who has faced hardships throughout his life: from coming of age in the 1960s as a black man in Mississippi to fighting in Vietnam, where he witnessed traumas and the injustices of war. His experiences, as Williams himself has explained, resulted in a personal transformation from an angry, violent warrior to an outspoken advocate for peace and equal rights.

A portrait is a visual representation of an individual or their persona; simply put, a portrait is a depiction of someone. The way an individual is presented (or presents themselves) in a portrait, along with what they wear and what objects they might be shown holding or placed nearby, might influence how a viewer perceives the subject. In addition, decisions the photographer might make independent of the sitter—such as the angle used to shoot the image, the framing of the individual, and the size of the resulting image—might influence the viewer's interpretations of the subject's character.

Gill made this photographic portrait of Williams as part of a tribute project that paralleled Wisconsin Public Television's documentary *Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories*, which first aired in 2010. For this project, Gill photographed veterans who were interviewed for the documentary in sessions conducted throughout the state. Conceived in the tradition of art honoring and commemorating veterans of armed conflicts, Gill's photographs show the veterans decades after U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War ended in 1973. He subsequently published a book of the project entitled *Back in the World: Portraits of Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans*.

Gill gave his sitters the choice of what to wear and how he or she wanted to be seen. For their portraits, made between 2007 and 2009, many wore uniforms or held mementos of their service. Recalling the project, Gill has said, "Portraits can tell stories when people put their masks down and stop being protective. Some [of these veterans] were open, some were not. I didn't ask them not to smile, but most of them didn't. The way they stood and what they wore also gives insight into their personality."

Larger than life-size, the portrait of Williams frames his face, topped by a black beret decorated with a POW-MIA patch and many pins, which are meaningful reminders of his life as a veteran. Williams enlisted in the army in 1962 to escape the racism he experienced as a young black man growing up in Mississippi. He took Basic Training and AIT (Advanced Individual Training) at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. After a three year tour of duty in Germany, Williams re-enlisted in July 1965 for six additional

² Oral History Interview with William B. Williams (Wisconsin Veterans Museum, 2005), 20



years and was sent to Vietnam in January 1966. The horizontal pin with green and red stripes and the year '66 indicates Williams served in a military campaign in 1966. The pin with a wolf's head is the unit crest of the 27th Infantry Regiment, nicknamed the "Wolfhounds," to which Williams belonged. When he arrived in Vietnam, his unit was building a base camp in Cu Chi. The Latin motto *Nec Aspera Terrent* on the pin means "frightened by no difficulties." During his one-year tour—what would be his first of two—Williams became a squad leader (i.e. staff sergeant) in the 27th Infantry Regiment, which is indicated by the gold pin with three chevrons over a single curved band.

The POW/MIA patch (emblem for the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia) evokes a story recorded in William's oral history, which is archived at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. He recalled an incident when another sergeant's squad was killed, and the sergeant himself was presumed to be captured by the enemy. According to Williams, the subsequent search for the sergeant, with which he was involved, was his longest operation in the field. Years later, he learned that the sergeant had been released as a prisoner of war.

Returning to the United States in 1967, Williams was so bothered by anti-war protests that he requested to return to Vietnam. Although the exact year is obscured on the second campaign pin higher on Williams' beret, it probably reads "69", the year of his second tour of duty in Vietnam. Williams was honorably discharged in March 1970 with two Bronze Stars and a Purple Heart.

Williams admits that he was enthusiastic in the fight against the Viet Cong. Initially, the stresses of war and the violent deaths fellow soldiers fueled his anger. However, trauma he experienced, actions and events that upset his moral sensibilities, and racism he experienced as an African American soldier in the U.S. Army bothered him. With the release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, he came to believe the U.S. government was not forthright about the reasons behind its military campaign in Vietnam, and he began researching the political history of the country. In addition, Williams struggled with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and was afflicted with nightmares and flashbacks, which intensified during the First Gulf War. Over time, he underwent a personal transformation. As Williams explained:

"The Vietnam experience, I found some good in it now. I see where out of all the bad things that happened there, all the bad that I did that something good was in Vietnam and that was that I learned to respect life more than I had before... So it made me see people as people all over the world, to realize that my life is no more important than life in Afghanistan or Iraq, and that what we are missing I think in this country as a whole is the ability of people to understand different cultures are different but they are human, that they bleed, they breath as we do."³

Williams started becoming active in the Madison Area Peace Coalition in the lead up to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The pins to the right of the POW/MIA patch speak to Williams transformation from soldier to social activist. He has become an outspoken member of Veterans for Peace. The pin further to the right references the organization Vietnam Veterans Against the War. The ribbon-shaped pin with black, green, and white stripes and a red triangle, refers to the flag of Palestine, and thus shows

³ Oral History Interview with William B. Williams (Wisconsin Veterans Museum, 2005), 28-29



solidarity for the Palestinian people, whose historic homeland is controlled by Israel. Williams is also an advocate for equal rights for African Americans and Native Americans.

Williams has spoken openly on several occasions about his military service, experiences in Vietnam, and his life after the war. In addition to the WPT documentary and the oral history he recorded in 2005 for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, Williams was one of five veterans from different American wars featured in the 2009 documentary film *The Good Soldier*, directed by Lexy Lovell and Michael Uys.

Williams has lived in the Madison area since 1973.



Discussion Questions

1. Of this project, photographer James Gill has said, “Portraits can tell stories when people put their masks down and stop being protective. The way they stood and what they wore also gives insight into their personality.” What insights does this portrait give us into the type of person Will Williams is? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Williams is a prominent activist throughout Madison who is often spotted wearing the beret pictured here - a hat that is both a reminder of trauma and a symbol of resilience. If you were to sit for a commemorative portrait, what would you wear? How would you want to be seen?
3. Will Williams believes protesting injustice, immorality, or any circumstance where the United States is not living up to its creed is the most “patriotic thing” that you can do as an American. Do you agree or disagree with him?
4. What is the impact of this photograph being larger than life-size? Why do you think the artist might have printed it that way?

Collection Connections for Further Engagement: *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

Harold Feinstein (American, 1931—2015). [*Soldiers Embarking, San Francisco, Cal*](#), 1956. Gelatin silver print, 13 15/16 x 11 in. Gift of Dr. Kristaps J. Keggi.

An Army draftee of the Korean conflict, photographer Harold Feinstein carried his camera with him from basic training to the troop ship and into Korean villages, capturing intimate and unfiltered scenes of both conflict and comradery amidst tragedy.

Tom Jones (American, Ho-Chunk, b. 1964). [*Ho Chunk Veterans*](#), 2001. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in. Elvehjem Museum of Art General Endowment Fund, 2002.53.

Photographing the Ho-Chunk tribe’s community Memorial Day powwows since 1999, Tom Jones addresses the role and responsibility of veterans as central to traditional ceremonies, noting that Ho-Chunk warriors have fought in the U.S. military long before their legal acceptance as U.S. citizens.



Larry Towell (Canadian, b. 1953). [*Army Maneuvre, Cuscatlan, El Salvador*](#), n.d. Gelatin silver print, 12 5/8 x 18 7/8 in. Alice Drews Gladfelter Memorial Endowment Fund purchase, 1998.69.

Larry Towell first traveled to El Salvador as part of a human rights delegation. He'd later spend over ten years documenting the civil war there. Rather than focus on the combat, his photographs record the human impact through vignettes of the most vulnerable, such as grieving mothers or fleeing children.

William Weege (American, b. 1935). [*Peace is Patriotic*](#), 1967. Portfolio of twenty-four offset lithographs (one with screenprint) and one screenprint, each approx. 23 x 18 in. Gift of Scott Robertson, 2001.87a-z

Weege, a UW—Madison alumnus and professor, created this portfolio protesting the Vietnam War as a master's degree thesis project at UW, publishing it on July 4, 1967. At the time, eight of the prints from the portfolio were turned into posters and disseminated widely.



Additional Resources

Will Williams's oral history interview is archived at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. A transcript is available as a pdf and the link to the catalogue record is here:

<https://wisvetsmuseum.pastperfectonline.com/archive/B6098775-B276-49AD-A627-989384697813>

Wisconsin Public Television (produced and directed by Mik Derks), *Wisconsin Vietnam War stories: Our Veterans Remember* (2008), 180 min. Excerpts can be found:

preview for the documentary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpx90C5n1fU>

on racism in Mississippi and losing a friend: <https://pbswisconsin.org/watch/wisconsin-war-stories/wisconsin-war-stories-vietnam-escalation-elusive-enemy/>

David Dahmer, "Everybody that Stands Against What is Destroying this Country is Patriotic," *Madison365* (October 16, 2017), <http://madisonvfp.org/everybody-that-stands-against-what-is-destroying-this-country-is-a-patriot/>

Phil Klay, "Can the Trauma of War Lead to Growth, Despite the Scars," *The New York Times* (July 6, 2020) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Doug Moe, "Madison vet's struggle with Vietnam Captured in The Good Soldier," *Wisconsin State Journal* (October 27, 2009), https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/doug_moe/doug-moe-madison-vet-s-struggle-with-vietnam-captured-in-the-good-soldier/article_96ef0e28-c345-11de-9e27-001cc4c03286.html [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

David Wood, "A Warrior's Moral Dilemma," *Huffington Post* (March 2014), <http://projects.huffingtonpost.com/projects/moral-injury>