



A Veteran's Healing Through Abstract Expression: Examining Michael Novotny's Artistic Portfolio

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ABSTRACT

Michael Novotny's creative journey began early in his life; however, during the 20 years he spent in the US Army, his artistic style truly emerged. Over his military career, his experiences shaped the themes and techniques of his distinctive abstract art, which forged a visual language deeply influenced by it. This analysis will explore six works within his portfolio that draw attention to the veteran experience and the artist who lives with trauma and traumatic recovery.

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MICHAEL NOVOTNY—THE VETERAN AND THE ARTIST

First Sergeant (Ret) Mike Novotny dedicated two decades of his life to the United States (US) Army, serving in various leadership and intelligence roles. His career expanded global assignments, including deployments in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). His distinguished service is recognized through numerous awards, including, but not limited to, the Meritorious Service Medal, Drill Sergeant Badge, and Parachutist Badge. Beyond his military experience, Novotny pursued his education, earning a Master of Arts degree in Humanities Studies. He is currently enrolled in a Doctorate of Visionary Practice and Regenerative Leadership program. Not only is Novotny a veteran and scholar, but he is also a visual artist whose work explores the depth of human experience through abstract, non-objective painting. With his experience and education, he draws from diverse disciplines—art, philosophy, history, and music—to examine themes of individualism, community building, and cultural evolution. His experience in the army allows him to draw from his military training, lived experiences, and trauma. His art prioritizes emotion over meaning, inviting viewers to engage with their feelings rather than search for interpretation. Beyond his visual work, Novotny is dedicated to raising collective consciousness through art and writing. Through his practice, he challenges perceptions, encourages mindfulness, and seeks to illuminate the complexity of human thought and emotion.

WHEN HEALING MEETS ABSTRACT EXPRESSION

A MOTHER'S CLIMB THROUGH COMPLEXITY

A viewer could have a visceral emotional or physical reaction to *A Mother's Climb Through Complexity* (Figure 1), Novotny's (2024) mixed media on canvas. It is easy for the bright red steps to capture the viewers' attention because red, which is correlated to human sensory associations (Elliot & Maier, 2014; Shibasaki & Masataka, 2014), could represent a warning that the steps are burning hot or stained with blood. In many cultural art traditions, red symbolizes blood, strength, transformation, and vitality (Gage, 1999; Turner, 1967). As a figure of a pregnant Black woman wearing traditional African clothes navigates the steps, parts of her hand, wrist, and lower leg show her interaction with them. The viewer may notice that her left hand appears stained with the red paint from the stairs, which could symbolize some transference of the strength, transformation, and vitality associated with the color to her (KB). These seem like attributes she will need due to the strings that support the

steps breaking when she encounters them. These attributes will offer protection from the stairs to safeguard her, her womb, and the life contained within it. Although pregnant, her figure still possesses a buoyancy, belaying the precarious stairs. She floats upwards, perhaps propelled from below by an ascendingly angled labyrinth; the ascentation could represent progress over the uneven ground (BM).

The artist's description of *A Mother's Climb Through Complexity* was inspired by their recent exploration of intersectional identity and its relationship with discrimination and privilege (Novotny, 2024) and asks the viewer to take



Figure 1 *A Mother's Climb Through Complexity*.

Note. The artwork is used with the artist's express permission.

a more intellectual approach with their interpretation. This approach may ask viewers to short-circuit their visceral response to the work and, in doing so, bypass the trauma and recovery that underlies it (BM) and overcome their aesthetic racism (KB)—the ejection or devaluation of Black representation in visual culture due to racialized standards of beauty or worth (Taylor, 2016; hooks, 1995).

Novotny suggests the labyrinth as a starting point. A traumatic moment can rupture an individual or a community's connection with components of identity and self-definition, which is widely supported by literature (see Berman et al., 2020; Truskauskaitė-Kuneviciene et al., 2020). Taking an intellectual approach to an artwork depicting trauma, strength, transformation, and vitality can create an artificial safe space for the viewer, insulating them from experiencing a genuine emotional rupture (BM). However, by engaging critically rather than reacting instinctively, viewers can move beyond any aesthetic racism, fostering a deeper connection with the artwork and acknowledging Black representation as an essential and valuable part of art history (KB).

Allowing the viewer's attention to be seized by the fragile red steps places them in that moment of rupture. While they may not experience the woman's pain to the same extent, they can nonetheless share in her uncertainty—whether imagining the searing heat of burning hot or, blood-stained stairs or absorbing the strength, transformation, and vitality embedded within them. This experience may draw the viewer closer to the woman, compelling them to help and making them vulnerable in the process. At that moment, they may feel an inner urge to provide aid, becoming physically and emotionally present. In doing so, the viewer transitions from sympathy—seeing themselves in another—to empathy—seeing another as themselves (BM). Novotny's *A Mother's Climb Through Complexity* conjures a moment of communion and human connection, allowing the viewer to experience an echo of the Black woman and Black mother's experience within themselves (KB).

In his descriptive catalog (see <https://mikenovotnyart.com>), the artist reveals that he sees himself as the child inside the womb. By placing himself in this perspective, he encourages the viewer to do the same. From this vantage point, the viewer not only witnesses the trauma of the climb from within the womb but also experiences the buoyancy of the maternal figure. The catalog suggests that being lifted from trauma, protected by the mother's sacrifice, and grounded in the upward-arching labyrinth is sustained by the maternal. As a result, the viewer may find themselves emotionally prepared, in the future, to navigate their own journey slowly and intentionally (BM).

MAN DOWN!

In *Man Down!*, Novotny used a combination of acrylic, spray paint, and decoupage to express a sudden release



Figure 2 Man Down!.

Note. The artwork is used with the artist's express permission.

of emotions (Figure 2). Unlike *A Mother's Climb Through Complexity*, there appears to be no path to strength and vitality—there only appears to be traumatic rupture (BM). *Man Down!* communicates psychological and emotional symbolism and, according to Novotny (2022), represents the closing out of their military career. Novotny used a collage technique that implements contemporary pop art. The painting is centered on a figure wearing half of a gas mask on the right side of their face with a green canister that appears to have Chinese calligraphy in cāoshu cursive script. In the reflection of that lens, there appears to be an explosion. On the left side, the face is bare, and the eye appears covered in protective eyewear with the reflection of the “Welcome to the Fabulous Las Vegas” sign. The figure has a collar made of the United States Constitution with an American flag draped over its shoulders and is swaddled in it like a newborn. The figure also wears what appears to be a Cuban link-style gold chain with a medallion engraved with a Spartan helmet. Red lines are bursting from the figure's head, creating a visual effect reminiscent of an explosion. The word “BOOM!” is written in comic book-style text, reinforcing the impact of the explosion (KB). The background contains circular patterns with multiple written languages. The writings are suggestive of Arabic and Arcane Greek

writing with Mandarin logographs. The polyglot of languages creates a sense of chaos and information overload and suggests a connection that spans different times and places (BM)—specifically two decades of military service.

The consciousness of this artwork appears to be from traumatic intrusion—personal and universal (Herzog et al., 2022). The American and military cultural symbols could represent an autobiography, expressive therapy, navigating trauma, or transformation and growth. In my opinion (KB), Novotny appears to be defining his personal narrative by using fragments of memories and military identity to reinforce their history as a form of therapy—both joyous and painful. Therapy can help process emotions, with “process” being a sanitized word (BM). Those who suffer from trauma initiate the traumatic recollection in a process that is akin to a controlled explosion (Back et al., 2022), which appears to be represented by the “BOOM!” in this artwork (KB). Within the analogy of a controlled explosion, Novotny is shifting through the debris fields of memories, which can be fragmented from trauma, and exploring and analyzing the details of the traumatic experiences to create a consciousness (BM) that moments of rupture initiate (Bedard-Gilligan & Zoellner, 2012).

Man Down! communicates that a controlled explosion lays bare traumatic intrusion, redefines personal narratives, and acknowledges difficult experiences. Thus, sifting through the debris and exploring memories can allow them to be turned into something meaningful (BM). This process is not beautiful unless Yeats’ (1916) phrase, “terrible beauty” (line 80), is being used, which has a philosophical meaning that reflects the idea of profound change or revolution. Moreover, *Man Down!*, like Yeats’ *Easter 1916*, shows us life is “transformed utterly” (line 39), which has a philosophical meaning that personal change can sometimes be violent and radical.

YOU-SEA-MY-DOOR

You-SEA-My-Door, painted in 2018, is an abstract landscape utilizing acrylic, string, sand, and concrete to express hope (BM) or peace (KB) (Figure 3). For viewers of this artwork who are not familiar with trauma and traumatic recovery, it might not make sense that *You-SEA-My-Door* is not only the most optimistic of the artworks but also the earliest work of Novotny. Like this manuscript’s timeline, traumatic recovery is not a linear process (Schiepek, 2009). Those who suffer from trauma know that therapy can help develop ways to come to terms with horrific experiences (Gjerstad et al., 2024) by offering hope and moments of transcendence. However, trauma can adjust and still find “[a] way in.” In response, trauma survivors adapt, develop new coping strategies, and discover new moments of transcendence (BM).



Figure 3 You-SEA-My-Door.

Note. The artwork is used with the artist’s express permission.

In therapy, a trauma survivor may be asked to imagine an actual safe place that is distinct from the artificial safe space of limited engagement and to use sensory cues (e.g., touch, sight, sound, hearing, and smell) to create it (McGreevy & Boland, 2020). The actual safe space is both a refuge from reliving traumatic events and serves as a place of recovery; it can be spiritual and practical. *You-SEA-My-Door* reminds me of such a place (BM). It, too, gives inviting sensory cues, as illustrated by the artist’s use of the texture on the rough concrete and the sandy beach. These visuals can take a trauma survivor to a physical and mental safe space (Kelly & Garland, 2016).

In this artwork, the sea lies in the foreground and is neither calm nor threatening. The depiction of the water conveys tidal movements and waves hitting the shore, which suggest that it is alive and vital. The difference in the size of the waves can also represent change and rebirth (BM). The sandy shore not only offers a dramatic transition through a line of demarcation between land and sea, but also a safe destination. The sand can be a place for a seaside vacation that offers refuge from the charging waves and represents a soldier’s trauma of being in the desert. In this case, the Iraqi desert (KB). The horizon is bare concrete, stark enough to suggest desolation, but also smooth and deliberately textured, suggesting artistic intervention (BM).

The third element is a red bridge suspended by ropes, which is reminiscent of the red stairs in *A Mother’s Climb Through Complexity* and the “BOOM!” in *Man Down!*. The bright red planks start in the sea, which stains parts of the blue ocean. However, this is not the wine-dark sea from Homer’s *Iliad*, which was used to suggest the turbulent,

chaotic nature of the sea during the time of war, leaving it desolate (BM) (Lapham's *Quarterly*, n.d.; Poundstone, 2024). Rather, the sand absorbs and limits the strength of the sea, creating a sense of relaxation (KB). The bridge leads to the textured horizon, and although it appears to be peaceful, there are no promises of safe arrival to shore. Having already examined *A Mother's Climb Through Complexity*, there are known dangers inherent in crossing the red steps. Nonetheless, the bridge is inviting, just like the safe spaces created in therapy. Therefore, as a viewer (BM), *You-SEA-My-Door* can be seen as both a refuge and a launching-off point that can be used not just as an escape but as a touchstone in coming to terms with trauma.

ACHILLES WOUNDED 2.0 AND SIZE YOURSELF

Achilles Wounded 2.0 and *Size Yourself* suggest larger perspectives of time and place. *Achilles Wounded 2.0*, a mixed media on canvas, used spray paint and acrylic to create a textured portrait of Homer's hero from the *Iliad* (Figure 4). The catalog description of this artwork tells us that Novotny "Create[d] this piece as he learned tools for resilience and fighting depression between 2015–2018". By embodying his strength and resilience, Novotny presents *Achilles Wounded 2.0* as an offering that represents warrior ethos, which is ideally suited to recovering from trauma (BM). In my opinion, this choice of gold is very significant (KB). In alchemy—transmuting base metals into the purest form of matter—gold represents the transformation into something purer or more valuable, both materially and spiritually (Hermetic Academy, n.d.). Gold has also long

been associated with knowledge, enlightenment, and spiritual awakening across various cultures and traditions (Jones, 2024). Even though Achilles' battle ends in death, his struggle lives on through artistic expression both in the everlasting writing of Homer and, more specifically, on this canvas (BM).

Size Yourself is a work of abstract expressionism inspired by the Fermi Paradox, which argues that in a universe so vast, there is the likelihood of earthlike planets with human-like civilizations in other places and times exist (Shkurko, 2024). The figure in *Size Yourself* (Figure 5) is a



Figure 4 Achilles Wounded 2.0.

Note. The artwork is used with the artist's express permission.



Figure 5 Size Yourself.

Note. The artwork is used with the artist's express permission.

silhouette of a soldier as the central focus. Although it appears to be a soldier wearing all their gear, the shape of the figure also resembles the African continent. The colors—gold, red, and cream—create a layered, textural effect against the dramatic black background. The base of the painting appears to have a golden, cracked, earthlike quality, which suggests terrain. The contrast between the silhouette and splattered background creates visual tension for the viewer; however, the purple lavender draws the eyes upward (KB). The figure also appears rooted in the Earth, but their gaze directs itself to the stars, seeing and experiencing the life and beauty possible in the universe. It is quite possibly the artist's intent that in seeing oneself as part of a community that has endured trauma that has spanned history through the vastness of time and place, it is possible for the viewer to understand that trauma is not only shared but with time and place, can endure and transcend trauma (BM).

As a viewer, interpreting *Size Yourself* through the lens of the Fermi Paradox created an intriguing conceptual framework (KB). The silhouette stands isolated against a dark, seemingly empty void, much like how life on Earth appears to be alone in the vast universe, with the lavender symbolizing the unknown future of humanity's expansion. By seeing *Size Yourself* as Africa—the cradle of human evolution (Wayman, 2011)—as distinct and internally complex, the artwork parallels the figure and Earth's current situation in the universe according to the Fermi Paradox—filled with unlimited potential.

DE-STRUCK SOMETHING

De-struck Something is a work of abstract impressionism, utilizing acrylic and concrete to convey the start of a journey (Figure 6). This artwork is a compelling exploration of color, texture, and spatial division, which presents a combination of warm and cool tones that create a sense of depth and movement within a structured framework. The artwork is meticulously organized into vertical panels, each with its own distinct color palette and textural quality. The rigid vertical divisions are softened by weathered textures that blend between sections, creating tension between the geometric precision and the organic fluidity. Unlike his previous works that use striking and saturated colors, this painting employs a more pastel palette dominated by warm ochre and amber tones, muted sage and seafoam greens, soft grays and neutral backgrounds, and accents of turquoise (KB).

Here, Novotny demonstrates remarkable skill in creating textural depth, with each panel having multiple layers, revealing glimpses of the underlying colors that create a sense of aged, weathered surfaces. The texture suggests a scraping technique, and combined with these colors, they interact in a way that suggests a stratified Earth or abstract geological formations. Beyond its visual appeal, this artwork speaks to themes of fragmentation and unity, the passage of time, and the interconnectedness of seemingly distinct elements. It also represents a departure for the artist from his previous techniques (KB). The catalog description tells the viewer, "It is distressed, yet neat and



Figure 6 De-struck Something.

Note. The artwork is used with the artist's express permission.

orderly. The viewer can see that balance and symmetry are holding the piece together as it is falling apart.” For many, trauma can feel like an effort to hold things together even as they are falling apart (BM).

Michael Novotny’s portfolio depicts a veteran’s struggle with trauma, traumatic recovery, growth, and healing. For more information about his portfolio, please visit <https://usvaa.org/michael-novotny/> or <https://www.instagram.com/mikenovotnyart/>. For veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health concerns, please visit the US Department of Veterans Affairs website <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/> for the National Center for PTSD or call the Veterans Crisis Line using the following options: dial 1-800-273-8255, dial 988 then press 1, or text 838255 to chat. We encourage you, if you are struggling with trauma, to seek help.

NOTE

Micheal Novotny’s website, <https://mikenovotnyart.com>, which is referenced in this manuscript, is currently down and under construction—it will be available soon.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Ethical approval was not required. The artwork used in this publication is displayed with the artist’s express permission.

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Bernard McKenna is an associate professor at the University of Delaware. His most recent work focuses on the Negro Leagues. He has also published on trauma in theatre from the North of Ireland. He volunteered for the ESGR in the 2010s and has worked with veterans and veteran groups. He is also struggling with PTSD.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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