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Review by Paula Kent

Veteran Vision Project's The Wall

By Devin Mitchell | veteranvisionproject.com

The [Veteran Vision Project](http://veteranvisionproject.com) began on August 8, 2014, and is the result of photographer Devin Mitchell's desire to tell the stories of veterans through a journalistic scope using photos. On the website, Mitchell posts images of veterans from various branches of service that display both the service aspect of life and domestic life on a page called The Wall. The juxtaposition of the images contained in the photos demonstrates the split lives of military personnel: one part of the image shows the service member in uniform, and the other represents their domestic life. More specifically, the mission of the project is as stated:

The Veteran Vision Project is a photo documentary, featuring authentic military service members and their lives. The photo subjects represented are not commissioned models or actors. The people and the artifacts belonging to them as photographed in this project are real. This is currently an independent, privately funded and organized academic photo essay of American military service members through a series of images. The mission is to help veterans heal by providing them with a voice. ("About")

Moreover, it is not a project that solely focuses on veterans: "active duty, reserve and guard members are welcome to participate" as well ("Register"). The focus here is on all those who serve or have served in the military, no matter how they served. Overall, Mitchell's images display a rawer side of service solely through a visual medium. The only writing on the images is the name of the subject and the branch in which they serve(d).

The goal of the project is to display 10,000 images of military service members. Currently, 343 images can be seen on The Wall. No two images are alike. In fact, the diversity on display is one of the most important aspects of the project. Additionally, because no stories accompany the images, the viewer is afforded some leeway in their assessment of what they see. It is, for all intents and purposes, an online art gallery that welcomes viewer interpretation. For example, Figure 1 below is the photo that appears on The Wall for United States Army member Emily Abrams. No one is in the photo with her on either side. In the mirror, is an image of Abrams in her service uniform with her hair pulled back, and she wears minimal make-up. On the opposite side of the mirror, Abrams stands in the bathroom in civilian clothes—a sorority t-shirt to be more specific—and her hair has been styled in curls. There is a clear difference between the representation of the same woman. As a soldier, Abrams appears stoic, and as the member of a sorority, both her hair and her stance (with her hand on her hip) indicate a sense of youth and fun. More importantly, however, is that the military member in the photo chooses how they will be photographed.



Figure 1: Emily Abrams-United States Army. **Source:** veteranvisionproject.com

Despite the interpretation of the viewer, the image is ultimately how Abrams assesses herself. Nevertheless, because there are no words to accompany the image, different viewers can apply other interpretations.

Another image that demonstrates the power of this online project, while also demonstrating the diversity amongst those in military service, is in Figure 2 below. In this image, Dustin Cattani of the United States Navy also stands in a bathroom. However, his bathroom paints a much different image of service. In the mirror, Cattani is in his service uniform and seems to be pleading with his civilian self. His face appears to show emotions of worry, concern, and perhaps even sadness. His hand reaches out from the mirror as if to tell his counterpart to stop what he is doing because his civilian self is drinking. Despite the appearance of wearing a suit, Cattani, in his civilian clothing, is drinking alcohol straight from a bottle. Moreover, there is another bottle of liquor as well as a can of beer on the bathroom sink. Once again, there is a clear distinction between the two versions of Cattani. It appears as if the return to civilian life might have been too difficult for Cattani, and as a result, he turned to drinking. The image even goes so far as to suggest that Cattani may be an alcoholic.



Figure 1: Dustin Cattani-United States Navy **Source:** veteranvisionproject.com

This is a difficult topic that Mitchell captures beautifully. This is merely one interpretation of this image based on how Cattani projects himself within the photo. Depending on one's own life experiences, interpretations will surely vary.

Though only a few images have been excerpted here, the power of each image is not to be taken lightly. Again, one of the main strengths of the project is the diversity it puts on display. There are images of families, both single and two-parent, both traditional and non-traditional; images that demonstrate sexuality, within both the heteronormative and the LGBTQ communities; and images that shed light on the darker side of service—in addition to alcoholism, the issue of suicide is put on display as well. The seriousness as well as the magnitude of this project can be seen in each of Mitchell's images. No subject is taboo, and the images force viewers to confront some aspects of military life that they may be unaware of or uncomfortable with. This is the ultimate purpose of The Wall: to tell the authentic stories of those who serve in the military and of the veteran experience. Moreover, the division seen within each image demonstrates how services members must confront the military-civilian divide both as active service members and as veterans. In doing so, Mitchell allows for viewers, especially those who are non-military members, to recognize an aspect of military life that most may never even consider. Even a cursory view of the images on The Wall's webpage is enough to render the viewer speechless. More importantly, viewing the images allows one to see how successful Mitchell has been in his campaign even though he is yet to reach his goal.

If there is one downside to the website, it is also the same thing that gives it a sense of uniqueness. The lack of stories that accompany the images could be construed as a weakness. If the stories are so important to Mitchell, then one might ask why the stories do not accompany the images. It is worth noting, though, that the stories do matter, and they can be seen via the social media effort of the overall project. In particular, the Facebook page and Instagram account dedicated to the project both allow for narratives to accompany the photos. In fact, the website prepares those who register to be photographed to write about themselves:

The photo project is an artistic effort to create a vast series of images that tell the stories of veterans and military men and women. Once your photo is taken, you will be required to submit a one paragraph written narrative about your life experience. This information will be VERY public via social media, because the photos themselves are a social media project. In light of this fact, you are strongly advised to NOT over exaggerate any details about your service. This is called stealing valor. You will be called out. You will upset people who knew you during your time in the military. You are encourage [sic] to remain honest throughout the process of your participation. I, Devin the photographer, will know nothing about you when showing up to your door step. ("Register")

Clearly, the stories do matter, but they are not present within the website. Nevertheless, it is the lack of written stories that gives The Wall strength when viewed as a work of art. The fact that Mitchell had an exhibit of the images in the Gallery of Art Design at the University of Central Missouri supports the notion that these images are meant to be seen as visual art, as visual rhetoric ("Exhibits"). While on the webpage, the viewer must interpret what he or she sees within each image. Viewers must allow the images to speak to them, even if the message takes them to an uncomfortable place. This is what successful art does, and Mitchell has turned military service, as well as how service members transition back into domestic society, into a successful form of art.

The sheer reach of this website, in addition to social media platforms, should allow for the project to achieve its goal of 10,000 images. In addition to The Wall, the website has begun expansion of the project. It also offers documentaries and video logs, though, only a few are posted as of now. The mini documentary that can be viewed currently is called "Suicide," and the posted video log allows one veteran to "voice his opinion on veterans who file false claims with the VA" ("Video Logs"). A recently released coffee table book can also be purchased via the website to help the project with funding to help reach the goal of 10,000 images. There are also the aforementioned ties to Facebook and Instagram, but the website seems to have a different intent outside of social media. Nevertheless, social media provides an opportunity to bring more awareness to the project, and it is awareness that Mitchell seems to deem most important.

Works Cited

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