

Beauty

By Ann Casapini

He was smart and his Senior Officers knew it. So they trained him as a medic and choppered him in to the front lines. During his first week in ‘Nam, at age eighteen, he was stitching up skulls. He was the “Doc” with the morphine. When one of the boys got his lower half blown away and begged Doc to permanently end the pain, he did.

When the shattered soldier/doctor returned home, a conscientious objector, the artist buried within began to create hundreds of fierce collages with hypodermic syringes, a mixture of ketchup/paint as blood, and hefty bags stuffed like body bags.

The doctors and nurses at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital might have known what to do with the teenage girls “in” for depression, anxiety, and anorexia, but they did not know how to handle the wounded warrior: the man of Irish descent from the suburbs of Boston, who had the heart and drawing talents of an artist, the hard body of an ice hockey player, and the lost dreams of professional baseball. They ordered him a straightjacket.

The other patients began to think of the Irishman as a kindly physician. Always fascinated with people’s stories, he listened intently to theirs, and they tried to bribe him daily for cigarettes. The TV room had an arbitrary white line painted on the floor and the “inmates” were forbidden to cross it. The medic meticulously obeyed.

“Meds!” “Meds!” Next there came the zombie-like line up for fistfuls of pills, but there were not enough pills to stop the collages from coming in “art therapy.”

The staff asked him for beauty, but with his wry, charismatic smile, the Veteran informed them, “Beauty is for amateurs.”