

GOOD LIVING

Artist's Commemorative Work, 'Fallen Heroes/Afghanistan' slated for US Congressman Jim Himes' Office in the Capitol Building

Connecticut Congressman Jim Himes recently acquired a commemorative mixed media artwork, "Fallen Heroes/Afghanistan" by Westport painter Marlene Siff. Visitors can view the work in Congressman Himes' Washington D.C. office in the Capitol Building beginning Nov. 1. Siff began the conceptual assemblage on Aug. 7, 2008, in response to her encounter with the New York Times' publication of the "Roster of the Dead." The unsettling roster engulfed three pages of the paper with the portraits, names, and ranks of all of the American soldiers who had lost their lives in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan up to that point. "I started looking at these photos of all these young men and I was just overwhelmed. I felt I had to do something. I had to make a statement," said Siff.

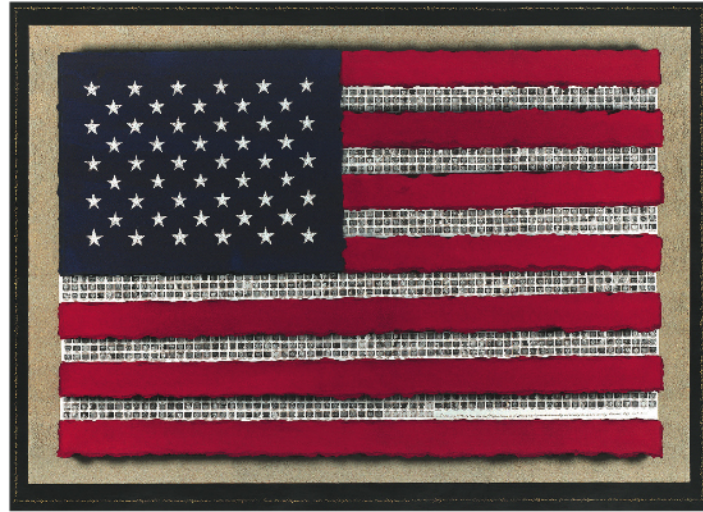
One of the project's major challenges for Siff was keeping track of the death toll, which changed daily. The completed memorial incorporates nearly 1,000 portraits, commemorating those who died up to December 31, 2009. These portraits appear on the white stripes of the American flag, protected and buried within the red stripes, which are raised four inches above the surface. The six-foot long stripes, composed of fastidiously torn paper, command attention; communicating the discipline of a soldier and arousing a feeling of mourning, sacrifice and strength. Handwritten text borders the flag, repeating the title of the work—"Fallen

Heroes/Afghanistan", over and over again, in a quiet manner, which feels like a homemade prayer and reminds us never to forget. Sand on a golden background references the excavation of the "Hidden Treasures" in Kabul, dating back to 3,000 B.C., that were recently reintroduced to the world. From 1979-2009, curators and guards of the Afghan National Museum risked their lives to hide the glittering relics from invaders and the Taliban. A layer of shell casings, donated by West Point Military Academy, lies gravely below.

Siff worked for two years to research and accumulate the names, ranks, and portraits of the soldiers who appear in her work, and to determine how to unite the portraits and the symbolic materials.

Congressman Himes will contribute to this powerful union between art and government by providing a space for the artwork to remain on display before it travels back to Connecticut for Siff's upcoming solo show in September 2012. Congressman Himes will invite military leaders, Pentagon officials and museum curators to visit the work (fall 2010 – fall 2012), with the mission of finding a more suitable location where it can be placed permanently on public display.

"Fallen Heroes" will be the magnum opus of Siff's show, titled "Elements of Peace," slated for display in The Walsh Art Gallery at Fairfield University from September through December 2012. Organized by Director Diana Mille, the



Contributed photo

"Fallen Heroes/Afghanistan" by Westport artist Marlene Siff will hang in the U.S. Capitol.

exhibition will include 47 large multi-dimensional paintings, works on paper and mobiles that attest to various elements of peace and respond to the philosophical theme of the exhibition, including "History/Geography", "Triage", and "Beshert" (a Hebrew word meaning 'meant to be').

The emotional experience of viewing "Fallen Heroes" is documented in a television episode of "Creative Women Today" that aired this past summer on Connecticut Cablevision, and featured a tour of Siff's studio while the work was in progress. Host Sally Fine described the work as "extraordinarily involved," "inspirational" and "beautiful."

"Fallen Heroes" is the third conceptual political work by Siff to receive international attention. In 2007, Ori Soltes, the former director of the B'nai

B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum in Washington, DC, exhibited and acquired for the museum's permanent collection, "Peace/War," an abstract painting that paid tribute to the 57 victims of the 1996 suicide bombings in Israel. In 2009, the National September 11th Memorial Museum selected "The Great Mystery That Surrounds Us" for feature on their Online Gallery.

Additionally, Siff has exhibited political works at her gallery in New York City, most notably "Tribute," a painting that compositionally references the Purple Heart and pays homage to the soldiers who are serving in Iraq, and "Delta Force," a watercolor and oil pastel painting created in honor of the military SWAT team that responded to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.