

NINA LIPKOWITZ **IST LT MORTON POLKOWITZ** 24 X 20" MIXED MEDIA

Nina Lipkowitz

BATTLE FATIGUE

Nina! This body of work goes beyond the meaning of just art. You have created a body of work that depicts life, history and love. A cohesive interpretation focusing on remembrance and personal meaning of time, space, shape and form. Please tell us about the exhibit at 510 Warren Street Gallery in Hudson, New York that you have called *Battle Fatigue*.

Nina Lipkowitz: First, I want to say "thank you" for giving me the opportunity to talk about my new work. I never realized how helpful it would be to think about it through language. Often I don't understand what I've done-I just do it.

The work in this exhibit is a departure from anything I've ever done before. As you know so well Harryet, I've been a sculptor and a potter. I've worked in watercolors and on my iPad, and a little bit on canvas. My work has always been a dance between light and color, circles and lines; often it's quite meditative... but this is the first time I have ever tried to tell a story like this. My new work has been inspired by some of my very difficult and very enigmatic father's experi-

ences during WWII, my attempts to understand who he was and what he went through during that war, and the scrapbook that my parents put together from material that he collected and carried with him for two years, through five European battles while he was in Patton's Third Army. All the paintings in the show are multimedia, using photo transfers of photographs, letters, papers, picture postcards, playbills and other memorabilia.

And what were the challenges you faced in creating this new art work?

Nina: Everything! Figuring out how to use this material and turn each painting into a work of art and a personal statement was an enormous challenge. In addition to the learning curve of doing an entirely new body of work in a new medium, I had stopped painting over two years ago. I once went ten years without making art so I had some faith that the magic would return. I trusted (sort of) that it would reappear in time. I had another problem. I knew that I had a show scheduled for early November, 2018 at the gallery in Hud-

son, NY and I had no idea what I was going to do. My last big show in June, 2017 and was all iPad images.

What was that moment when you began thinking about using this historical material for a project?

Nina: It's a big jump from looking at a family album and deciding to use it to make art. About a year ago I was working with a healer and for no reason that I can think of, (maybe that's what healers do?) I started talking about my dad's scrapbook. He got really excited, said that it sounded like an important historical document and that I should share it out in the world. That set my mind to thinking. How could I share it without destroying the material in this precious, fragile, 70-year-old scrapbook and what did I have to say about it?

Can you talk a bit about the scrapbook and what it has meant to you?

Nina: When I was a child there was a cabinet in our house that contained all of our family photo albums plus this scrapbook. I spent a lot of time alone, turning

those pages and looking at those images. I once asked my dad if he ever shot a gun or killed anyone and he said "no".

Here are the few things he did tell me: He told me that although he was thirty-two years old, he felt that, especially as a Jewish American, this was a war that needed to be fought, and he needed to be part of that fight. He told me that he used to refill his Zippo lighter by dipping it into the gas tank of his jeep and also, that Germans strung wires across the road and Army Jeeps would drive through them and soldiers would be decapitated so my dad figured out how to put a long pole on the front of his Jeep to cut through the wires. That's about all I learned from him.

Over the years that I've been looking closely at the scrapbook on my own, the things that I saw were photos of a concentration camp (Ohrdruf) that he helped liberate. (Looking at those photographs are how I learned about the holocaust); A faded and well worn six-pointed yellow star with the word "Juif" on it. (he did tell me a little bit about the encounter with the French Jew who gave it to him), a photo of women from Cherbourg. I recently discovered the same image on the internet and realized that the photo was not taken by my dad and it was of Belgian women who were accused of being collaborators. They had been stripped naked and tarred by their angry neighbors. Their heads were shaved and they were forced to give a Nazi salute. I call this painting "Victims or Collaborators?" They were mostly young mothers trying to feed themselves and their children. There are playbills from a weekend leave in London a month before D-Day, photos of soldiers doing everyday things. I particularly like one called "Sergeants Valentine and Sullivan" taken at Ft. Devens during basic training. There were Stars and Stripes newspapers, yellow and crumbling, with headlines like Hitler Dead. I used this transfer in my largest painting titled "Hitler Dead". There were *Blondie* and *Lil' Abner* cartoon strips and sports news from back home and so much more. I never asked him many questions, and he never talked much about any of it. There were some notes in the margins that I later learned were in my mother's handwriting that gave some hints as to some of what was going on. Google became my best friend. I spent hours and hours enlarging the images and Googling questions.

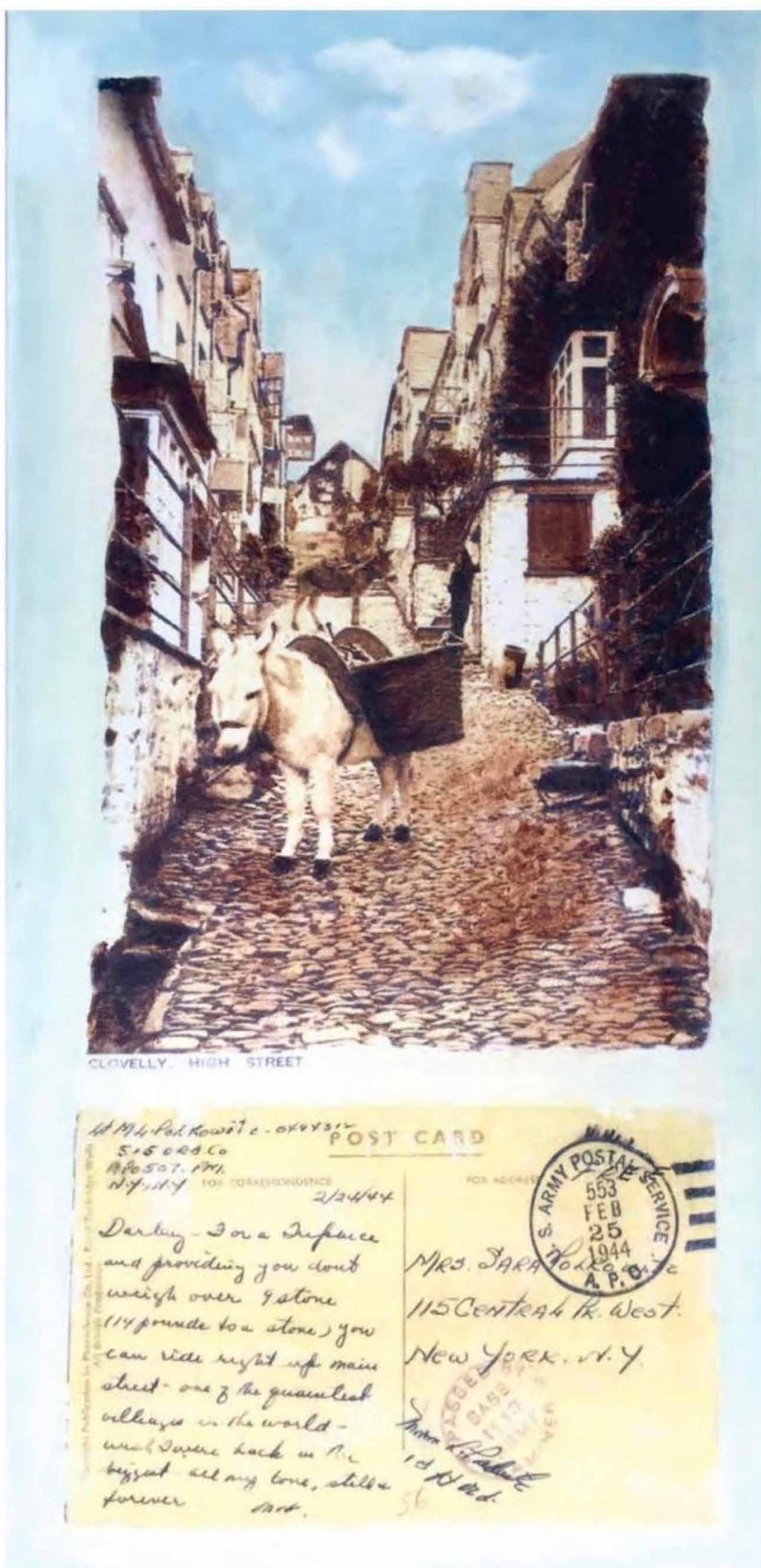
Eleven years after my father died my mother said to my sister and me, "How come nobody ever talks about Daddy?". I decided to open up a big conversation with this enigmatic man. Oh, how I wish I had my father here to talk to about it. I have so many questions.

I always wondered what my married, thirty-two year-old, lawyer, automobile dealer, father was doing as a First Lieutenant in an ordnance unit fighting all over Europe with Patton's Third Army while my mother and my one year-old sister lived with my mother's parents on the Upper West Side in Manhattan. I thought that my project might serve several purposes. It might give me a subject for a new show, it might be a way of sharing some of this WWII material, and it might help me better understand my enigmatic and difficult, father.

All this sounds incredible Nina, how did you begin? Please take us step by step through your process.

Nina: The first thing that I did was photograph every page and each individual item on every page. The second thing I did was order canvases in a variety of sizes and shapes. Since I had never worked like this before I didn't want to be frustrated by not having the material I might need. Then I had to purchase paints. What colors?

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NINA LIPKOWITZ **ALL MY LOVE STILL AND FOREVER** 24 X 20" MIXED MEDIA



NINA LIPKOWITZ **SERGEANTS VALENTINE AND SULLIVAN** 10 X 20" MIXED MEDIA

What medium? I just guessed at what I might need. Next, I needed to figure out how I was going to use the material from the scrapbook and make art. I had heard about a photo transfer process so I went on-line and watched many how-to YouTube videos, and slowly I began to experiment. I discovered that I couldn't use images printed on my own ink-jet printer since the ink was water soluble and would bleed, so I had to have my prints copied. This became one of the most frustrating and tedious parts of this journey. I knew that I needed to have many copies of each image, in a variety of sizes. Some needed to be in color, some in black and white and some in sepia. I also knew that it was time to begin to paint, but I truly had no idea what I was doing or how I was going to begin. At the end of May (Memorial Day Weekend) I finally put the first bit of paint on a canvas and the first two photo transfers which were photo portraits of my dad in his uniform ("1st Lieutenant Morton Polkowitz") I set myself a goal. I would begin the project around Memorial Day and finish and hang it around Veteran's Day in time for my 510 Gallery show in November in Hudson, NY. In my mind there was a certain symmetry to this idea.

How long have you been working on this project?

Nina: Without realizing it, I began this project the first time I sat quietly looking through the pages of the scrapbook in my parents' house, maybe from sixty years ago.

It must be one of your most important achievements? How would that be true?

Nina: I think that trusting my abilities as an artist and doing this project without any pre-conceived ideas of what I was doing or how I would do it was both crazy and a total act of faith. Definitely a major personal achievement. A painting is really just one mark at a time.

Have you felt exhausted at times from working furiously? I hope you took some yoga breaks!

Nina: All summer I worked in fits and starts. The two concentration camp paintings were overwhelming and I had to take frequent breaks while I was working on them. In fact, I wasn't sure if I would be able to use any of the photographs from the camp. Another thing that gave me a break was going back and forth between painting and transferring. The transfer process is actually quite relaxing and fun and it made a nice balance between the intensity of the paintings and the simplicity of the process.

What is the most important message you want viewers to know and absorb? Is it about you as an artist, or is it more about the historical event that matters most?

Nina: Stay open; you just never know from where or when your inspiration might come. Don't be afraid. As Yogi Berra said, "When there's a fork in the road, take it." The historical part is important, but without the willingness to take a chance on the complete unknown, I never would have learned what I did, both about my dad, and about the war. I certainly wouldn't have had any idea of how to communicate any of it to the world.

What techniques have you reeled in to create this masterful body of work, and what have you learned.

Nina: All the work in the show is multi-media on canvas. I have used acrylic for the photo transfers. I thought that I would finish the paintings with oil paints, but in the end, it became unnecessary.

First, I had to pour over the pages of the scrapbook and see what spoke to me. Some of the photos were so tiny that I didn't know what they were until I had enlarged

them. Next, I had to decide what images would simultaneously tell the story, work as photo transfers, and also work as integral parts of a painting. I had to teach myself the technical aspects of making photo transfers and combining them with paint on different-sized canvases with paints that I had never used before. I think the hardest part was making sure I didn't make the paintings decorative. I respected the material so much. I wanted to make sure that the message was not obscured.

Will this show travel to other parts of the state or country? It is truly educational and meaningful for all ages.

Nina: I would love for it to travel. If anyone has any ideas as to how to make that happen please contact me through my website at ninalipkowitz.com

How did this all begin? What did you find and discover in the forefront that made this come to fruition?

Nina: I considered writing a book and having the images professionally scanned. I contacted my amazing cousin Ellen Kleiner who has a publishing company called Blessingway Author's Services. She thought it was a great idea and told me that she would find me a ghost writer and suggested that I could tell him my stories and she could help me self-publish it. Now, I am an artist, and as little as I knew about the process of making this body of work I knew even less about writing a book. So I thought, I won't write a book. I'll try to make some sort of art project using these images.

This may never be finished. You might just want to keep working on aspects of this part of history you are working with now and develop it even more. Would that be true?

Nina: It's not complete. I look forward to discovering what happens next.

Has this been incredibly time-consuming, more than other exhibits you have put together?

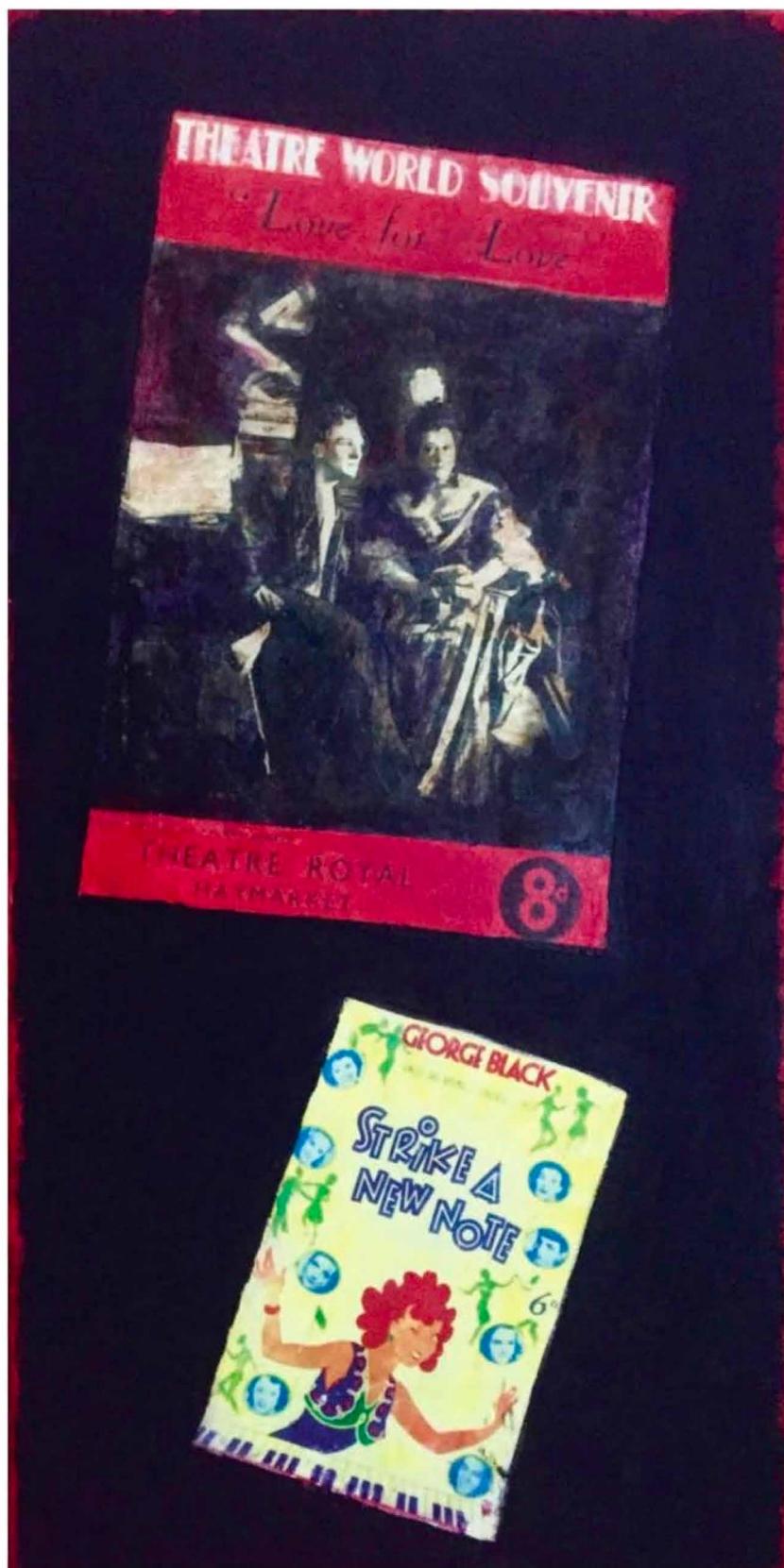
Nina: If you count the time I've spent pouring through the scrap book, photographing, enlarging, scanning, flipping and printing the images then having them all photo copied- all that before I began to touch paint brush to canvas- yes, it has been more time-consuming and taken more patience than any other work I've done.

What was a mind-boggling experience that you encountered that has touched you deeply?

Nina: Harryet, you know this story. I painted my first painting when I was fifteen years-old. It was the face of *Rima*, the magical, mystical bird girl from the book, *Green Mansions*. I had never painted with a brush so I mostly used my fingers to rub the paints into the canvas. The first day, my father came into the room where I was working and complimented me. That was unusual. My father didn't compliment. He was a passionate art lover and art collector, so I respected his words. I kept on working and the next day he looked at my painting and said, "Why don't you paint it over white and start again. Don't waste the canvas." I guess at that point I didn't respect his words, because I didn't do that. I do remember being shocked by his comment.

The next evening there was going to be a PTA art show at my school, and I liked the painting and put it in the show. The following morning, a boy I knew told me that his father wanted to buy my painting. That sounded pretty good to me. So I sold it to his father for \$25. The only

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NINA LIPKOWITZ DAD'S PLAYBILLS FROM LONDON | MIXED MEDIA



NINA LIPKOWITZ **HITLER DEAD** 48 X 36" MIXED MEDIA

thing I remember discussing with my father was how to price it.

Many years later, I did have a conversation with my father about his comment. That's another story for another day, but...I didn't pick up a paint brush again for almost fifty years. I guess I was pretty traumatized by his reaction. I've had to do a lot of healing work around it, and I think that I finally have forgiven him. So I would say that the most mind boggling thing about this work is that I made it at all.

Nina, what is your father's background story?

Nina: My father was an incredibly complicated and interesting man. Brilliant, charming, funny, critical, harsh and self-centered. A man of many passions. He was a respected and successful businessman. He loved and collected art and art books and amazing artist's letters. He played golf, worked to build the first synagogue in our town, and later in life became an

obsessive sailor on his beloved 41' ketch, Samora. He grew up in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. The oldest son of Jewish immigrant parents. His father was from Budapest, Hungary and came to the United States at fifteen, at the end of the 19th century with nothing. His mother came with her siblings from Oswicim, Poland, (later called Auschwitz). In New Jersey, the family business was buying and leasing horses, and later automobiles. My father grew up with horses and cars, and I heard that he loved to tinker with engines. He went to George Washington University in Washington, DC and graduated after five years with a combined BA and law degree. He went back home to New Jersey and worked in the family automobile business. He and my mother were married in September 1939, and my sister was born a few years later. In 1941, way too old to be drafted, he enlisted and became an officer attached to an ordnance division. He spent two grueling years in Europe with the Patton's Third Army.

I learned that it was his background in the automobile industry which gave him the training to oversee the men who were maintaining tanks and jeeps and other equipment. He was in Paris when it was liberated, in August 1944 and also at Rosh Hashanah services there a few weeks later in September. That's where he was given the now faded six pointed yellow star by a recently liberated anonymous French Jew who tore it off his jacket in gratitude to this Jewish American officer.

According to his discharge papers he participated in five battles: Normandy, Northern France, Ardennes, Rhineland and Central Europe. He was awarded a Bronze Star Medal for "recruiting 300 Luxembourg steel workers and taking over an idle factory between February and April, 1945. He was shop officer in the 515 Ordnance Heavy Maintenance Company, Field Army. They reclaimed 1,397 G.P. and S.P. Vehicles". (I've never figured out what those are, but they were

obviously important). By July, he was back in Paris standing in front of the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel, and finally back home on August 13, 1945 (my sister's third birthday), and into Mason General Hospital. He was finally discharged in October, 1945. ... *How could I not have been proud of him?*

Where and how and why did you come up with Battle Fatigue for the title of this project?

Nina: That's a perfect segue from the last question. I've been crawling all over this scrapbook for so many years, and almost every time I interact with it, I learn something new. One day, several years ago I looked closely at my father's discharge papers and noticed that he was discharged from Mason General Hospital, "not by reason of physical [sic] disability". I thought that was odd and I researched it and discovered that Mason General was a mental hospital on Long Island that the army opened between 1944 and 1946 to treat returning GIs. I think that he was there for about two months with a diagnosis of Battle Fatigue. In World War I, it was called shell shock, in World War II, battle fatigue, and today we refer to it as PTSD or Combat Stress Reaction. Neither my mother nor my father ever spoke one word about any of it. One more interesting fact about Mason General Hospital that I discovered while doing this research was that The Hollywood director, John Houston made a documentary about the hospital called, "Let There be Light". If you can bear to watch it, you can find it on You Tube. It was suppressed by the US government and not released until the 1980s. Hence, the title of my show "Battle Fatigue", something I came to realize that my father suffered from and was really not treated for. It began to give me answers to my mother's question, "How come no one ever talks about Daddy?"

How has this art experience help you to understand the dynamics of your family through all the years?

Nina: Painting "Daddy Come Home Soon", I shed many tears as I worked on it. My father was overseas for two full years of my sister Enid's life. Reading the letters to him that she dictated to my mother broke my heart. I didn't know him before the war, but I would say that he must have come home damaged and a changed man. While he and my mother were busy trying to rebuild their lives together back home, I can only imagine what it was like for all of them and especially for that little three-year-old girl. My sister was seven+ years older than me, and I never knew that adorable child in that painting. I think that I wept for her and for me and for all of us and what we lost.

What brings to you a great amount of joy in life, Nina?

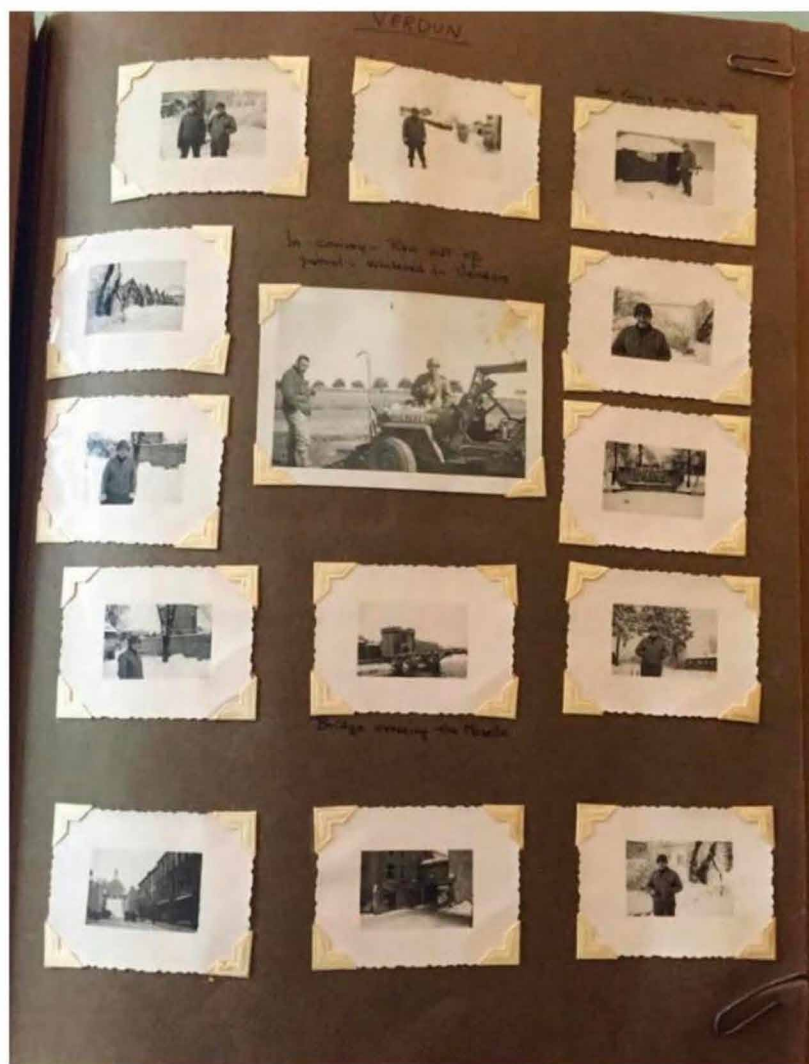
Nina: Singing!

What will you be doing next? Have you been jotting down ideas yet? You're a full-time artist!

Nina: I have no idea what's next, and no, I've not been jotting anything down. Do you think that maybe I should have been keeping notes? I have another exhibition that will open in May 2019. Once again, I have no idea what I will do, and only six months to do it in. Stay tuned!

Your husband, John, is a fine art photographer, just curious—has he been involved in your project?

Nina: Yes, by being supportive and encouraging of my work, as he has been throughout our fifty years together.



NINA LIPKOWITZ
ONE SCRAP BOOK PAGE

How do you view your earlier work in comparison to Battle Fatigue?

Nina: I think that it laid the groundwork for this new work.

One thing you will always remember about this project?

Nina: The mind-blowing excitement of actually figuring out how to tell some of this story and use this material to create art. That, combined with feeling incredibly close to this difficult man who was my father, in a way that I never felt before. One last thing for anyone who has actually read to the end of this interview. I want to tell you about the conversation I did finally have with my dad about my first painting and his suggestion that I paint it over white and not waste the canvas. About a year before he died I decided to ask him what he was thinking of when he made that statement. He told me that he had just read "Lust for Life" the biography of Vincent Van Gogh and that in it both, Van Gogh and Gauguin were constantly painting over their

paintings and starting again. I said to him, "Dad, that's because they couldn't afford canvas. How could you say that to your fifteen year old daughter?" His response? "I guess you are right. It wasn't a very good thing to say." Battle Fatigue, PTSD? Your guess is as good as mine.

Thank you Nina!