

WORLD WAR I: 100 YEARS LATER

A *Smithsonian* magazine special report



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An Exclusive Preview of the New World War I Memorial

One sculptor and his team of artists take on the epic project of conveying the century-old conflict through a massive bronze installation

The massive sculpture by Sabin Howard consists of five tableaux about a U.S. soldier. This is "Battle Scene." Vincent Tullo

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By Jeff MacGregor

Photographs by Vincent Tullo



“Light is everything,” says the sculptor. And, all at once, it is.

You see light as if for the first time. Not as some condition of simple illumination, but as the maker of solids, the hand, the hammer and the chisel, the creator. You see it sifting down from the ceiling and sneaking through the glass doors, cascading from the two big windows up front, the long room filled with it in every angle and on every surface, the whole place swelling with daylight pouring through the glass bricks out back. Iron light, straw light, light bright as brass, sun-yellow light corkscrewing from the skylights to settle across every unfinished face and figure. Light gathering in the folds of the uniforms, washing the boot tops and the rifle barrels, radiant, hard as marble, soft as lambswool, painting the floors, drifting into the corners like snow, sleeping in the shadows. Light on every body—indifferent light, animating light, sanctifying light.

The sculptor is Sabin Howard. While his tools and materials suggest Howard works in clay and bronze, his true medium is light. And this sculpture, *A Soldier's Journey*, years in the making, will serve as the centerpiece of the National World War I Memorial in Washington, D.C. When complete, Howard's immense frieze will tell the story of an American reluctantly answering the call to war—a deeply personal and individual story and the grand symbolic story of the nation all at once. Across five scenes and 38 larger-than-life-size human figures, it will be nearly 60 feet long and ten feet high. And it may become the greatest memorial bronze of the modern age.

Sabin Howard is avid. Born and raised in Manhattan, in his youth he and his parents, both educators, routinely visited Italy, where his mother was born. He spent summers there with his grandparents. Back and forth, back and forth. Florence, Turin, Milan, walking museum after museum after museum. Those long cool marble hallways echoing, echoing. He spent almost as much time there as he did in the States, almost as much time in the 15th century as in the 20th. Very early, in his teens, immersed in the art of the Renaissance, he knew what he was called to and what he was born for and where his gifts were meant to take him.

Those talents, honed for years as both student and teacher at places like the New York Academy of Art and the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and in his Bronx studio and across tens of thousands of hours of drawing and sculpting and succeeding and failing, have led him here: a converted printing plant in Englewood, New Jersey, and perhaps the most ambitious artistic commission of the 21st century.

The high forehead haloed by the Pre-Raphaelite curls, the face at rest is smooth, youthful—not cherubic, but affable. Approachable. An effect achieved in part by wire-rimmed glasses. When he tells you something, those magnified eyes search your face to be sure you understand before telling you the next thing. He is funny and serious—and modest and vain and naive and wised-up. Sabin Howard is a concert of opposites, and holds in perfect tension every imaginable trait of personality. He is placid and passionate, quiet and voluble, self-taught and well-schooled, patient and impatient, steady and mercurial, a woolly savant in thrall to the muses and a guy with a lunchbox punching a clock. The energy produced by these tensions radiates off him in waves.



The sculptor Sabin Howard in his studio, a former printing plant in Englewood, New Jersey. Behind him is the scene known as "Leaving Home." Vincent Tullo

Strong hands, as you would expect. He'll push a thousand tons of clay a million miles with just his thumbs before he's through with these panels. Barrel-chested and dressed for work in body-cut exercise shirts and board shorts, Howard is 58, but looks 15 years younger. And 15 years fitter. Sabin Howard is *ripped*.

He began to make his reputation 25 years ago in the art galleries of downtown Manhattan. His classic studies of the body in a time of postmodern pastiche and cerebral deconstructions of ornament and sentimentality were a sensation, and a small revolution. As the *New York Times* wrote 20 years ago, of a gallery show featuring his classical-style, anatomically exact nudes, "Sabin Howard, a sculptor of immense talent, has created some of the last decade's most substantive Realist sculpture. When viewing his works, visitors may be reminded of the times when sculptors like Donatello and Rodin walked the earth."

He sold his sculptures to museums and private collectors all over the world, sometimes making copies of the originals, and he taught art school courses, lectured online, gave private lessons. He wrote a book with his wife, the novelist Traci L. Slatton, called *The Art of Life*, a sort of statement of purpose, thick with luscious photos of Sabin's work. "The spirit of art is the reflection, and also the springboard, of the spirit of humanity," they wrote. "It shows us ourselves. In figurative art, it literally shows us ourselves, in our every dimension. It is revelatory. It reveals not just who we are, but who we have been and who we can be, in body, mind, spirit, and psyche. In this way, a great piece of art conjures magic."

“In figurative art, it literally shows us ourselves, in our every dimension. It is revelatory.”



Sabin and his creative team, including two other sculptors, use a great deal of sophisticated technology. But no substance is more important to their artistry than clay.
Vincent Tullo

In 2015, the World War I Centennial Commission announced a design competition for a national memorial to the war. There was a feeling—a fear—that the legacy of the war was being lost, forgotten. The last combat veteran had died four years before at 110 years old. And though there was, already, a local monument on the National Mall, dedicated in 1931 to the District of Columbia residents who fought and died in the war, the Great War was still alone among America’s major modern conflicts unrepresented by a comprehensive national memorial in the capital.

The new site eventually chosen was Pershing Park, just off the Mall and down the street from the White House, in front of the Willard Hotel. A statue of Gen. John J. Pershing, who’d led American forces during the war, had long stood watch here, but the rest of the space was *exhausted*. An important element of the international competition to design the memorial included redesigning the park itself.

In 2016, the architect Joe Weishaar won the competition, selected from more than 300 entries. Weishaar is from Arkansas, and was then 25, so young he looked like your neighbor's son home from college. "I was working full time for a firm in Chicago," he says. "The memorial was sort of a weekend hobby for me. When everybody found out that I had won, my bosses weren't super-happy. They felt like I was moonlighting on the side."

But the commission appreciated that Weishaar's design was sophisticated in serving competing purposes: It had to include an appropriately solemn war memorial, and it also had to be an inviting, well-functioning, living, breathing city park.

"You want a memorial that is respectful, and you want a park that people can enjoy," says Edwin Fountain, general counsel for the American Battle Monuments Commission, who spearheaded the effort to erect the memorial. "Joe's design works with the existing footprint of the park, the existing fabric of the park, the existing orientation of the park to its surroundings—that in itself was a value."

Howard, in a separate submission, had originally paired himself with a different architect, but the committee liked Howard's work. When Weishaar reached out to him about collaborating, he quickly signed on. You'd be forgiven for thinking that what then ensued was a battle between the artist and the memorial commission, the artist and the bureaucracy, the artist and the money. (The cost of the park update and memorial is \$44 million, largely raised from private donations.) And you wouldn't be entirely wrong. But after a contentious beginning during which every interested party expressed themselves clearly and emphatically and sometimes heatedly, everyone now mostly gets along. That everything has been a negotiation and everything has been a discussion does not mean that everything has been a compromise. Far from it.

For Howard, the process began with 12,000 photographs of models in action. Then dozens of preliminary sketches. Sometimes the models couldn't find the pose—couldn't understand what Howard was after. "What is the pose *depicting*," they'd ask him. "I began to realize this is a very movement-driven process," Howard says. So he told the models to perform the action—to crouch, to lunge, to charge, to fall—and he shot the whole sequence on his iPhone in "burst mode," which takes multiple photographs in rapid succession. "From the burst, we would extract the one pose of the 12 shots that explained the action—when you have a change occurring as you freeze a figure in time."



In composing the sculpture, Howard took 12,000 photographs of models in action. Top, a compositional drawing. Bottom, a small scale model cast in resin. Vincent Tullo

Eventually, the models traveled with Howard to Britain, to a studio with a custom-built photogrammetry rig. One-hundred-sixty cameras in a 360-degree spherical arc around an elevated platform. The models, in authentic period attire, posed and recomposed and shot from every conceivable angle and captured in high-definition until, at last, Howard had 30 final drawings and a 3-D digital rendering of the tableau he sought. Forty hours a week for two years. From the renderings, a maquette, a small-scale model, five feet long, was made. Then a full-size steel-framed foam armature, milled in England and shipped over in huge sections. It's upon this foam surface that Howard applies the clay that brings it all to life.

His life-size bronzes *Hermes* and *Apollo* and *Aphrodite*, all beautiful muscle and dynamic grace, are tucked into the corners of the studio, so the vibe is a sort of Greco-Roman cult of the body by way of Florence and Paris and Peloton. Someone is always doing a push-up or a sit-up or a pull-up, or spinning the stationary bike over by the heat lamp and the big warming tray of plastiline clay. The whole gang of models and assistant sculptors bike or run or swim or lift weights, so there's exercise equipment and high-tech carbon fiber bicycle gear in every corner. Rodin and Donatello may have walked the earth, but more often than not Howard bikes to work, fast and hard, all muscle and lungs and dynamic tension on a bike as fine and sharp as a blade, clearing his head for the day's work.

If Sabin Howard is avid, his wife, Traci, is ardent. Smart and dark-haired, she is the heart-on-her-sleeve show-runner here, the project manager and lead accountant and den mother, the writer, producer and thumbprint-by-thumbprint documentarian, the number-crunching wrangler of dogs, politicians, commission members, children, fans, journalists and seekers of the neo-Classical, neo-Realist absolute. (It is worth remembering that the Renaissance gave us not only Michelangelo but also the Medicis and Machiavelli, too. So she has her hands full.) She put her own career as a popular novelist on hold to do this. For the duration of the project, she makes sure the only thing on Sabin Howard's plate is sculpture—and lean, high-protein meals. “The way it's set up is, Sabin sculpts and leads the sculptors, and I do everything else.”

Her office is in the front window of the studio. Behind her, running nearly the length of the 5,000-square-foot space, is the clay rendering of what will become the huge bronze. It is at once a frieze and a bas-relief and a series of nearly free-standing figures. From left to right it tells the story of an everyman gone to war.

In the first scene, Everyman answers his call to duty. He kneels, penitent, while his wife rests her hand just above his heart and his daughter presents him his helmet. It is a family intact, in a state of holy repose. In the second scene, the husband turns away from his family, and begins his march to war. He locks arms with his fellow soldiers, joins them in step, and is pulled away from his wife. Her grip, even strengthened by worry, can no longer hold him.

In the next scene, now armed with a rifle, he beckons those behind him forward, a call to arms, while his comrades raise their weapons and hasten their steps and in the foreground another crouches to pick up his gun and rise to join them, all of it gaining momentum now, urgency, all of it leaning into that awful history, headlong, the terrible power and purpose and planetary pull of war, each man poised on the edge of his own mortality...and then the explosive rush *up* and out of a trench, soldiers charging forward, leaping, all muscle and grimace and courage and war cry as around them men fight and begin to fall.

Now the sorrow.

At the center of the memorial is a battlefield Pietà. The wounded and the ruined and the lost are gathered there in the arms of the nurses and their fellow soldiers. The pace of the sculpture slows. It becomes more ruminative, but no less dynamic, no less visceral. One soldier stands straight, undone, an awful stillness staring helplessly out, directly at the viewer, to some unfocused middle distance. To be witness to horror is only one price we ask our warriors to pay. This figure, expressionless, indicts us all.

The pace of the sculpture slows. It becomes more ruminative, but no less dynamic, no less visceral.

Now the nurses lift the wounded and help them back to the ranks, easing them into the march home, where they shoulder their rifles and the flag. They raise their chins in pride or defiance or resignation and despair and walk back into a world that cannot understand them and which they no longer recognize.

In the final panel, Everyman comes home. He is, of course, remade. He is a hero—reluctant, called and tested and strengthened, bearing to his people a message of order, rebirth and hope out of chaos and violence and death, in the manner of the mythos preceding us all, going back to the beginning of history. Joseph Campbell called it the “monomyth,” also known as the Hero’s Journey, a resemblance Traci first pointed out to Sabin while he was already composing the tableau, and which gave the work its title and its clear narrative core. “Sabin stumbled on it because it’s so archetypal to who we are as human beings,” Traci says.

At last, the father is reunited with the daughter. He hands back his helmet, into which she peers, divining the future in its shallow upturned pan. What does she see there?

As any work of memorial art must, it tells its own story without writerly embellishment.



Awaiting the sculptors' touch are claycoated foam armatures for a "battlefield Pietà," with soldiers cradling a fallen comrade. Beside them a nurse tends to a soldier gassed in combat. Vincent Tullo

“I’m hoping to make something that lets a kid, when he’s walking along the wall, experience it like it’s a movie in bronze,” Sabin says. “The scenes are changing. And the kid goes home and he’s like, ‘Oh my God, I got to see what World War I was all about.’ And he gets the idea that we’re on a journey—each and every one of us.”

Mornings in the studio are simple. Everyone in and working by 8:30. No excuses. No woolgathering. No waiting for a bolt of inspiration to strike from the heavens. There's a deadline for every panel and a deadline for the whole project and, art or not, the work is the work. The deadlines are on a spreadsheet in Traci's office. She gives the sculptors 700 hours per figure. "I start hassling them at 500 hours," she says.

The planning and the design and the drawings and the photographs are long finished. This is a manufacturing process now. There are three sculptors working at once, often in three different parts of the big room. Sabin. Charlie Mostow, mid-room right now, at work on a leg, is the first assistant. The second assistant sculptor position has been, well, *dynamic*, and a source of some upset. Today, though, all is peace and perseverance over there by the main frieze. Sabin is in a corner up front by the office, hard at work.

The project is being documented minute by minute on YouTube and

Instagram. "Capturing the soul in sculpture is about capturing movement that is pushing *out* from the body," Howard tells the camera.



"Everything that I sculpt is to show the intention or the psychology of the figure," Howard says. Top, he works on Figure 17, also known as Charging Guy. Right, assistant sculptor Charlie Mostow at work on Figure 16, modeled by Dante Amato. Above, sculpting tools. Vincent Tullo

Mark Puchinsky, right now modeling that leg for Charlie, is reading *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. In order to hold the pose, Mark is propped on a padded stand built for the purpose. This is true for all the models and most of the poses, some of which are torturous and might need to be held off and on for hours. Lunging, running, screaming, jumping—every act must be seen in every light and from every angle. A two-dimensional drawing or a photograph won't do. Every fold in every garment requires a live model. When Mark strikes the correct angle of ankle, calf and thigh, the uniform covering his leg is artfully draped and held fast with clothespins for the length of time required to reproduce it in clay. What's really being sculpted is the muscle beneath the drapery. The effort. The vigor. The *flesh*. That, Howard says, is what creates "tension and force and ultimately emotional drama, so the motion creates emotion." This leg—every leg, any leg—might take weeks of incremental attention from each sculptor.

While not improvisational, the process here is adaptive. One of adjustment and counter-adjustment. Every inch of that giant sculpture will be made and remade. Although the foam core armatures, bearing the real-time facial expressions of the models from the photogrammetry shoot, came from England with a thin layer of sculpting clay already applied, it's the final layer, applied here, by hand, one small bead at a time—that last millimeter of plastiline—that breathes vitality into the piece. It's where the details are. Where *life* is.

The studio is filled with tools for moving and removing clay. Spatulas as delicate as medical instruments, razor blades and calipers and scrapers and smoothers, wire loops and wire ribbons, rakes and tongs and fettling knives. But mostly, it's thumb work. A small gesture, a delicate pressure, one smooth inch at a time.

Thus does the leg from an early photograph become the leg in a drawing become the leg in foam on the armature become the leg in clay—until becoming at last the leg on the bronze, the leg they'll see in Pershing Park 100 years from now, unique in the world, full of life and purpose.



This foam core armature, manufactured from digital images of a model, is covered with a base layer of clay. Sculptors will apply myriad details to bring the work to life. Vincent Tullo

While the sculptors work, it is as quiet as a library. Quieter. Madeleine does her homework at the big table in back. She's Sabin and Traci's daughter. She's 17 now. When she modeled for the girl in the sculpture's first and last panel, she was 11. During the early phases of the pandemic, everyone here, including Maddie and the dogs and every model and sculptor, was part of a quarantine pod. So the spirit here is not only that of a Renaissance-era Florentine workshop, of master and apprentice, but of extended family. It's quiet, but not sleepy. There's plenty of coffee and every kind of tea. Lots of music, sure, but it's all ear buds and headphones, so what you hear might be the thin whisper of a melody as if from the bottom of a well. It is rare to hear a phone ring. People mostly walk outside to talk on the phone.

The Great War changed everything. It rewrote global treaties. It redrew the Middle East. It hastened a revolution in Russia. It moved the United States—reluctant and isolationist—to the center of the world stage. It solved the problems of the 19th century by creating the problems of the 20th. As the last act of the Industrial Revolution, it industrialized killing. It was an inglorious, mechanized war wrapped in the Victorian language of valor.

That dissonance helped break art into a million pieces. Poetry, music, painting, movies, novels—none of it was ever the same. Jazz, Joyce, Yeats, Stein, Proust, Millay.

"In all my dreams before my helpless sight / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning," the English poet Wilfred Owen wrote of the poor comrade in arms who was too slow to pull on his gas mask.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

“It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.” The lie that cracked open the world. Grosz, Dix, Duchamp, Prohibition, bathtub gin, Gatsby, the League of Nations, the Red Scare. A broken, vengeful Germany. Atonality, anti-melody—every abstraction came to crowd out the representational, the romantic, the sentimental.

Ironically, it destroyed the very art Sabin Howard seeks now to restore. It was an end to earnestness. There is of course a whole school of public memorial trafficking *only* in earnest cliché, the one that honors “honor” and glorifies “glory.”

But that’s not what Howard is after. “What I want is to make something relevant to our age, to find the thread that runs through humanity—that human beings can reach great heights, and they can sink to the level of the animal.”

In a world that is now unreachably distant and suddenly no larger than a laptop screen, there still exists a need for monumental works of art meant to move the human heart and mind not only by their excellence but by their very scale.

“He has reverence,” Traci says. “That’s why he’s not a postmodernist. He wanted to make the figures compelling, engaging, emotive, expressive. Not just make something visually pretty—but engage people so that they can enter into that experience of reverie and reverence.”

The First World War cut a trench in the earth into which a whole generation disappeared. The war to end all wars certainly did not, instead setting loose a century of geopolitical confusion, violence and misery that plagues us to this day. In every era we are insufficient to our own humanity, and every war memorial reckons to settle a debt we can never repay. But the best of them reach out not only in space, but across time to offer us connection and catharsis. In this way every war memorial aims to heal.



Adjacent to the WWI memorial work-in-progress are older bronzes by Howard—*Mars*, *Armor* and *Bust of Ceres*—that embody his neo-Classical aesthetic. Vincent Tullo

Outside this studio, everywhere howling all around us, is a global pandemic—
and territorial incitements and radical politics and sedition and violence and
panic—just as at the time of the First World War.

In here though, only art. And lunch.

“Let’s talk.”

“Let’s talk about art.”

“Let’s *argue* about art.”

But they don’t, at least not much. They agree about most of it, about why they’re all gathered here. This is the communal lunch at the studio, and the conversation bends to the work, and from the work to the craft, and from the craft to the practice, and from the practice to the art, and from the art to Art with a capital “A.”



In the studio, inspiration comes in many forms, such as a miniature version of *Borghese Gladiator*, a Hellenistic sculpture dating to c. 100 B.C. It's next to an avocado pit. Vincent Tullo

They cook for themselves in the kitchen they built along one wall. As many calories as this team burns, the menu here runs to a high-volume midday meal of proteins and starches served family-style at the refectory table in the back. Real training camp stuff: great steaming bowls of ziti or rigatoni; lean meat and sweet potatoes and salads; platters of chicken or beef or fish, spooned out over a bed of risotto.

"Pass that pork roast."

"All you ever have is the *process*. You can't depend on the result. Not the finished piece or the praise or the fame or the money..."

"*Especially* not the money. May I have the salt, please?"

"Or the fame."

"So you have to concentrate on the *act*. Not the art or the outcome. Not the praise or the applause. The gesture. You have to love the *doing*."

"Thousands and thousands of thumbprints every day. Every turn..."

"...exactly..."

"...of the modeling knife or the spatula..."

"...finding the pose. Holding the pose..."

"...*that's* what you have to love."

"You honor the art by showing up every day and doing the work. Putting in the hours."

"Punch the clock like any other job."

"That's the discipline..."

"...and the thing most people don't understand."

"Inspiration is the least of it."

"We have a responsibility..."

"...not just to the art, but to the history."

Every piece of gear in this studio is authentic. Every helmet, every uniform, every rifle. Every bandoleer and gaiter and collar, every canteen and map case and cartridge. Now every piece must be *remade*—first in pencil, then clay, then bronze—becoming not a quartermaster's inventory but a work of art. Art, which is a truth surpassing reality, requires in this instance every detail, every measure be accurate. But there can be a paralysis in perfectionism, too. So Howard works not only with grace and the persistence of artistic obsession, but with the disciplined, determined urgency of a manufacturer on a tight deadline.



Dozens of models have posed for the sculptor and his assistants. For the sake of verisimilitude, the soldiers are not in stage costume—their uniforms and equipment were manufactured for use in World War I. Far left, Giuliano Stanila. Left, Traci L. Slatton, Howard's wife, who posed as a nurse in one scene; left below, Mark Puchinsky, who posed for multiple figures; below, Javier Robles; bottom, Evelyn Christina Tonn, who stood in for the mother; right, Dante Amato. Vincent Tullo

When each scene is done—when the final millimeter of clay on each grouping of figures has been molded and remolded—it is shipped back across the Atlantic in great big sections in a container built for the purpose, to Pangolin Editions, a foundry beloved by name-above-the-title artists from the moment it opened in 1985. So far, two completed panels—Figures 1 through 20—have been shipped to the foundry.

The casting process, now 6,000 years old, is as simple as fire and as complex as a human heart. First, sculpt a beautiful, “heroic size” statue out of clay. (In this case, sculpt 38 of them.) Now ship it to England in that specially designed container. Tom Woodman-Povey, project manager at Pangolin, sums up the process this way: You make a “negative,” a reverse of the sculpture. Then you make a “positive,” a wax reproduction of the original. Then you make another negative, based on the wax reproduction, an empty vessel to receive molten bronze. Finally, you make another positive—the bronze sculpture itself. “The process is pretty traditional,” Woodman-Povey says, with British understatement.

You make the first reverse mold by spraying the whole original statue with a layer of silicone rubber. Once it sets, you seal and stabilize it in a hard fiberglass jacket. Take the original sculpture away, and divide the silicone mold into smaller pieces for casting, finding the least conspicuous spots for cuts—an underarm, a neckline, a wrinkle in a uniform.

Fill the reverse mold with melted wax to create the reproduction, reintroducing any detail lost in the first step. This requires a team of specialists working with brushes and what look like heated dental tools. Plumb the sculpture with a Rube Goldberg lattice of runners and risers and sprues and gates and vents. These will allow you to fill the final mold with molten bronze. Now dip the contraption in a ceramic slurry again and again.

Heat the mold *crazy* hot. The wax inside melts and runs off—hence “lost wax casting.” A perfect reverse mold remains.

Fill that mold with molten metal—in this case, 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit or so. Once cool, crack the mold and remove the bronze. Trim and smooth every piece to the millimeter. Repeat the process more than 200 times. Weld every perfect part into a perfect whole. Burnish and patinate and apply wax to color and protect. Install.

Back in Englewood, the work continues. The next panel, Figures 21 to 28, will be sent to the foundry in mid-September 2022. The harrowing battle sequence is nearly complete, but the longer journey is far from over.

Only time and history will have the authority to judge Sabin Howard's work. As a matter of craft, as an *act* of artistry, it is indisputable. But as a *work* of art, a thing beheld, is it an act of radical return? Will it reanimate and redefine figurative art for this still-young century? Will it create a new art for a new age?

As a memorial commission, will it inspire? Will it teach? Will it move future generations to search their hearts? To work for peace? Every war memorial is a balancing act between glory and warning. Does it merely honor the old lie? Or can it sing out the awful truth of sacrifice?

Michael Kimmelman, architecture critic for the *New York Times*, suggests that memorial art is most interesting when viewed as a reflection of a process. "The debates about what it should look like, where it should be, and what it represents—that is, in fact, the process of remembering, of memorializing. To the extent that a memorial later becomes just a sculpture in a park, part of the furniture of a city, it's no longer doing that job. But what makes memorials so interesting is the way they are engaged in a public process, and provoke a public debate. And the longer that takes place, the more, in a sense, successful that memorial is."

When not exhausting himself on his bicycle, Sabin Howard likes to walk in the woods. He'll do this at his place up in northern Connecticut. The silence helps quiet his mind. More important, he sees again there the unity of all things—not just forest, not just trees, but the harmony of sun and sky and water and earth, of canopy and understory and roots. Everything in concert.

Like Howard's interdependent forest, art is not something separate from history or humanity or memory or society. It is the tangle of those things, the interrelatedness of those things, the harnessing of the collision of those things in process and in practice breathing life into one new thing. Thus in art's wholeness, Howard sees his own work.

The best of these inspire catharsis and gratitude, and remind us of our common humanity.

If it is impossible to judge a work of art by its intentions, it is impossible to judge a war memorial by anything else. The best of these inspire catharsis and gratitude, and remind us of our common humanity. The worst are anodyne costume drama, sentimentalizing nationalism and sensationalizing violence.

But *no* work of art adequately conveys the horror of war. Not *The Iliad*, not *War and Peace*, not *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Maybe Picasso's *Guernica* comes closest in our own time.



The memorial will be installed in Washington, D.C.'s Pershing Park in 2024. For now, the site features a photograph of 20 sculpted figures and a full-scale drawing.
Vincent Tullio

Arguably the greatest war memorial in American history fits in a vest pocket. It reads, in part:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

But even the honored dead are still dead, only dead, and the dead forget everything.

Remembrance, on the other hand, is the business of the living. On April 16, 2021, a First Colors ceremony is held to raise the flag above the new Pershing Park.

It's a soft spring day, pandemic quiet, in Washington, D.C. The program is largely a video presentation, hosted by the actor and veterans' advocate Gary Sinise.

The geometry of Weishaar's new park is inviting, every angle clean, every sightline pleasing and modern. There is a military band in the park, and "To the Color" is played and the flag raised. Then the bugler blows taps and breaks every heart. Live taps will be played in Pershing Park every day at 5 p.m. The sculpture will be installed in 2024.

Sabin Howard keeps working. "To me, art represents culture, and I want to be represented by something that elevates our human spirit. When I was a little kid, and I would walk around museums, or go into a cathedral, my feelings would change, my *internal feelings*. That's what I want to show to others."



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The full Battle Scene, shown before being shipped from the U.S. to the Pangolin Editions sculpture foundry in Chalford, England.
Andrew Holtz / Sabin Howard Sculpture

Until then, a long rendering of the final living bronze stretches huge and beautiful above the fountain and the pools where the great memorial will shimmer. Completed figures are shown as photographs; those still to come are drawn exactly to scale. So the sculpture is both there and not yet there, present and absent, as are the soldiers and the wives and the daughters and the nurses, past and future, here but not here, the wounded and the lost, the heroes and the ghosts, the fallen and the risen and the living and the dead, and the light is fine and bright and everywhere around them.



Jeff MacGregor | [🐦](#) | [READ MORE](#)

Jeff MacGregor is the award-winning Writer-at-Large for *Smithsonian*. He has written for the *New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Esquire*, and many others, and is the author of the acclaimed book *Sunday Money*. Photo by Olya Evanitsky.

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