

# Portraits & Observations

*Emily Prince documents the cost of war*

By Lisa Harrington



**American Servicemen and Women Who Have Died in Iraq and Afghanistan (but Not including the Wounded, nor the Iraqis, nor the Afghanis):** "The numbers kept coming up in the daily reports. Five here, fourteen there, one day after another. And then the growing figure mounting over a thousand. Peripherally it was ever-present, but still only an abstraction.... I needed to see pictures of them, to familiarize myself just a tiny bit more with what was happening far from my warm home," writes Emily Prince in an introduction to her project. Shown above at the 52nd Venice Biennale, the artwork has been seen by thousands of people from around the world. (Courtesy of designboom.com)

In her San Francisco studio, artist Emily Prince quietly continues a work-in-progress, her vast memorial to U.S. troops whose lives were lost in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. The artwork she's created, completely by hand, consists of thousands of individual, wallet-size portraits, finely drawn in graphite, that, when arranged on a wall, create a very large map of America.

Conceived by Prince on November 4, 2004, the day after the last presidential election, her project *American Servicemen and Women Who Have Died in Iraq and Afghanistan (but Not including the Wounded, nor the Iraqis, nor the Afghanis)* was prominently displayed at the 52nd Venice Biennale, the historic and prestigious international art festival held in Italy last summer through fall. Prince, then 26, was one of the youngest artists invited to participate. "I was stunned," she says. "I never thought my work would be in it at any point, and certainly not now."

Before leaving for Venice, she confessed some fears regarding reception, but reports Prince, "People were so kind to me there. I met artists from several continents who were directly kind to me about my work." Her apprehensions about physically installing the work there ("because it's such a large piece and the size is always changing — I wasn't even sure that it would fit") quickly dissipated as an eager crew composed of artist Shaun O' Dell (her husband), two Italian art students, a gallery rep from New York, and a Greek journalist who just happened to be going through



**Face to face:** During the Venice show, her wall of portraits brought Prince considerable notice and praise from the press. Michael Kimmelman, chief art critic of *The New York Times*, called her installation a "remarkable work." (Courtesy of designboom.com)



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**Portrait of the artist:** Emily Prince, who will earn an MFA degree from Berkeley this year, has completed over 4,000 drawings of fallen servicemen and women. "I'm just continually trying to catch up," says Prince. "The more I draw, the more there are to draw."

the gallery helped her pin the portraits in place (to specific locations representing their hometowns), finishing well ahead of time.

During the 10 days she spent there, Prince was pleased to see such attentive crowds viewing the work, including a group of women janitors who paused each evening to study the portraits. She also had some time to herself, to view pieces by other artists. "When I saw their work, I was just amazed to be among them," says Prince. "It felt like a great privilege to have the experience not just of being in the show but seeing it too."

Committed to the project, for as long as the war continues, Prince makes weekly visits to *The Military Times*, an online memorial site (<http://www.militarycity.com/valor/honor.html>), where casualties, as confirmed by U.S. Central Command, are listed and photographs and biographical details can often be found. She saves the information she finds there in a journal. She uses 4 x 3 inch sheets of vellum for the portraits, in colors meant to correspond to the race of each soldier, as a way to document racial demographics. Her project also includes a chronology of military deployment and casualties.

Most moving are portraits on which she has included remembrances from family and friends of the soldiers. For example, a private first class from Troy Alabama, 21, is remembered by his sister as a "big teddy bear" of a brother who "would do anything for you." Another portrait shows a 19-year-old service woman from Davenport, Iowa, who "was determined in everything she did" and wrote to her parents that "being deployed was one of the hardest things." A high school teacher remembers a service-

man, 18, from Paradise, California, who was a "deep thinker" and excelled at math and physics, "who had a bright future as an engineer."

Prince, who grew up in the Sierras in Gold Run (pop.125), says her artworks (including an exhibit called *Familiar* at the Eleanor Harwood Gallery in San Francisco in which she catalogued all the hats, all the lamps, and other items in her apartment) share common threads: they map her environment and focus on things, one at a time. "It's the way I look at the world," she says. Spending time with each soldier's face is her way of engaging with the information on a personal level "somewhat akin to prayer."

Her memorial to the troops will appear next in a group show (May 18–October 19) on loss and remembrance at the Wanas Foundation in Sweden (<http://www.wanas.se/>), and later will travel to the Saatchi Gallery in London (<http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/>).

Though the portraits are a large part of her practice, Prince devotes most of her time to the MFA program at Berkeley, where she's been studying with Ann Walsh, Justine Taylor, and Brody Reiman, faculty in Art Practice whom she calls "very supportive." With an undergraduate degree in studio art and psychology from Stanford, she chose graduate school at Berkeley because she had been questioning her work and needed "a safe place to experiment." She also wanted to try her hand at teaching here. Fall semester, she taught an introductory art class to 26 undergrads and found that she "thoroughly loved it." In May Prince will present a new work, using animation to show passage of time, in the MFA Exhibit on campus.

To find more art by Emily Prince, visit:

All of the American Servicemen and Women project  
<http://www.alloftheamericanservicemenandwomen.com/>

Kent Gallery  
<http://www.kentgallery.com/>

Eleanor Harwood Gallery  
[http://www.eleanorharwood.com/Site/Emily\\_Prince.html](http://www.eleanorharwood.com/Site/Emily_Prince.html)



**National archive:** "The act of drawing is very intimate," says Robert Storr, curator of the 52nd Venice Biennale, which took place in Venice, Italy, from June 6 through November 21, 2007. Storr discovered Prince's memorial to American troops on display in archival boxes (above) at the Kent Gallery in New York City. (The gallery found her work in an *Art in America* article about the Bay Area Now 4 show in San Francisco in 2004.) "What's good about Emily's project is that it's not rhetorical or sentimental," notes Storr. "It really says, 'here are individuals.' And this honors the sacrifices." (Courtesy of the Artist and Kent Gallery)