

Memorial Leaves

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The Lost Cause monuments now have fallen. Still, the American Civil War remains our great nation-shaping crisis, and how we remember it, in this moment, is both contested and crucial. The *Memorial Leaves* exhibition presents itself as a possible way forward.

The exhibition concentrates on the portraits of soldiers as they prepared for departure and family members as they sat in mourning clothes. Mia Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial remembers the casualties of its war, name by name, and *Memorial Leaves* presents its casualties face by face, rendering them in the flesh of 21st Century leaves.

The chlorophyll prints and archival inkjet prints of this exhibition enact little resurrections, inspired by the central trope of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The memorial leaves that hold soldiers' images have grown out of contemporary American soil and fulfill Whitman's prediction that the war dead, "in nature's chemistry distill'd," will inhabit "every future grain of wheat and ear of corn, and every flower that grows, and every breath we draw."

The chlorophyll print process used to make these portraits takes the poet's trope literally. Some of the portraits have been made in leaves from "witness" trees that stood on battlefields during the war and that continue to draw sustenance from that once-blood-soaked ground. An unidentified Union soldier stares out from a leaf plucked from the Brompton Oak at Fredericksburg, Virginia; an unnamed Confederate soldier peers out from the leaf of an Appomattox oak. And two Whitman portraits were made in hosta leaves plucked from the back garden of the poet's Camden House in New Jersey, where he spent his last years. "I bequeath myself to the dirt," the poet wrote. "If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles." So I did.

After August 2017, when white nationalists carried torches past the University of Virginia Rotunda chanting the Nazi slogan "Blood and Soil," the gradually evolving *Memorial Leaves* project took on a new inflection and urgency. For Whitman, the grass springing from American soil was a sign of democracy, "Growing among black folks as among white, / Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same." And American blood in American soil fed "the beautiful uncut hair of graves."

Tenderness is the keynote emotion of Whitman's response to the Civil War, exemplified in his visits to the sick and wounded in Washington's wartime hospitals. And it is tenderness that I hope to make available, too, in *Memorial Leaves*. Whitman's poem "Reconciliation," written at the end of the war, challenges us with its exemplary compassion: "...my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead, / I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw near, / Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin."

Memorial Leaves aspires to a similar humanity, and to be a memorial gesture that calls us to our better angels of reconciliation. It seeks the secret history of war in the faces of its combatants and those who mourned their loss. Whitman's compassion for soldiers both Union and Confederate may seem superhuman, but it provides an example, beyond race or party, of hope overcoming fear when we look one another in the face.