

Honoring the Westport artist's work installed in nation's capital Fallen Heroes Afghanistan

by NANCY HELLE



By what standard should art be judged? Is it by the artist's unique vision, skillfully executed with sensitivity to the medium? A timely subject or the timelessness of a universal theme? Or by how well the work engages the viewer, creating a dialogue between creator and beholder and provoking the intellect while stirring the emotions?

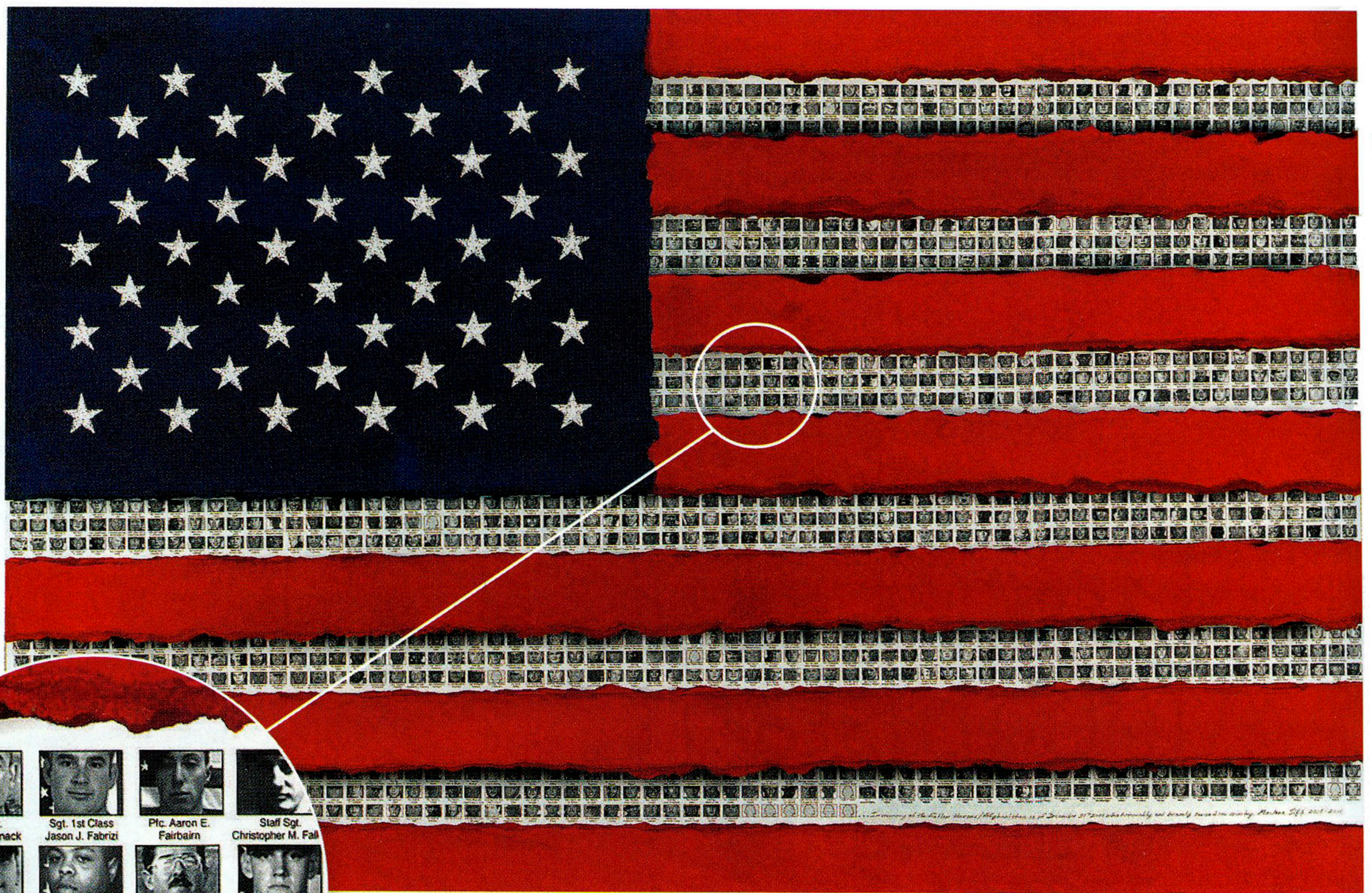
"Fallen Heroes/Afghanistan," a compelling mixed-media installation by Westport artist Marlene Siff, is ready to be judged, satisfying high expectations and high standards. The work commemorates all the American soldiers who lost their lives in Afghanistan through December 2009. Nearly 1,000 photographs with names and ranks of the deceased heroes are incorporated into her construction of a U.S. flag.

Two years in the making and completed this past autumn, the work had been seen only by visitors to Siff's at-home studio. That is, until last November when U.S. Congressman Jim Himes of Greenwich saw it. He was so enthralled with the piece that he offered to hang it in his office in the Capitol in Washington, D.C., and show it

to military leaders, Pentagon officials, and museum curators with the purpose of finding the piece a permanent home open to the public. Congressman Himes says, "I am delighted to have Marlene's artwork in my office. Her piece challenges us to consider the real cost of war and will serve as a daily reminder to us of the incalculable sacrifices made by our men and women in uniform." The installation was sent to the Congressman's office in early November.

The work was inspired by a three-page spread in the *New York Times* on August 7, 2008. Called "Roster of the Dead," the story included portraits, names, and ranks of all the American soldiers who died in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan up to that time. It had a profound effect upon Siff, who wept. "When I saw all those faces, I was completely overcome. And thought [about] how I would present my feelings. I knew that the most important issue was to show all the faces; then the flag seemed the ideal way to display them. Although my work is usually abstract, it was not such a great departure as I work frequently with torn paper, and

Westport artist Marlene Siff at work on her piece "Fallen Heroes/Afghanistan"



The artist's work includes nearly 1,000 photographs of soldiers who have lost their lives while serving in Afghanistan.

“I just knew I had to do something as an artist to keep the memories of them alive.”

— Marlene Siff

I usually include text in my art,” she says. “I just knew I had to do something as an artist to keep the memories of them alive.” Her biggest challenge was keeping track of the death toll, which changed daily.

She positioned the portrait of each soldier on the white stripes of the American flag, buried and protected within the red stripes, which are raised in layers four inches above the surface. The commanding six-foot-long red stripes are made of fastidiously torn hand-painted paper. The title of the work, “Fallen Heroes/Afghanistan”—handwritten in gold along the border of the flag—is repeated over and over. Siff describes it as “a homemade prayer, which reminds us never to forget.” She also glued sand to the golden background to reference the terrain of the country and the excavation of the Hidden Treasures in Kabul, dating back to 3000 B.C. A layer of shell casings, which Siff acquired from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, is positioned at the bottom of the piece.

Siff stopped collecting photos at the end of 2009 in order to finish the work; she left several spaces with unidentified sketched profiles to indicate that the death toll continues. She says, “My goal was to make people aware of the tragedy of war. These men and women are fighting to keep us safe and some of them are losing their lives in this effort. We should be thinking about them every day.”

From September through December 2012, the work will be on loan to Fairfield University’s Thomas J. Walsh Art Gallery at the Quick Center for Siff’s exhibition “Elements of Peace,” curated by Diana Mille, gallery director. She says she admires “an artist who has given such careful thought to being a responsible global citizen. Marlene is such a mindful artist. Her process matches her content; everything is carefully thought out, the best way to approach a subject and the best materials to use.”

To see the work in Washington, D.C., call Devon Kearns in Congressman Himes’s office at 202-225-5541. **W**