

## ***Talismans of the Long Gray Trail: Vistas, the Valley, and the Veterans of '85 Battlefield Landscapes in Sepia and Gray***

Works drawn and collaged upon veterans' photographs of Winchester, Kernstown, Cedar Creek and Fisher's Hill--dated September 1885  
An Exhibition by Geraldine Wojno Kiefer

### Artist's Statement

Resonating with spiritual and metaphorical power, revealing a place as well as concealing it, the late-nineteenth-century veterans' photographs which initiate and underlie this series have become veritable wellsprings of creativity. Studying them repeatedly and intently for bits of information on Shenandoah Valley battlefields, as well as the Valley Road which "stitches" them together, I began to excavate layers of interpretation that were not only historically significant, but artistically definitive. These layers led me to import and impart a set of battle metaphors, which I reverified by reading veterans' accounts of Valley battles and battlefields. In turn, metaphors became the starting points for my own pictorial interpretations. Storehouses of collective memory, they include evocations of masculine militarism--commanding heroism, all-seeing surveillance, covert tension, and the rush and fear of battle--along with more enduring feminine themes--nested bliss, pastoral harmony, and eternal rest. In total, these metaphors and themes evoke and *make* places: a field scoured by war and blanketed by peace; a land scorched by burning and restored by planting; a pike laid bare by advances, victories and defeats; and a valley richly clothed in embodied highlights and ghostly shadows. Steeped in the contemplation of embattlement, retreat, surrender, recuperation, and change, and how these can become founts of energy and creativity, I found it imperative to "do something" with these images.

Each photo-collage, a low-relief composition of cut, abutted, and overlaid photographs, or photo-assemblage, a high-relief construction of photographs and other media, begins with one or more images of a battlefield or site, printed from digital picture files. At least two inkjet prints are used for any one piece: 2 to 4 prints of a single image, or 1 print each of two different images. The completed piece is a combination of two to four in). In certain cases two images "go together" naturally to form a panorama; say, an expansive view of Winchester and its surrounds, looking west and south or east and south from the vicinity of Milroy's Fort. In most cases, however, images that "go together" conceptually and strategically; for example, the Shenandoah River ford crossed by Kershaw at the beginning of the Battle of Cedar Creek "goes with" a portion of the battlefield itself. I join the images in a variety of ways, linking elements from one picture to the next. I also pre-visualize the final composition to suggest two modes of nineteenth-century vision: panoramically expansive or stereographically three-dimensional. In the former, a singular composition "streams" across multiple borders or seams, evoking a battlefield panorama or

cyclorama; in the latter, two pictures join at one border or seam, evoking a stereo card.

In order to bring out the latent power of each image and to focus on landforms and structures, I work into and over the prints, using a variety of “warm” and “cool” Prismacolor pencils. Warm tones amalgamate sepia, burnt umber, dark brown, gold and bronze; cool tones move into steely gray and silver; intermediate tones range from dark to light “warm grays.” I look for singular and interrelated shapes and for telling textures and details. In general, areas closest to the centers or seams are brought out with more clarity and warmth than those towards the edges, giving the viewer a sense of awareness, closeness, and adjacency. At some point during the hand-coloring process, I myself become aware of elements I would like to highlight further, such as a farmhouse, a horse-drawn cart, a woman and girl standing in a Winchester street, a cow grazing in a Frederick County field, or a field of rock outcroppings that reads as a natural cemetery. These I bring out through additional coloration, highlights and outlines. Towards the end of the overlay process I add three-dimensional objects to set out foreground stages or vantage points. In order to strengthen a sense of action or process (fighting, blasting, burning, burying, or harvesting), I often add what I call “symbolic texture.” Salt and pepper symbolize fighting and burning; crushed limestone and sand symbolize movement and path-taking; grasses symbolize planting and harvesting; twigs and stones symbolize memorial-making and monument building. The composition is then sealed and mounted onto two or three layers of rice paper. Serving both to set off the composition and to suggest its transformation into a screen or scroll, akin to an centuries-old Chinese or Japanese landscape, the rice paper affords closure and continuity. Set into a shadow box, the completed piece “reads” as a singular statement and as a chapter in an ongoing story, one the viewer is free to periodize (as a Civil War image) or personalize (as a private memoir).

Finally, *Talismans of the Long Gray Trail* sequesters an ongoing narrative. Each piece has both a historical and metaphorical title: a series, identified by actual place—a battle, battlefield, or road (here, the Valley Pike), and one or more metaphors, identified by symbolic place. Certain titles are biblical (Rest on the flight); others evoke the titles of Shenandoah Valley books, promotional brochures and even sheet music (Roll, Shenandoah; Peaceful Scenes; Where the Shenandoah River Flows). Should I work into and over these places again, I hope to revivify, deepen, and add to these values. The field is open; the Valley beckons.

Geraldine Wojno Kiefer  
July 2004

\*The source for the images is the Civil War print collection of the U.S. Army Military History Institute; digital copies of the original prints are by Bruce Kiefer.

Historical and source details may be found in the essay which also accompanies this exhibition.

### The Artist

Geraldine W. Kiefer is an assistant professor of art at Shenandoah University, specializing in American art, history of photography, feminist theory, material culture studies and drawing. She has a Ph.D. in art history from Case Western Reserve University, a master's degree in art history from Oberlin College, and a B.A. in studio art and art history from Kent State University. She has published one book and numerous articles, has a new book in process, and is a contributing essayist as well as illustrations editor of *The Valley Road: Culture and Landscape* (forthcoming). Her paintings, collages and drawings are in public and private collections in Ohio, Hawaii, and Virginia. She is represented by Dancing Fire Gallery, Winchester.