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Unforgotten: The Art of JD Smith

Isabel Spiegel · Wednesday, March 24th, 2021

Tucked behind a bungalow in Venice, California, is an art studio smaller than some people's closets. An American flag thrust into a potted succulent droops in front of the window. Inside, wall-to-wall shelves are packed tight with battered books on naval warfare, engineering and astronomy. A scramble of sketches, blueprints and photos are pinned behind a drafting table that takes up half the room.

Within these cramped quarters, artist JD Smith births giant ships. Using pencil, pen, and rolls of paper measuring up to twelve feet in length, Japanese and American battleships from the Second World War are rendered to commemorate the men who lived and died on their decks. It can take Smith over three hundred hours to complete a large-scale piece. Since he works in such a confined area, he often alternates between his studio and the driveway.

"I have to take them out and open them up all the way on a big piece of wood to proportion them," he chuckles. "I found that I can do it when it's rolled up relatively well but there's nothing like seeing the whole thing. I'll stand there and gawk at it myself."

Most people think of war memorials as public sites of commemoration, but Smith generates his own unique tribute to Navy veterans of WWII outside the public eye.

"I'm not thinking of a ship as an inanimate object. I'm thinking of it as a home. It's their home. It's where they lived," he says, sitting at his drafting table. His workspace is reminiscent of a ship's berthing compartment with the table wedged underneath a bunk bed, ladder and a lone light bulb. Smith's forearms are dotted with faded tattoos— a blue anchor inked when he was in the Navy and the lettering 'UFO.'

"It was my favorite band in high school," he explains, when asked what the letters mean to him. He hasn't lost his taste for metal, and the studio often vibrates with power chords and thunderous drum rolls. A sonic background of head thrasher music helps him focus.



Smith works on his rendering of battleship USS North Carolina. Photo by Jackson Goad.

Smith was born years after the conclusion of the Second World War and never saw combat during his own service in the Navy. Even so, he'll recount the history of every ship he draws as if he's walked the ghostly labyrinth of her passageways countless times.

"I haven't sailed the Pacific. When I was in the Navy I was in the Atlantic. The Pacific is the largest ocean. It's a lonely place to be buried," he says, when asked why he chose to honor Navy crewmen as opposed to Military soldiers. "These sailors didn't have grave markers. They just got coordinates. That's how they did it during the war, casualties were jettisoned."

Like the young men they carried, many battleships were lost to the waves. The USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor is unique in that it was built directly on top of the sunken ship. The scale of Smith's renderings creates an immersive experience. Both veterans and non veterans are invited to revisit these forgotten spaces and remember the fallen, as well as the sacrifices of those who survived. Fittingly, *Unforgotten* is the name of his current art show on display at the USS Iowa, a retired battleship turned museum in San Pedro, California. The battleship, which served in WWII through The Cold War era, was decommissioned in 1990 and eventually made her way to Southern California, where she now serves as a living history site and community resource center for Los Angeles veterans.

For Smith, ships have held a certain mystique since childhood. Their stories are interwoven with his own family history. Smith's grandfather, George C. Smith, proved to be a wellspring of information about World War II battleships and sparked his early interest in engineering.

"My grandfather was a hydrostatic welder during the war, so he'd repair a lot of the ships that came back with damage," Smith says. "He'd put on the metal helmet and the canvas suit and do the jobs no one else wanted to do." As a boy, Smith spent hours playing in his grandfather's welding yard in Venice and accompanied him to contract jobs by the docks of San Pedro, California. Awestruck, he'd watch cargo ships pull into the harbor stacked with multicolored containers that looked

like Legos from a distance.

When he was in high school, Smith's father, George O. Smith, asked him to find the location of his cousin Edward Malone's doomed ship, the USS Astoria. Edward was only twenty-five when the Astoria sunk off the coast of Savo Island in the summer of 1942. Smith spent several years reading everything he could on the fate of the ship. The long hours hunkered in libraries marked the beginning of his evolution from layman to human sponge.

Plumber and skilled laborer by day, historian and self-taught artist by night, Smith is armed with an encyclopedic knowledge of each ship. He'll explain every piece of machinery, the class and type of ship (battleship, cruiser, destroyer) and how it was fabricated.

Lighting a Marlboro, Smith swivels in the chair to survey his latest piece, a 12-foot long depiction of the USS North Carolina which lies partially unrolled on his drafting table. The ships are drawn without any digital input using drafting techniques such as radius perspective and 1/97 scale. A 728-foot-long ship will become a 7'5" long drawing and every detail of the ship's deck will be visualized on paper.

"With the North Carolina I struggled with the smokestacks," he says, pointing to the twin columns. "In the photos you can see that one of them is slightly higher than the other. I had to draw them five times." The average viewer would never notice the subtle difference or have a historical reference point for comparison, but to Smith, even a centimeter-sized error will be worked and reworked.

"I think it would be important to the crew that their ship was represented accurately. Even though there were lots of ships built of the same class and they looked identical from a distance, each ship is like a city. They might all look the same, as cities do from space but they're individual in their own right."



Smith's rendering of IJN Kaga hangs in the Alfa Romeo Tango gallery at the USS Iowa Museum.

Photo by Jackson Goad.

During his service, Smith came to deeply respect certain values that he has applied to his ethos as an artist. Above all, it was the sense of duty, selflessness and dedication to the collective that impacted him most. His ability to remember and render the multitudinous parts of a battleship stems from direct experience. After graduating high school in 1978, he became a pipe fitter at seventeen, enlisted in the Navy in 1981 and worked as a boiler room technician on an amphibious assault ship.

“The Navy trains you to do your job and it trains you in such a way that you don’t deviate. I drew the engine room for my test to get my boiler rating in the Navy and twenty-five years later I could draw the same diagram. I remembered everything. Where every gear was, what parameter the pressures were. I can’t say that there’s anywhere else in my life that I learned something and had it so ingrained.”

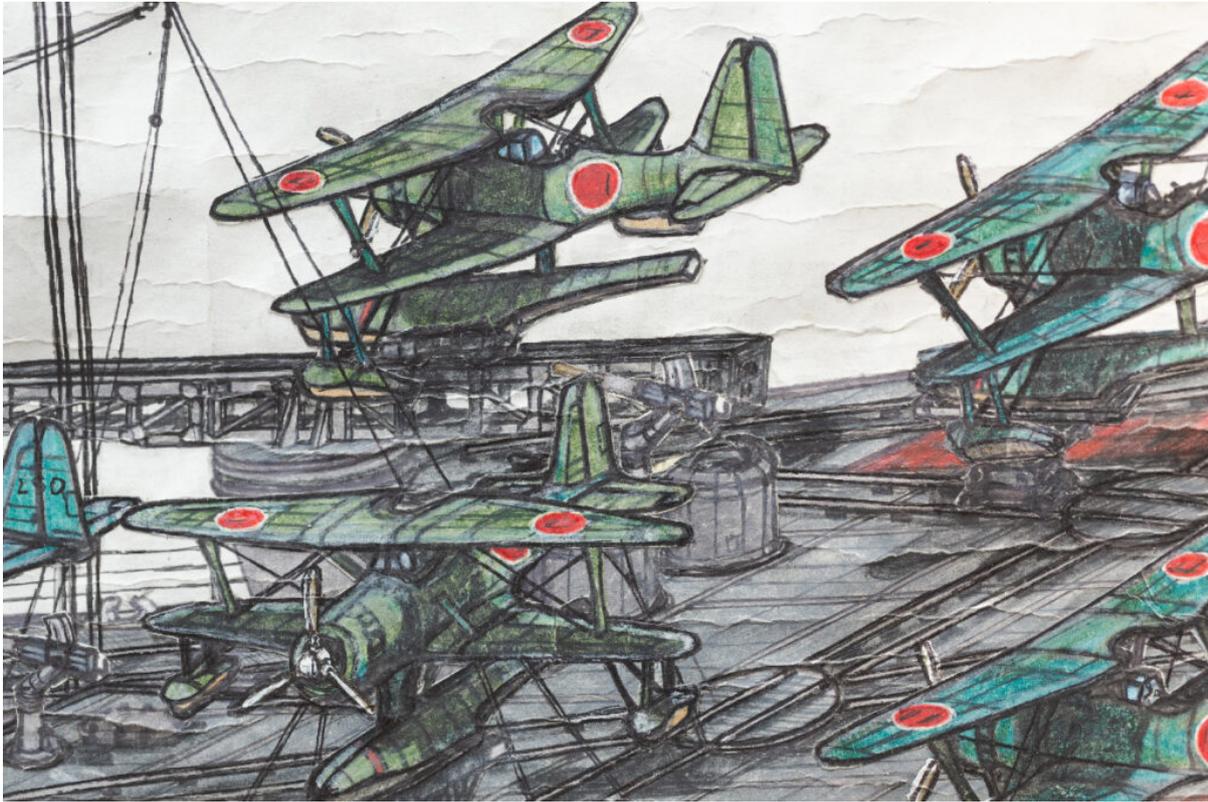
Drawing a ship means total immersion in the ship’s structure and story. Prior to creating a preliminary sketch, Smith will pore over historical references. Two of his primary sources for American and Japanese ships are the websites Navsource and Nihon Kaigun, which contain a photographic history of the American Navy and Imperial Japanese Navy from their inception until today.

“Most of the images from WWII are from when the ships are in the repair yards,” he explains. “So I have photos of these ships being refitted with welding machines all over them. The photos they took are so crisp that I can zoom in and see the guy’s shoelaces.”

Some of the ship’s parts will be drawn separately and then collaged onto the main body of the piece. This allows Smith to obtain greater accuracy and he feels the layered paper adds texture and depth. Opening a yellow folder, he reveals sheets of minute renderings; rows and rows of guns, rangefinders and cannons, which he’ll apply with the meticulous delicacy of a jeweler.

“These are the American guns and these are the Japanese guns,” he says. “I draw them in nests. On American battleships they’ll have them in rows. So I drew two in a row, three in a row and then at different angles. Some are head on or in profile depending on their placement,” he laughs, as if recognizing his fastidious dedication to his craft from an outsider’s perspective.

The way a particular part was fabricated can have great historical significance and must be taken into consideration while drafting the piece. When Smith drew the iconic Japanese battleship Musashi, he redid the deck multiple times until he’d accurately depicted the angular indentation made by Japanese manufacturers to conserve steel.



Detail from battleship IJN Musashi. Photo by Jackson Goad.

In addition to archival references that help him understand the layout and mechanical particulars of each ship, specific historical events inform artistic decisions.

“As I’m drawing the ship, I’m trying to determine what’s the best angle to shadow it at. For example, should it be 3:00 in the afternoon, and should the ship be going north, or in another direction. I did the destroyer USS Killen and when I drew it, I had the shadow coming from sunrise because it was shelling Balikpapan, which means it would have been sitting in the water with its guns aimed west, and the sun coming up in the east.”

The actions of sailors on deck as they unfolded in real time are at the forefront of Smith’s mind. “See, this rangefinder here is a little bit off from this one,” he says. “I did that on purpose. That means the guys were practicing and left it a couple degrees from center.”

Careful consideration of a ship’s orientation in the water, the position of the sun in the sky and actions of the men onboard, recreates a singular moment in time. It is as if the ship is preserved in suspended animation—still intact and the future unwritten for its crew. Floating in the middle of the blank page, Smith’s mammoth ships appear oddly weightless. Waves are suggested using negative space, eroding the ship’s hull as if to suggest its ephemerality.

Despite their immense size and destructive power, many of the era’s most intimidating battleships were ravaged by enemy aircraft and underwater torpedoes in a matter of minutes. A ship became an open target in the middle of the ocean with nowhere to hide.

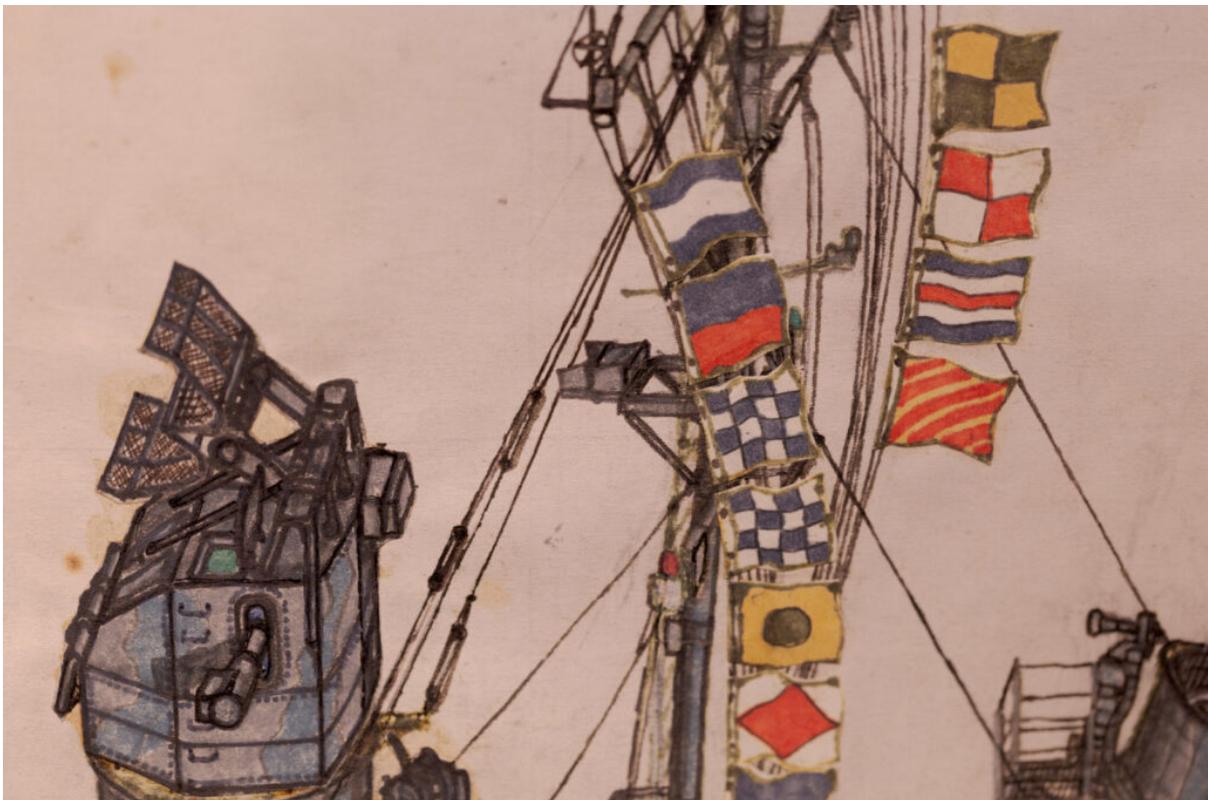
Shouldering the weight of history, Smith’s artistic process is often an emotional one. When he first unrolled his preliminary sketch of the Japanese battleship IJN Musashi, he was struck by an overwhelming sense of loss. With the USS Astoria, he knew exactly what part of the ship his father’s cousin had lived in during the war and rendering those sections was particularly painful. After he completed the USS Indianapolis, it was a drive past the field of headstones at the Los

Angeles National Cemetery that did him in.

“When I feel I’ve captured the ship and its essence enough for the crew of that ship to say, ‘ok, this representation is our ship,’ that’s when I get the tears. I feel like I’m doing them right,” he says.

The final art object is not a dispassionate technical drawing or one dimensional blueprint but a personal tribute created by the artist. Every ship bears the mark of the maker and the rough-edged eccentricity of outsider art. Their galvanized hulls contain a heartbeat. Sketch lines peek through colored pencil, an inky thumbprint smudges a corner, and buckling paper imbues the piece with handmade warmth.

“The flags on each ship [I draw] has somebody’s name, whether it’s a veteran or an old girlfriend. Usually, I put the men’s names on the Japanese ships and the women’s names on the American ships. If someone I know who’s a veteran passed away while I’m drawing a ship, then automatically they’ll go on the ship, whether it’s Japanese or American.”



Detail from USS Sims. Photo by Jackson Goad.

Smith chooses to honor the lives of the sailors irrespective of the cause they represented.

“I draw the ships without any bias. The Japanese’s naval doctrine was almost exactly the same as the American and English naval doctrine. The Japanese [casualties] were more numerous, almost every time. Death is pretty final. We’re all the same in that sense, we’re all human,” he says.

On board the USS Iowa, Smith scurries down ladders and strides through passageways, leading the way to the Alfa Romeo Tango gallery. The space was constructed entirely by volunteers, most of them local veterans, and is curated by Los Angeles based sculptor and educator Ben Jackel. *Unforgotten* is Smith’s first official gallery show and features five of the fifteen large ships he’s drawn thus far.

“JD lives and breathes the ships’ details,” Jackel says as he stands inside the gallery space. “His draftsmanship, the way he delineates the volume to optically work, the collage elements he adds using traditional drafting techniques...they’re stunning objects. He’s also our first Navy veteran that we’re showing in the gallery here, which is particularly significant. The whole point of this space was to bring the art world of LA and the veterans world together, and Smith is representative of that.”

Jackel also says Smith’s work aligns with the message of “reconciliation instead of battle” that the Iowa as an educational resource center seeks to promote. He feels that a historical site like the Iowa can foster dialogue and empathy between veterans from both sides as well as civilians who were not directly impacted. “We’re all proud Americans here, but none of us like war,” he states matter-of-factly.

Over the years, Smith has come in contact with a number of World War II veterans but many are hesitant to talk. Smith understands their reluctance based on accounts he’s read and his own experience of mass casualty assisting at the site of a military plane crash.

One encounter with a WWII veteran stands out to Smith. While working a maintenance job for an elderly gentleman, Smith shared that he was creating a panoramic drawing of WWII battleships stationed at the Ulithi atoll in the Western Pacific Ocean. The veteran said he wanted to show Smith something and brought out a leather notebook bound with rubber bands the size of his palm. It was his flight log from when he first started flying in WWII all the way through Vietnam.

“It was emotional reading it, because it was all written in the ink from that day, when the ship got hit by a Kamikaze and some of his friends had died,” Smith says with a slight tremor in his jaw. “He would write the time down when he took off and when he landed, any damage he incurred, bullet holes. Everything I was reading, his hand wrote at the actual time it happened. There were different colored inks and some of it was in pencil,” Smith recounts with a note of incredulity in his voice, as if marveling at the power of pen and ink to record the tenuousness of human existence. “One hell of a life, and to come out of it alive,” Smith sighs, shaking his head.

The last day of the job, Smith brought his drawing and asked the man if the ships looked the way he remembered. “I’d say so,” the man said as he stared intently at the drawing. Even though the piece was incomplete, Smith decided on the spot to give it to him. The man didn’t offer up any stories about the war or his experience stationed near the island Ulithi, but he traced the outline of the drawing with his finger, as if he were walking through the ship in his mind.



Smith walks the deck of battleship USS Iowa as the sun sets. Photo by Jackson Goad.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Smith's show at Battleship USS Iowa Museum is closed until further notice. Please refer to the [USS Iowa's website](#) for updates.

Enjoy Southeast Asian cuisine at local Venice restaurant, [Wallflower](#), and check out several of Smith's pieces on permanent display.

To get in contact with JD Smith, email him at pacificwarships@gmail.com

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