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Rehs Galleries, Inc., New York City

Exhibition: Opens May 6, 2010 – 5:00 – 8:30 PM; continues through June 7, 2010

Omaha – An Artist's Journey; Memories of D-Day: Works by Ugo Giannini

Ugo was a poet, an artist and had the strength of a boxer. He was a civilian drafted into the army, used to the comforts and clamor of his immigrant Italian family. Ugo's family consisted of his mother, Clara, an opera singer, his father Antonio, a simple tailor, and his three brothers, Richard, Walter and Harold, the baby. Clara and Antonio immigrated to this country from Italy just before WWI. They had intended to return, but were prevented from doing so by the war. To walk into their home was like entering the medieval town of Sera Capriola in Italy. Italian was spoken and Ugo didn't speak English until he entered kindergarten. The depression affected them, and they moved fifteen times in Ugo's formative years. When Ugo was eleven he returned home from school to find all the furniture in his house repossessed. Only a chair and a small table remained. Clara made dinners in an electric coffee pot. There was no money for meat. Ugo quit high school and worked for the WPA raking leaves in public parks. Later - Ugo worked for an advertising agency in Philadelphia when he received notification from "Uncle Sam." Ugo trained in England for twenty-two months in the 29th Division, preparing for the assault on Hitler's fortress-Omaha Beach was to be the 116th's destination.

June 6, 1944 was a defining day in the history of World War II. Ugo was an MP (Military Policeman) 29th Division, 116th Regiment assigned to Headquarters. His job was to control the incoming traffic; he actually had signposts to carry to the beach. His platoon landed at Omaha at H+70 minutes. There were thirty-seven men in his Platoon, six got to the beach. The last three men to jump from the boat were Rex Potts, Drummond and Ugo. Rex went to the right, Ugo to the left, and Drummond was killed in the water. When Ugo got to the beach, someone told him he was needed on the hill above. He climbed the Vierville Draw, jumped into a crater made by naval bombardment and spent that day as an eyewitness to the greatest invasion ever conceived. Remarkably he began to draw. These are the only drawings made on that historic day.

It is through the eyes of this particular eyewitness that we can return to those terrifying times and begin to understand what it must have been like, for just one man to experience war. Perhaps through the individual narrative, we can understand the universal lesson of the brutality of war; the transformative experience which is unique to the Infantry soldier, the man who fights the war on the ground.

The following was written by Ugo on June 7, 1944 (D-Day plus 2). It was in a box of his war mementos, on a crumpled piece of paper.

I retraced my way from the battered remains of Vierville-sur-Mer, I walked slowly dragging my unwilling soul with me and forcing it to inhale the death odor.

I was alone, searching for my comrades – 37 men who were hurled ashore yesterday morning (or was it years ago?)

I walked, stopped, resumed again always against the visible signs of war. Which way did they go? I reached the first enemy machine gun emplacement, leaned heavily against its sand bags. They were vomiting their white dusty guts – it was still - very still- but I heard the war crashing exploding in my ears; my nose and my mouth. I drew from a smashed wet pack of cigarettes - the bitter nicotine tasted sweet - I inhaled thick quantities of smoke like vaporous balls of opaque cotton - I wanted to forget, to stop thinking or feeling - I wanted to rest or to die - a thin plaster of white mud, darker brown where it was still wet, painted my legs, my boots, my hands and- yes – It must have been inside me too, in my stomach and along...

In June of 1945, while stationed in Vegesack, Ugo wrote this description of the landing in a letter written to his girlfriend Irene:

As I write I find it difficult to realize that I am not censored. Words just won't come now. I've been tongue tied so long.

Perhaps if; you write me questions I will loosen up a bit. O.K? I am still in the 29th doing occupation work in Bremen - my work for some time revolved about divisions traffic system (after all I am a copper) isn't that a gag!

Training with the infantry in England was tougher than combat. Of course - they taught us commando tactics but they never suggested a real enemy. (He makes all the difference). I used to be a doggie with a B.A.R. [(Ugo is referring to a Browning automatic rifle. He was with the 175th Regiment, and was transferred to the 116th as an MP. B.A.R.s rate of death was alarmingly high. About ten minutes in battle)]. I assure you I would have been dead by now - if as I wrote you once while in England (I was expecting a change for the better). I didn't realize how much better until shortly after D-Day. I haven't killed anybody yet – I don't think so?

Most of the real killing is done by artillery. I have been so terrified as to forget eating for days at a time.

Once in Brest, France a shell landed four yards in back of me – (four feet to be exact) I measured it next day. It was a dud or I wouldn't be writing about it. On D+4 I was in a field with the Rangers - Jerry

bombed and strafed us - a few of the boys were replaced by craters (Approx. 10 ft. from me). I didn't display any heroics until it was absolutely necessary - and it was on D-Day (I spotted a half dozen mines) and by lying down parallel to them I cautioned the infantry as they approached. The doggies used to be in back of me in those first days. I shouted at them but one guy didn't hear and I saw him sink a few yds. from me, his legs were only pieces of wet flesh and clothes; the blast was one of many.

Dear - I'm safe now, you don't mind if I talk a bit? That's enough for a while; yes one war is enough and sooner or later one's number comes.

For as far as I could see along the water's edge - there were bodies, hundreds, hundreds dead - I didn't believe it then - I still can't quite grasp it. How did I come through without a scratch?

This is a terrible letter! There were a lot of funny incidents-to-I'll tell you all someday.

*Goodnite and
Love always*

Maxine Giannini, Ugo's widow, writes: In 1993, January 30 – the day before Ugo died, he cried out:” Get me my bullet. For Gods’ sakes let me die like a man!” Pete and Helen were there, and we tried to calm him down, the ravings of a sick man, so out of context. Mark, on the other hand, knew where the bullet was and was ready to help Ugo with his plan. It was in those moments, that Ugo revealed his true state of mind; a facet that had lain dormant since he brought that bullet back from the war in 1945.

The men of the 29th Division whom I had met, carried with them some indelible memories etched into their psyches, never to be forgotten. There was a fatalistic, superstitious view of life and death – “Your numbers up - There's an Angel guarding you- The Joker's appeared.” They had a sense of an otherworldly destiny. For Ugo: The bullet. The one with his name on it – it missed him, for all his time in battle. Now he would take it home. If he could keep it – he'd survive, and this he did.

And on that day, January 30, 1993 he knew – there was no more time. Death Called to him, and he responded, but at the very last gasp at least he could die as a soldier – as a man – by the bullet; which was to him “ate” or fate.

He once said to me in those last days:” morphine is for old ladies”. Pretty funny – but I missed the point, the essence of his thinking and feeling. The guy was a soldier, a warrior, a man, and an artist. Ugo died on January 31, 1993. His last pastel, done the previous month, was H-Hour.

It is in this context that one must decipher these contemporary works.

Just as the very first drawings were made on Omaha in 1944, under completely impossible conditions – so were the last works made in 1992.

With oxygen being pumped into his lungs, no breath left. Once again, impossible to conceive of the courage he needed to create this final tribute to the 29th Division, the 116th Regiment; Ugo's comrades in arms.

Ugo's hands creating and completing the full circle of his epiphany – in war.

For more information about this exhibition (which runs from May 6 – June 7, 2010) or images of the works, please contact:

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Images of War



Omaha – June 6, 1944



D Plus One, Looking Out to Pont du Hoc – Bodies As far As One Can See

Memories of War



116th Regiment, 29th Division



St. Lo, Normandy, France – July 18, 1944 (1991)