

Check it out: Poetry readings commemorate Veterans Day

Thursday, November 9, 2006

To commemorate Veterans Day, Framingham State College professor of English Alan Feldman will read from the works of World War I poets at 3 p.m. on Saturday in the Danforth Museum of Art's auditorium.

Admission to the museum, as well as the reading, will be free for all veterans and those in active military or National Guard service.

The Danforth Museum of Art is presenting the reading in conjunction with a current show of work by John Walker, one of America's most innovative painters. Born in Birmingham, England, Walker is currently chairman of the graduate painting program at Boston University. His exhibition, "Passing Bells," which was inspired by the memory of his father's recollections of World War I, will be on view through Nov. 19.

About the exhibit

During one day at the Battle of the Somme on July 1, 1916, John Walker lost 11 uncles. His father survived, but almost died from shrapnel wounds received at Passchendaele. Sent back to England to recover, Walker's father was settled in a chair in front of his home so that neighbors could come and ask him about their family. For the rest of his life, he tried to reconcile his turbulent emotions of battle anxiety and loss set against the peace and tranquility of an English village. War affected the fabric of English society, as well as the relationship of a wounded soldier to his son. Recollections of battles fought were a constant presence in the Walker household.

At the start of the first Iraq War, John Walker began to meditate on the nature of war. He was fascinated with the World War I poets, particularly David Jones and Wilfred Owens, and incorporated theof their war poems into his painting. These dark works not only pay homage to his biological father, but also his artistic father. Those acquainted with "The Disasters of War" will be able to see the visual references to the war prints of Francesco Goya. A further visual reference to drawings made by Walker's son deepens the complexity of this work, commenting on what we learn from our fathers, as well as what we learn from our children.

About the artist

In his essay on this body of work, the critic Jack Flam has written the following: "John Walker is not only one of the best painters of his generation but also one of the most independent and unpredictable. During the 1960s, he first came to

prominence as an abstract painter working in a flat, planar style. During the past few years Walker has done something even riskier and more unexpected. He has dared to deal with literary and historical subjects that are inherently fraught with powerful emotion. And he has done so with such wholeness and such intensity as to make the longstanding dichotomy between abstraction and figuration seem surprisingly irrelevant."

The etchings in "Passing Bells" take their title from the opening line of Wilfred Owens' poem, "Anthem for Doomed Youth," and their subject is the carnage of World War I: "What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?" The iconography is deeply personal. Walker has said, for example, that the figure in uniform with the sheep's-skull head is specifically meant to evoke his father.

In the "Passing Bells" etchings, John Walker offers contemporary art an implicit prod and rebuke, and reclaims for high art an unembarrassed depth of emotion. By starting from an historical experience rather than from a body of previous pictures, Walker seems to be turning his own head, and forcing us to turn ours, to a different reality -- almost like one of the fiercely contorted images in the etchings.

About Alan Feldman

Alan Feldman is a professor of English at Framingham State College. His latest collection, "A Sail to Great Island," won the Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry and is available from the University of Wisconsin Press. His first book of poems, "The Happy Genius," won the 1978 Elliston Book Award for the best collection published by an independent press in the United States.

His work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *Kenyon Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, "The Best American Poetry 2001," and elsewhere, and has several times been selected as poem of the day on *Poetry Daily* and appears in the new anthology, "Poetry Daily: 366 Poems from the World's Most Popular Poetry Website."

He has received fellowships for poetry from the Massachusetts Artists Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. More information appears on his Web site www.framingham.edu/faculty/afeldman.

The Danforth Museum of Art is located at 123 Union Ave., Framingham. Museum hours are Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m., Friday and Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Museum admission is \$8 for adults, \$6 for students and senior citizens, free for children under 12 and Danforth Museum of Art members. For more information, visit www.danforthmuseum.org or call 508-620-0050.