



*Award-winning author and exhibiting artist Dr. Robert Schultz, John P. Fishwick Professor of English at Roanoke College, is a multi-talented scholar and educator who brings his talent to powerful collaborations that unite history, memory, and humanity. After teaching at Luther College for nearly two decades, Schultz moved to Roanoke College, where he would have the opportunity to continue working with students but also spend much of his time on his fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and art. Newly retired, he now is focusing on his creative and scholarly work, where he will continue to engage and enlighten with his unique talent and via powerful collaborations with other scholars and artists.*

## PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT

by Rachel Clevenger

# Exploring History and Humanity at Roanoke College

### A Resurrection of a Life

In 1865, upon considering the deaths of so many men in battle, Walt Whitman wrote, “The land entire is saturated, perfumed with their impalpable ashes’ exhalation in Nature’s chemistry distill’d, and shall be so forever, in every grain of wheat and ear of corn, and every flower that grows, and every breath we draw.”

This interweaving of violence and nature informed a collaboration, “War Memoranda: Photography, Walt Whitman, and Renewal,” between Schultz and artist Binh Danh, who grew up in California after his family fled to the U.S. from Vietnam as refugees when Danh was only two years old. The exhibit addresses the way Americans remember war. This conceit, the idea of our dead living on in the plants that grow from the soil, has been reproduced in what Danh calls chlorophyll prints.

Feeling he was seeing Waltman’s words come to life, Schultz learned the chlorophyll print technique: a delicate, painstaking process that involves placing a transparency on a leaf to be left in the sunlight, where the exposed areas are bleached out, while the shielded areas remain dark. The collaborators purposely avoided famous soldiers, choosing to focus instead on the common soldiers. Schultz explains that each leaf print is “a resurrection in a way.”

### Feeling More a Part of America

What Danh first remembers about his earliest meeting with Schultz is how he took Danh “under his wing almost like one of his students but also like a colleague.” Schultz was there for Danh, then a nervous young artist and professional, to witness the blossoming, and Danh views his time with Schultz as a powerful learning experience where he could watch how Schultz worked as an academic and a poet.

Schultz introduced Danh to Whitman, leading him to delve into the history of the US Civil War and explore 19th century printmaking techniques, such as daguerreotypes. The resulting “War Memoranda” features many of Danh’s daguerreotypes as well as passages of poetry and portraits of soldiers. Danh came to Roanoke College for a brief residency, where he met with photography students in the art department. He brought his box camera into the woods near a local Civil War memorial and took photos of students reading Walt Whitman’s work. Many of those photos made it into the exhibition, and Binh Danh made an artist’s book of them and donated it to the college’s archive.

Theirs is still an ongoing collaboration, with the recent exhibit opening at its third venue in Lancaster, Pennsylvania this past September. This month, they will rendezvous at Franklin and Marshall College, back in the area where Binh’s parents first settled when Binh was a toddler. Danh notes that their collaboration is evolving:

a “living memorial in a way” that reminds us about the larger issues we face as “anyone who considers the U.S. their home.”

Danh believes Schultz opened a door for him—helping him apply his Fine Arts background to consider the relevant history within the photography. He was able to learn about the history, and not just the medium, via this “invitation” from Schultz that brought him deep into Civil War history, something that helps him “to be an American” and even make him “more comfortable in his own skin” through a sense of connection and empowerment. This friendship with Schultz has brought Danh a sense of feeling more a “part of America” while also helping him find his own voice as an artist.

Schultz sees their work as both relevant and timely, as discussions of war memorials are very much a part of contemporary public discussions, how we “reconcile out of conflict.” In the run-up to the 2015 exhibition, Schultz’s students were deeply involved in the work, writing essays and making brief presentations of their research at the museum where the exhibit first opened. He explains that this work offered students both a wider audience and a “sense of occasion.”

### Working Toward Unity

David Wyatt, Professor of English at University of Maryland, has known Schultz since the early '80s, and he notes that Schultz is a



“multi-talented person” who, whether working as a poet or novelist or visual artist, has “excelled in all these different fields and media.”

Like Schultz, Wyatt recognizes Whitman’s connection to our lives today. Quoting passages from Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Wyatt suggests that Whitman was able to anticipate and address in advance “what we were going to feel 150 years later when the World Trade Center fell.”

Wyatt suggests we are in the midst of “a third civil war,” as we are continuing the struggles of the Civil Rights movement. Of Whitman, Wyatt adds, “He puts his arms around everyone, including people not yet born.”

In striving to reach unity, Wyatt argues we are tasked with focusing on what connects us, what unifies us. This connection, which is one explored in Schultz’s work, also speaks to acknowledging our own anxieties, dark thoughts, and faults. Wyatt concludes, “We are also united in that—united in falling short.”

While any writing-intensive course can be vocational and skills-based, Schultz notes that classroom conversations center around “a very life-oriented subject matter.” As such, these courses are good for students—and their professors for that matter—because “they address us as we live in our lives.”

### Life-Expanding Work

Schultz explains, “I came to teaching basically as a writer first.” Whether he is teaching literature, film, or writing, he approaches the classroom as a writer, practitioner, and artist. He adds that he has been tremendously grateful to Roanoke College for allowing him the opportunity to focus much of his time on personal passion projects but still work with students, experiences he approached in the same unique way that he approaches his creative work.

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He made it clear to students, “If we’re just playing school here, then I’m not interested.” Explaining his deep connections to literature, film, and the arts, he told them, “This is not just



Photographic scan by Robert Schultz including a chlorophyll print, hosta blossoms, and a cased photograph of a young black boy and American flag. Cased photograph and portrait of an unidentified African-American Union soldier courtesy of the Liljenquist Family Collection, US Library of Congress.

my job—this is my life.” He was passionate about his students understanding that these works “carry you out of your sole self,” and are thereby “life-expanding.”

In a classroom, Schultz was not interested in just going through the motions. Instead, he was “interested in encountering the works themselves”—exploring a work of art in a meeting place within a community. In writing courses, where students were delving into their life experiences and their most personal thoughts, he would often leave a classroom with goosebumps, recognizing this was “the real deal.”

Roanoke College graduate Chalalin Giron speaks to how Schultz’s untraditional approach changed her relationship to poetry. When she confessed how incredibly daunted she was by the idea of composing poetry, Schultz recognized she might struggle in a traditional class setting; he designed an independent study for her. After asking what subjects she was interested in, he sent her to work on what mattered to her, without worrying yet about the tools and semantics for dissecting the poetry.

Once Giron had something on paper, they “worked from the bottom up.” As she found her footing, he progressed into the structural critiques. When she moved into the classroom setting, where students would share peer feedback, Schultz set the tone that these conversations were private—recognizing that this degree of vulnerability is a “very unique thing to poets.” No matter how much work an initial attempt might need, Schultz

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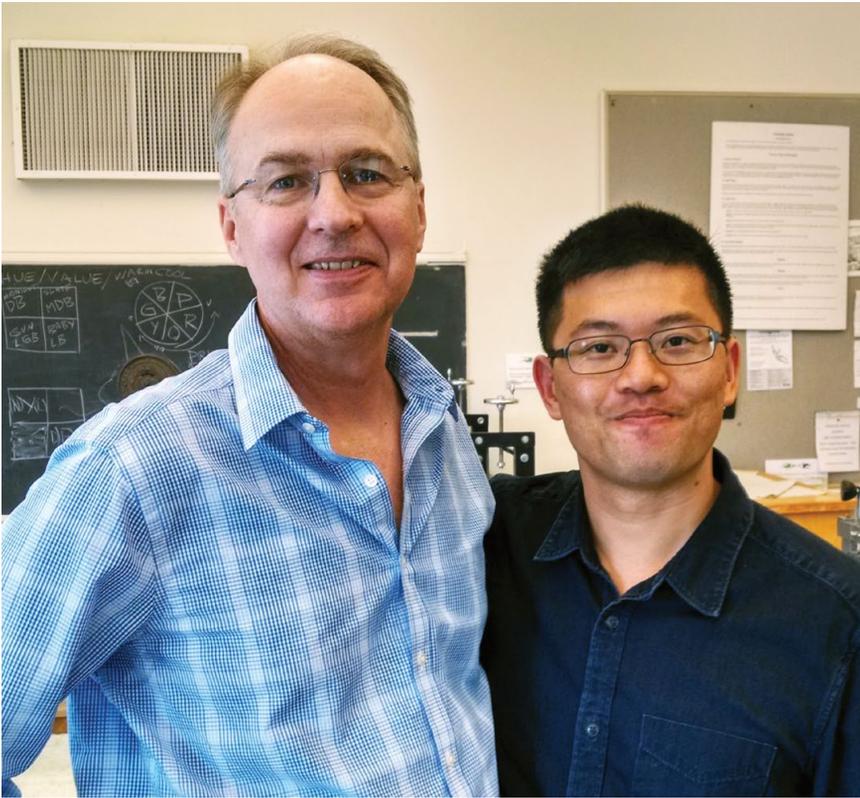
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always found something positive to work from—even if it were just a single word. She ended up minoring in poetry and has since published three poems.

Paul Hanstedt, Professor of English and Director of Pedagogical Innovation at Roanoke College, notes that Schultz is “that rare professor who can demand more of students—intellectually and creatively—and earn not just their respect, but the reward of seeing them become their best selves.” He believes that whether Schultz is teaching a course on 9/11, fine art, or literature that Schultz can pull in the students and help them dissect the complexities as they discover how much enjoyment there is in that process. Hanstedt shares, “He opens up to his students the life of the mind—and of the heart.”



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Dr. Rachel James Clevenger earned her M.Ed. degree from Mississippi College. After finishing her PhD in Composition and Rhetoric, she taught and served as the University Writing Center Director for Birmingham Southern College and University of Alabama at Birmingham. Most recently, she taught Business Communications at Samford University.

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