

THE ARION PRESS ANNOUNCES

Slaughterhouse-Five, or— *The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*

by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

An artist book with twenty original drawings
in black and white and with color washes by

VINCENT VALDEZ

Issued in both Fine Press and Deluxe editions
at San Francisco, 2023

Slaughterhouse-Five is Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s darkly comic novel of survival and sanity in times of utter despair. And, like any enduring work of serious literature, it invites fresh appraisals and analysis. Since its release in 1969 in a modest first printing of ten thousand copies, the novel has appeared in twenty languages, sold more than eight million copies worldwide, and inspired critically acclaimed adaptations both in film and on stage. Its seamless blending of memoir, allegory, protest, gallows humor, pathos, and gee-whiz time travel offers new insights with every reading, inspiring provocative visual interpretations from all cultural and generational divides.

It is in this spirit of intellectual engagement that Arion Press is pleased to announce the publication of a fine press edition of *Slaughterhouse-Five* featuring twenty original drawings, some with washes of ink, by Vincent Valdez, a daring artist whose social consciousness and alert eye for telling detail have won him acclaim for his uncompromising

engagement with complex subjects. In the rich tradition of what is often called narrative art, Valdez embraces large, contemporary subjects in expansive ways. Similarly, Kurt Vonnegut possessed an innate sense of observation, capable of articulating both the best and the worst in people, and Valdez's art complements those efforts.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1922-2007) was a native of Indianapolis, Indiana, the son of third-generation German Americans. His birthday, November 11, fell on Armistice Day, which had been declared a national holiday four years earlier to commemorate the conclusion of what was naïvely proclaimed to be "the war to end all wars." Vonnegut observed his twenty-second birthday in uniform as a recently enlisted soldier in the United States Army and was sent to France in the waning months of World War II, in time to be swept up in the ferocious counteroffensive launched by the German 1st Panzer Division in December of 1944 known as the Battle of the Bulge. Assigned to the U.S. 106th Infantry Division as an intelligence scout, PFC Vonnegut was cut off from his battalion amid the ensuing chaos. He was captured on December 19 after wandering alone behind enemy lines for eleven days.

Transferred to Dresden by cattle car with a forced labor detail, Vonnegut was put to work in a malt-syrup factory and confined at night to the relative safety of an underground meat locker in an abattoir designated Schlachthof-5. This surreal circumstance proved fateful on the evening of February 13, 1945, when a combined fleet of Allied aircraft unleashed a blanketing barrage of incendiary bombs over Dresden, reducing the beautiful city once described as "the Florence of the Elbe" to a fiery rubble. The attack killed nearly thirty thousand civilians but spared the occupants of Slaughterhouse-Five. In the aftermath, the POWs were tasked with collecting corpses for burial and funeral pyres. Advancing units of the Red Army freed Vonnegut and his fellow POWs in May of 1945.

After returning to civilian life, Vonnegut worked at numerous jobs, married, and began to raise a family. Turning to writing for additional income, he produced several short stories for magazines, eventually

publishing his first novel, a science fiction paperback titled *Player Piano*, in 1952. Four similar efforts—*The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Mother Night* (1961), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965)—followed in due course. Finally, twenty years after the fact, Vonnegut was ready to grapple with his war experiences. *Slaughterhouse-Five* became, in publishing parlance, his "breakthrough" work, vaulting him to the top of all major best-seller lists, achieving a degree of popularity that continued with his subsequent novels, *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* (1970), *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), *Slapstick* (1976), *Jailbird* (1979), *Deadeye Dick* (1982), and *Galápagos* (1985).

While clearly inspired by the firebombing of Dresden, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is more about the psychological impact of time and death on its principal character, who in the novel is putatively Billy Pilgrim, but is, in fact, the narrator, a fellow survivor of the firebombing, Kurt Vonnegut. Another notable character in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is Vonnegut's recurring alter ego, the fictional writer Kilgore Trout, who made his first appearance in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and is known for crafting bizarre tales that typically deal with disturbing topics. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Trout is a friend of Billy Pilgrim and the author of several stories that provide a commentary on the novel's events and occasional insights into Billy's experiences.

As a critique on modern warfare's profound impact on the human psyche, *Slaughterhouse-Five* defies every metric usually applied to what constitutes a "war novel." It appeared as the sixth in what would be a total of twelve novels, exactly midway in Vonnegut's career as a novelist. Often lost in the discourse is that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was written when young Americans were dying at record monthly rates in Vietnam, with no signs of resolution or abatement. One of the few passing references to the national disquietude generated by the Vietnam War appears in the opening chapter, when the narrator visits the home of Bernard V. O'Hare, a fellow POW, to tell him of his plan to write about their war experience. O'Hare has no suggestions, though his wife requests that the book not glorify warfare. In response, the narrator promises to subtitle the

novel "The Children's Crusade," a reference to an ill-conceived initiative mounted in the early thirteenth century to have young people march to Jerusalem on behalf of the church elders and convert Muslims to Christianity. Their earnest efforts were an abject failure, with many of the youthful envoys seized and forced into slavery.

Vonnegut resisted being classified as a science fiction writer, his previous writings notwithstanding, and rightly so, since his style is anything but formulaic—and a good deal of it is deliberately preposterous. (Vonnegut himself described his fictive perambulations in time and space as "horseshit" in a 1973 interview with *Playboy* magazine, albeit "a useful, comforting sort of horseshit.") In a review for *The New Republic* that appeared shortly after publication, the novelist Michael Crichton, author of *The Andromeda Strain*, a novel that deals with an extraterrestrial virus and that also became a runaway best-seller in 1969, stressed that the "business about a distant planet and flying saucers" in *Slaughterhouse-Five* "does not make the book science fiction, any more than flippers make a cat a penguin. In the final analysis, the book is hideous, ghastly, murderous—and calm. There are just people, doing what people usually do to each other." Another contemporary reviewer, Christopher Wordsworth in the *Guardian*, declared *Slaughterhouse-Five* to be "the oddest and most directly and obliquely heart-searching war book for years," proving "how art, in its own good time, can find a way. Here is war as a ridiculous ogre trapped by its own braces on the pillars of the firmament."

Vincent Valdez has said several factors influenced the scope and shape of his artwork for *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in particular the experience of his great uncle. Like Vonnegut and Billy Pilgrim, Ernest Valdez was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge and imprisoned in a POW camp, where he remained until being liberated in 1945. After returning home to San Antonio, Ernest struggled with what is now known as PTSD for the remainder of his life. For this work, Valdez relied partly on an archive he inherited, including the last letter Ernest sent to Valdez's grandfather, who was then

seventeen years old and bound for Europe with a B-17 bomber loading unit.

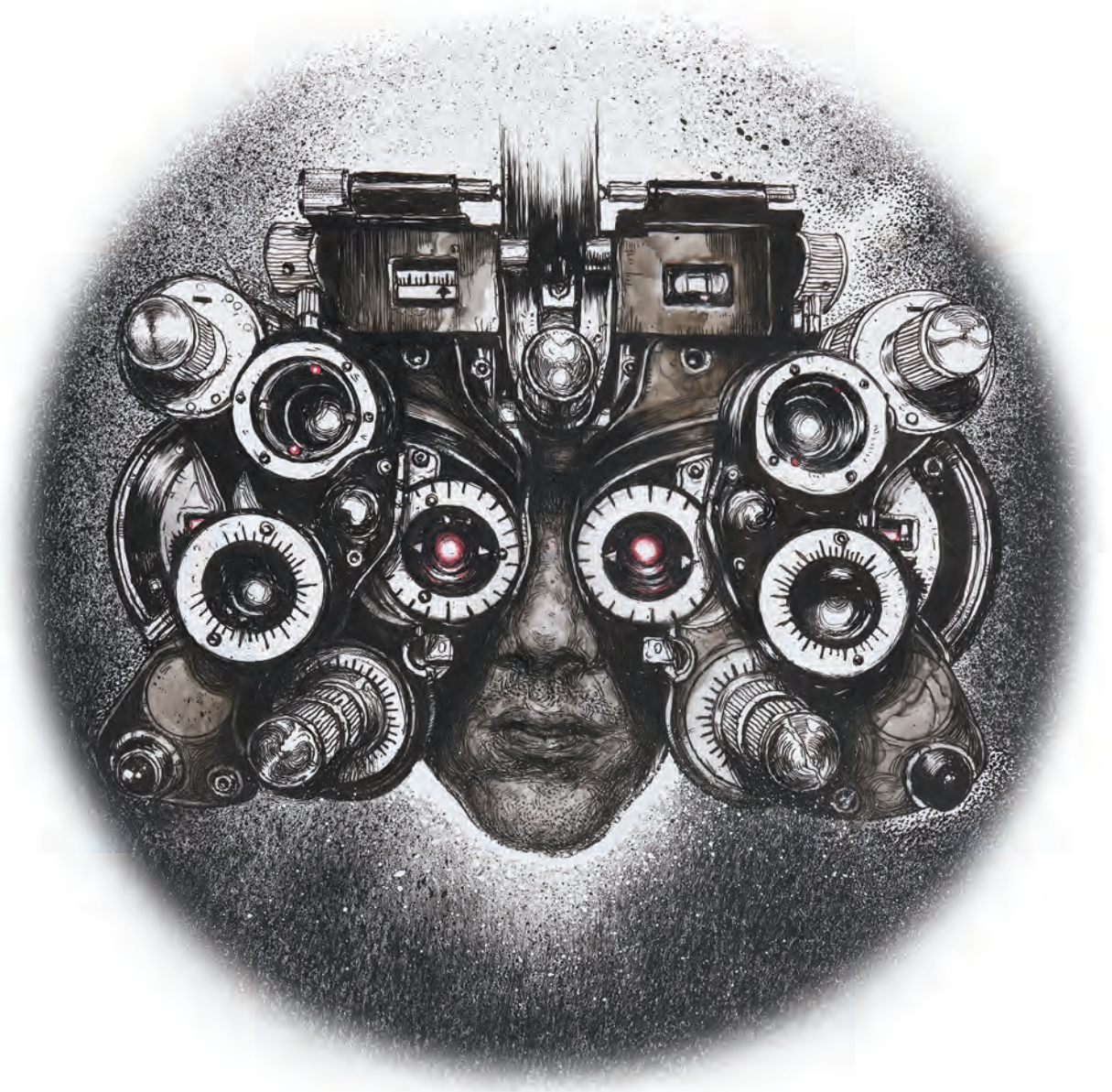
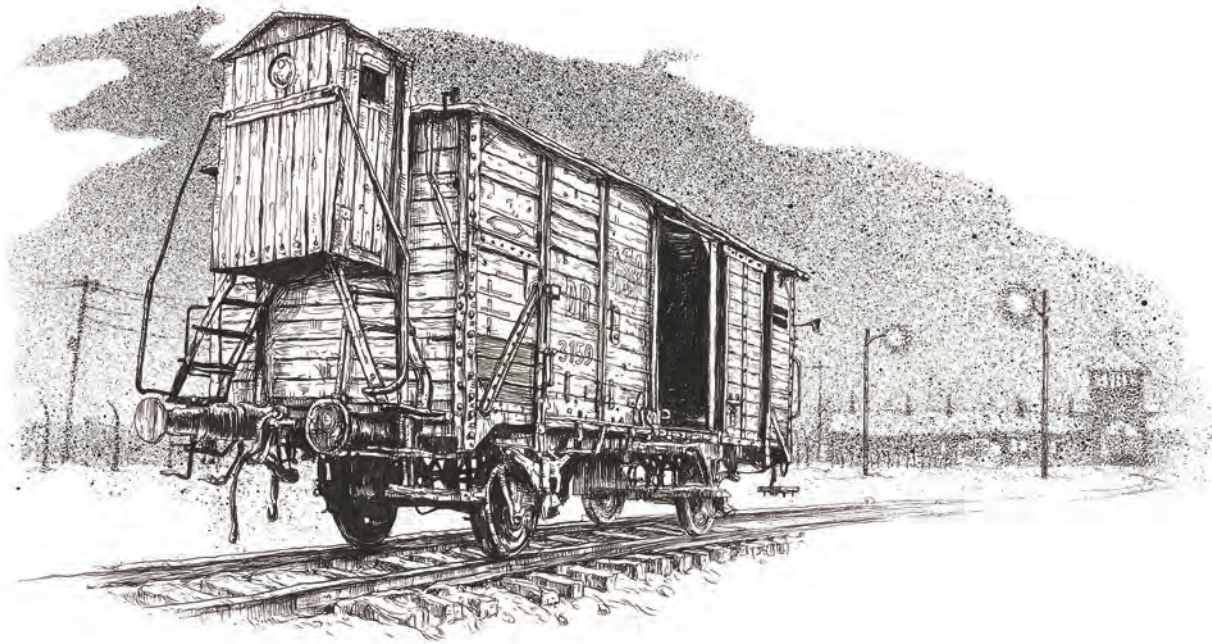
Valdez approached the Arion commission as a team effort, just as he would were he working alongside a living colleague or writer, to the point where he felt Vonnegut's presence in his mind and at the studio. Ultimately, he aimed to emphasize the subtleties sometimes overlooked in the text while paying close attention to better known visuals such as the "re-renderings" he made of Vonnegut's sketches that appear in trade editions of the novel.

With the goal of blurring the distinctions between myth and reality, past and present, Valdez hopes this edition of *Slaughterhouse-Five* offers a "visual testimony of transformation, hope, love, and survival in twenty-first-century America."

The Artist

Vincent Valdez was born in 1977 in San Antonio, Texas, and began developing his interest in critical image-making at an early age. His polished execution and singular talent earned him a full scholarship to the Rhode Island School of Design, where he received his B.F.A. in 2000. His work focuses on painting, drawing, and printmaking, often exploring themes of social justice, memory, and ignored or under-examined historical narratives. Valdez is most recognized for his monumental portrayals of contemporary figures. His drawings and painted subjects often remark, in starkly visual ways, on universal struggles within various social and political arenas.

On viewing Valdez's monumental painting *The City I*, Lawrence Downes of the *New York Times* recognized that Valdez "had put his finger on something that was incredibly relevant and incredibly evocative." The four-panel panorama on canvas, thirty feet wide and more than six feet high, is now installed in its own gallery as part of the permanent collection at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas Austin. It portrays thirteen figures in Ku Klux Klan robes and hoods, situated on a bluff overlooking a city at night. The black-and-white palette suggests



Samples of artwork

a historical photograph, but details such as an iPhone and a new Chevrolet truck place the work firmly in the present. Valdez characterized it as “a work that gives us ways to speak about things we don’t often speak about,” an approach to his craft that is evident in the original artworks he produced for Arion Press.

Valdez divides his time between Houston and Los Angeles, and his work is represented in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Ford Foundation, the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the National Portrait Gallery. His numerous honors include grants and citations from the Ford and Mellon Foundations. He created several of the drawings for this edition of *Slaughterhouse-Five* during his tenure as the inaugural King Artist in Residence, an initiative where visual artists work and collaborate onsite with Arion craftspeople in the foundry, pressroom, and bindery of this historic cultural institution.

One of Valdez’s renderings for *Slaughterhouse-Five* depicts a woman who appears lost in a sandstorm, a reference to the Biblical destruction of Gomorrah when Lot’s wife cannot help but watch the annihilation of her city. Vonnegut ruminates on the connections to Lot’s wife in the first chapter: “People aren’t supposed to look back,” he writes. “This one [book] is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt.” Here, Valdez renders Lot’s wife the moment she disintegrates, her body almost entirely transformed except for her piercing, unwavering eyes, a warning to readers not to forget the past or become numb to it—itsself a core tenet of Valdez’s working manifesto to create images that counter humanity’s “fateful desire to repeat history.”

The Book

The book is quarto, 9-1/4 x 7 inches, 200 pages with 24 unnumbered pages for drawings with color, plus 2 imprinted translucent overlays. There are an additional 8 drawings rendered in black only, including 2 sweeping depictions of the destruction of Dresden in 1760 and 1945

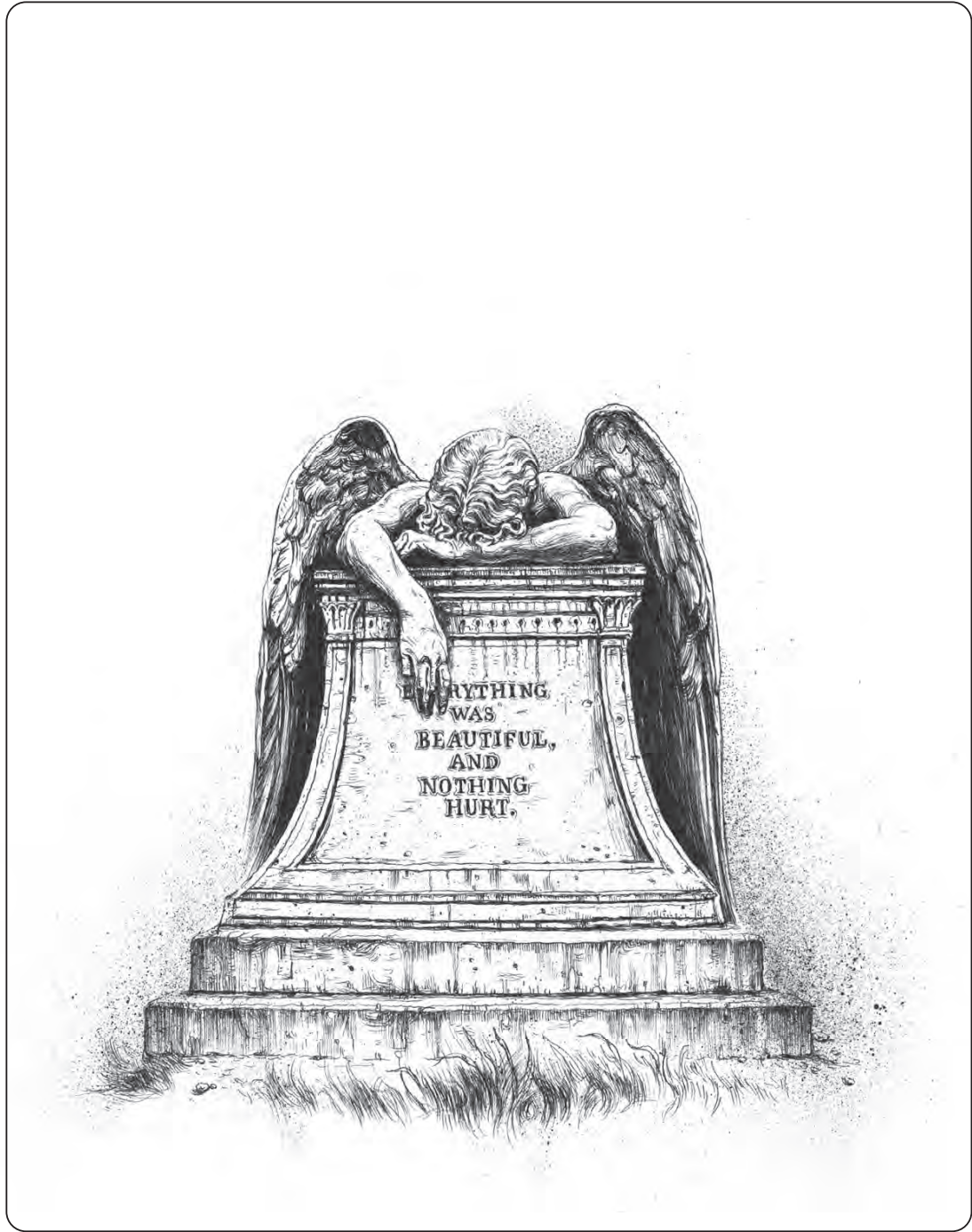
that span the front and rear endsheets, respectively. Together the 20 drawings, including the artist’s interpretations of Vonnegut’s 3 original illustrations, reflect Billy Pilgrim’s fractured psychological landscape as well as the external collective psychosis of a world engaged in perpetual warfare. Valdez’s careful reading of Vonnegut is expressed through ultra-fine linework, the subtle delicacy of ink washes and minute applications of color, and the masterful application of ink splattered with a toothbrush to render shadows, dissolution, and the cosmos itself.

The books are printed by letterpress from metal types cast onsite expressly for the project. The typeface throughout is Univers, conceived in the wake of WWII by the Swiss designer Adrian Frutiger. A marvel of the technological boom of the 1950s, it was one of the earliest modular faces adapted for photocomposition type. While Univers was originally considered for the signage at Charles de Gaulle airport, its vestiges can still be found throughout the Bay Area Rapid Transit system in San Francisco.

The binding employs a military dossier motif in a modified “dos rapporté” style, with paper over boards and titling imprinted on the front cover in red and black inks. The total edition for sale is 250 copies: 210 in the Fine Press edition and 40 in the Deluxe. Fine Press copies are presented in custom die-cut cardstock envelopes with string-and-button ties whose *trompe-l’oeil* design—stamped “Classified”—is derived from wartime ephemera in the artist’s family archive of personal correspondence. Deluxe copies feature leather spines and are housed in free-standing sculptural aluminum slipcase towers that have been riveted and powder-coated to resemble military surplus canisters, complete with stenciled titling.

The Extra Print

Deluxe edition copies are further complemented by an original etching, *Everything Was Beautiful*. Inspired by Vonnegut’s beloved sketch for the initial trade edition, Valdez has heightened the pathos of the epiphany in a neo-Baroque rendering of an angel weeping over a gravestone.



The etchings are printed on 300 gsm textured white Somerset and measure 10-1/2 x 8-1/4 inches, on paper 13-1/2 x 11 inches. The prints are presented in chemise and limited to 50 copies for sale, each signed by the artist: 40 accompany the Deluxe edition and an additional 10 are offered for individual sale.

How to Order

We reserve a copy of the Fine Press edition for each of our current Subscribers, who are offered the first opportunity to order the Deluxe edition instead, at an additional charge. Pricing varies depending on the type of subscription and is generally 20-30 per cent below the retail price. A supplementary fee of \$2,160 will be charged to Annual Subscribers who elect instead to purchase a Deluxe copy with custom slipcase and signed etching. All other subscription prices are as follows:

Fine Press Edition

210 copies
\$1,120 with Subscription (\$1,600 retail)

Deluxe Edition, with signed etching

40 copies
\$3,280 with Subscription (\$4,100 retail)

Individual signed etching (shown at left)

10 copies
\$1,680 with Subscription (\$2,100 retail)

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