

Art review: 'Divine Ammunition' by Al Farrow at the Crocker

HIGHLIGHTS

Crocker Art Museum exhibit is both beautiful, disturbing

Religious pieces sculpted from guns, ammunition

Artist's medium, message are one, says curator





BY VICTORIA DALKEY
Bee Art Correspondent

The entanglement of war and religion lies at the heart of Al Farrow's sculptures of reliquaries, cathedrals, synagogues, mosques and other devotional objects and edifices on view at the Crocker Art Museum. Made of guns and ammunition, they are at once beautiful and disturbing.

These elaborate, dollhouse-like structures have domes made of bullets and flying buttresses, minarets and arches fashioned from Uzi parts. Many mimic actual structures: a Nigerian mosque, a Gothic cathedral reminiscent of Chartres and Amiens, a synagogue modeled after the great Synagogue of Brussels. Others, especially reliquaries, many housing human bones, are feats of the imagination. All are amazingly well-crafted.

The initial inspiration for these works came after Farrow visited the crypt of the basilica of San Lorenzo, in Florence, Italy, in 1995. There he saw a display of ornate reliquaries that preserved the bones and other attributes of venerated saints. One in particular, a vessel in which were suspended the bones of a single finger crooked as though ready to pull the trigger of a gun, caught his fancy.

The piece stayed in his mind after he returned to his studio in San Rafael and resulted in a new work that departed from his earlier cast bronzes. Made of guns, bullets, bullet shells, steel and bone, "Trigger Finger of Santo Guerro," the saint of warfare, is an artifact of an imagined saint that represents the link between religion and wars both historical and current.

Farrow, who buys 20th-century guns, some from the two world wars, and ammunition from various countries at gun shows and on the Internet, cuts and welds his arsenal into works that offer social critiques of humans' ostensibly diametrically opposed penchants for violence and spirituality.

Here the medium and the message are one, said exhibition curator Diana Daniels at a walk-through of the show.

There is nothing ad hoc about Farrow's sculptures, Daniels said, pointing out that he starts with sketch books and architectural plans and does a great deal of research on the structures he creates.

It took 15 months and two assistants to make "Bombed Mosque," based on a mosque in Pakistan that was bombed in a dispute between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims. From one side, the very beautiful mosque with a golden dome is whole, but as you move around it, you see the gaping hole in the dome and the rubble of its destruction on the ground.

More than 200 guns and thousands of bullets were used to make "The Spine and Tooth of Santo Guerro," a Gothic cathedral in three parts, weighing 1,200 pounds, that also serves as a reliquary for Farrow's invented war saint. The "saint's" tooth has a gold filling, lending a chilling note to the relic.

"Synagogue V" topped by a star of David and a faux slate roof with a blue-green patina, combines Uzis, copper bullets, brass shell casings, lead shot mimicking stucco, and glass. It calls up associations with present day conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians, while "Skull Fragment of Heilige Krieg" a relic of the personification of "Holy War," with it's piece of the Berlin Wall and a glass gas jet, calls up associations with World War II and the Holocaust.

In an introductory statement to the show, Daniels notes that Farrow denigrates no one belief, being mindful and respectful of all. And while seeing guns and ammunition so ingeniously employed to make devotional objects may be discomfoting, Farrow, disavowing responsibility, has stated that such a reaction reveals "far more about the viewer than it does the artist."

DIVINE AMMUNITION: THE SCULPTURE OF AL FARROW

When: Through Jan. 3. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursday.

Where: Crocker Art Museum, 216 O St., Sacramento

Cost: \$10-\$5, free for museum members and children 6 and under. Every third Sunday of the month is "Pay What You Wish Sunday."

Information: 916-808-7000, www.crockerartmuseum.org