

Al Farrow



Al Farrow interview with introduction by Alan Magee and commentary by Chris Hedges
Critics Corner, Features and Essays, Winter 2020



Alan Magee – Al Farrow

I remember Monika saying, “Alan, come over here. You have to see this.” We were at the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco, in a room displaying recent acquisitions of contemporary political art. I had been standing in front of Gottfried Helnwein’s impressive *Adoration of the Shepherds*.

When I turned around to respond to Monika, she was examining what appeared to be an intricate scale model of a Gothic cathedral. It was about six feet in length. Moving close to it I began to realize that every part of this exquisitely-crafted likeness of a thirteenth-century European church

was actually a gun, a part of a gun, or a bullet. I was experiencing the inescapable double-take that the artist had built into this work. That visceral jolt is what grabs you, and once you are captured, the piece holds onto you. *Cathedral* is a work by the San Rafael-based sculptor Al Farrow, who has practiced art as a form of activism for more than forty years. This single example of Farrow's art was utterly convincing—a masterful, forceful merging of concept and artistry. I needed to know more about this artist, and I wanted to meet him. During our first phone conversation I learned that Al knew my work as well. He told me that he was interested in having an exhibition at Forum Gallery, where I show my paintings in New York. I advocated for that exhibition enthusiastically, and I asked Chris Hedges, the political journalist, former war correspondent, and former Presbyterian minister to write the catalog essay. That show took place in March, 2015 at Forum's gallery in the Crown Building on Fifth Avenue. It was a marvel.

Al Farrow is an equal-opportunity social critic. His religious edifices and objects include mosques, synagogues, cathedrals, rural-American churches, weaponized menorahs, and barbed parodies of Catholic reliquaries. He presents viewers with a Dreidel constructed from five high-caliber bullets, and a reliquary containing the enshrined "Trigger Finger of Santo Guerro."

Al is fierce in his condemnation of self-righteous, religiously-driven violence; he is at the same time a remarkably kind and generous man. I feel privileged to know him as a friend, and I am delighted to have this opportunity to introduce his work to the community of artists in Maine. October 2019



Al Farrow with his work, 2012

What do you think is the role of the POLITICAL in your art?

I think of my art as social commentary rather than political. My main purpose is to get the viewer to think about the symbols, materials, and unusual juxtapositions they are confronted with and hopefully lead them to think about the relationship between war and religion. I am not trying to lead the viewer to any particular conclusions, just to get them to think. I think art that is purely political risks being written off as propaganda.



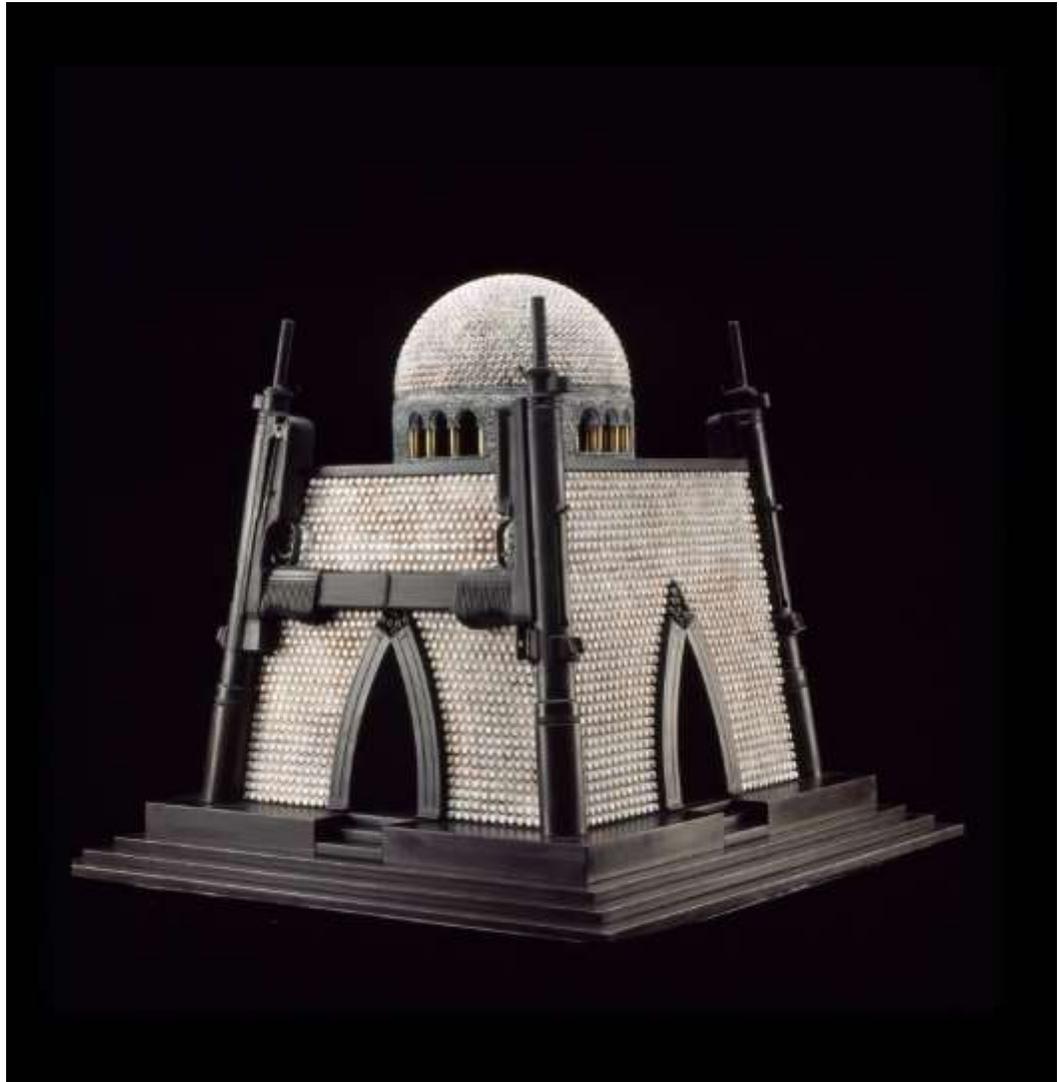
Al Farrow, *Fence Menorah*, shell casings, steel gears, barbed wire, 12 ¼ x 21 ¾ in. (9 in. diameter base), 2012

We are asking you to share your ideas about how—and how deeply—political concerns play a role in the art you produce and how you present it to the world. Here are some questions to start you thinking:

While my art is considered political by many, my personal concerns are to provoke thought and perhaps personal investigation into one's own attitudes.

Do you consider art as refuge OR soap box/cultural canary/conscience/satire?

Art is certainly a refuge for the artist. It can also be a cultural canary, giving the viewer something to think about, perhaps guiding the viewer into thoughts they hadn't considered before.



Al Farrow, *Mausoleum II* (after National Mausoleum of Pakistan), guns, bullets, lead shot, steel, 27 x 30 x 30 in., 2007

Do you see art as escape or engagement?

My art is most certainly about engagement. The sculptures I make are intensely detailed and highly crafted. This tends to hold people's attention and they spend a lot of time discovering things and making connections about the imagery. In a personal context, I can escape the world around me by making art.



Al Farrow, *Mosque III* (after National Mosque of Nigeria, Abuja), tank killer missiles, bullets, shell casings, steel, brass, lead pellets, trigger, 2010

For you, is art about transcendence or does it keep you in the fray?

I see myself as outside the fray, but I have hopes that the viewing public has a transcendent experience.



Al Farrow, *Synagogue III*, guns, gun parts, bullets, steel, lead shot, Israeli Army issued Tefilin bag, talit, tefilin, 20 x 27 x 33 in., 2010

Do you employ your art as a vehicle for cultural critique?

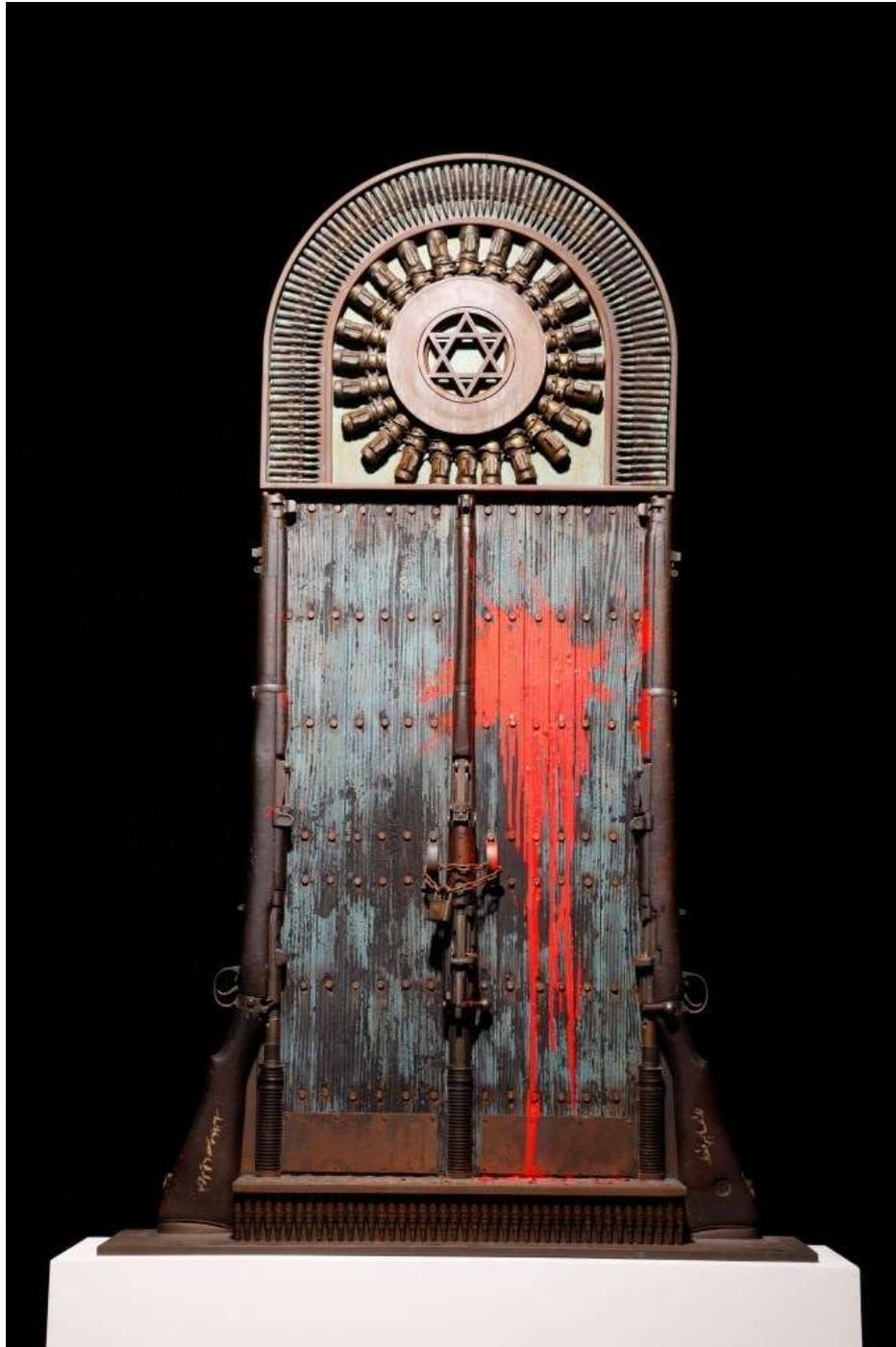
Absolutely! I see myself as a cultural critic yet I am not demeaning my subjects (the various religions). I am illustrating the involvement of the various religions in war efforts. I treat all religions equally and with respect for their traditions. I feel quite strongly that aiming for a place that is interpretive rather than specific is more effective in reaching into the viewers mind.



Al Farrow, *Bombed Mosque*, guns, gun parts, bullets, shell casings, lead pellets, steel, 40 x 56 x 34 ¼ in., 2010

To what extent do your political concerns appear in your art?

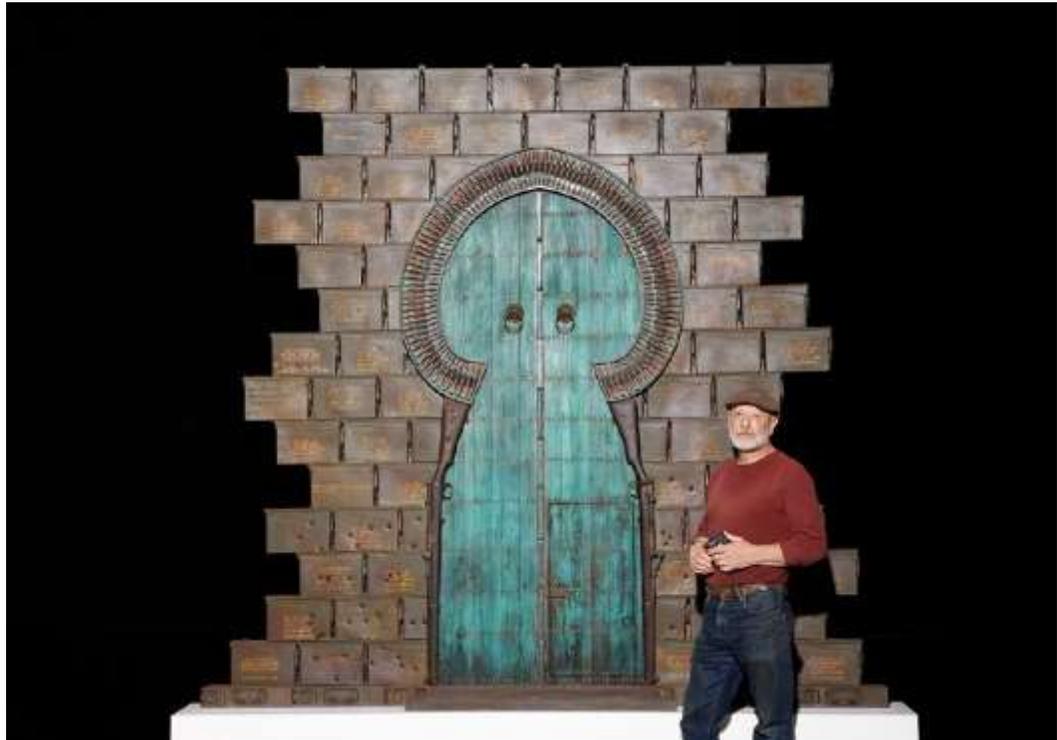
My political concerns are woven into the entire effort, but I don't try to lead the viewer to any particular place and certainly not to my personal beliefs. I hope to lead the viewers to themselves in order to encourage them to think about where they actually fit in this larger equation of what role their religion plays in war.



Al Farrow, *Vandalized Synagogue Door (II)*, guns, gun parts, shell casings, bullets, steel, wood, brass, paint, 67 x 40 x 10 in., 2016

To what extent do your moral concerns act as your artistic muse?

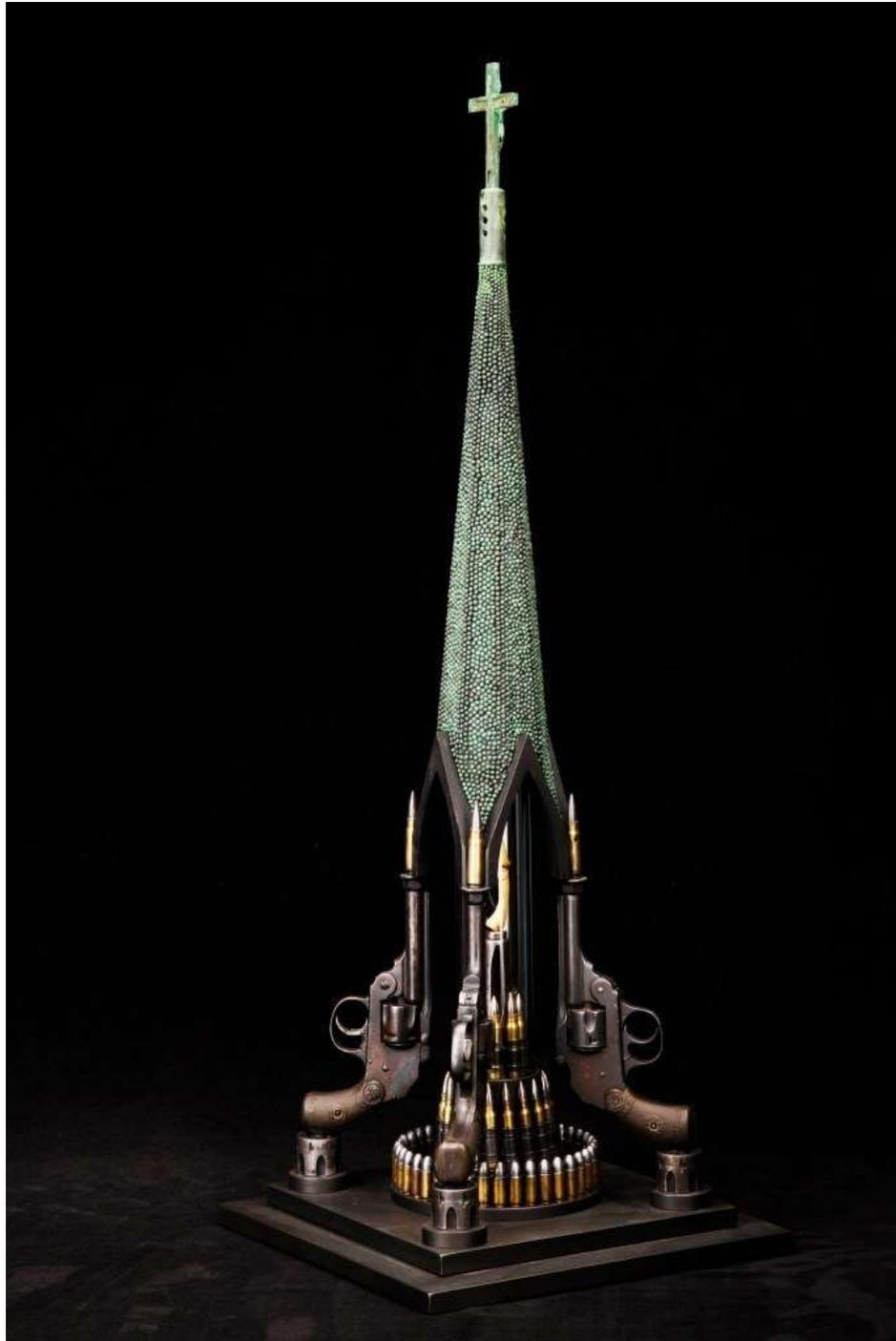
My moral concerns are what motivates my entire effort as an artist. I have devoted my life's work to social commentary.



Al Farrow, *Vandalized Mosque Door (II)*, ammo boxes, guns, gun parts, bullets, shell casings, steel, wood, paint, cluster bomb parts, 91 x 107 x 14 in., 2016

Do you work from a political/moral/spiritual base? Are these fundamentally different or separate? Do they overlap in your art?

I think the political, moral, and spiritual all inform my artwork in overlapping ways. I leave my personal spirituality out in specific form but it is a guiding force. The political is inferred, not obvious as to any particular point of view. The moral is the position I am coming from.



Al Farrow, *Trigger Finger of Santo, Guerro (XI)*, guns, bullets, shell casings, steel, glass, bone, crucifix, 32 x 12 x 12 in., 2008

How do you think of visual culture? Is it part of the general cultural stream, or does it have a moral/political voice?

Visual culture is definitely part of the general culture stream but more so in TV, video, film, and in many ways through social media. But a large part of our cultural population does not engage in the visual arts where there is much more commentary and a variety of points of view. There does exist a moral/political voice in mainstream media, but it is mostly entertainment. The visual arts can also be entertaining but it is often used to impart much more.



Al Farrow, *Trigger Finger of Santo Guerro (II)*, guns, gun parts, bullets, shell casings, steel, bone, crucifix, 1996

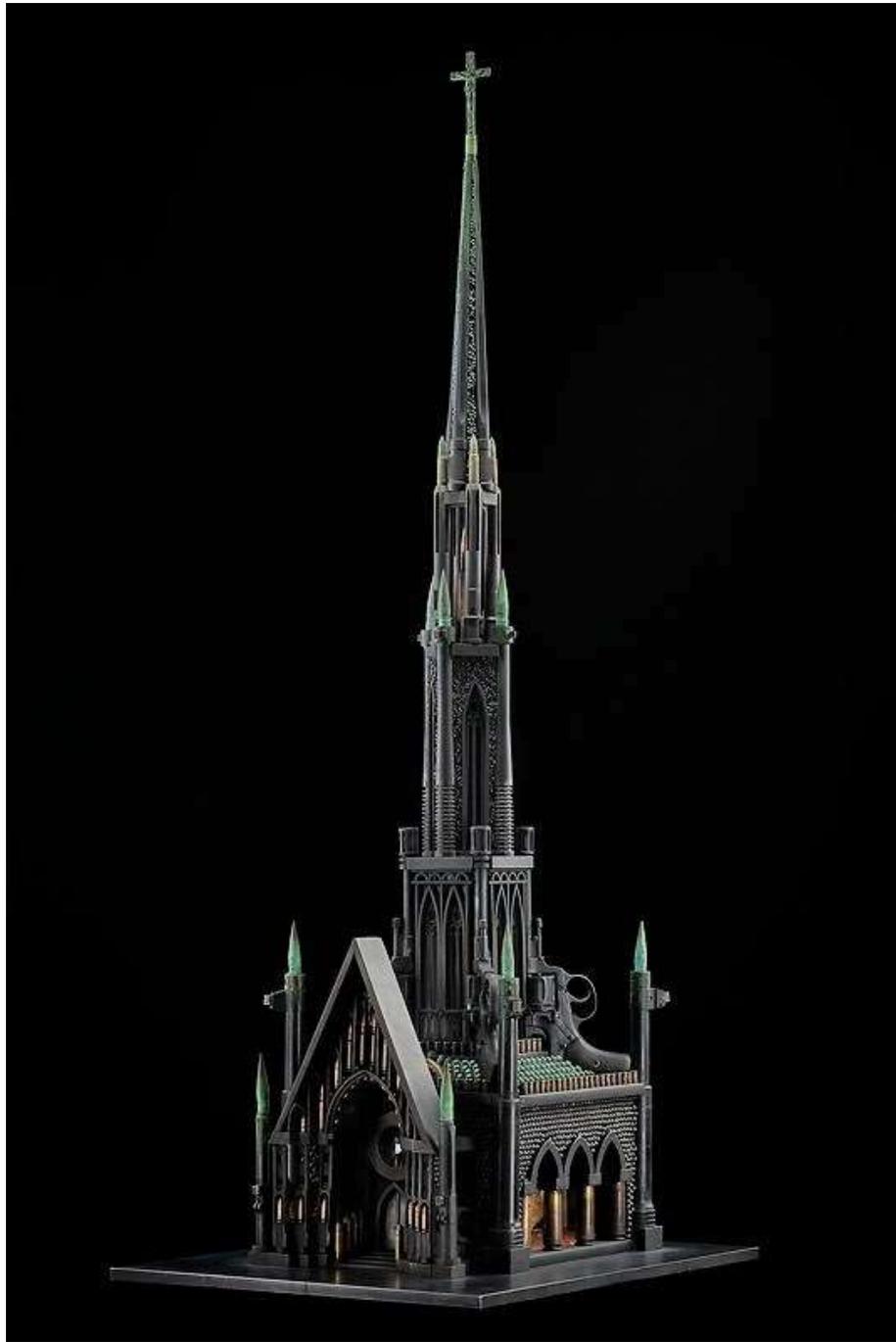
Is art just a way to state your political stance or do you see your work as a form of activism, intended to effect change?

My art doesn't take a particular political stance, although it is a form of activism and it is intended to effect change, yet I don't believe it will. I feel it reflects my time and place in the world and will be more appreciated in retrospect.



Al Farrow, *Skull of Santo Guerro (II)*, artillery shells, bullets, shell casings, gun parts, steel, glass, crucifix, 2011

The most I can expect is to get the viewer to think. What they actually think is not important to me, but just the fact that they think. So much in our culture disallows true thinking, so much is predigested, formulaic, and aimed at a low intellect.



Al Farrow, *Skull of Santo Guerro (III)*, guns, gun parts, bullets, shell casings, steel, brass, lead shot, glass, bone, antique textile, 52 x 18 x 22 in., 2011

Chris Hedges – Foreword to Al Farrow’s *Wrath & Reverence*, published by Forum Gallery in Conjunction with the Crocker Art Museum, 2015 (edited version)

The haunting art of Al Farrow—mosques, synagogues, churches, and reliquaries constructed with guns, bullets, and bone—exposes a powerful, often hidden truth about war. Religious leaders and religious institutions sanctify war’s barbarity. This perversion of faith away from the sacred, the nurturing, and the preservation of life, directs believers, as Farrow makes clear, towards the unholy deities of nationalism, violence, vengeance and death. Cruder apostles of death use suicide vests and knives to murder their captives. Our Israeli allies and we in the Middle East use militarized drones, attack aircraft missiles and heavy artillery. It all ends up, morally, in the same place. And Farrow shows this place. He shows us our collective temples of death.

Farrow’s work does what great art does—makes plain, and in Farrow’s case, literal—a reality about war we refuse to acknowledge. He shows us our actual houses of worship, our charnel houses built by instruments of death. And he does so by fashioning religious relics out of the material we use to kill. Farrow forces us to confront not only the role institutionalized religion plays in war, but the religion of war, Santo Guerro adoring itself. And he knows no faith is exempt—Christianity, Islam, nor Judaism. Farrow combines a draftsman’s precision with an artist’s understanding of metaphor. The sculptures’ exquisite architectural forms, like the unholy instruments of war, are strangely beautiful. The human brain sees the structure in its entirety before noticing the particulars. The edifices have a satiny, burnished gleam. But we see, looking closer, that the flying buttresses are automatic weapons, and the Byzantine mosaic of the mosque’s golden dome is tiled with golden bullet casings. There is a shock in this recognition. It is the collision between the profane and the sacred.

The most disturbing sculptures feature human bone.

The reliquary series includes *Skull of Santo Guerro*, which showcases a human skull in a glass case. The skull is fallen back, looking up towards the brass crucifix above the casket. Its jaw is agape as though screaming. It lies on a heap of oxidized ammunition casings.

Farrow’s sculptures have a jarring, visceral impact. They are appalling in their gruesome immediacy.

Farrow does not take sides. His target is Santo Guerro itself, the strong who prey on the weak. [...] *Menorah (Fence II)*, with its twists and knots of

barbed wire and nine straight white candles, invokes the horrors not only of the Holocaust, but of war itself. War is a Satanic form of worship. I have hidden behind walls with armed rebels in El Salvador as helicopters hunted us down. I was at once awed by the majestic force of these machines of war and terrified. We feel this twin allure in Farrow's work. It is at once attractive and repellent. It thrills and revolts us.

By creating his buildings and caskets out of used ammunition, Farrow introduces into our consciousness, however subliminally, the colossal global arms trade, a multi-trillion dollar industry that keeps the gears of war grinding forward in its unrelenting pursuit of profit.

Farrow, by shattering the conventions and myths used to glorify war, forces us to confront our weakness, vulnerability, and mortality. In taking instruments of violence and annihilation, and creating objects of macabre beauty that open our eyes to the perversion of war, Farrow turns this hijacking upside down. He reclaims the sacred.