

Al Farrow

the
scene

Farrow brings 'Divine' inspiration to Bellevue Arts Museum using guns and ammo

By Ryan Murray
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Artist Al Farrow shows off his 'Divine Cathedral' artwork that he constructed out of guns and ammunition.— Image Credit: Ryan Murray/Staff Photo

The rubble from the bombed mosque's qubba scatters in blackened heaps on the ground, a stark juxtaposition to the glinting gold and turquoise mosaic of the building's walls.

But this is not a war zone. The building is just 3 feet tall, and makes one of California-based artist Al Farrow's most spectacular works in "Divine Ammunition," the new exhibition occupying most of the second floor in the Bellevue Arts Museum from now until May 7, 2017.

Farrow constructs his elaborate works almost entirely of guns and ammunition, always with a political subtext. The "Bombed Mosque's" shining exterior mosaic is constructed out of 50,000 spent cartridges, chemically treated to create different hues. The mosque itself is an Iranian-style construction with a Sunni-style dome, and with minarets constructed out of heavy Russian machine gun barrels, the work is meant to reflect the internal conflict between worshipers of different Islamic sects.

Across the room, an iron menorah uses Nazi machine guns and French-resistance pistols for some evocative imagery.

"I became an artist in order to do social commentary," he said. "My first works were in something I called the Icarus series. I followed that with the African series. They were bronze sculptures with war machines. The public did not respond to it. Seeing naked black men with weapons scared the hell out of most white folks."

He dropped the figures and moved on to second-hand weapons, welding the steel structures together in reliquaries, cathedrals, mosques, synagogues and other places or symbols of worship.

One of the most meaningful works in the exhibition (which consists of more than 20 years of the 73-year-old artist's work) is the Burnt Church.

The skeletal remains of a county Gothic church is literally made of French rifles dropped by French soldiers at Verdun. The poilu died on that battlefield by the hundreds of thousands, and the shell casings, rifles and bones remain to tell the story.

"I have a lot of reverence for this piece," Farrow said of the scorched, twisted columns. "These are dead men's guns."

Farrow gets most of his supplies from gun shows and from gun dealers, where often he can buy firearms and ammunition in bulk.

"I'm probably on a list somewhere, but I'm sure the FBI or the ATF [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives] has bigger things to worry about," he joked.

Despite using the religious imagery, Farrow said he has the same respect for all the religions he represents, and does considerable research in architecture and aesthetics before undertaking a new

project. As a draftsman in a previous life, his abilities to lay out the buildings on paper ahead of time make things a little easier on himself and his assistants.

But risks still exist.

While using a blowtorch to create the bombed effect of “Bombed Mosque,” one of the supposedly fired primers exploded and shot him in the neck, luckily just creating a glancing burn.

Farrow didn’t become part of his own artwork, but he does use bone as Catholic relics in his works, inventing “Santo Guerro” (Saint War) as inspiration for reliquaries.

His most complex work, a French-inspired Catholic Gothic cathedral called “The Spine and Tooth of Santo Guerro” uses body parts as relics (no points for guessing which ones) amid the bayonet windows, anti-aircraft gunsight cross and flying buttresses.

His spray-painted church and mosque doors are another set of works meant to provoke and engender conversation, Farrow said.

“I want people to wonder why violent elements are used to create religious elements.”

The Bellevue Arts Museum is located at 510 Bellevue Way NE, Bellevue. For information, visit www.bellevuearts.org or call 425-519-0770.