

Sandow Birk

PHOENIX
New Times

“Artillery” at Mesa Contemporary Arts Doesn’t Go Far Enough With its Message

By Lynn Trimble

Thursday, July 16, 2015

SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com



Mentally Assured Development/ Destruction (MADD) by Angel Cabrales

"ARTillery" — an exhibition currently on view at Mesa Contemporary Arts Museum — is an interesting survey of weapons in contemporary culture. But it could have been a call to action in an age when simply talking about violence isn't doing squat to end it.

With more than 50 works of art by nearly three dozen artists on display, museum-goers never experience the two perspectives most likely to enhance their understandings of weapons: the view from behind the barrel of a gun, and the view directly in front of it.

It's a missed opportunity that sculpture or digital technology could have provided. Instead, we see guns from angles that make it easy to dismiss their relevance or power.

The disconnect is heightened by the way these objects are placed within the space, mostly mounted along three walls in a horizontal line that rarely requires people to break their gaze. It's a sterile, clinical approach that only serves to punctuate the detachment many Americans already feel about weapons after years of being saturated in violence served up in books, video games, film, and TV shows.

There's a lot to see in this show, curated by Annie Adjchavanich of Los Angeles. But I'm not so sure each work manages to "provide a social dialogue about our time," as she promises — at least, not in the way they are displayed.

For gallery-goers who like to understand and appreciate the full measure of what they're seeing, "ARTillery" is frustrating fare. It's compounded by the fact that viewers don't know what they don't know. Without text panels that include explanatory text, for example, people might love seeing the little red wagon Angel Cabrales converted into a missile launcher, but they never realize that the pencils it's set to launch pay homage to last year's victims of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris.

Sure, it's cool to look at Joshua Levine's orange jumpsuit laden with an odd technological backpack, or Chaz Bojorquez's oversize handgun covered in silver glitter. But there's nothing to help viewers understand what they're seeing. It's great to see Shepard Fairey's *Obey Molotov* (2005, spray paint, stencil and collage on paper), but better still when you know he also designed the iconic Barack Obama "Hope" poster. Museum panels should share such things. Not everyone is a gun whisperer.

Some works speak for themselves. For a pair of William Mooney photographs, one showing weapons lying on a stoop, and the other a young boy holding a handgun near his waistband, no explanation is necessary. But it's the exception rather than the rule, which makes "ARTillery" feel like a secret artists' society at times. Still, the exhibition has merit.

Al Farrow's *Mezuzah #14* (2011, 50-caliber machine gun bullet, steel, kosher parchment with hand-rendered Hebrew text) is especially profound, in part because its simplicity stands in such stark contrast to the complexities of Middle East history.

It's a treat to see works by two Arizona artists, Fred Tieken of Paradise Valley and Jackson Boelts of Tucson, as well. Tieken's *Mass Hysteria* (2012, acrylic on canvas with wood frame) explores the role of greed and fear in fomenting war. Boelts' *War Zone: What If? HB #1* (2014, watercolor) and *War Zone: What If? Z #2* (2014, watercolor) explores life for children inside a war zone.

To the curator's credit, she's also included works that define weapons more broadly. Technology as weapon is evident in two pieces viewers see when first entering the gallery space: a ceramic surveillance camera and a cardboard rifle with top-mounted point-and-shoot camera. Yet there's a significant omission: the airplane as weapon.

Art nerds will delight in seeing works by several well-known figures, including Sandow Birk and Elyse Pignolet, who set guns inside symmetrical designs that look from afar like beautiful Arabic script for their pieces *AK-47 Palmette #1* and *#2* (2009, ink and gouache on paper).

Although some museum materials suggest the exhibition includes "today's leading artists," viewers won't see art by the likes of Jeff Koons, Ai Weiwei, or Kara Walker. Instead they'll see a drawing by executed serial killer John Wayne Gacy (dubbed the "Killer Clown") and a painting by former *Brady Bunch* actress Eve Plumb.

"ARTillery"

continues through Sunday, August 16, at Mesa Contemporary Arts Museum, 1 E. Main St. in Mesa. For more information, visit the Mesa Arts Center website at www.mesaartscenter.com.