

Al Farrow



21c hosts powerful exhibit by Al Farrow, who examines the intersection between religion, war and death

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February 19, 2016

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"Bombed Mosque" by Al Farrow | Courtesy of 21c Museum Hotel

At first glance, Al Farrow's 3-D sculptures of elaborate religious structures like churches, synagogues and mosques look beautiful, detailed and inviting. However, the closer you get to the works of art, Farrow's underlying theme of exploring religion and death becomes dramatically clear. Farrow's sculptures aren't made with clay or wood, they're constructed using bullets, guns, missiles, shell casings and sometimes real human bone.



A close-up of Al Farrow's "Revelation I," the Protestant church | Photo by Sara Havens

[21c Museum Hotel](#) opened the exhibit, titled "Al Farrow: Wrath and Reverence," last week, and it'll be on display through July 15. Farrow's meticulously crafted works represent all three of the major religions — Christianity, Judaism and Islam — as well as his take on reliquaries, which are containers that store and display precious relics. In fact, it was witnessing a real reliquary on a trip to Italy two decades ago that inspired the idea for this show.

According to an essay in the exhibition catalog, Farrow, a social activist, came across a reliquary that contained a saint's withered, bent finger.

"The event sparked a cascade of thought in which he questioned the mystery, paying no mind to the saint, finding himself powerfully stirred by the finger's presentation: bent and lean, encased in glass and surrounded by worked silver," writes Diana L. Daniels, curator of contemporary art at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento. "Its fantastical appearance, locked like a finger with *stenosing tenosynovitis* (better known as trigger finger) in its artful home struck him not only as bizarre, but incongruous."

It was then Farrow began contemplating the contemporary political climate, religion, war, history, culture and faith. Unfortunately, religion and death go hand in hand, even before Christianity. So by creating these sacred religious symbols out of weapons and ammunition, the beautiful, detailed sculptures also are startling and horrific at the same time.

Last Friday, Insider met up with VP and museum director Alice Gray Stites for a tour of the exhibit, and about halfway through our session, Farrow himself, who was in town for the opening, stopped by and further explained the intentions behind his art.



Al Farrow discusses his art with museum director Alice Gray Stites. | Photo by Sara Havens

Stites was passionate about the underlying themes of the show and pointed out that although cryptic, they're also alluring in the way dollhouses are — they're miniature replicas of powerful symbols.

"This is where art and real life truly intersects," she says. "To have the opportunity to present an exhibition that will encourage people to start discussing these very serious issues is encouraging, but it's disheartening in that it's such a necessary thing."

Stites says 21c owns two of Farrow's pieces on display, and the others are on loan from several galleries. The entire exhibit will travel to Bellevue Arts Museum and the University of Wyoming in 2017, and then the McKinney Avenue Contemporary in Dallas in 2018.



One of Al Farrow's reliquaries | Photo by Sara Havens

In 2013, 21c hosted an exhibit titled "Aftermath" in which two of Farrow's pieces were shown among many others that commented on the 10-year anniversary of the War on Terror. It also opened shortly after the Newtown school shootings.

"It's tragic that things have actually gotten worse both in this country and across the world," says Stites. "Violence all around the world is not going away, and the discussion about the proliferation of firearms, not only in this country but as a massive global trade, is a point this show makes."

Some of Farrow's pieces are exact replicas of actual structures, such as the Plum Street Synagogue in Cincinnati or the Trinity Church in Manhattan, and others are a hybrid of sketches and photographs, like the bombed mosque. The reliquaries are his interpretations of the religious relics and honor Santo Guerro (Saint of War), a fictional saint he created.

Farrow says all of the guns and ammunition in his sculptures are real, and he colors the bullets through a chemical process he learned when he used to work with bronze. He attends gun shows looking for antique items, and he scours eBay for relics like old Bibles (one of which is featured inside his Protestant church, opened to the book of Revelations). He also once dug up a plethora of bullets when a friend gave him a tip on where the Navy buries ammunition. He studies each religion so as not to offend anyone, and painstakingly molds his sculptures into exact replicas — paying special attention to arches, doorways, steeples, symbols and traditions.

"You can criticize me for my point of view, but I'm not insulting anybody," says Farrow. "I'm doing my absolute best to be respectful to the religions I'm being critical about. Because it's more I'm criticizing the power structure, and these are just the symbols of all that."



"Burnt Church" by Al Farrow | Courtesy of 21c Museum Hotel

There is one piece in particular that both Stites and Farrow wanted in the Louisville exhibit. It's of a burned church where only fragments of the facade remain. Although it was patterned after a European church destroyed in a war, Stites says it resonates with the South due to the destruction of churches here during the Civil Rights era.

Three rusted rifles form the skeleton of a steeple. Farrow relates the rifles were used in the World War I Battle of Verdun in 1916 between the Germans and the French. The battle lasted for 303 days and became the longest and one of the most costly battles in human history — with more than 700,000 in casualties.

Farrow obtained the rifles from his friends who run a military museum. He says they made a trip there and dug up the artifacts using metal detectors.

"I've had them for about 20 years and could never bring myself to use them — they had to be exactly for the right use," he says. "So I waited."

Farrow hopes his exhibit ignites discussion and contemplation on the intersections of religion, power, war and death. Does religion justify destruction and death? Why is one set of belief systems used to destroy other belief systems? After witnessing and studying the horrors around the world throughout time, the artist says he used to be idealistic, but not anymore.



Al Farrow's "Plumb Street Synagogue" and his interpretation of a menorah | Photo by Sara Havens

"One of the aspects of being human is corruption, and another aspect is this goodness we're all capable of," Farrow explains. "It's a dichotomy. The world is a big dichotomy. I've given up thinking we can cure all these things. I actually believe that's the way we're created. We're in balance — half good and half bad. If everything was black, there's no light. If everything is light, there's no shadow. So I think that may be the natural order."

"Al Farrow: Wrath and Reverence" continues at 21c Museum Hotel, 710 W. Main St., through July 15. The museum is free and open all day/night long. In conjunction with the exhibit, Willie Doherty's film "Buried" is shown in the video lounge. On loan from the Speed Art Museum, the film explores the devastation of war in the artist's homeland of Northern Ireland.