

Al Farrow

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Al Farrow @ Crocker Art Museum

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Bombed Mosque, 2010, Guns, gun parts, bullets and steel, 40 x 56 x 34 1/4"

Violence committed in the name of religion stands as one of the more vexing contradictions of human existence. Atheists gleefully seize upon it, insisting that the toll exacted by religious violence far outstrips that of all other wars combined, even when history shows otherwise. Still, from the floods and plagues summoned by the Hebrew God of the Old Testament to the murderous injunctions carried out against non-believers during the Crusades to the persecution of Christians and Shiites by ISIS extremists, it's evident that religion can be a nasty, bloody business.

That is the argument set forth by Al Farrow, a San Rafael sculptor who uses bullets, shell casings, projectiles and disassembled firearms of every sort (from Saturday night specials to Uzis) to replicate sacred architecture. These feats of design and engineering, showcased in *Divine Ammunition*, an exhibition organized by Diana Daniels, the Crocker's associate curator of contemporary art, mimic the structural details of architecture so faithfully that even if you enter the show knowing full well what to expect, you can't help but be knocked off balance by the ease with which the aesthetics of weaponry translate to religious architecture.

Look, for example, at how assault rifles frame the aedicule of *Bombed Mosque*, and how in that same piece, shell casings, alternating in color between turquoise and brass, form a gleaming entryway whose patterning echoes the geometrically precise, decorative motifs of Islamic art and architecture. The verisimilitude of the structure's brass dome, made of the same cartridges, is no less stunning. *Synagogue (IV)* (after Plum St. Synagogue, Cincinnati, OH) uses pistols and rifle barrels as support pillars, while bullets and shell casings stand in for brick and mortar. It radiates menace, as does a menorah built from a rifle barrel and eight pistols, all of which can hold Hanukkah candles.

Taking aim at Protestant traditions, Farrow creates a chapel with bibles open to the Book of Revelation, along with a facsimile of Albrecht Durer's engraving of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The single biggest portion of the show is devoted to an invented saint of war, Santo Guerro, in whose name Farrow creates monuments, each of which holds a reliquary containing human bones: macabre, fetishistic reminders of bygone Catholic memorial rituals. Farrow may be ecumenical in his choice of targets, but his view of religion isn't; he sees it as a blight, a global death cult.

The idea to use armaments to re-create sacred buildings came to Farrow while viewing reliquaries in the Medici Chapel of Florence's Basilica of San Lorenzo. There, in San Lorenzo's crypt, he found a digit deformed by a condition commonly known as trigger finger. Out of that experience came the epiphany that spawned his current body of work. He began it in 1995, six years before Al Qaeda struck the U.S. and nearly 20 years before ISIS began ravaging the Middle East.



Trigger Finger of Santo Guerro II, 1996, guns, bullets, bullet shells, steel and bone 20 x 16"

Rarely do we see good and evil, sacred and profane, beauty and horror so closely aligned. But by prying open this tight-shut window – this cultural taboo against calling things by their real

names — Farrow hands us an aesthetic crowbar, a way to unlock a deeper, more visceral awareness of how and why religion and violence have become intertwined. In so doing, he probes the psychosexual nature of war, an act of domination and subjugation made explicit by the artist's use of munitions whose shapes are emphatically phallic. Their role — as building blocks for domes, cupolas, arches, windows, gables, minarets, arcades, balustrades, columns, vaults and pediments — feels like desecration. But it's a desecration that shines light on the dark side of religion, where intolerance, masquerading as faith, mocks every value religion is supposed to uphold, the biggest being that it promotes peace, love, healing and reconciliation.

Yet as Farrow reminds us, religion has long been the ideological handmaiden of imperial forces. Whether he's pounding swords into ploughshares or merely throwing fuel on an already raging fire is hard to tell. Farrow may well be doing a bit of both.