

The New York Times

Published: May 21, 2004

ART REVIEW | 'TERRORVISION'

Sampling Degrees of Terror, From Al Qaeda to Cancer

By GRACE GLUECK

Under the not far-fetched assumption that terrorism is Topic A in the minds of many, the nonprofit exhibition space Exit Art has mounted "Terrorvision," a big, shapeless show that, true to Exit Art form, wanders all over the place but doesn't lack punch.

Noted for the wide latitude of its theme exhibitions, Exit Art asked participants to make works that defined their most "extreme fears." So the terrors conjured by the 50-odd artists in this particular jam come in all types, degrees and sizes. They range from the general threats posed by Al Qaeda and its franchises, evoked mostly in the show's video works, to the traumas of personal catastrophes like breast cancer and heart operations.

The exhibits run from an artificially bloodied sink by a Moroccan-born artist, François Zelif, meant to recall the horrors of toothache, to an interactive device that projects images of bombs dropping in formation from overhead planes. That piece, by Saoirse Higgins and Simon Schiessl, based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is activated by winding up a toy drummer, which sparks a ceiling-mounted video projector to throw the bombing images on the floor, with the bombs falling to the beat of the toy drum.

But before getting on with the show, a quick refresher on Exit Art. It's a multi-financed nonprofit exhibition space established in 1982 by Jeanette Ingberman and Papo Colo, to promote the work of lesser-known artists involved with "the diverse, multidisciplinary nature of contemporary culture."

Its self-generated exhibitions have ranged from underground comics to performance art from former Soviet bloc countries.

Although planned in advance, the shows usually have an engaging rawness about them, partly because Exit Art seems to care more about their content than about the sleekness of the space where they're shown. This one, the third in Exit Art's new quarters on 10th Avenue at 36th Street, is no exception.

To assemble the show, the gallery issued an international open call in December to its 10,000-address e-mail list, asking artists to submit works that defined their visions of terror. From the 650 proposals the gallery chose 36 objects and 18 video works.

The multidisciplinary presence is there, all right, including — besides a program of videos — film, audio, computer-generated and other tech-y creations, along with mediums as simple as prints and photographs.

Among the entries sparked by the direct threat of international terrorism is Uri Dotan's video installation, "We Fall," which shows barely distinguishable imagery of Daniel Pearl's execution after he was abducted by Al Qaeda agents. "I Live for Art," a video piece by Mark Gould and Michael Zansky, meditates musically and visually — by means of optically tweaked systems of images from the World Trade Center destruction — on the remark by the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen that 9/11 was a great work of art.

On the lighter side is a takeoff by Gary Keown, via a digital print on canvas, of René Magritte's 1928-29 painting showing a pipe with the legend "This is not a pipe." Mr. Keown has chosen to replace the pipe with a box cutter and the statement, "This is not a boxcutter."

A strong thread in the show is American fear of American power, exemplified in one interactive video installation by a New York artist using the "spiritual name" Flash Light. In his work "I Am Terrified of the Patriot Act," a video screen shows, in very small print, statements of his fears about the loss of free expression. But as the viewer approaches the screen they disappear, to be replaced by an American flag.

In Gabo Camnitzer's floor piece, "273 Molotov Cocktails," the fabric wicks placed in the bottles are colored and coordinated to represent the stars and stripes. The flag's potential volatility represents, I suppose, constitutional freedoms that the authorities could take away.

And a two-channel DVD installation by **Joy Garnett** about American nuclear weapons testing, in Nevada and in the Pacific during the cold war, based on declassified film obtained from the Department of Energy, is meant to comment on the universal urge to destruction while questioning the United States role in its furtherance.



Exit Art

A partial installation view of Exit Art's "Terrorvision," for which about 50 artists were asked to create works that defined their most extreme fears, whether of a personal or a global nature.

A symbolic view of how American power might be perceived by the outside world is offered by Dennis K. McGinnis in "Self Portrait as an American." A modest but shocking little black-and-white photo collage, it depicts a hefty, not to say obese, man surrounded by starving adults and children, obviously from somewhere else. American might and overconsumption are the issues satirized here.

There are works in the show tied to specific pre-9/11 evils, like Iván Navarro's grim briefcase holding four fluorescent light bulbs, each bearing the name of one of four persons killed by order of the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, and an artist named Kosyo's off-the-wall white plastic bust of Hitler with his mustache bitten off (by the artist), titled "Erasing the History."

And there are entries that are not overtly about terror but that give you the shudders nonetheless, like Reuben Lorch-Miller's mysterious "Nonterminus," a digital video piece depicting an endless tunnel, a claustrophobic, frustrating space from which the viewer never emerges.

No one can accuse this show of balance, mixing as it does successful efforts with some that don't quite make it, well-executed pieces with others that leave the viewer hanging, the lightweight with the more substantial. But at least it doesn't suffer from curatorial overload. It's alive, and kicking.

"Terrorvision" remains on view at Exit Art, 475 10th Avenue, at 36th Street, Chelsea, (212) 966-7745, through July 31.