

The Star-Ledger

The art of war

Exhibit takes root at South Orange gallery

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THERE'S a distress signal in South Orange.

Blossoming on the slope of Flood's Hill in Meadowland Park is the silhouette of a crop-circle-sized AK-47, picked out in white artificial roses on the green spring grass.

The big outline of an assault rifle is a work of art by New York artist Carlo Vialu, who is referring to Vice President Dick Cheney's assertion before the invasion of Iraq that American troops would be greeted with flowers.

Vialu and 15 other regional artists, six of them based in New Jersey, are part of "Headlines," an exhibition of art about current events at the Pierro Gallery in South Orange. Three years after George Bush's statement of "mission accomplished," this is the first full-throated American anti-war art exhibition in the New York area -- at least in a permanent gallery setting.

"Headlines" is almost all about the war in Iraq, from Lynn Sullivan's crude papier-mâché figures made out of New York Times pages and posed like selected war photos to Karina Aguilera Skvirsky's video of people dressed like Middle Easterners jerkily approaching the camera along a wooded street, asking us to wonder, like a reservist in Iraq, "Which one do I shoot?"

"We've all been trying to lead our normal lives since 9/11," says Pierro director Judy Wukitsch. "And on through the war, the natural disasters, all the disasters, trying not to let it weigh us down so we cannot function. But you can't ignore trauma and depression forever. Artists have been doing this work all along, they just didn't have a place to show it. And I think hosting this show now in South Orange is almost cathartic for all of us."

Amy Wilson's long, narrow watercolor series here, "A Glimpse of What Life in a Free Country Could Be Like," is already somewhat famous. The series tells a complex story in densely scripted thought balloons emanating from tiny figures, some of them skeletal, about the shifting rationales for war with Iraq and the horrific consequences. (Wilson is also showing two anti-war watercolors in "Among the Trees," a show at the New Jersey Center for Visual Arts in Summit through June 4.)

The New York Daily News made one tiny, 4- by 5-inch section of "Glimpse" known earlier this year by blowing it up and putting it on the paper's cover: a painting of a hooded figure with electrical wires attached to his hands, based on the famous torture photo from Abu Ghraib prison, only in Wilson's version the wires loop down below the figure to spell out "LIBERTY." The ruckus kicked up by the tabloid ultimately got the Drawing Center, a widely respected SoHo nonprofit

where Wilson's drawings were on display, kicked out of the cultural planning for the new development at Ground Zero.

That "Headlines" comes to a relatively modest municipally supported art gallery in an inner-ring New Jersey suburb, before anything similar has opened anywhere else in the region, must say something about today's art world -- probably about its intense love affair with wealth, and the timidity of institutions that have dreams of billion-dollar facility expansions.

It says something about South Orange, too. Guest curator Mary Birmingham of Montclair drew this show together in a relatively short time (though there is a full-color catalog) and did a remarkable job, cobbling together a collection of committed art works that nonetheless seem to touch on a broad range of contemporary currents in terms of media and methods. She found that many artists were making anti-war pieces all along, so many that she had to arbitrarily cut off the stream of work.

Painter **Joy Garnett's** oils on canvas mine a painterly interest in form while conveying a deeply threatening sense of global dread (check out "Evac," from her "Strange Weather" series). Jersey City artist Brendan Carroll sets up toy soldiers and snaps Polaroids that look like grainy field shots with absurdist typewritten captions like "Somebody kicked the baby buffalo. It was still alive, though just barely, just in the eyes."

Montclair collagist Peter Jacobs is showing the collage journals he's been keeping since the war began -- he makes at least one a day -- each image reproduced on the page of a spiral sketchbook. Jonathan Allen paints blue skies and blowing leaves in acrylics with faint outlines of an M1-A1 Abrams tank limned in over them. Curt Ikens of Cranford, who does "unauthorized collaborations" with the work of other artists (he is also currently showing a sculptural assemblage at the Jersey City Museum) has the largest installation: two enormous, quite comfortable sofa chairs made entirely from shredded and baled copies of The Star-Ledger.

A checklist of objects in the show is no substitute for finding your way to the second-floor galleries in the Baird Center, which is in Meadowland Park. No doubt "Headlines" will raise some controversy -- though perhaps less than it might have before polled approval rates for the war began plummeting.

The chief weapon of these artists is a sassy irony. Take Indiana artist Cheryl Yun's very witty set of women's clothing, hung on a garment rack in a gallery back room. Yun takes photos of war subjects, prints them on tissue, cuts the paper into dress patterns, and then sews them into nighties or beachwear to mesh with President Bush's post 9/11 injunction to Americans to go shopping.

That's how you get pieces titled "Flyaway Babydoll with Suicide Hipsters: 'U.S. Troops Get a Warm Thank You from President Bush, April 13, 2005.'"