

Choosing Violence

By  
Dominic Mario Sansone  
Master of Fine Arts

Herron School of Art and Design  
IUPUI  
Indiana University

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Greg Hull, Associate Professor of Sculpture  
Advisor

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Eric Nordgulen, Associate Professor of Sculpture  
Committee Member

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Robert Patrick Kinsman, Lecturer of Art History  
Committee Member

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Professor Valerie Eickmeier  
Dean of Herron School of Art and Design

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Date

Through my current body of artwork I am venturing to give voice to the violence of humankind and the role each of us play in facilitating an endless cycle of barbarity. Much of the work is autobiographical, drawing heavily from my past and world-views. Jean Baudrillard writes, “The real victory of the simulators of war is to have drawn everyone into this rotten simulation” (253). My childhood was filled with playthings of a violent nature; toy guns, army men, tanks, and fighter jets. Fantasies of war were acted out with glee, as I pumped round after imaginary round from a plastic machine gun into unseen adversaries. As a young adult I became a part of the Military-Industrial Complex in the private sector where I spent two years working in the aerospace industry producing fabrication and assembly drawings for satellites, military aircraft, and mobile artillery units. Since becoming a father I have reflected on my own childhood and my past employment and come to realize the truth contained in the adage “history repeats itself”. Growing up in the 1980s I can recall a significant fear of the Soviet Union and nuclear obliteration at their hands, and now, thanks to the nightly news, my son may have radical Islamists and terrorists as the source for his nightmares. Always a new enemy, always some new evil to vanquish, war without end.

This notion of war without end appears to be shared by Baudrillard, ever the post-structural defeatist and pessimist, where he writes in an essay regarding the first Gulf War, “The mastery of the end of war escapes us and we live all this in a uniform shameful indifference, just like the hostages” (232). Ironically, many of the same people we armed and supported in fighting the Soviets throughout the Middle East and Asia, are now the very same people we face as our enemies in

the “War on Terror”. Americans, in particular, have seemingly become addicted to the state of war, in part, due to our desensitization at the hands of the media we consume. From video games glorifying killing, to twenty-four hour coverage of conflicts, to real time video of smart bombs dropping down chimneys; we have an endless supply of stimuli to numb ourselves. The pain and suffering endured by others becomes nothing more than flickering images on a screen. Defense spending in the United States far outpaces any other nation as evidenced by the amount being over six hundred sixty-billion dollars according to table s.12 of the Updated Summary Tables for fiscal year 2010. This is poignantly expressed by Georges Bataille who wrote, “In our time, the relative importance of armed conflicts has ever increased; it has taken on the disastrous proportions of which we are aware” (185-186).

Influenced by the assembly line fabrication of industrial machinery, weaponry and munitions, and even our food; repetition plays a significant function in my sculpture, being representative of both the products and people behind the areas of my explorations. Whether it is hundreds of identical individual components combined to make a single piece or an echoing of identifiable form in seemingly disparate objects. Using plaster and rubber molds allows me to reproduce my forms in exponential quantities. Unlike the tightly controlled production runs of an actual assembly line, I allow my final tallies to be arrived upon in a more intuitive manner. Some repeated forms have a finality to them and others have a sensibility that indicates a possible continuation or the impression of there being yet more objects to come. As a direct result of my extensive use of molds, cast

objects dominate the work, whether in the more traditional mediums of bronze, iron, and porcelain; or more contemporary materials, such as silicone and urethane rubbers. I choose to work in a variety of metals due to the permanence and gravitas they imbue in a work. Their physical weight is expressed clearly to the viewer and metal can capture a moment, a fleeting emotion, or passing thought; and make it enduring, with an aura quite unlike any other material. For example, in the piece *Holiday in Fallujah*, a bronze bowling ball sits ominously ready to knock down the baby-faced pins at the opposite end of the lane. Despite the small size of the ball, it appears heavy due to being made of bronze; its potential energy is apparent. The piece *Invaders Must Die*, captures seven hundred faces in a moment in time, all experiencing the same event, all reacting with the same emotion as evidenced by their consistent expression.

The elements of repetition and reproduction, combine to create an industrial mass-produced sensibility within my artwork. As in television's breaking of the fourth wall, I seek to leave traces of the hand of the artist and in effect remind the viewer that the art before them is a representation of their world as seen through my eyes, with rough castings, raw materials, exposed mechanisms and industrial fasteners. According to Dana Polan, Bertolt Brecht stated, "One must compare the depiction of life in a work with the life that is being depicted." This manifests in my sculpture by leaving flashing and tool marks on castings, exposed fasteners, and obvious methods of hanging or support such as; cords, cables, etcetera.

Artists like Hans Bellmer and H.R. Giger have influenced my decision making process significantly. Bellmer's odd hybrid "dolls" evoke a strange discomfort, but more in a manner of seeing something pornographic. Giger's biomechanical combinations are a more literal hybridization, compared to my more subtle combinations of industrial materials or the markings of industrial production and organic forms. The literal or figurative mergings of organic forms with the inorganic or mechanical, amplifies the unexplainable discomfort experienced by my audience. To a lesser extent filmmakers such as David Cronenberg and Shinya Tsukamoto have also influenced my visual vocabulary within this realm of cyborg compositions.

All of these conventions result in the four works that make up my current investigation into our contemporary society. These four pieces represent the four primary components of the violence surrounding us; the participants, the weapons, the munitions, and the leaders. Foremost in this body of work is *Invaders Must Die* (see fig. 1 and 2), composed of seventy separate rings, each consisting of ten individual heads. Each seemingly identical head varies considerably from its neighbors due to casting imperfections in either the original wax or final bronze and from coloration differences. Artificial means of patinazation were not applied and very little chasing occurred beyond the removal of pearling. I did not attach any particular significance to the quantity of rings, seventy, or the number of heads, seven hundred, but a height of ten feet dictated the final tally. This particular height was chosen to create a feeling of

intimidation in the viewer when approaching the work, as its sinuous quality lends it an air of instability and towers over the audience.

Utilization of semiosis creates opportunities for multifaceted interpretations of this sculpture and I attempt to further heighten the ambiguity through the title of the artwork. Do these faces represent the fervent nationalists, bent on elimination of outsiders and the establishment of a “pure” society? Do they represent the alienated and isolated outsiders or invaders? Do they represent the dead, the victims of our aggressions and weapons? These are but three possible interpretations for this tower of humanity. George Orwell may have described *Invaders Must Die* in his novel *1984* where the faces were the loyal drones that willfully follow the orders of their leaders.

The Ideal set up by the Party was something huge, terrible, and glittering - a world of steel and concrete, of monstrous machines and terrifying weapons - a nation of warriors and fanatics, marching forward in perfect unity, all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans, perpetually working, fighting, triumphing, persecuting - three hundred million people all with the same face (Orwell 64; bk. 1, ch. 7).

Seeing them as representative of the dead and accounting for the phallic reading ascribed to the work by some, Georges Bataille might explain the work in the terms of his essay, the Solar Anus, “Communist workers appear to the bourgeois to be as ugly and dirty as hairy sexual organs, or lower parts; sooner or later there will be a scandalous eruption in the course of which the asexual noble heads of the bourgeois will be chopped off” (8).

My own interpretation of *Invaders Must Die* is that of hordes of loyal and mindless drones, swallowing whole what they are told as reality and willfully participating in advancing their ideology through whatever means necessary. The goggles on each one serve to hide their identities and to conceal the direction of their gaze, hence the faces cannot pass judgement, nor can they be judged. The face is our window to our identities and these represent the assembly line worker making munitions in the factory, the soldier in the trench, or the mass of individual fanatics; all coolly preparing to blow themselves up in a car loaded with explosives on a busy street corner. Ultimately this piece is autobiographical in that it is a representation of myself and coincidentally my seven hundred or so odd coworkers from my time designing components for weapon systems. Figuratively speaking, the face is mine and represents my active participation in our violent society. Brancusi's, *Endless Column*, was a direct inspiration for the composition of this piece. While his work stands as a testament to the Romanian dead of World War One, my sculpture commemorates the facilitators of death.

Serving to bridge the gaps between my childhood, my professional career, and my art is, *Cyrus Ching Never Expected There Would Be Guns Involved* (see fig. 3 and 4). This work consists of twelve slip-cast porcelain pigs, armed with a pair of aluminum revolvers, and "tattooed" with decals composed of drawings for planetary gear-heads on military aircraft. Like much of the other work, *Cyrus Ching* makes use of repeated cast elements. Also employed is the combination of the organic form of the pig and the mechanical form of the revolvers, creating an odd hybridized metaphorical animal. The size of each pig coupled with the

use of toy revolvers is intended to lend the qualities of a child's plaything, while maintaining a certain menacing quality. Despite their charming playfulness, they are capable of generating unexplainable feelings of discomfort in the viewer.

Pigs are physiologically similar to humans and within popular culture are representational of authority figures; police, politicians, warmongers, and corporate elites. The pig, in my opinion, embodies all those that relish their authority and flaunt it in the face of the common man. These twelve pigs have a higher degree of refinement given to them, to better produce the suggestion of precisely manufactured war machines.

Another of my artworks that continues to explore my personal participation is *Giulio Gavotti's Decision* (see fig. 4 and 5). The title references an Italian pilot responsible for the first air-dropped bombs (four grenades) on November 1, 1911 and asks the audience to consider the implications of their choices. In this piece, eighty-one bomb-like lathe turned cherry blocks, placed in nine groups of nine, stand as an ironic testament to the mass production of war munitions. With this artwork, wooden blocks have been hand-crafted into precious representations of destructive projectiles designed to detonate in an exothermic reaction. Contrary to real munitions, each wood turning is unique and stands as an individual despite following the same basic design format. Each group of nine is clustered closely together, projecting outward from the wall, giving the sense of freshly dropped bombs beginning their descent.

Aerial bombardment has been used to great and horrific affect, from the fire bombing of Dresden to the ridiculous sloganeering of the "Shock and Awe"



campaign over Iraq. Robert Stam, writing about Jean-Luc Godard's film, *Les Carabiners*, explains the prevailing attitude regarding the ethics of such efforts ...

Godard's professed goal was to make the logic of war so simple a child could understand it, and if war is anything in the film, it is above all a kind of bellicose consumerism, a pretext for pillage. Godard counterpoints sound and image to highlight the patriotic glorifications of war and the sanguinary realities they mask. The conventional ethical hierarchies of war - massive aerial bombardments are antiseptic and humane; disemboweling with a knife is evil and barbaric - are leveled and revealed to be prevarications (108-109).

By intentionally leaving the marks from the lathe, which can give the indication of the urethra, the pieces take on the connotation of the phallus. This suggests the merging of the organic and the mechanical within this piece and generates an uneasiness in the viewer. A further heightening of this reaction takes place from the gentle swaying of the forms on their steel-rod mounts. Perhaps this is an uneasiness that is capable of overcoming the detachment caused by the distance allowed us through methods such as aerial bombardment.

The final piece in this body of work is *Confessions of a Corporate Wage Slave* (see fig. 5, 6, and 7). A massive boar's head, contrary to the smaller more refined pig heads on other works, is heavily textured and blackened by the heat of the molten aluminum from which it was cast. With its two polished bronze tusks, it creates a much more aggressive and menacing presence than the other pigs found in my work. The head is settled at the top of a rib cage of rolled steel tubing, which is in turn skinned with a patchwork of screen-printed urethane

rubber. This assemblage of rubber panels is reminiscent of and informed by the material experimentations of Eva Hesse's artwork. Her use of nontraditional materials has inspired my own thinking about recontextualizing the casting rubbers I use for making molds. The graphic content of the rubber skin references the same iconography on the formerly mentioned porcelain pigs and calls to mind the pig tattooing of Wim Delvoye. This element has some sensibilities reminiscent of a coat of arms or a religious icon. Its general form is similar to the Celtic Cross.

A spine consisting of almost two hundred smaller pigs encased in urethane rubber follows the central tube which the ribs are welded to. The physical characteristics of the rubber references the Vaseline works of Matthew Barney. This work continues the device of employing the hybridization of combining the organic with the industrial and is not intended to be a literal pig, but like the smaller works, acts as a metaphorical pig. Between the greater scale of this swine and the repetition of the smallest of my pig forms contained in the spine, this piece acts as the pig of pigs, master of them all and beholden to none.

The size and shape of this sculpture indicates a vessel or dwelling space that can be occupied by the audience or donned. Considering an architectural interpretation of this, the piece has some sense of a cathedral in a more intimate scale or perhaps in a theoretical sense, the confessional booth, where the "sinner" can enter and confess their transgressions in anonymity thanks to the obscuration provided by the translucent rubber skin. For some, the military is akin to a religion, and the work seeks to address this notion by creating a feeling of

sanctuary within its confines. Approaching this structure within the context of the figure, the frontmost ribs act as welcoming arms, seeking to embrace the viewer, inviting them inside. They can choose to enter, but the grotesqueness of the piece will likely cause most to stay outside. Like their actual life choices make them participants, however minor, in the suffering of others, they still participate by being in its presence. In *Lord of the Flies*, the boy Simon has a hallucination of a conversation with a severed boar's head, where the head explains that the thing the children on the island fear most, is in reality, themselves.

“Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!” said the head. For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated places echoed with the parody of laughter. “You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?” (Golding 143).

Ultimately the intent is for this artwork to cause the audience, in an oblique way, to question their choices and consider them with more than just a fleeting thought.

As a single cohesive composition, my work is intended to create a monument contradictory to the ones that dominate the landscape of cities like Indianapolis. While not in and of themselves, site-specific, the works hopefully become so in a general sense when contrasted to the memorials that glorify or romanticize war in this city. These are works that are meant as a rebuttal to our public monuments, thereby rendering them site-responsive or perhaps even site-conditional as Robert Irwin described it. “Here the sculptural response draws all of its cues (reasons for being) from its surroundings. This requires the process *to begin* with

an intimate, hands-on reading of the site” (44). By venerating the masses, the munitions, and the mechanizations of the war machine, I hope to call attention to the other side of war, the true side. As defined by Carl von Clausewitz in his treatise, *On War*, “War therefore is an act of violence intended to compel our opponents to fulfil [sic] our will” (101). What right does anyone have to compel fulfillment of their wills on anyone else? Does might really make right?

Unfortunately we seem, as a collective race, unable to say no when called upon to wreak havoc, whether due to unswerving nationalism, religious zealotry, or desire for greater riches; concern for our fellow humans is set adrift. In the end, these works do not answer the questions or propose solutions, but hopefully cause the viewer to consider, with more than a cursory glance, the visual culture of our cities, our entertainment, our public art, and our media. Perhaps then they will ask themselves, why? Why do we stand silently by while this happens? Why do we accept this? Why do we embrace this? Where and when does it all end? My pessimistic side tells me that there will be no end to these cycles of conflict, but the optimistic side cries out that if enough people begin to question, we can cause a shift of titanic proportions. If this body of work results in just one more person saying, “no more”, it was successful.



Fig. 1. Dominic Sansone, *Invaders Must Die*, 2009, Cast Bronze, 117 x 13 x 13 in. Photograph by Michelle Pemberton. 24 January 2010



Fig. 2. Dominic Sansone, *Invaders Must Die (detail)*, 2009, Cast Bronze, 117 x 13 x 13 in. Photograph by Michelle Pemberton. 24 January 2010

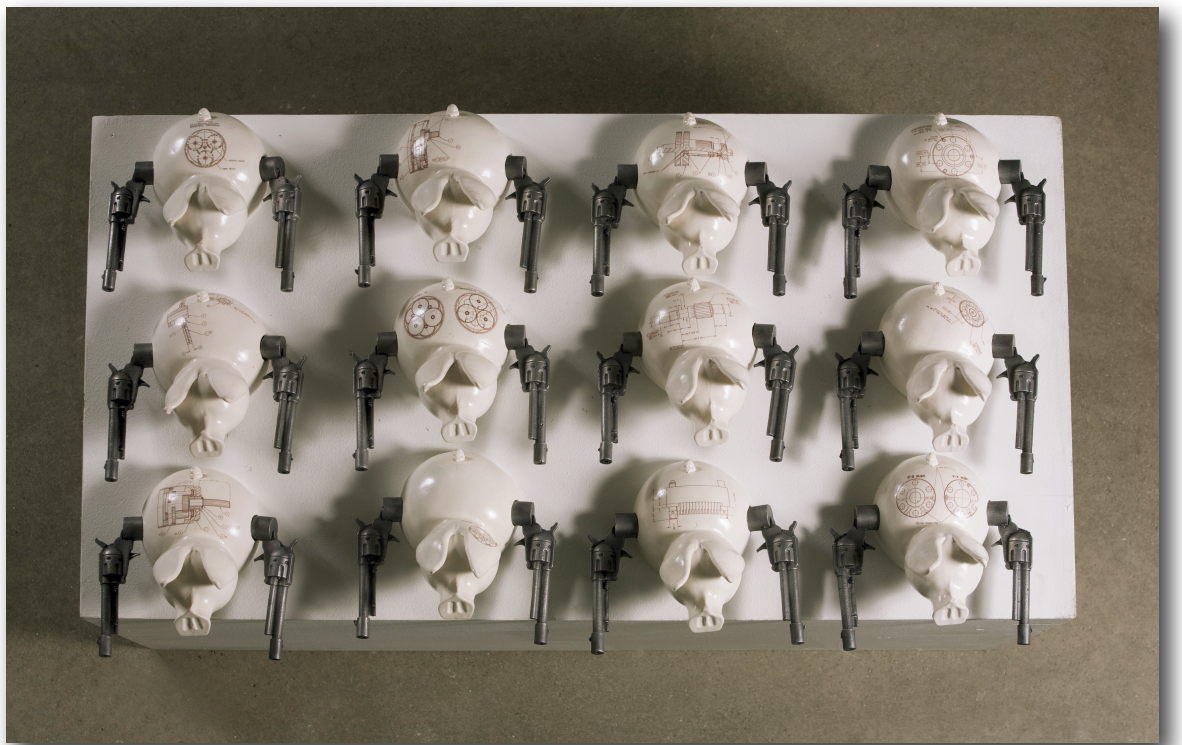


Fig. 3. Dominic Sansone, *Cyrus Ching Never Expected There Would Be Guns Involved*, 2009, Slip-cast Porcelain and Cast Aluminum, dimensions variable. Photograph by Michelle Pemberton. 19 December 2009



Fig. 4. Dominic Sansone, *Cyrus Ching Never Expected There Would Be Guns Involved (detail)*, 2009, Slip-cast Porcelain and Cast Aluminum, dimensions variable. Photograph by Michelle Pemberton. 19 December 2009





Fig. 5. Dominic Sansone, *Giulio Gavotti's Decision*, 2010, Cherry and Steel, 42 x 42 x 42 in. Photograph by Michelle Pemberton. 18 April 2010



Fig. 6. Dominic Sansone, *Giulio Gavotti's Decision (detail)*, 2010, Cherry and Steel, 42 x 42 x 42 in. Photograph by Michelle Pemberton. 18 April 2010



Fig. 7. Dominic Sansone, *Confessions of a Corporate Wage Slave*, 2010, Cast Aluminum and Bronze, Urethane Rubber, Steel, 88 x 53 x 120 in. Photograph by Michelle Pemberton. 18 April 2010



Fig. 8. Dominic Sansone, *Confessions of a Corporate Wage Slave (detail)*, 2010, Cast Aluminum and Bronze, Urethane Rubber, Steel, 88 x 53 x 120 in. Photograph by Michelle Pemberton. 18 April 2010



Fig. 9. Dominic Sansone, *Confessions of a Corporate Wage Slave (detail)*, 2010, Cast Aluminum and Bronze, Urethane Rubber, Steel, 88 x 53 x 120 in. Photograph by Michelle Pemberton. 18 April 2010

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