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University of Colorado at Boulder



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IN DEFENSE OF NEUTRALITY

by

Thomas J. Zima

B.F.A., Northern Illinois University, 1988

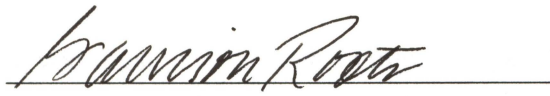
A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate
School of the University of Colorado in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts


Department of Fine Arts

1991

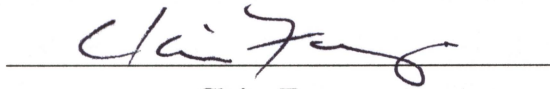
This Thesis for the Master of Fine Arts Degree by
Thomas J. Zima
has been approved for the
Department of
Fine Arts
by



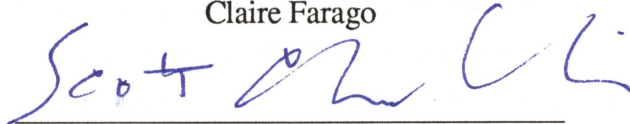
Garrison Roots



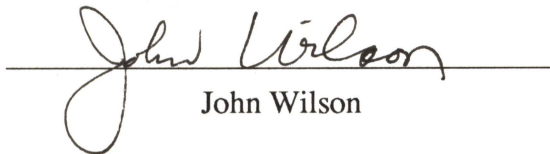
Antonette Rosato



Claire Farago



Scott Chamberlin



John Wilson

Date 4-9-91

"In Defense of Neutrality" is a multi-media installation that depicts the recent re-militarization of the general public by the mass media. The installation has a very child-like, playground feeling since this conditioning begins at a very young age. I built the environment almost exclusively out of found objects in order to give it a sense of "history", as well as making the whole work feel false and trashy. By making the work a miniature golf course, I can trick viewers into participating in this celebration of war in order to point up the fact that we all participate in "war games" at one time or another (whether consciously or otherwise), while challenging the traditional role of art as something that should be seen and not touched. I intentionally layer the work both physically (so that there are many objects to peek behind to discover little treasures), and metaphorically in order to give the work enough depth that a viewers will discover new things each time they view it. I've included painted canvases, sculpture, light and even (mock) video elements in order to stretch out personally as well as trying to promote a type of art-making that is about getting a message across rather than drawing distinctions between what is art, and what is everything else.

The Gate:

To enter the installation, you must pass through swinging saloon-like doors cut into the shape of the "soldier-figure". As the doors spring shut a devil-like figure closes behind the viewer barring any return through the portal. In this way the viewer becomes "trapped" in the installation. The date over the 'entry tunnel' reads 1965. That was the year the first troops were sent into Vietnam, as well as being my birth year. While growing up, I have a vague recollection of a "war on T.V." that nobody ever talked about. It was a war we 'lost' in the sense that people seemed to finally begin to realize that nobody wins a war. The first films dealing with Vietnam (Deer Hunter, Apocalypse Now, Full Metal Jacket) portrayed it as a wrong, awful thing. Gradually this view began to change as such actors as Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris began "winning" the war in a wierd, twisted, yet hopeful way by bringing POW/MIA's home safely. By the end of the 1980's, there were several series on T.V. depicting U.S. soldiers winning battles weekly while neglecting the big picture of a losing war (sort of like appreciating the trees and not realizing that you are lost in a forest.)

Hole In One:

I chose the miniature golf course setting because it is one of those icons that traditionally serves as a venue on which to play out the prevalent values of American mass consciousness. The viewer plays through the course, following the green astro-turf as if it were a "yellow-brick road". The course winds through tiny crevases, lawnmower blades, up impossible grades, over dogs and through a tank as it winds its way toward "the hole". It follows the narrative through the various stories that eventually combine to give the greater picture of a game you cannot win. The morbid punchline is that this course has only one hole, which is a grave in the shape of the repeated soldier-figure. The viewers feel a sense of identification with the open grave form since it is the same shape that they had to pass through in order to enter the show.

Old Glory:

Although the images and attitudes portrayed in this installation are largely derived from American pop-culture, the problem is a global one. There are very few societies on this planet that do not practice, or at least prepare for some kind of warfare. For this reason, I did not want to make the statement "anti-American". I invented my own flag, drawing from the Swiss who passionately defend their neutrality (hence the title) and the Colorado flag, which is my legal State of residence. The smiling face in the middle serves simply as a reminder to anyone viewing it to smile.

Armchair Warriors:

The repeated soldier figure is my buddy Mooch. The image of him dressed as a soldier standing in the yard holding a flag struck me like a "weekend warrior", or an armchair strategist who "plays along at home", watching the war on T.V. and announcing what he'd do next if he were in charge much the way football fanatics like myself play at home by second guessing the plays called by the coaches and quarterbacks. This had originally been intended to be a "serious" image by the photographer, but the leer on Mooch's face gave him a far more ghastly appearance. I cut these images out of flat material in order to give them the silhouette appearance of Police Targets as well as the cut-out shooting gallery targets that are knocked over as they pass by, and then mechanically set right back up so that they can be shot down again.

The Dogs of War:

The dog soldiers about the room are far less standardized than the "cookie-cutter" soldiers. Each one is modeled after a dog I know (Bo, Spritzzy, Snuf, etc.), and they represent "real" soldiers you know; a buddy from high school, a brother, cousin, your mechanic. The dogs are meant to be almost comical; furry, lovable, tail-wagging creatures that are equipped with high-tech implements of destruction; the way "defense" researchers are currently developing mechanized devices with which to equip infantry that is hauntingly reminiscent of the killer cybernetic-organisms from B-rate science fiction films.

The Tower of Power:

The tower began as a guard tower. It is also a prison tower and a communications tower, from which to launch nuclear warheads. High atop the tower, encircled by barbed wire and pario lights is a throne that overlooks all of "creation". An Uncle Sam in a gorilla suit is climbing the tower in order to achieve the throne. The throne is flimsily constructed from mock-precious materials because this type of power is a false power, and needs to be constantly maintained through conquest, oppression, torcher and terrorism. Entrapped within the structure of the tower are victims who are either rotting away, chained to the bars of their cells, or hanging disemboweled after the eluded to torcher session. These figures portray the alleged "enemies" of the ruling structure who are systematically rooted out either to provide 'examples', or because they differ from the ruling ideology, or simply as a result of paranoia on the part of a dictator who cannot trust his own second in command.

Machines of War:

A tank and helicopter assault the tower in formation. They are intentionally playful devices. The tracks on the tank are in the shape of rockers, so that it takes on the appearance of a "rocking horse", while at the same time subtly suggesting that we put these machines into retirement. Likewise, a tire-swing is suspended from the helicopter to remind the viewer how many childhood games are based on war, while at the same time suggesting that a better use for helicopters would be to suspend playground equipment from them. The nightmare aspect of the installation is enhanced for me by the fact that the figures operating these killing machines are all friends of mine in the same way that many of my buddies from high school are presently driving tanks around Europe.

Mountains:

The impact of my physical environment on my art is evidenced by the mountain backdrops that enclose the installation. Upon arriving at C.U. two years ago, Professor Antonette Rosato asked a small group of us incoming, wide-eyed grads how we foresaw that living in the grandeur of the lofty mountains was going to impact on our art. There's a feeling of isolation up here in this town that's "nestled between the mountains and reality" that adds an interesting twist to the notion of armchair warriors as the citizens of this sheltered Hamlet rage about their global causes. All over Boulder I find activists who seem as concerned about whether their spandex matches their Zodiac sign and whether to buy the B.M.W. or the jacuzzi and the matching his and hers jet-skis as they are about the homeless and the war victims and world hunger victims and the rainforest. Across the sides of the mountains I've reproduced billboard-like views of familiar "patriotic" images, ranging from the silhouettes from gradeschool history books to the brightly painted "war toy"

marketing. By surrounding the viewer completely by these images, I want to give the feeling of the depth of saturation that warring mentality has soaked into human thinking. War is found in clothing and clocks and comes out of gumball machines in tiny plastic capsules for only \$.25. All around these patriotic images, tiny materialistic activists go about the business of playing in the mountains and trying on fashionable religions.


The Great Egress...

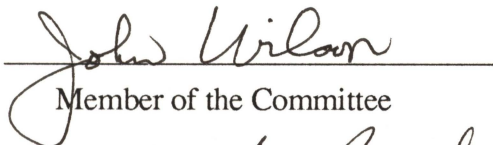
The Great Escape...

The Great Leap Forward:

Beside the grave sits a lone mourner who's grinning like she knows a secret. In one hand she has a lamp while the other draws back a curtain that conceals the entrance to a tunnel. This is the only "true" way out of the installation. I do not see the situation as being without hope, and I know that there's a way for humans as a rapidly growing race on a tiny planet to learn to settle disputes without resorting to slaughtering each other. It's going to involve some crawling, and at times it will seem like the 'hell' I've eluded to by lining the back corridor with red, camouflauge "flames", but I honestly believe that there is a big smiling face waiting for us when we walk or crawl out of this mentality leaving it behind like an old skin, or an adolescent belief, or even one of the "forts" we used to build as children, and then we will most assuredly "have a nice day".

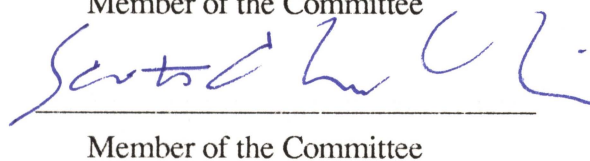
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts
Thomas J. Zima
has submitted this written thesis
as a supplement to the creative thesis
and 20 slides
which are in the permanent possession of the
University of Colorado and recorded with the
Department of Fine Arts

Approved by 
Chairman of the Committee


Member of the Committee


Member of the Committee


Member of the Committee


Member of the Committee

Chairman, Department of Fine Arts

