

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Art for the New Apocalypse”

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"Disarming Images: Art for the Nuclear Disarmament" is a disturbing exhibition, but not in the way that it is meant to be. The show includes forty-six works by forty-four artists. Of this group less than a dozen succeed in making strong statements. The irony in the title echoes the problem with the exhibition: too many of these works are more disarming - in the coy sense of endearing- than they are moving - in the sense of conveying deeply felt convictions that connect to our ongoing anxieties about nuclear war.

The show can roughly be divided into two types of art, conceptual and figurative. A few of the artists - Red Grooms, Robert Rauschenberg and Claus Oldenburg- belong to the generation of figurative art that dates back to the 1950s. Of works by the three, Grooms Nuclear Nuts pull toy is too cute and Rauschenberg's characteristically veiled references are more aesthetic than anything else. Oldenburg's Styrofoam model for a sculpture in the form of an extinguished match is by far the most resonant' it makes ironic reference to war monuments and the inane simplicity of the act of total destruction.

The character of the work shown ranges from these somewhat pop pieces to more clearly conceptual works. As an inherently political art form, conceptual art functions well within the theme of the exhibition. A huge charcoal drawing by Robert Morris dominates this group. His Untitled (Firestorm Series) is inscribed with passages from Leonardo da Vinci's description of firestorms and a comment on the appearance of Nagasaki after the dropping of the bomb: it mixes eerie visual and verbal elements that convey a deeply felt anxiety.

Hans Haacke's experience with political statements underlies the effectiveness of his billboard like image of Reagan praying, saying "Lord, the Pershings are launched. What now?" This sardonic commentary captures the absurdity of our present political situation. Barbara Kruger's image of a mushroom cloud which bears the statement, "Your manias become science" speaks equally succinctly from a more feminist perspective. John Baldessari, through a staircase of images ranging from a small piano player to a large lizard over a round photograph of a "golden orb" suggests that our civilization totters on the brink of destruction. Jenny Holzer/Lady Pink's painting also uses a verbal statement effectively. Making her usual reference to neon signs, she has painted the message "You are trapped on earth, so you will explode" over a disintegrating world.

Among the works by well-known figurative artists - such as Ed Paschke, Joan Brown Robert Arneson, William Wiley and Robert Long - Arneson's Holy War Head stands out. It pushes expressionism beyond a comfortable esthetic statement but does not become sensationalist or tacky. Much of the other figurative work, whether neoexpressionist, geopolitical or nonfigurative is deplorably weak. Too often it fails both as an arousing statement and as art and settles for the maudlin, the raucous or the polemical.

In Pullman, the exhibition was considerably enlivened by a multimedia performance at the opening by Jim and Josephine Hockenhull. Their visual and verbal collage of imagery, music and poetry, which related to war, resistance and protest and evoked a nightmare science fiction drama, provided an element of immediacy that much of the work in the exhibition lacked.

The mediocrity of many of the works in the exhibition is all the more regrettable for two reasons. First, it is entirely unnecessary; a large number of major contemporary artists are concerned with a type of apocalyptic imagery that would have been appropriate here and would have given more impact to the exhibition. Second, the failure of *Disarming Images* is serious because its purpose is urgent. The sense of an impending apocalypse is as real now as it was in the Middle Ages.