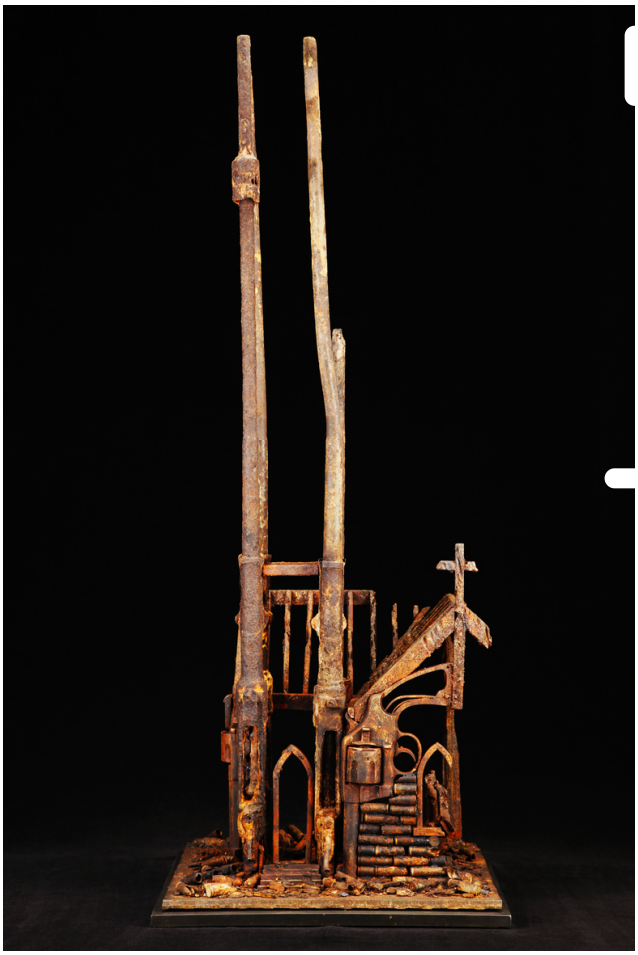
Artist recycles guns, ammo into provocative models of houses of worship

Originally published January 4, 2017 at 2:47 pm



1 of 2 *Al Farrow's "Burnt Church" (2014) is made from three rifles from the WWI Verdun battlefield, revolvers, bullets and steel.*

Al Farrow was a political activist but came to feel that his protest efforts weren't doing any good. He turned to art to make a deeper contribution to the conversation on wars in which God is invoked. His work is at Bellevue Arts Museum through May 7, 2017.

By Michael Upchurch

Special to The Seattle Times

Soaring cathedrals, handsome synagogues, gleaming mosques — at first glance, the large-scale architectural models of artist Al Farrow look like some sort of opulent interfaith celebration.

But step closer and you'll see they're made almost entirely of gun parts, bullets, shell casings and lead shot. In an astonishing feat of craft, Farrow has transformed instruments of annihilation into structures of beauty and provocation. Our wish to

spread our faith, he suggests, is inextricably linked to our urge to destroy anything that doesn't conform with it.

That makes "Divine Ammunition" at Bellevue Arts Museum a must-see, especially as we enter an all-bets-are-off world in 2017. The sheer ease with which he obtains his materials is a cautionary tale in itself. At the press preview for the show, the 73-year-old artist had plenty to say about both his working methods and the aims of his work.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

'Divine Ammunition: The Sculpture of Al Farrow'

11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays, 11 a.m.-8 p.m. First Free Fridays, through May 7 (closed Easter Sunday). Bellevue Arts Museum, 510 Bellevue Way N.E., Bellevue; $5-$12 (425-519-0770 or bellevuearts.org).

"I became an artist in order to do social commentary," he declared forthrightly.

As a young man in the Vietnam War era, he was a political activist but came to feel that his protest efforts weren't producing results. He turned to art to make a deeper contribution to the conversation on wars in which God too often is said to support both sides of the conflict. His early efforts were "naive," he says. But in "Divine Ammunition," which surveys 20 years of work, the pieces are both visceral and sophisticated.

"I'm trying to get people to think," he says. "I'm not offering answers. I don't have answers."

The details of the pieces come from Farrow's research rather than actual visits to architectural sites. A few are based on specific buildings (always mentioned in the title), but others are "made up, cobbled together" from examples of their type.

"The Spine and Tooth of Santo Guerro," made of bullets, guns, glass, shot, steel and bone, is a European Gothic cathedral incorporating elements of Notre Dame and Chartres. It doubles as a reliquary containing a skeletal human spinal column. The saint it honors is of Farrow's own devising. ("I respect all the religions equally," he says. "I didn't want to offend anyone's patron saint, so I made up my own.") "Guerro," of course, echoes the French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese words for "war."

"Burnt Church" — the most anomalous and sobering piece in the show — incorporates rifles dug up from the World War I battlefield at Verdun.

"I needed to use them with a lot of reverence," he says. "The people holding them were killed. These were dead men's guns, for sure."

Farrow gets his bullets and shells online where, he says, anything he wants is readily available. California law prohibits him from purchasing more than one weapon a month, but restrictions are looser in nearby Nevada and Arizona. He regularly haunts gun shows, looking for materials. With rare exceptions, he doesn't tell dealers what they're for: "I don't want to risk not getting it."

The risk, he explains, is that they'll see his artwork as gun-culture sacrilege. At a group exhibition where one of his pieces was featured, he once overhead a comment that stuck with him: "What a waste of a good gun."

He never buys gunpowder or primer — at least not intentionally. For "Bombed Mosque," however, some of the 50,000 bullet casings he used to construct its gorgeous golden dome had live primer in them: a problem when it came time to blow-torching the hole in the dome.

"It went perfectly," Farrow deadpans, "except for getting shot."

Fortunately it wasn't a penetrating wound: "More like being branded."

Farrow stockpiles guns and ammunition as he can afford them, then works with what he has in hand. "Material comes first, rather than design," he says. "There are times when I run out of materials."

A materials shortage led to “Vandalized Mosque Door,” an 8-foot-by-9-foot wall-mounted structure. The larger scale let him use 100-year-old British muskets he’d been hanging onto that were too big to use in his other work.

Some NATO ammo boxes he’d had for years were put to use as the “brickwork” that flanks the bullet-damaged door. “Vandalized Church Door” and “Vandalized Synagogue Door,” in the same room, tell parallel stories.

Asked what dealings he’s had with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives or the National Security Agency as he gathers mass quantities of weapons and bullets, he smiles, “I’m sure the authorities are aware of me.”

He’s also confident that they know he is not, beyond the odd mishap, working with explosives.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

The war supplies that go into his elaborate sculptures, Farrow says, “can never be used as weapons again. I definitely am removing them from their function.”

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