

The New York Times

November 20, 2005

Everything To Fear, Especially Fear Itself

Danger Zones
Both Visual
And Imagined

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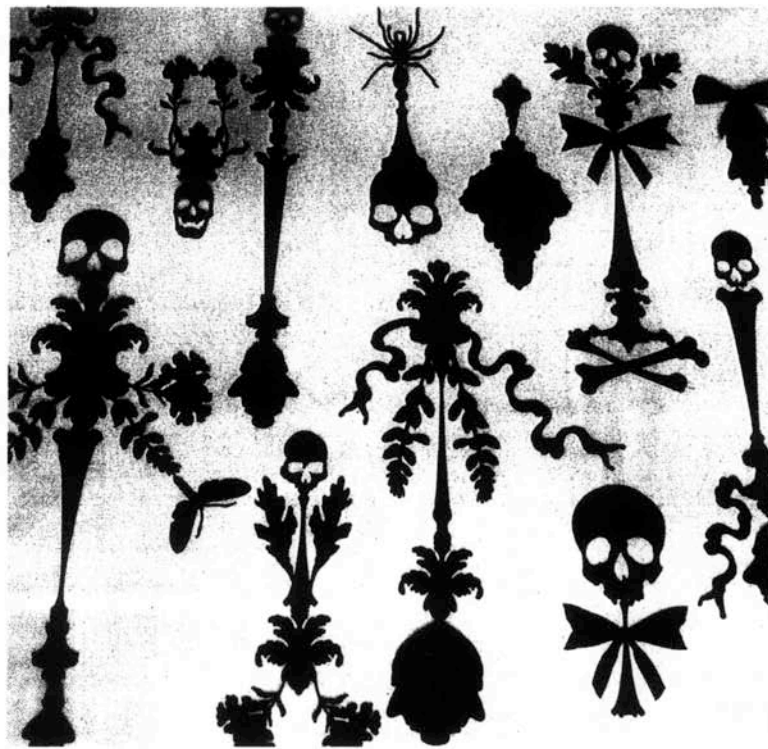
FLIP through any newspaper these days, and chances are there is an article or two revealing some shady terrorist threat or foiled mega-plot. These reports have the ancillary effect of feeding a culture of fear in which we become afraid of everything, convinced that someone is looking to do us harm. Perhaps that is the terrorist's goal.

Artspace's latest, fearless exhibition, "With Shuddering Horror Pale, and Eyes Aghast," (the title is lifted from a line in John Milton's epic poem "Paradise Lost"), surveys contemporary art that speaks to the experience of fear. Some of the artwork invokes a struggle between good and evil, while some deals with fear more generally. But it is all very apt.

Fear is an unwelcome emotion, a mixture of dread, reverence and anxiety caused by a belief that we are in danger. Artworks plumbing these depths are often unpleasant to look at, forcing viewers to negotiate feelings of discomfort while at the same time trying to work out what the artist is saying. It is a bit like watching pain-oriented performance art.

Daniel Hesidence's "Chambers Street Paintings" (2002-3) series, five of which are here, include images of ghostly human heads whose hollowed-out eyes and peeling, mottled skin recalls images of chemical warfare and burn victims. You want to look away, but can't help marveling at the artist's unflinching dedication and focus. These aren't paintings for the visual luxury trade.

What they are, rather, are images that give form to a haunting absence. They made me think of Iraq, and the 2,000 dead United States soldiers and thousands of missing and dead Iraqi civilians. No doubt other viewers will associate them with the victims



of the World Trade Center attacks, given that the title refers to a New York City street close to the site.

For several years, Corinne May Botz took close-up photographs of highly detailed dioramas of actual crime scenes, made in the 1940's to help train police recruits, by Frances Giessner Lee, the Chicago heiress and amateur criminologist. Collectively titled "The Nutsell Studies of Unexplained Death" (1998-2004), the photographs, mostly cropped and dark, invite us into the crime scene, much like an episode of the hit television series "C.S.I."

Ms. Botz's photographs are compelling in a way I can't make up my mind about. Is the chilling silence and emptiness of the images just a replay of the dioramas (the original models now reside at the office of the Mary-

land State Medical Examiner in Baltimore), or is it unique to the photographs? Or is it that the artist is intimately attuned somehow to the psychic wave lengths of the perpetrators?

Randal Thurston's installation of cut-paper black skulls shaped like door-knockers, and deftly slathered with symbolist detail, references the door knocker scene in Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol," when Scrooge sees a dead friend's face in the knocker of his door. The work gives us pause, like Scrooge, to wonder at the merits of our social and political ways. It is an allegory of redemption.

Even the most optimistic visitor has to start to wonder at about this point in the show whether things will lighten up just a little. The answer is no, for the rest of the

artworks — a pair of horror movie-like videos (one based on real events, the other on a series of quotes from popular cinema) and a lifelike sculpture of a demonic-looking child — reinforce the impression of fear as pervasive in our society.

Horror is a staple film genre in Hollywood, and elsewhere. Particularly gruesome and scary are black-and-white Japanese horror films, from which Maciej Toporowicz has sampled short clips of both predatory and victimized women. It is a catalog of gore, the 13-minute-18-second loop leaving the viewer overwhelmed and fairly grossed out.

Perhaps most disturbing here is Erika Van Natta's video "Sara 7/16" (2005), which traces the true story of a young woman stabbed and killed in broad daylight in a

New Haven parking garage in 1973. The story is told through graphic recreation and interviews, including one with the perpetrator who seems surprisingly unrepentant about the act. "Would you believe me, I told you that she looked at me as if she's been waiting for me to come?" he says, in one point on camera. It is very creepy.

Walking past the parking lot after visiting the exhibition, I couldn't help feeling a chill run through me. Perhaps, once invoked, fear of a place, a person or thing never goes away.

"With Shuddering Horror Pale, and Eyes Aghast" is at Artspace, 50 Orange Street, New Haven, through Jan. 14. Information (203) 772-2709 or www.artspace.org.



"Marley's Ghost," left, at Artspace. A video clip by Maciej Toporowicz, top, and Erika Van Natta, right. A print by Corinne May Botz.

