

Mark Roessler, "The Pit and Other Sculptural Tales of the Great American Decline", The Valley Advocate, Northampton, MA

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Harriet Diamond's **THE PIT**

...and other sculptural tales
of the great American decline

By Mark Roessler

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Harriet Diamond's The Pit

...and other sculptural stories of the great American demise

Story and pictures
by Mark Roessler

On the top floor of an old brick factory building along a canal in Holyoke, Harriet Diamond's sculpture studio has a panoramic view over the industrial landscape to the south. It's easy to imagine an aspiring artist whiling away her time up there with a cup of coffee and a cigarette, taking in the ever-changing scene.

But filling Diamond's studio and spilling out into the hallway beyond are vistas of another sort that have been occupying this accomplished artist's time and vision. A Northampton resident, she has been spending her days in her studio creating giant scenes made from wood, clay, paint, Styrofoam and tinfoil that depict a country at perpetual war.

An exhibition of her new work will open on April 1 at the Oxbow Gallery in Northampton.

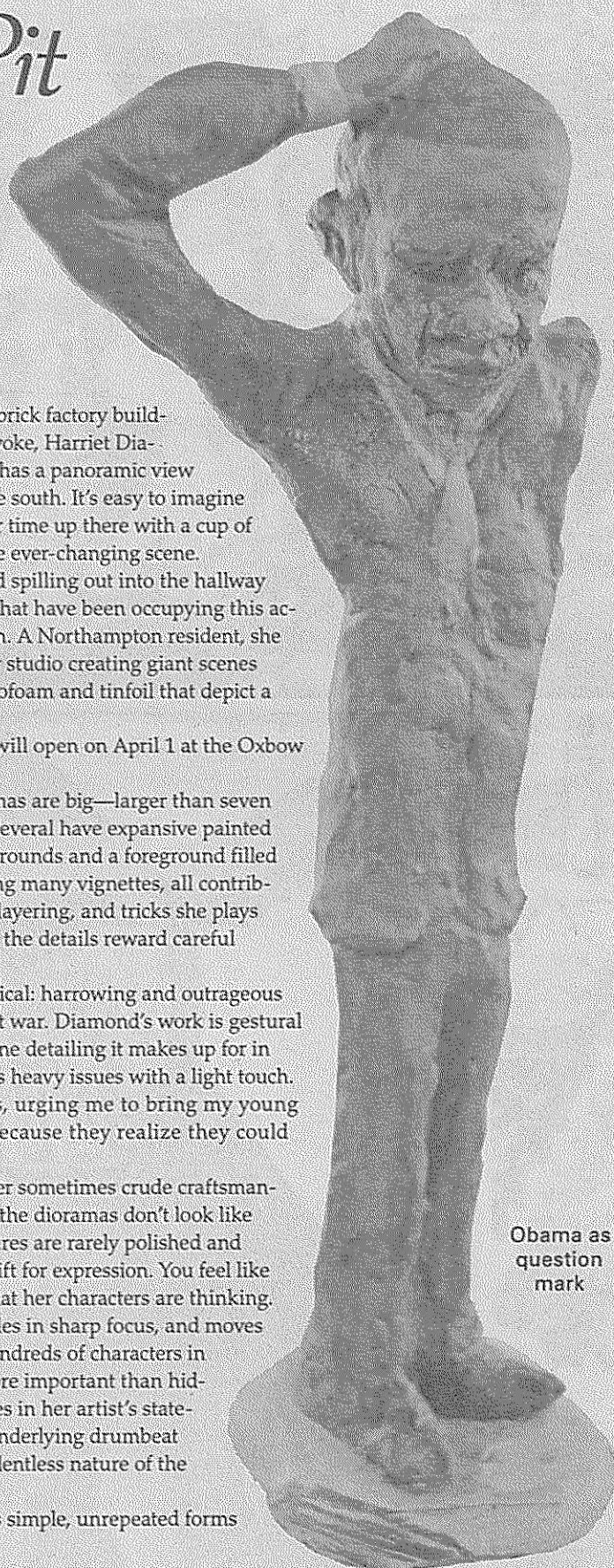
Many of these sculptural dioramas are big—larger than seven feet tall—and many layers deep. Several have expansive painted plywood backgrounds with mid-grounds and a foreground filled with her clay caricatures composing many vignettes, all contributing to a cohesive narrative. The layering, and tricks she plays with perspective, draw you in and the details reward careful inspection.

The scenes are all urgently political: harrowing and outrageous scenes of America's near-decade at war. Diamond's work is gestural and immediate. What it lacks in fine detailing it makes up for in humor and humanity. She handles heavy issues with a light touch.

"Kids love my work," she says, urging me to bring my young son to the opening. "Probably because they realize they could do better."

While she herself jokes about her sometimes crude craftsmanship—the structures that support the dioramas don't look like they'd pass code, and her clay figures are rarely polished and finely detailed—Diamond has a gift for expression. You feel like you know what's being said or what her characters are thinking. She renders her characters' attitudes in sharp focus, and moves on. Since she often works with hundreds of characters in her scenes, the overall effect is more important than hiding seams in her clay. As she writes in her artist's statement, "Repetition of form is the underlying drumbeat that drives home the grave and relentless nature of the message."

But in some of her work she lets simple, unrepeatable forms communicate volumes.



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Images from Harriet Diamond's exhibition *The Pit*.

For descriptions, please refer to story on next page.



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Alone on a pedestal in her studio stands a tall, wiry Obama with his arm curled in the air as he scratches his head in reflection. Both the shape of his clay figure and the look on his brow present a tremendous question mark.

In another scene, deep tire tracks tear up an otherwise wind-scarred sweep of Styrofoam desert (*image 5 on preceding page*). The tire ruts are interrupted by a shallow crater. An overturned jeep lies near by, a body stretched out next to it; three figures with their heads in their hands stagger amidst the wreckage.

Asked about the simplicity of this scene in comparison with some of her more elaborate works, she confesses she's had to resist an urge to add to it.

She began the series of sculpted scenes with one commemorating the anti-war rallies (*image 1*) in New York and Washington, D.C. Initially she intended the piece to be a triumphant celebration of the massive showing

of public outrage, but over the years it's taken on a more ironic tone. Subsequent pieces show a big, media-friendly sendoff for the troops (*image 2*). Another illustrates the explosion of the arms industry (*image 4*). A third depicts the return of soldiers in flag-wrapped caskets (*image 3*).

The Pit is the centerpiece of Diamond's show at the Oxbow (*cover image*). While perfect rows of silvery jet fighters soar above, an endless parade of soldiers and technology marches forever down into a bottomless pit. The effect from the edge of the gaping abyss is breathtaking. Like some Cecil B. DeMille epic with tens of thousands of extras swarming in staged battle, Diamond has created a piece that recreates the scope and technical sophistication of her military subject matter. Her "repetition of form" drives its many points clearly home.

While she was clearly excited about the visceral vertigo the piece inspires, when I visited, she was still wonder-

ing if she could intensify the effect somehow. She invited me onto a ladder behind the piece and told me to climb it and look down into the pit. Sure enough, hovering in the skies above the fighter jets, looking down and peering over the lip of the pit into the toilet-bowl swirl of technology and lives the nation has committed to foreign conflicts, gave pause. It's like looking over the rim of the Grand Canyon, but instead of a million years of subtle erosion creating a marvel, I as a taxpayer had a hand in creating this pit in less than a decade, and each year my dollars help to dig it deeper.

As I stepped down, she smiled, "Wow, huh?"
"Wow," I agreed.*

The Pit, a new exhibition of Diamond's work, opens at the Oxbow Gallery in Northampton April 1. The opening reception will be held Friday, April 9 from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. More images are available on line at valleyadvocate.com.

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