

The Pit

Northampton artist's gritty view of endless war

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Writer

Northampton artist Harriet Diamond's latest exhibit, "The Pit," is as deep, gritty and earthy as its title suggests.

The show, on view at Northampton's Oxbow Gallery through Sunday, features drawings and sculptures of clay, wood, ceramic, tinfoil, Styrofoam, and paint which depict the wages of American wars. From bomb vendors to civilian casualties, and from foot soldier to commander-in-chief, the artist gives voice to every player in the most dangerous game.

The installation borrows its name from its grand centerpiece: a literal pit, down into which are spiraling a seemingly endless stream of soldiers, bombs and tanks.

The piece's use of perspective underscores the weight of its meaning: standing directly in front of "The Pit," the viewer seems to be perched upon the side of a mountain, looking down at the visible yet indistinguishable faces of nearby clay-made troops, beyond them at a mass of helmeted green and grey formations, and skyward toward a fleet of aluminum pie-pan planes above.

Fittingly, the image calls to my mind the ominous, warning words of Irish poet W.B. Yeats, in his poem "The Second Coming": "Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world; / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned..."

Indeed, Diamond, a 1973 Smith College graduate, calls her exhibit "a kind of dire message. ... It's about the endless process. It's always the same. We're always going down into the pit. ... We've always been at war."

Diamond illustrates that feeling well, managing a universality throughout "The Pit" that allows her work to apply to just about any of the wars of the last 70 years.

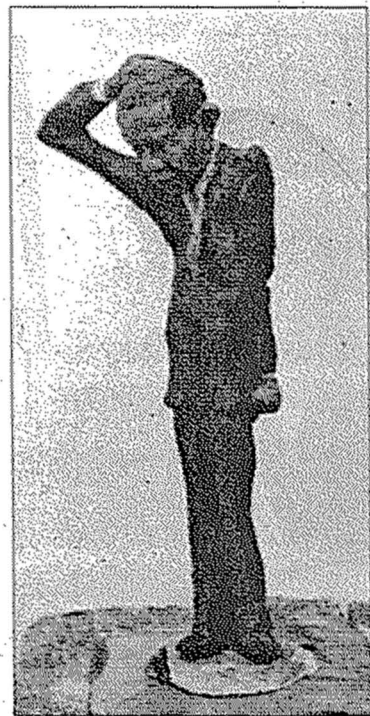
Faces are muddled and ageless, though imbued with emotion; and settings, weapons and clothing are generic enough to be from just about anywhere.

The most obvious exception to the exhibit's timelessness is the sculpture "Obama," which depicts the president standing atop a tall, unassuming pedestal, scratching his head apparently deep in



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Harriet Diamond's drawings and sculptures of war images is on view at the Oxbow Gallery in Northampton through Sunday.



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In Diamond's "The Pit," President Barack Obama appears as a man who feels the weight of his responsibilities.

and the world's expectations on his shoulders, but the utter loneliness of his lofty placement, and expressed in his furrowed brow, preserves the man's humanity.

On the other hand, "The Bomb Store" illustrates the least humane, and most impersonal, aspect of war — the commercialized business of selling weapons, as represented by the dozens of price-tagged bombs pridefully displaying the American colors.

Patrons wander through the store as if it were an auto show, marveling at missiles peppered with balloons.

The scene is punctuated by the distinctly patriotic image of a plane-sized bomb topped by a white star, stamped with the American flag, and accompanied by a bust of a woman.



GORDON DANIELS

The settings, weapons and clothing of Diamond's soldiers are generic enough to be from just about anywhere.

mond seems to ask the question: Is this the new era of American diplomacy?

She has been asking such questions of herself and her audience for a while now; two years ago the Oxbow featured an exhibit of hers titled "War and Protest."

"I'm still stuck in this thing," she said. "We're still stuck in it."

through Sunday at the Oxbow Gallery, located at 275 Pleasant St. in Northampton. Concurrently, the small gallery is also featuring the landscape paintings of Smith College Art professor Gary Niswonger. Gallery hours are Thursdays through Sundays from noon to 5 p.m. For information, call 586-6300 or visit www.oxbowgallery.com.

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