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ART PAPERS

ANITRA HAMILTON TORONTO

An audio loop of a humming lawnmower greets gallery visitors, who will later walk past a bomb suspended below a skylight. Indeed, for the last two decades, Anitra Hamilton's work has explored war and territory. Hamilton's first solo exhibition at a commercial gallery juxtaposes new works with pieces dating to 1996, tied together by their concern with people's inevitable, at times insatiable capacity for violence and the customs that euphemize it—from military dress to art and craft [Georgia Scherman Projects; September 11—October 24, 2009].

Hamilton's military imagery does more than strictly reference war. It forms an extended metaphor for the ubiquity of human violence. In *Amber*, 2000, a piece exhibited in an actual mini-fridge, toy soldiers are encased in orange Jell-O in a Mason jar. The warriors' incursion into a fridge, trapped in a jar, implies domestic violence's pervasiveness behind layers of social constructs.

The war motif often works in tandem with decorative eggshell mosaic to form the surface of several of Hamilton's pieces and series. As such, the mosaic works ironically because Hamilton quickly deflates its crafted prettiness through war-related images and objects. Particularly effective is *Who's gonna tell Jesus there's no Santa Claus?*, 1998, in which Hamilton covers a U.S. Air Force WW2 test bomb with chicken eggshell mosaic. The bomb appears crafted like a ceramic vessel, causing one to forget—but just momentarily—that it could kill. The ultra-thin, fragile surface of this substantial weapon illustrates human vulnerability to violence despite social decorum's masking efforts.

The glossing over of the effects of war by way of decoration is also the theme of *Humpty Dumpty*, 2008, a series of sixteen absurd collages in which egg shapes—appropriately made of eggshell mosaics—replace the heads of soldiers taken from a military uniform book. Hamilton's subsequent referencing of the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme suggests that soldiers' formal dress and associated pomp and circumstance fail to indicate war's reality: that is, after soldiers return

home, the psychological damage they have suffered often cannot be repaired.

Humpty Dumpty's nursery rhyme title points to a paradoxical deadly innocence, which the *Cock Robin* series, 2009, pursues. Here, the title references "Who Killed Cock Robin," the Tom Thumb poem that incidentally appears as a murder archetype in literature by writers as diverse as George Orwell and Tennessee Williams. For this series, Hamilton collages found illustrations of birds and grenades in such a way that the birds perch on the grenades' pins. The slightest motion could, of course, trip the grenade. Black humor arises from this tension as Hamilton presents the delicately beautiful as unapologetically bellicose. Furthermore, the allusion to violence in nature, juxtaposed as it is here with human violence, shows our violence to be innate.

Innate violence, Hamilton's *Still Life with Fruit*, 1996, asserts, hides not only behind disingenuous military decorum but also behind fine art. The "fruit" actually is defused hand grenades covered in eggshell mosaic. Art, accordingly, does not civilize the savage, but acts as a ruse to mask his savagery. Hamilton may seem, then, to implicate art as conceptually and ethically bankrupt. Quite the contrary: she uses art to reveal discomfiting truths. For her, art is a minefield beneath a rose garden.

—Earl Miller



Earl Miller. "Anitra Hamilton," *Art Papers*, January/February 2010, pg. 68