

PHOENIX New Times

art

Enemy Lines

We are under attack. The enemy, invisible and silent, has annexed every living room, classroom and workplace — and gallery. At monOrchid Gallery in downtown Phoenix, a show titled “A WarLike People: Victims or Perpetrators?” exposes the adversary, sounding the alarm on government control through fear, subsequent elimination of civil liberties, corporate scandal, and control of the media.

In the aftermath of September 11, the show’s 26 artists harness symbolism, satire and wit, revealing the invisible assaults in our day-to-day lives, as well as the shifting roles of victim and perpetrator within societal constructs. Sharing a political platform, these nationally and internationally known artists (from all over the globe, as well as some of the Valley’s best) broadcast an urgent message: *War has been waged in your own backyard; nothing less than democracy is endangered.* The exhibition’s triumph is the power and harmony of their voices.

New York artist Peter Kuper (an adept illustrator well-known for his work in *Time*, the *New York Times* and *MAD*’s “Spy vs. Spy”) ironically and effectively uses comics to comment on the forces of exploitation and oppression in today’s society. In *A Little Fable*, an illustrated cat-versus-mouse narrative, the mouse becomes the fat cat’s dinner. Under the shadow of scandal and war, Kuper encourages us to take a critical look at corporate and government leadership, such as Enron and the Patriot Act.

Another New Yorker, Fawad Khan, conveys the fear of bioterrorism with a shiny blue Postal Service mailbox (reproduced to exact specifications and materials), reflecting the post-9/11 removal of New York City’s public mailboxes. Visitors to the show can open Khan’s mailbox to reveal a menacing green light. The pairing of this everyday American icon with a rendered effect of biological weapons evokes the presence of terror in our day-to-day lives. The toxic substance emanating from within also represents the government’s internal state of affairs. Khan asks us to consider: Is the American government using fear as a weapon against its own people?

Robert Hickman, also from New York, underscores his role as victim by inviting viewers to aim and shoot a fake gun at his moving image, represented in

a video clip. Hickman’s figure rises for another round after each assault (who hasn’t felt this way?), cleverly involving the viewer as perpetrator.

Scottsdale artist Joan Baron addresses disregard for the planet with a heartfelt mixed-media installation titled *The Pledge*, a 6-by-12-foot configuration of the American flag made of seed pods, tiny shells and other natural materials. Clay hands (179 of them) compose the stripes in the flag, each adorned with questions about peace on Earth or quotations from leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. If this sounds cornball, it’s not. Baron’s work has the spiritual strength to turn almost any skeptic into a seeker.

While most artists contribute forceful works to the show, several could use more muscle. Using two green plastic chairs, Britain’s Tom Ellis intends to make something meaningful from meaningless materials. This fine (but certainly not unique) concept falls flat. With tight, tiny brushstrokes, New York’s Laura Watt painstakingly renders paintings resembling computer-generated imagery to explore technology’s role in today’s society. Like Ellis, Watt aims high with her message, but misses.

Yet any regular at First Fridays will recognize that this exhibition, overall, raises the bar within downtown’s gallery scene (on and around Roosevelt Street and Grand Avenue), where many art spaces function as co-ops for local member-artists to exhibit their work. “A WarLike People” features not only local emerging artists, but mid-career and established artists from all over

the globe. I hope this welcome infusion of new talent sparks downtown’s collective creative spirit.

Masterminding this powerhouse exhibition is Lara Taubman, a newcomer to the Phoenix art scene. Considering this is her first go as curator (her only gallery experience was as an assistant for a year), it’s an especially impressive accomplishment. She’s pulled off the most talked-about art show of the season.

A former painter with a master’s in cultural studies from New York University, Taubman moved to rural Arizona in 1998 to escape the often snobbish New York City art scene. While teaching at a community college and writing about art for *Shade*, *Java*, and *US Art*, she formalized an idea for a gallery show to convey her growing outrage at the post-9/11 climate of fear and the concealed violence around her. She



A Little Fable, silkscreen print, 2004, by Peter Kuper

relocated to Phoenix to realize her vision. “Like a few regional markets, Phoenix is open to new ideas and new people,” says Taubman. “The support for this show within the arts community here has been overwhelming.”

Funding was harder to come by. Taubman says she pounded the pavement for more than a year, facing many closed doors in the public sector. “Acquiring funding was 80 percent of the work,” she says. Donations ultimately came from local private patrons with a history of supporting the arts, including Eric Jungerman, Mitchell Stillman, and Kimber Lanning.

With a full cookie jar, entree into the art scene, and a healthy dose of chutzpah, Taubman tapped into some of the best creative talent in Phoenix and

Scottsdale (the show features Jon Had-dock, Colin Chillag, and Dave Quan, in addition to Joan Baron), and landed one of downtown’s top art spaces, monOrchid Gallery (she knew gallery owner Wayne Rainey because she’d written for his art magazine *Shade*).

With the show on firm ground, Taubman networked with several prominent New York and Los Angeles galleries to showcase their nationally and internationally known artists.

Taubman describes the show as “filled with hope.” That seems misleading, at first. After all, this is a show about veiled violence. Yet, standing in the gallery, I realized that these artists aim to wake us up, to recruit our support for a better world. It may be a small act, in the face of large problems, but it is full of optimism. ●

“A WarLike People: Victims or Perpetrators?” Continues through March 24 at monOrchid Gallery, 214 East Roosevelt Street. Call 602-309-1728 or see www.warlikepeople.com.