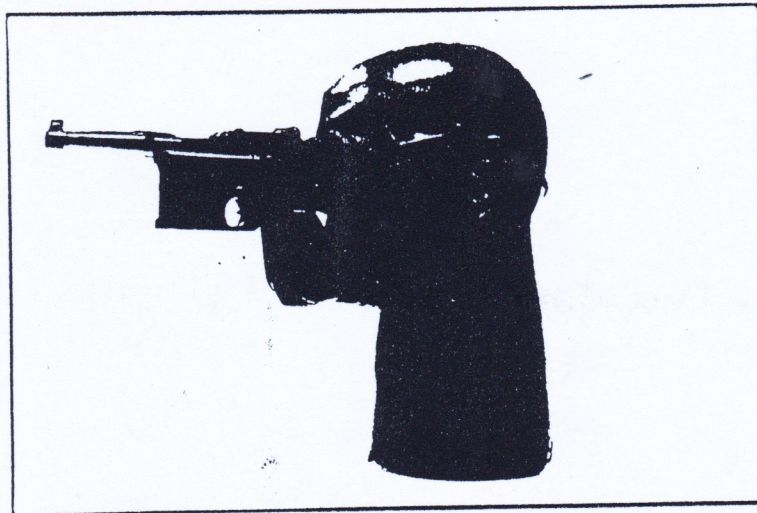


LEDISFLAM Covert Action



Marcel Grossman, Gunhead (1991)

By Elizabeth Hess

"Women at War"
LedisFlam
584 Broadway
Through March 13

Several of the 18 artists in "Women at War" were antiwar activists during the Vietnam era. It was a time when political art reached new polemical heights and on occasion went over the top.

The occasion was usually outrage over one covert action or another. It's easier to count the number of wars referred to in this exhibition than to count the number of current wars. Nevertheless, unlike the '60s, this moment holds no coherent political art movement; ideologically thoughtful artists are traveling in independent subgroups. There's little consensus in the art world today about aesthetics, let alone politics, which is why the '90s are feeling unformed; there's no dominant movement. This is a successful group show because it has a little of everything, surveying a small body of work that is diverse and full of conviction.

There's nothing like war to get artists going. During the '70s, the war between the sexes was a popular theme among women artists. (This is precisely the work today that is under critical reevaluation in light of the contemporary wave of "new" feminists.) A show on war by women artists asks, quite naturally, how gender affects com-

bat. Thanks to recent television coverage, we have no trouble imagining women warriors carefully placed in a desert landscape. But it's not as if the Equal Rights Amendment has just been passed by the Pentagon, or anywhere else.

Mimi Smith has designed a camouflage dress with lace around the collar for the older, more subdued, career officer. It looks a little like a servant's uniform; we can imagine this mercenary serving her enemy tea, rather than bits of shrapnel. The absent woman's body is as thick and shapeless as a tree trunk, more like our collective grandmother than a combat soldier. (Smith hangs a small, head-size, acrylic canvas with the image of a television screen over the outfit, which is really an unnecessary addition.)

Most objects in this show go back to previous wars, while several pieces, including Smith's "dress," take on recent issues that are broader than actual events. *Gunhead* (1991), one of Nancy Grossman's most impressive signature heads, comments on the fashionable obsession with violence and weapons. Covered in leather, this bald figure breathes life into his phallic weapon, which is attached to his face as if it were literally a part of his body; the mouth seems to suck on the handle like a pacifier. Deborah Masters has two huge heads included, each wearing a helmet. It's impossible to tell their gender, which is her point. Grossman's head is all

testosterone.

One of May Stevens's infamous Big Daddys, painted in a tight realist style, stands like a sentry in the main gallery. This is the piece that takes us back to the antiwar movement, which in 1971, when this canvas was made, was synonymous with Vietnam. Big Daddy is draped in an American flag that conceals his potentially telling body; a large bulldog with layers of rippling skin lies in his lap. The dog and patriarch have the same white complexions.

Curator Lori Ledis has carefully integrated works in disparate mediums. In the smallest and most dramatic room, a life-size coffin by Joseley Carvalho, filled with photographic images from the Gulf War, is surrounded by work by Nancy Spero, Käthe Kollwitz, Susan Meiselas, Sue Coe, Toyen (a little known Surrealist from the '30s and '40s), and Margaret Bourke-White. This is a persuasive group, and their images work together, making necessary links between wars around the world. Meiselas's colorful portrait of Sandinistas, their bodies taut and their guns pointing (the cover image from her ambitious book, *Nicaragua*), echoes the sentiment in Nancy Spero's *Kill Commies*, where figures dangle to their deaths.

Ledis makes a revealing comparison between Meiselas's and Bourke-White's war coverage. Meiselas is renowned for getting close to the action, often risking her own life. In Bourke-White's

Italy—Hospital Train From Caserta to Naples, we see a candy striper, smiling as she feeds a wounded soldier a spoonful of medicine; the other boys watch, wishing they too could get a mouthful. The picture looks like a setup for *Life* magazine. In the space between Bourke-White and Meiselas, we see the progress of women photographers and their access to war.

A photographic collage by Annette Lemieux combines an image of scattered bodies from Hiroshima with a bird's-eye view of shapely women (maybe from the '50s) lying on a beach in their stylish suits. It's an odd and provoking juxtaposition that questions the position of women in war, if not their passivity. A photomontage by Anita Steckel, *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*, shows Hitler dining with his cronies. (WAC sang a version last season that went: "I'm Dreaming of a Nonwhite Christmas.")

The world wars appear largely in photographs, with the notable exception of an unknown painting by Ida Applebroog of a ledger filled with listings from a concentration camp. The painting is a dark, sickly yellow, the color perhaps of dead flesh. It lies on the floor like a corpse. Applebroog's divided canvas shows the name of the victim, the date of his or her demise, and the cause of death, written in German. The third column is a loathsome list of lies used to cover up the shocking truth.