“A mixture of technical know-how, moral anger, and all-American barbaric yawp”

Kienholz, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

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The recent Kienholz exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) spans more than forty years of artistic work by Ed Kienholz (1927-1994). On display are some of his earlier installations and sculpture from the 1960s, but from 1972 onwards all the work is in collaboration with his fifth wife, photographer Nancy Reddin Kienholz. She continued to work after her husband’s death and some of her pieces are also on show.

Most of the work—which takes up ten rooms—is overtly politically and socially critical, showing the nexus of power, politics and big business, social inequality and poverty, the cultural domination of TV in the USA, and the treatment of the most vulnerable members of society such as Native Americans and the mentally ill. The most prominent however, are the antiwar and anti-religion installations.

The Kienholzs’ oeuvre, Ed’s in particular, has been variously labeled as robust and coarse. Marcel Duchamp, for example, once described it as “marvelously vulgar”. And while this may be a bit too generous, it is apt. The Kienholzs are clearly on the side of society’s downtrodden, the forgotten, and the oppressed and vulnerable. However, the work as a whole, although serious and honest, lacks subtlety and insight that goes beyond the initial shock and confrontation.

One of the most imposing pieces is the *Ozymandias Parade*. The title is taken from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem in 1817, *Ozymandias*, the powerful “king of kings”, whose ancient empire, lying in ruins in the desert sands, is found by a traveller. This tableau is a collaborative mixed media effort made in 1985. It is an enormous arrow-shaped float, illuminated on all sides by red, white and blue flashing light bulbs. On top are several horses, ridden by blindfolded generals, one riding backwards, the other beneath the rearing horse while speaking into a phone that dangles from his wrist, and another rides a skeletal, half crippled woman, who symbolises the cost of war borne by society. The general dangles a stick in front of her face, from which hang several religious symbols of different faiths. Suitcases full of money, ships with dead toy soldiers, boatloads of toy guns and a pork barrel decorated with pig’s snouts are scattered at the base of the huge horses.

Surrounding this grotesque and eerie spectacle are figures representative of the third world and those with less political influence. There are also individuals from the Stone Age and ancient civilisations, all watching on the sidelines, surrounded by flags from around the world. The whole world is involved, either looking on, or hoping to accompany the more powerful and belligerent, yet ridiculous-looking, imperialist forces. A flag, usually that of the country hosting the exhibition, is kept waving by a fan attached to the mast. The artificiality of contrived nationalism for the purpose of war seems to be the main point. Military marching band music plays incessantly, giving the whole installation a sense of menacing, unrelenting madness.

Nancy Reddin Kienholz’s *The Ozymandias Parade*, is leadership or the lack thereof. It questions whether the leaders themselves believe they are more important than the people they are purported to lead.” There are too many things going on, but in general the antiwar sentiment, the brutality and absurdity of war is the most important and striking aspect of this work.

In the same room is a huge Statue of Liberty made from fibreglass, resin cloth with copper patina and red neon by Nancy Reddin Kienholz. Entitled It’s Not My Fault (2004), the statue’s face is expressionless, its right arm extended and holding the torch that has, instead of a flame, an encased caption that reads “It’s Not My Fault” in large red neon capital letters. Although there is a gap of nineteen years between the two works, they complement each other.

As is well known, the original statue was a gift to the US from France in 1886 on the centenary of the American Declaration of Independence. While Nancy Reddin Kienholz’s statue gazes impassively at *The Ozymandias Parade*, it clearly disapproves of the imperialist orgy on the other side of the room. It powerfully contrasts the genuine democratic traditions that the Statue of Liberty represents and the atrocities carried out by US imperialism in her name.

The Non-War Memorial (1970) is subtler and conveys not only the senselessness of war, but of the human loss and the anonymity of the soldiers’ death. Stuffed military uniforms from the Vietnam War period are scattered on the floor, corpse-like, without heads, hands or feet. They surround a monument upon which a framed glass box sits. Inside the box is a book or photo album containing 50,000 photos of the same uniforms stuffed with dirt.

The installation *76JCs Led the Big Charade* is another collaborative effort and a play on the popular 1950s song “Seventy Six Trombones Led the Big Parade.” Three walls are covered with crucifixes made from toy wagon axles and doll parts, all of them with a different representation of the figure of Christ. The role of religion—the church in particular—in politics and war is clearly pointed to here, yet this work is more muted and lacks the intensity evident in some of the more colourful and explicit installations. Nevertheless, it does cause the viewer to consider in a more thoughtful, introspective way the methods employed by the church to justify war, and the resulting human sacrifice, for which the church is responsible.

The Hoerengracht (1983-88) is an intricate and large construction of a brothel in Amsterdam’s red-light district. The women stand inside the sleazy and grimy rooms, gazing vacantly out of the windows. Their faces are framed by tin boxes, giving the impression that they are doubly imprisoned: by the profession itself and its grimy and gaudy surrounds, and as objects of a voyeuristic public. A certain sympathy and unease is evoked, yet it seems that it is voyeurism that is central to the work, rather

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than a more profound and crystallised humanisation of the prostitutes themselves.

One of the more unnerving installations is The Merry-Go World Or Begat by Chance and the Wonder Horse Trigger (1988-1992). From a distance it is redolent of any other fairground carousel, with its music and colourful, garish animals. It is only upon closer inspection that its sinister theme becomes evident. There are hairy hogs, malevolent looking monkeys, wild horses and other wild animals around the contraption. One can enter the carousel after spinning the wheel of fortune. Once inside, one of the many panels lights up, revealing various scenes of social misery. Only one panel contains an elegantly dressed middle class woman, with all the accoutrements of her social class such as jewelry, gold and ornate furnishings. Good or bad fortune will determine what type of society or environment you happen to be born into. The images suggest that poverty and misery is the only fortune for millions around the world.

Lining the walls of the same room as the carousel and part of the same tableau is a series of black and white photos of poverty and alienation from different parts of the world. These are some of the most affecting works in the whole exhibition, with a subtlety that speaks far more eloquently of social inequality and misery affecting millions of people than the political rhetoric of the large and noisy installations. One of the most moving is *Angel*. The photo is of a very young Native American child looking intently at the viewer. It is set in a galvanised metal frame with a wooden base and decorated with some of the tokens traditionally associated with Native Americans, such as braided leather, glass beads, deer antler and fur, shells and feathers. The caption outlining the top of the frame reads, "They made us many promises, more than I can remember—they never kept but one: they promised to take our land and they took it."

One of the more powerful antiwar installations is *God's In His Heaven All's Right With the World* (1993) taken from Robert Browning's poem *Pippa Passes.* A dressmaker's mannequin lies in a coffin-like structure. A WWI decommissioned rifle with bayonet pierces her genitals and emerges from her torso, which is severed in two. The heads of two baby dolls, one black, one white, are on the stomach. Underneath her upraised and outstretched legs lies another doll, symbolising a baby, with its severed head alongside it, and mutilated genitals. The epitaph reads "God's In His Heaven All's Right With The World." This work starkly conveys not only some of the more barbaric aspects of war such as rape, but the concomitant murder of the helpless and innocent as well as of future generations. It also points to the church's sanction of "just wars". The overall explicitness and grotesqueness of the work, however, seems designed to shock viewers rather than enlighten and profoundly move them about the horrors of war.

In most of the Kienholzs' work, aesthetic considerations are subsumed by overt political messages. The impact is striking, yet does not really resonate on a deep emotional level. With the exception of the photographs, the installations and sculptures more or less correspond to the easily recognisable traits and characteristics of a corrupt political system. Humanity, the victims, has been rendered, by and large, an abstract, faceless feature encompassed in a theme of loud protest politics.

Ed Kienholz was born in 1927 and was raised on a farm in Fairfield, a tiny town on the border of Washington and Idaho states. It was a rugged land where survival depended largely on one's resourcefulness and self-sufficiency, utilising what the immediate environment provided. Kienholz was largely self-taught in art, and his originality in the early 60s was his ability to turn junk, the detritus of American society, into an assembly of, at first small pieces, and then into entire rooms. Robert Hughes in *American Visions* says of Ed Kienholz that "What he believed in was a mixture of technical know-how, moral anger, and all-American barbaric yawp."

Eschewing all cant, including artistic, Kienholz's work expresses a very practical means of utilising objects, trash as well as treasure, much as he did in his rural upbringing, to produce something that is accessible, utilitarian, yet aesthetically quite crude. In many ways, Kienholz seems to be the Walt Whitman of contemporary art. However, instead of celebrating America as Whitman's poetry does, with the same fervour as Whitman he rejects all that is despicable about the contemporary society, especially American society.

Turning junk into art or metaphoric objects can be traced back to Surrealism and German Dada in the early decades of the twentieth century. One of the first Americans to take it up was Joseph Cornell in the 1940s, followed by Robert Rauschenberg in the 1950s, with Kienholz taking it further again in the 1960s. His work was occasionally classified with the American Pop artists of the time, of whom Andy Warhol became the most famous representative, yet Kienholz, for the most part, defied categorisation. His work was too intense and very much in the vernacular of the unpretentious; recording the fate of the mentally ill such as in *State Hospital* (1966) or *The Portable War Memorial* (1968), and being a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War.

Apparently, Kienholz was more appreciated in Europe, particularly Germany—where he and Nancy and their children spent several months of each year, alternating between Berlin and Idaho—than in the US. Conservative US critics claimed that his art constituted a kind of anti-Americanism. Their work was exhibited extensively in the 1970s and 1980s throughout Europe, with some of their most important pieces acquired by major museums.

The MCA exhibition is the first time the Kienholzs' work has been shown in Australia. The show's curator Judith Blackall says that "[The MCA] wanted to look at how their work is still relevant today and thought it was high time they were given a serious showing in this country."

The better pieces in the exhibition can be brutal and honest in their opposition to the ills of American society, including militarism and imperialism. In today's political climate this is, indeed, relevant. It is also significant that the MCA decided to hold such an exhibition. Perhaps its decision should be viewed within the context of a certain shift among the more serious and critical artists, who possess a certain sense of urgency about the state of the world today and their role in conveying this to wider layers of the population. Despite the limitations imposed by its coarseness and over-simplification, an appreciation of the Kienholzs' work, it is to be hoped, will serve to broaden and deepen this response.

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