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Violence, torture and 'Man's Inhumanity' on display



Günther Uecker's sculptures look like torture machines.

By **Mariam Hamdy** **October 16, 2008, 2:00 am**

The current highlight of Goethe Institute's 50th anniversary celebrations is the anticipated exhibition by German artist Günther Uecker at the Townhouse Gallery. Uecker's internationally acclaimed body of work ranges from optical art, to sculpture to installation.

Born in Mecklenburg, in the eastern German Democratic Republic in 1930, Uecker moved to the west in 1953 to study in Düsseldorf where he continues to live and work today. History and world events are what drive his art practice, having witnessed some of the most traumatic events in recent history as well as examining the differences between social and political values of East and West Germany and the repercussions of the unification.

Uecker's current exhibition, entitled "Man's Inhumanity", is a manifestation of this experience. The show constitutes 14 sculptural objects, or "implements" as he describes them, made of wood, cloth, sand, stones and nails. The objects have been a part of the artist's repertoire of works since the 50s when he first started to pound nails into canvases, pieces of furniture and musical instruments to name a few. The use of nails and their connotations of pain, violence and perseverance, act as a propagation to a new art that opposes conventional methods of art and art production.

The sculptures look like torture machines, hence their names: "implements". There is something sinister about the way the sculptures have been designed; they look new and somewhat clean as though they have not yet witnessed screams of pain, but they do anticipate it. The sculptures are predominantly made up of sharp edges, and though some are covered with a gauze-like material, the fabric lends more to the memory of wounds than it does to soften the protruding nails and edges it wraps.

Placed along the walls of the exhibition space are handwritten text paintings in Arabic script. Originally in German, the text has been translated for this show. The words on display are words of aggression taken from the Old Testament, uniting the sculptural pieces together with their consistency across the walls. However, the words seem to fall on deaf ears. Something about the way they were written - perhaps their patent, acute clarity on the walls that look like remnants of an Arabic lesson on an elementary school black board - rids them of their strength. The words fall flat rather than evoke confessions of guilt or allow the mind to wander along the meaning and ways of aggression.

The entire exhibition is monochromatic in color, a tranquil medley of beige, naples yellow and whites, interrupted only by the black text on the walls. The color scheme gives the works a serene and calm touch, contrary to the subject matter portrayed. This contrast is, without a doubt, a healthy addition to the exhibition, in terms of how it juxtaposes violence and peace as such. However, this is not how this viewer felt.

The show felt somewhat redundant. Perhaps it's how numb we've grown towards the concept of violence and its consequences that we need a little bit more than the presented subtlety to jar our senses.

"Man's Inhumanity" does not fully convey the sorrow that Uecker wants to portray about the human condition. This is not to say that subtlety in approaching violence, racism, xenophobia and the general atrophy of acceptance isn't enough; it is, in fact. Installations by veteran artist Mona Hatoum, photographic endeavors by journalist Michael Kennedy, emotionally-charged videos by artist Amal Kenawy, all of whom have exhibited in the same factory space at Townhouse, have employed



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subtlety in their work.

The only difference, and the key point missing in the current exhibition, is the proximity of their works from danger. All of the aforementioned works were a hair's breadth away from the normal and the safe, creating a tension that jolted the viewer into re-examining his or her own reality.

Despite having an abundance of texture and possessing an undeniable mastery of aesthetics, Günther Uecker's visual commentary approach on violence feels somehow sterile and contrived.

The work is independently intriguing, but falls short in its ability to carry the weight of the loaded connotations of the text paintings and the artist statement.



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