

Semper Fido

What if war was fought by dogs?



They're not real dog legs. Relax. | Courtesy Axle Contemporary

By Iris McLister | April 11, 2018

Would a dog be a good soldier? Loyal, guileless and abundantly enthusiastic, a canine front line would be hard to beat. For local multimedia artist Geoffrey Gorman, it's a question that provoked an entire show.

Recuerdos from a Forgotten War, which opens Friday at Santa Fe's preeminent gallery-on-wheels, Axle Contemporary, actually came about during the Iraq War. Gorman recalls looking through old photos of the American Civil War by era photographers Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner. As the artist notes in his press release, "I heard something about mercenaries fighting in Iraq, which led me to wonder what would happen if dogs were used to fight a war and what the battlefield might look like after the fighting was over." The objects in *Recuerdos*, however, aren't mutilated, or shrapnel-torn, but lovingly preserved with embellishments of jewels, gold and other dazzling accessories. The resulting remains are transformed into ornate, seemingly mummified artifacts.

Paul Klee, Marcel Duchamp, Ed and Nancy Kienholz and Louise Bourgeois are all artists Gorman cites as

influential to his work, as are anonymous creators of both ancient and contemporary work and even mummies; of special interest are the so-called bog people—mummified remains discovered in Europe, mummified bodies found in the Middle East and Peru.

For years, Axle's proprietors, Matthew Chase-Daniel and Jerry Wellman, have made it their mission to push boundaries, but the motivations for this admittedly oddball show are straightforwardly tender. "Dogs occupy some strange liminal place between human culture and the natural world," Chase-Daniel tells SFR. "They can calm us down and cheer us up, especially when the sphere of human relations gets difficult to navigate."

The show comprises dog limbs, mostly legs, made of wood, plastic, metal and other materials. In one, the top portion of a dog's wrist and paw is a stick; in place of claws are rusty nails, and pearls poke out from different portions of the arm. Other body parts are accompanied by fragmented metal, and some are covered by what at first appear to be bullet holes or wounds, but are actually the heads of screws, whose rims bleed with rust. Axle's funky old truck, hollowed out to form an immersive gallery space, works well for a show like this. The objects in *Recuerdos* are presented behind glass, so viewers can look, but not get too close. This makes it feel like a traveling, old-timey circus whose oddities—human, animal or other—remain tantalizingly out of reach. This isn't meant, though, to be a freak show. For Gorman, who grew up in Maryland on a farm, dogs were integral and abundant, part of the fabric of working life but also emotional life.

Gorman grew up on an old plantation about 30 miles north of Baltimore. "My father impressed on me how important it was to have animals around." His deep affection for man's best friend is poignantly evidenced in his current series, but for decades he's interpreted unique traits of a range of creatures. Gorman must have gotten some of his love for animals from his father, who would bring home cats and dogs, but also rabbits, snakes and squirrels, and even a squirrel monkey once.

The Santa Fe-based artist has always been fascinated by the animal kingdom, citing a practically spiritual connection. "Sometimes I think that I am more in the animal world than in the human world," he says. "I spend so much of my time thinking about animals and how they live and how they survive. I guess I would have to call myself an animist."

Unsurprisingly, Gorman also considers himself to be a pacifist, a viewpoint which in many ways informs his creative practice. Imagining animals as soldiers first occurred to him during the outbreak of the Gulf Wars in the 1990s.

"I think of the animals I build as picking up what we discarded as we've ruined the environment and using these pieces of flotsam and jetsam to make themselves stronger," Gorman explains, highlighting another of his passions: the environment, which he believes humanity is destroying at an alarming clip. "Every day species are becoming extinct," he laments. He sees aspects of his work as hinting at potential retribution. "These animals are planning attacks against us humans; we can't see them, but they are in the shadows."

Detached animal limbs sound jarring, but Gorman's emphasis is on compassion and understanding, and he highlights the innocence and beauty of his subjects with gentle, even reverential treatment. The message is one of respect for life, especially those of the most vulnerable.

Recuerdos from a Forgotten War Opening Reception

5 pm Friday April 13. Free.

Axle Contemporary, 670-5854;

will be parked at Selby Fleetwood Gallery,

600 Canyon Road, 992-8877