

Glenn Kaino's Balancing Act in Chicago

Scott Indrisek

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Los Angeles-based Glenn Kaino is a busy man at the moment. He's just celebrated the opening of "Leviathan," a solo exhibition at Chicago's Kavi Gupta Gallery that features a series of sculptures made from things like mirrors, rulers, wine bottles, and bomb-fin cases. Down in Washington, DC, as part of the 5x5 curatorial project, the artist recently unveiled "Bridge," a fiberglass-and-steel hanging sculpture that replicates the arm of Tommie Smith, responsible for an iconic Black Power salute during the 1968 Olympics. And he's currently working on a project for the Prospect.3 biennial in New Orleans for which he's growing coral on pieces of a plastic-cast military tank. Kaino "believes that art can change the world, that it has political agency," he said — but "with a constant struggle for its own relevancy, particularly within the museum and gallery space."

The artist's Chicago solo exhibition raises interesting questions

in this regard: Is a MakerBot-printed rock as efficacious as a real one, hurled at the cops? What is gained (or lost) when politics is mined for aesthetics, and how can the works' origin story be imparted without coming across as preachy?

"Portugal. China. Russia. Syria. Athens. The Philippines. Indonesia. Ferguson. Crimea. And Yemen's in there somewhere," Kaino said, ticking off the actual rocks that are included in the sculpture "Suspended Animation," arrayed along a conveyor belt contraption that is balanced on its rear wheels. The various chunks of asphalt were all culled from protest sites in areas around the globe; Kaino brought back a piece of rock from Tahrir Square during a trip to Cairo in 2012, and then asked an international roster of friends to help him cull other possible-projectiles from their own cities. The artist is fascinated by the changing, contextual nature of these simple stones, and the way they're activated for political means: "Once it's in the air it has the full-on agency — it's armed, it has potential and value — but once it hits its target and falls back to the ground it becomes street detritus again."

The rocks led to another series of works, which Kaino referred to as "dent paintings": Geometric arrangements of mirrored, polished steel, loosely representing door-window configurations at American embassies around the world, against which he hurled rocks in the studio. The impact left divots that drastically alter how the surface reflects, creating warped fish-eye moments. ("What an amazing way to increase space," Kaino noted, with a level of enthusiasm that belies his side gig as senior vice president for digital over at Oprah's empire. "This act of protest resolves itself, even for a moment, in a new world and a new type of reflection on our world.") An additional work in the show, "Don't Bring a Gameboy to a Gunfight," is a pile of protest-rocks 3D-printed using the popular MakerBot; since printing a single rock takes hours, Kaino found assistants online who were willing to generate the objects using the digital files he sent. It appealed to his sense of building a "new ecosystem of an idea" — an exchange of data and a system of exchange that breathes new life into the original object. A slightly taboo, quasi-legal kink didn't hurt, either. "The State Department has governed the digital transfer of what they call munitions," Kaino said. "Technically, I was asserting the idea of digitally transferring a weapon, which is now contraband, through this network."

Other pieces in "Leviathan" are built around notions of "precarious balance," often quite literally. (It's somewhat astounding that a particularly drunk gallery-goer I spotted at the weekend's opening managed to escape without sending anything crashing to the ground.) "We Have Found The Enemy And He Is Us" is a stack of bomb-fin boxes that Kaino saw at a military archive; they reminded him, he said, of a wobbly Jenga game. For the sculpture, he's reconstituted them into the rough shape of an Easter Island Moai head. "In the process of making it look like a Moai, it became more and more precarious," he explained. "For every pull that I made to try to make it look like a monument, it actually looked more vulnerable, and more in jeopardy."

The works in Kaino's "Leviathan" are proof of his restless intelligence, one that is prone to connect often disparate dots. His Prospect 3 project is much the same: A personal experience that mutated into a reflection on the world's larger patterns. Years ago, Kaino said, he discovered that the military dumps old tanks into the ocean, providing a foundation for coral reefs to grow. For the past year or so he's been doing the same, having cast an entire tank in plastic, and then cut it into smaller segments that are placed in aquariums. Kaino is intrigued by the way the coral itself grows. "When corals touch, they actually sting each other," he explained. "It's a constant fight, a war for space going on. When I started growing the coral, I realized the shapes began to look like states and countries. It looked like Greece!" In Kaino's symbiotic worldview, one thing is always a springboard — sometimes whimsical, sometimes deadly serious — to the next.