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L.A. artist reimagines U.S. Army tanks as living coral paintings: A best bet at Prospect.3 in New Orleans

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Los Angeles artist Glenn Kaino's collection of living coral displayed in murmuring high-tech aquariums on the second floor of the Contemporary Arts Center is my personal favorite of the Prospect.3 international art festival exhibits I've previewed so far.

Kaino's odd, conceptual artwork begins with a question: What does the U.S. Army do with obsolete tanks? About 10 years ago Kaino discovered that the army dumps some of its old tanks in the ocean, where they are meant to be the foundations for future reefs.

"It is a military program to dispose of the detritus of war," Kaino said, during a preview tour earlier this week.

Once submerged, the old war vehicles are eventually encrusted with a colorful shroud of coral. Finally at peace.

Or so it would seem. But Kaino, who once worked in an aquarium store, knew that that wasn't exactly the case. Coral only appears to be peaceful; actually the pink, pale green and purple colonies are constantly at odds, competing for prime territory with stinging tentacles, poisonous chemicals and other weapons of miniature destruction.

If you looked at it right, the old tanks had been removed from the macro wars of man and plunged into the micro wars of coral. The spreading quilt of coral colonies was like a world map, with constant border conflicts.

"It struck me as a poetic contradiction that beneath the surface of the ocean, invisible to our view," Kaino said, "some of the smallest organisms in the world were reclaiming the instruments of displacement of, ostensibly, some of the largest. To me there was a metaphor in there."

The idea for an artwork bubbled up.

Kaino was allowed to make molds from some of the surface details of the retired tank, such as the commander's hatch, a mushroom-like air vent and less recognizable elements. He cast those details in clear plastic to produce a ghostly effect. Then, with the coaching of coral husbandry experts, he planted the tank parts with live starter colonies to produce what he calls living paintings.

I love Kaino's installation because it pushes the boundaries of what form art can take. As he explained, the individual elements of his installation, the aquariums, the coral, the pumping water may not, in themselves be artworks. But taken together, they become a sort of intellectual sculpture.

"I engaged in an art that's about ideas," he said.

What's lost sometimes in idea-oriented art making is beauty. But not this time.

You'll agree that Kaino's collection of otherworldly coral, displayed in gently burbling, blue aquariums couldn't be more visually alluring. The dimly lit gallery, the sound of the water and the gently undulating coral are transporting. And that's the underlying irony, because the soothing exhibit is all about the omnipresence of war.

The Contemporary Arts Center is at 900 Camp St.