



Military Machines Become Coral Reefs In Glenn Kaino's 'Tank'

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Art exhibitions are sometimes described as incubators for new ideas, but rarely do they also serve as incubators in the literal sense of the word, helping to sustain or breed life.

New Orleans's recently opened Prospect (P.3) Biennial, however, could be described as an incubator in both senses, thanks to a contribution by Los Angeles-based conceptual artist Glenn Kaino, who will use the exhibition as a stage to present his ambitious work, *Tank* (2014).

Produced in collaboration with Grand Arts in Kansas City and set to show there once the biennial ends, *Tank* (2014) integrates fragments of a decommissioned M-60 Patton military tank into aquarium environments. There, the translucent cast pieces of the tank are transformed into breeding grounds for coral polyps, which will continue to grow in seven aquariums, slowly spreading and articulating their progress in bright colors and patterns.

It's a concept and structure that might sound odd, but one that, as Kaino explained to *The Creators Project*, was inspired by real life. Ten years ago, Kaino learned about a U.S. Army and Department of Defense-affiliated program called "Reef Exercise"

(or, in abbreviated form, "ReefEx"). When submerged in ocean water long enough, armored cars have the potential to simulate coral reefs, and in the last decade states across the U.S. have been experimenting with repurposing old tanks by dropping them into the ocean. There, they transform into suitable environments for marine life, ameliorating local ecosystems.

"As the tanks eroded they were being covered with coral and algae and were actually helping to become reefs and attract fish to exhausted or over-fished areas of ocean," Kaino wrote in a recent exchange.

This gesture of nature overtaking machines—specifically, machines associated with destruction—is one that resonated with Kaino. "I thought it was very moving and poetic that some of the smallest creatures of the world were reclaiming these enormous and advanced instruments of displacement," he said.

But while this image of nature triumphing over war machines is a hopeful one, when considered from a different perspective, coral's evolutionary reflex to spread can lead to darker conclusions about nature and the animal world. In Kaino's words, corals' reclamation and negotiation of space suggest that "at the most basic level of life there is a colonial urge."

As animals with only a responsive nervous system, and lacking anything that resembles a human brain, corals act on impulse, "surviving without thinking." And though the movement and growth of coral polyps is hardly the stuff of Hollywood war flicks, their impulse-driven interactions with their aquariums and with each other, while slow, can still evoke images of violence and force.

In a set of simultaneous motions, then, *Tank* (2014) both undermines and underscores the colonial drive. The corals physically transform the tank into a beautiful and life-sustaining object. At the same time, though, this gesture is only achieved after the corals wage a war of sorts with the tank's surface, fighting for the space to properly thrive.

Acknowledging that the impulse towards colonialism, to borrow Kaino's term, may exist in nature is a first step towards addressing and ultimately combating this instinct in ourselves. "If these non-intelligent actors have the desire to occupy and negotiate borders with warlike tendencies, how are we able to consider the needs of peace?" Kaino asks.

As Kaino explains it, one way of working towards peace may be to first understand and contemplate what makes humans unique and evolved, and which of the many influences on our bodies—emotion, impulse and intelligence, to name several—should be trusted and followed.

“Is generosity and sacrifice a condition of our humanity? What is the cost of human subjectivity?” These, and similar reflections on human nature and the inherent responsibilities of being a human actor are the questions Kaino feels the piece raises.

When originally conceived, the tank fragments were meant to evoke specific zones of colonial conflict and encounter, both contemporary and historical, but as the piece developed, they came instead to represent imagined or implied zones of conflict.

This makes sense given that the piece does not articulate a direct political message, providing instead a nuanced means of visualizing and considering violent encounters, and how we may prevent them.

