

Robert Kunec

532 Gallery / Thomas Jaeckel, New York

By Francis Timothy Walsh

At first glance, it's tempting to classify this collection of images and ideas as "political art," and move on. Pause a minute, though. There is "political art" and there is fine art that is political. The former is a genre available to most anyone with an agenda to promulgate. In the past decade, galleries have been full of "political art"—one looks, one gets the point, and one leaves the ideas, generally, in the gallery, on the walls. Viewers avoid collateral damage to their minds; the work prompts little questioning of one's moral pre-conceptions.

Then there is fine art that is political. This is what Robert Kunec makes—careful, reflective work imbued with a political message. It's art with an emotional punch, too—one that lingers in the mind afterwards.

Each piece in this show is made from materials that range from bronze to plastic; some incorporate found objects. Surfaces are clean; color choices are subtle. For the most part, this work quietly invites the viewer to come closer, to linger nearby, to look beyond the initial gestalt. Kunec is careful to avoid letting materials overpower his political message.

And what is that message? On the face of it, Kunec's is a message about terrorism as a universal source of cultural angst. One piece entitled *IT'S NOT A BOMB!* reminds us of the added "cost" of contemporary travel. Consisting of a black suitcase with leather straps, the title is printed on its side, in glaring white letters. Enough is enough, it seems to tell us.

Raised in the Catholic faith, Kunec does not confine his ideas about fear to the obviously political. The show's title, *In the Name of* (lacking the obvious Father) alludes to this. There is a "Presidential" podium that, when viewed from the speaker's

viewpoint, is also a *prie dieu* (praying desk). Since the finished piece is a product of a "WE CONFESS Do-it-yourself kit" found in another part of the gallery, we can assume that it's also a stab at all of us.

In our modern world, whole cultures seem to have an increasing capacity to forgive themselves for their political misdeeds. Another piece, consisting of a loaf of bread painted gold, with a mallet and a spike on either side, bears the title *Corpus Dei* (*God's body*), a reference not only to the Eucharist but to the Crucifixion as well.

But this is not a show about redemption. Kunec uses irony to remind us that the fears and uncertainties of our post-9/11—and now post Bin Laden—world lurk just below the surface of our collective sub-conscious.

There's an AK-47 in bronze, with what seem to be thorns sticking out from it. There are photographs of faux IEDs (improvised explosive devices) that appear strangely amusing (one is made of plastic water bottles) until we remember the Shoe Bomber. There is a beautiful tourist map of Iraq, which has been mutilated. Of course, entering the political arena, we are reminded quickly that there are two sides, and then some, to every issue. **M**

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Robert Kunec *Flag Day*, 2011. Photo series edition of 3. 16 x 24 inches. Courtesy: 532 Gallery / Thomas Jaeckel, New York.