

packaging paper and slabs of wood. The use of found material, while welcome in an ecological sense, has become a cliché in Bay Area circles and beyond in the indie pop *Found* magazine culture. But McCarthy still does it better than others who've come in her wake. Even more than the forebears who practiced assemblage in the '60s, she taps into the expressiveness of an object's wrinkled history, so the splatter pattern of a coffee stain can function like a splash of watercolor." This kind of forethought and intentionality appears in this exhibition as well. McCarthy's colored pencil grids and bursts are stunning exercises in pattern and form. They uncover depth and mesmerizing repetitions that conjure up memories of folk art and are intense reflections of work that has influenced her entire career.

Sitting inside the gallery, underneath a lighted penguin, surrounded by rainbows, drawings and simple delights, viewers can be reminded of those bygone days of Mission School frenzy or they can be delighted in the moment and realize that they are seeing their daily world in both a familiar and unexpected way.

—Aimee Le Duc

Alicia McCarthy closed in June at Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco.

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Rodney Ewing at Frey Norris Gallery

In *Jarhead*, Anthony Swofford's Gulf War memoir, an officer exhorts new Marine recruits to "maintain a constant state of suspicious alertness!" That pretty much sums up the Bush era action-movie paranoia that funded the 2003 sequel, Operation Iraqi Freedom, twelve years after the original monster hit, Operation Desert Shield. Set this time in Iraq, but featuring the same villain, it seemed an easy slam dunk, but it turned out after a thrilling prelude to be badly scripted, helmed and acted, way over budget and filled with gratuitous violence—and interminable. Thumbs way down! Unfortunately, the notion of war as national self-assertion and entertainment still persists. Rodney Ewing, who grew up in a military family and served as a National Guard artilleryman in Kuwait and Iraq, has created a thoughtful body of work, *Public Safety* that suggests that we adopt a wider, less adrenaline-fueled perspective.

The allure of weaponry is deeply ingrained in our culture, as the recent Supreme Court handgun decision again demonstrates. Anyone who grew up in the hunting culture of the red states, as

Ewing did, knows this; and blue-state shopper-gatherers who consider gun owners atavistic throwbacks should remember that the ultra-violent cyber-world/action-movie culture attracts fanboys of all ages everywhere. In *The Psychology of War*, Lawrence LeShan theorizes that war propels us from everyday empathetic pragmatism into an imagined cosmic battle between absolute good and evil; the mythic vision is so alluring that even extremely graphic antiwar films, as Swofford points out, still tempt immo-



Rodney Ewing, *Xibalba*, 2007, mixed media on paper, 59" x 42", at Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco.

tal, invulnerable young men. Ewing's complex art rebuts this glamorized violence, but without indulging in emotional grandstanding of its own; combining military imagery with material borrowed from literature and science, it challenges us to "intersect body and place, memory and fact to re-examine human histories, cultural conditions and events." It confronts us with ambiguous situations and asks to think before choosing. *Public Safety* comprises three complementary bodies of work: *Disarm*, mixed-media drawings and sculptures employing marksmanship targets; *Countermeasures*, light boxes featuring airport security body scans; and *Meditations*, installations and drawings of mandalas, devotional objects for meditation, composed of images of death-tech hardware.

The word "disarm" has dual, and related, connotations: seizing enemy weapons and allaying fears. Ewing's military targets, faceless silhouettes of heads and torsos drawn in permanent black marker, emerge from or melt into aqueous fields of poured, spattered and blown sumi ink and clouds of powdered-pigment; circles, crosshairs and tally numbers done in PresType emphasize the abstract, playful nature of the killing

game as it is taught. In *Compass*, Octavio Paz's poem "Reversible," with its themes of the self both in and out of space, is broken into lines revolving clockwise around the target's heart; a pistol hangs from its hand, and a number 10 denotes the maximum score—for a head shot. In *For Bailey* the target head is shrouded in black and slumped to one side, as if already lifeless, while the words "uhh ... yeah ... please snitch!" refer to enforced loyalty among gangs (which might presumably include blistering public e-mails these days). *Mirror*, with its Jasper Johns-ian title, is a free-standing wooden version of the target drawings; an armless male target (three points for lungs, six for liver, eight for base of nose) bears a Latin epigraph, *Quod sum eris*, once used on tombstones in a humbler age: What I am, you will be. These frontal figures set amid geometry suggest Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* and the humanism of the renaissance, but now dehumanized into targets; the branchlike sprays and stains of ink allude to nature, flux and time.

While soldiers hunt each other as living targets, civilians have other, less fatal objectifications with which to contend. The *Countermeasures* light box pieces, with their airport security body scans, are real-time X-ray hits, reminiscent of night-vision goggle images) that transform middle-aged Adams and Eves into pudgy, hairless kewpie ghosts to which pieces of metal—belt buckles, watches,

necklaces, rings—cling as if magnetized. Criminal forensics TV programs are popular, but it is disconcerting to imagine yourself as prospective corpse, a naked, fleshy bubble, wearing personal effects that will survive you.

While the target pieces disarm our aggressiveness, and the body scan pieces suggest that we look beyond the merely physical. Mandala in Sanskrit means essence or circumference or completion; mandalas in Eastern religion are symbolic representations of the universe employed for meditation and the induction of trances; some of these microcosms are considered in themselves sacred spaces. Ewing's mandalas are composed not of circles of fire or sacred glyphs, but, paradoxically, our high-tech machinery of destruction. *Xibalba*, named for the Mayan underworld, presents the sun bursting through clouds, a vision of glory worthy of a baroque ceiling fresco, but here seen through a circular clock face of B-2 Stealth bombers, with a smaller button set inside, its four batwinged planes like the familiar up-down-left-right controls of contemporary electronic gadgets. The cosmic vista of *Helix* derives from a helical star system, while the dashed-line rays

of its central sun are based on retaining walls that Ewing observed on the West Bank and on our Mexican border. *Revolver's* central orb comes from that workhorse of friendly persuasion, the ubiquitous .38; its eight chambers with their golden eggs or bulbs are surrounded by streams of red droplets meandering out into the surrounding aqueous plasma like red blood cells. *Serious A & B* conflates astronomy, folklore and ballistics: three circles represent the African-discovered Dogon binary star; an old Liberian proverb, "When two elephants fight on the grass, it is the grass that suffers," predicts collateral damage; and two .45-caliber machine guns spew not shell casings, but streams of bodies.

At the conclusion of the film based on *Jarhead*, Swofford and his friend Trent, a sniper team, are assigned to eliminate two Iraqi officers in a far-off airport observation tower, but at the last minute the order is countermanded: the enemies are to be bombed instead. The Marines, desperate for action after maddeningly boring weeks in the desert, beg to shoot the men first anyway, but are rebuffed, and they're devastated as they watch the bombs fall. It's a powerful, harrowing scene. Later, "Swoff" reflects on the "good news" of war that he has by now outgrown: "Some of the men who spread good news have never fought—so what could they say about the purity of war and warriors? These men are liars and cheats and they gamble with your freedom and your life and the lives of your sons and daughters and the reputation of your country." It's time for the country, too, to outgrow these chest-bumping puppets and think first next time.

—DeWitt Cheng

Rodney Ewing: *Public Safety* closed in June at Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco.

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Mars-1 and David Choong Lee at Bucheon Gallery

The interplay of whimsy versus truth loomed pleasantly over the recent exhibition, *Mental and Material Realms*, in which two San Francisco-based artists one-upped each other with their painterly explorations. Mars-1 (aka Mario