

SHERRY FRUMKIN GALLERY

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AROUND THE GALLERIES

Burning it is part of the art

Ritual, performance and destruction break down in "Zero Project" at Sherry Frumkin Gallery.



By Leah Ollman, Special to The Times

Katsushige Nakahashi's "Zero Project" is a multifaceted, participatory act of storytelling. It involves ritual and performance, creation and destruction. It breaks down History with a capital H into its constituent parts: individual actions with human consequences. Considered in its entirety, the project carries tremendous emotional, intellectual and spiritual weight. Elements on view at Sherry Frumkin Gallery are fascinating fragments of that larger whole.

The Zero was an agile, long-range fighter plane used by the Japanese navy during World War II. The plane became symbolic of Japanese military superiority in the air in the early '40s and legendary for its use in kamikaze (suicide) missions later in the war. Nakahashi, born 10 years after the war's end, started building plastic model planes as a child. For the Zero Project, ongoing since 2000, he revisits the craft. This time around, model-building is just the starting point for something physically and conceptually much larger, and the action is informed by deeper understanding of the repercussions of the war on his family, his generation and his nation.

For each installment of the project, Nakahashi builds a 1/32 scale version of one of the Zeros in plastic, using a commercially available kit or creating the parts himself. When finished, he photographs the sea-green model methodically, in 2-millimeter sections. The images (roughly 15,000 of them per plane) are printed in snapshot size and taped together by volunteers to re-create the form of the plane in its actual size.

Each quilting bee-like assembly is designed to be a cross-generational affair, military veterans sharing their stories with students as they build together. The planes, when completed, look intentionally handmade. Irregular, glossy and slightly lumpy, they're less precious than the similarly taped-together photocollages of the Starn twins, more politically charged than the Pop soft sculptures of Claes Oldenburg, which they bring to mind.

Nakahashi keys each project to the story of a particular plane, its pilot and its fate. When the paper plane is complete, it's brought to a location pertinent to its story. On a date also chosen for its relevance, the plane is ceremonially burned. Photographs in the Frumkin show (poignantly, across the street from the Santa Monica Airport), of projects in Australia, Japan and the U.S., depict different stages of the process: the carrying of a plane, the sculpture in flames, the scorched silhouettes branded into the earth. Nakahashi's first Zero plane didn't fully burn, and sections of it are on view in the gallery as well. A wing, one edge singed, is propped in the corner like a heavy pelt.

Nakahashi is soliciting volunteers for a project he hopes to bring to fruition in 2007, with a burning in San Diego, linked to Southern California's role in the Zero's history. In 1942, a plane, its pilot dead, was found by American naval scouts in the Aleutian Islands and brought to San Diego's Miramar Naval Air Station for examination. What American crews learned about the plane helped deflate the Zero's mystique and better equip Americans charged with bringing them down.

Nakahashi's father served on the maintenance crew for Zero planes at a base near Nagasaki during the war. If the Zero Project is the artist's way to process a chapter in his family history, it's also an opportunity for those who encounter the work to draw their own connections to places and events that Nakahashi foregrounds. Itinerant memorial, history lesson, burnt offering — the Zero Project engages on multiple levels. Images of the burning planes evoke a visceral unease, akin to witnessing the wreckage of a crash landing. Yet the fire has intentionality. It's sacrificial, purifying. It releases the spirits of the dead. It clears the ground of myth and legend, allowing for more immediate perspectives on the experience of war and its aftermath.

Normally, burning photographs would seem a way of extinguishing memory. Here, however, burning activates memory, the way forest fires catalyze new growth. Nakahashi may be destroying something symbolic, but in the process he brings real, potent understanding to life.

Sherry Frumkin Gallery, 3026 Airport Ave., Studio 21, Santa Monica, (310) 397-7493, through Oct. 15. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays.