

THE SACRAMENTO BEE [sacbee.com](http://www.sacbee.com)

Pieces from a puzzling world

Bee Art Correspondent

Published Sunday, Sep. 18, 2011

Michael Bishop's exhibition "Istanbul and California" is, as the title suggests, really two shows. Installed at Pamela Skinner/Gwenna Howard Contemporary Art, the works intermingle but somehow maintain separate identities. What ties them together is an attention to fine craft and an industrial-chic aesthetic.

For the past year, Bishop has been living and working in Istanbul on a Fulbright fellowship. While there, he produced a series of large-scale photo-based works printed on industrial felt. The photos – a hot rod from the 1940s, a motorcyclist at the salt flats in Utah – have a nostalgic feeling. The colors of the images are bled out and softened by the felt surface.

The image of the hot rod appears twice, once overlaid with a text in English and again with the same text in Farsi. It reads, "I am sorry for the pain we have caused one another. The memories are now mine alone." Suggestive of loss, the words have a haunting mysterious quality that makes the image deeper than it appears at first glance.

In "Salt," a motorcyclist faces away from the camera looking at the deadly expanse. A rectangle of text in Farsi, unknowable to one who is not a speaker of that language, leaves one mystified as to meaning, but appreciative of the lilting arabesques of the written words.

"Hot Code: Stuxnet" is an image of a ship with a crane attached floating in an unnamed sea. The image of the ship is overlaid with a code that occasionally opens up into fragments of sentences, which are again mysterious but suggestive of wartime communiques.

Bishop's sculptures, mostly of fabricated steel and cast bronze and made in California, are no less puzzling. Essentially surreal, they mix machined forms with unexpected objects to produce a feeling of disorientation and amazement in the viewer. Some take the form of "pictures" set in steel frames – a broken ship, for example, a horse, or a triad of boxing gloves.

The horse and ship appear together in "Like Two Ships in the Night," the horse suspended upside down from a table on which a ship sits. The juxtaposition is both unsettling and poetic, as is a wall sculpture in which a man's ear emerges from a metal square inscribed with text that refers again to some sense of loss or a mistake that has taken place.

The most elegant and evocative of these works is the prosaically titled "Floating Beam," a long steel beam with a hot-dipped galvanized finish, on which a line of cast yellow bronze containers is arranged. Looking like golden shot glasses from some ancient grave site, they

are also arranged on the floor in a square. A chair sits with one leg on the beam, projecting out into space over the gold-colored geometric form. Together the parts add up to an oddly beautiful and resonant piece.

More aggressive in nature is "Tilt," a large-scale wall piece with rows of a grinning man's face repeated 28 times. It's like the menacing faces of laughing clowns on carnival rides. It's scary and morbid, as is "Miniatures," a tablelike structure set with small babies' heads on tiny tables. Making one think of bronzed baby shoes, the baby heads have a disturbing quality that gives a dark edge to the piece.

A comment on the absurdity of war, perhaps, are two similar pieces, "The Substance of Nothing, Nuclear" and "The Substance of Nothing." The former is a wall piece with two hornlike forms under a nuclear submarine, the latter a horn with a pre-nuclear sub. Both are made of cast bronze and fabricated aluminum with a powder-coated surface, pink for the nuclear ship and gray for the non-nuclear one. The surface is matte yet luminous, echoing the effect of the photographs on felt from Istanbul.

While the works in the show are divergent, there is a cohesiveness to the exhibit afforded by the matte finishes on so many of the works and the attention to craft that is evident in all of the pieces. It's an intriguing display that looks wonderful in Skinner/Howard's industrial space. Bishop will give a talk about the show from 4 to 7 p.m. Oct. 13.

© Copyright The Sacramento Bee. All rights reserved.

THE SACRAMENTO BEE sacbee.com



Skinner/Howard Contemporary Art/

Michael Bishop cast "Incommensurable Floating Exchange" from bronze, aluminum and iron. Industrial techniques and matte finishes tie many of his works into a cohesive whole.

[close window](#)

