



"A Historic Landmark," by James Gilbert

Protective Devices

*Not the guarded, but the guardians in
James Gilbert's new work, opening tonight in
Manhattan Beach*

by Bondo Wyszpolski

Pink sandbags and a few two-by-fours to keep them propped up. What shall we make of this? Out of the gate, I was perplexed and, honestly, not too interested. So, that's my starting point in what turned out to be a rewarding encounter and learning experience when I met James Gilbert, whose solo exhibition, "Sledgehammer.Bullet.Bomb," opens this evening at the Manhattan Beach Art Center.

Curated by Homeira Goldstein and presented by Time 4 Art, the show contains nine new sculptures and two site-specific works, plus a video that addresses intentional destruction of cultural heritage sites. But is the work on view really serious or just playful, or both?

Well, it's both. Gilbert is a thoughtful artist who's unafraid to push buttons and boundaries, with what I'm guessing is an impish sense of humor. We met recently over dinner at the exclusive Goldstein Café and talked far into the night.



James Gilbert. Photo by Bondo Wyszpolski

THE SYMBOL BECOMES THE OBJECT

"Dealing with basic compositional elements is never enough for me," Gilbert says. "It has to be something that resonates with some kind of social impact. Those are the kinds of projects I really gear myself towards."

Although the projects themselves vary, he adds, “It always has to deal with social issues and identity. It could be social media issues, women’s rights issues, workers’ issues. Ultimately, you can distill it down in terms of where does identity come from. In this particular project, it has to do with destruction of cultural heritage sites. When you destroy those things you destroy part of cultural identity, which distills down to destroying the identity of a culture and a people.”

Does this series (“Sledgehammer.Bullet.Bomb”) relate to and resonate with what’s happening in the world right now?

“Absolutely,” Gilbert replies. “There’s this systemic kind of destruction in the Middle East, and people dealing with (the willful eradication of) temples or cathedrals or relics.”

It’s hard not to think of what has occurred in Palmyra as well as ancient sites in Mosul, Nineveh, Nimrud, Hatra, and other Syrian or Iraqi cities. Even the Israeli policy of bulldozing the homes of alleged Palestinian terrorists seems to fall into this category.

Still, the question might be lingering: Why the sandbags, the wood frames, and the color pink. What’s up with that?

“I was looking at World War I trench art,” Gilbert explains, “which led me to start looking at pictures from World War II. Something that kept coming up were cathedrals or monuments or frescos: They have these sandbags in front of them, protecting them from bombing. And so it occurred to me that these things that were protecting were actually becoming a new symbol for what was behind them.”

In case you’re skimming this article, the last sentence is worth re-reading. If you’ve got one handy, use a highlighter.



Gilbert references one of the pieces in the show, a buttress of sorts with sandbags. “I was thinking of a picture like ‘The Last Supper,’ and there’s always sandbags against it.” For Gilbert, the focus is not on Leonardo’s fresco, but rather what’s trying to keep it safe. Or, put mildly, the protector without the protectee.

This was how Leonardo da Vinci’s fresco, “The Last Supper,” was protected and survived the bombing of Santa Maria delle Grazie in August, 1943

"I like the idea that these things that are protecting it are the symbol and then we move them off, and then they become their own individual kind of piece.

"And so what I do," Gilbert continues, "is I take the sandbags and the buttress and I move it to the center of the room with these architectural elements, which has kind of this phony structure to hold it up, but also it becomes like a color-field painting."

TICKLED PINK

Did your eyes linger over those words "becomes like a color-field painting"?

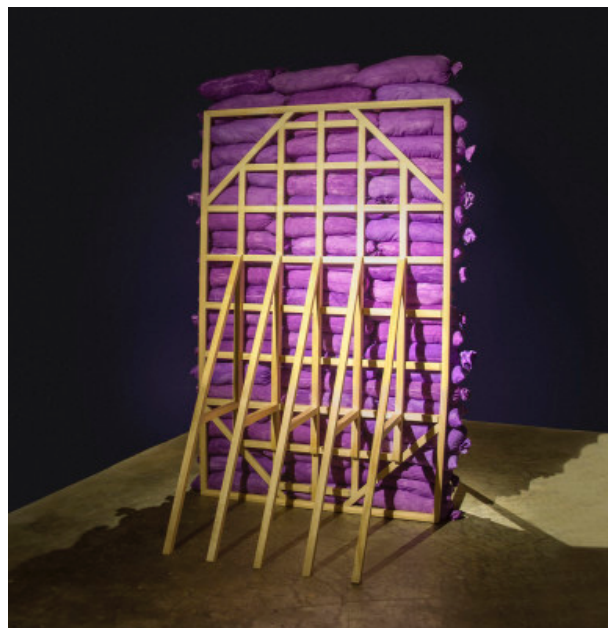
It certainly seems incongruous, sandbags as they might have been used during warfare, that is, aerial bombardment, to safeguard irreplaceable art or artifacts, with the color pink. But let's listen in on what James Gilbert has to say.

"I've used pink a lot in my work," he explains. "In a lot of my projects there's two parts. There's always the serious part, and then there's always the part where I try to bring in a sense of humor." And with regard to "Sledgehammer.Bullet.Bomb," "because I already have this element of destruction in it, I wanted to bring it back in terms of perception, to bring a more vibrant kind of playful vibe to it, a softness. Pink is a color I've often used for that. This one has a little bit of purple in it too, with a different meaning, but the pinks and the purples really bring a softness and a vibrancy to it."

Lest it seem like a purely arbitrary choice, Gilbert then makes one thing clear: "Everything from the materials to the colors is always really relevant to me." And with those words we are left to our own devices, as to whether the clash of battlefield and playground aesthetics work for or against our appreciation of the finished product.

Each work, however, takes hours, days, perhaps weeks to construct.

"There are hundreds and hundreds of pieces," Gilbert says, "and each one is handsewn, hand-dyed, filled, and then I have these elaborate wood structures that take an immense amount of time in terms of all these little details. So it's really a labor intensive process."



"A Bunch of Dum Dums," by James Gilbert

As some of his previous endeavors have shown, Gilbert opts for more rather than less.

“Every so often I review what I’ve done and what I’m trying to communicate in a bigger picture. I’ve noticed that everything is in huge multiples, and lots of layers, and really (involves) a physical process in terms of making the work. I don’t know why I do it; it’s just that I have to see it. And so, when I decide I want to do a project, I always do so many multiples because it plays into this *massness* of what I’m trying to communicate.”

Well, for one it’s more impressive that way. You can look at one terracotta warrior, ho-hum, or you can gasp at an area the size of a football field that’s packed with hundreds of them.

Gilbert mentions that there are still three more pieces he needs to finish for the show.

One of our dining companions, a fellow named Arnold, leans across the table and says: “Instead of being here, you should be working on those three pieces.”

Gilbert laughs. “Oh, man, I’m exhausted!”

The next morning he was back in the studio.

GERMINATING IN A JOURNAL

James Gilbert was born in Southern California, but because his father was in the military the family was often on the move.

“So I have this sense of constantly adjusting, constantly evaluating, constantly kind of figuring out different parts of the country and different parts of the world, and I think that’s been good for me in terms of that sense of balance that I have.”

As for an early interest in art, “I always liked making stuff,” Gilbert says, “and I didn’t know there was a term for being an artist. I just wanted to build something with my hands.” Later, he discovered that he didn’t have to fall into a traditional occupation. “I learned that there was an option to infuse my own interest and my own biography and my own sense of direction in terms of issues I like to deal with. That’s when I started to realize that (a career in art) was a viable thing and something that would be important for me.”

It wasn’t just the visual arts that nudged him forward.

“Besides my art background I have a theater background and a film background, and so to me a successful show is (one in which) I can combine lots of ideas. I like reading philosophy, I like listening to pop music, I listen to old music; there’s not really anything that I draw a line (against). I think it’s all fair game.” Furthermore, “I studied English, and I studied creative writing extensively in college. I find that writing short stories and essays really helps to clarify some of my ideas.”

Gilbert has been keeping a journal for well over 20 years, and that’s where many of his ideas incubate. The topics, naturally, are diverse. “I’ve started pieces and inserted little drawings on my studio wall for years, not knowing what I was going to be doing with it. It all comes to this head when I can resolve it, nothing more pointless to me than starting on something that I can’t resolve.”

Meanwhile, Gilbert has to sift through the same barrage of impressions—politics, pop culture, family, religion, war—that the rest of us encounter daily as well. It’s pretty much a nonstop flight, but what Gilbert is looking for are themes or subjects because there’s

permanent resonance. That's where his journals come into the picture.

"I did this experiment about a year and a half ago," he says. "I took all of the journals I'd made for 20 years, and I went down to Mexico for a month to read them, which I'd never done. I actually chose specific points in those journals where things made sense when I was 16 or 20, and I pulled them out to see if they still resonated."

Those that did were clearly more relevant. "I could make something that's on the news today, and that's important," Gilbert says. "I do that, but I think the arch (arc) has to have a timelessness too, something that relates to kind of multigenerational things. For me, that would be a successful piece."

The themes that Gilbert explores with his most recent work are part of an important and ongoing dialogue about destruction and preservation, a dialogue not only about what we create or knock down, but about what we believe, what we hold dear, and who we are as a result. Pink sandbags and a few two-by-fours to keep them propped up. Well, that's only the beginning, isn't it?



"Destroyed 4," by James Gilbert



"Destroyed 7," by James Gilbert

SLEDGEHAMMER.BULLET.BOMB, new work by James Gilbert, which involves some actual destruction of the gallery walls, opens this evening, Thursday, with a reception from 6 to 8 p.m. in the Manhattan Beach Art Center, 1560 Manhattan Beach Blvd., Manhattan Beach. Program presentation at 7 p.m. Hours, Wednesday through Saturday from 1 to 5 p.m. Closes Jan. 9. Call (310) 379-5800 or go to time4art.us. ER