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ART & DESIGN

Ed Bereal Brings Edgy to Bellingham



“Exxon: The Five Horsemen of the Apocalypse” at the Watcom Museum in Bellingham, Wash.
Credit: Jenny Riffle for The New York Times

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By Alex V. Cipolle
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BELLINGHAM, Wash. — The year is 2019, the place is the United States, and a black man walks into a foundry wanting to cast some bronze grenades. This is how the American artist Ed Bereal, 82, recaps preparing for his first retrospective at the [Whatcom Museum](#) here.

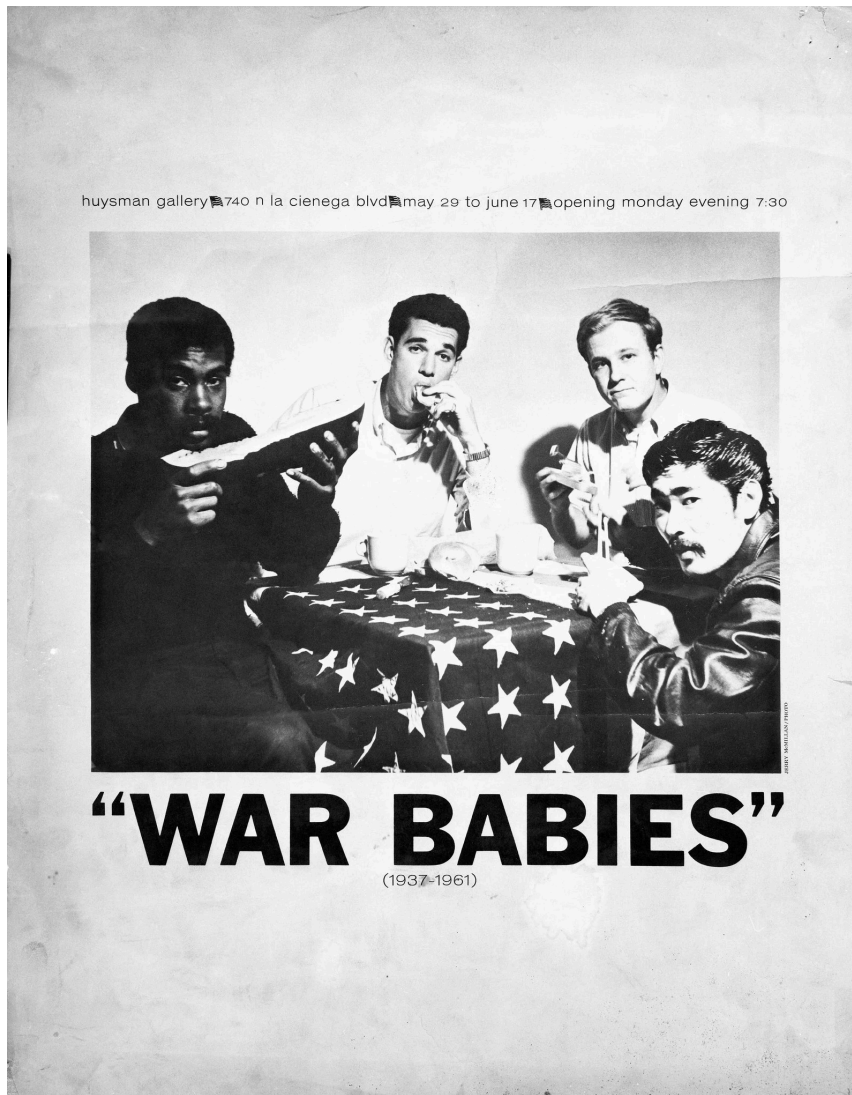
Creating new work for his politically charged exhibition "[WANTED: Ed Bereal for Disturbing the Peace](#)" raised some eyebrows in this predominantly white coastal city 20 miles from Canada. There was the foundry, Mr. Bereal said, where the staff was hesitant to serve him until a friend who happened to come in vouched for Mr. Bereal's artistic intentions. And that was before Mr. Bereal had explained that the grenades would stand in as testicles in an installation about the apocalypse.

Then there was the print shop. Mr. Bereal said that when the owner realized the images the staff were printing for him likened President Trump to the Antichrist, the cost of services quadrupled. Mr. Bereal found another printer.

None of this surprised the artist. The Riverside, Calif., native described Bellingham as conservative, preserving a 1950s way of life, albeit with a small but vocal left-wing contingent.

What did surprise Mr. Bereal was that Patricia Leach, executive director of the museum, approached him to do the show in the first place.

"Patty was very conscious of the fact that I'm edgy for them," Mr. Bereal said. "I kept asking her, 'Are you sure?'"



Ms. Leach laughed when she heard that. "We've been wanting to do something about Ed for a long time," she said. "Part of our mission is to provoke and promote curiosity on a variety of issues."

A poster from the the 1961 exhibition, "War Babies," in Los Angeles.

Credit...

Jerry McMillan, via Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, Calif.

Ms. Leach said that Mr. Bereal is well known outside of Bellingham — perhaps most so for when he was living and working in Los Angeles, a time that included his assemblage pieces using bones, pipes and Nazi imagery; the 1961 exhibition “[War Babies](#)”; and the radical activist performance troupe the [Bodacious Biggerilla](#), which performed in places that included laundromats and Richard Pryor concerts.

In Bellingham, however, people primarily know him as a retired Western Washington University art professor. In 1993, Mr. Bereal and his wife, the artist Barbara Sternberger, moved to Bellingham. They live on a farm with an art studio in Whatcom County.

His current exhibition runs through Jan. 5 at the Whatcom Museum, a Smithsonian Institution Affiliate, featuring six decades of work, much of it new or never seen by the public. The oeuvre of Mr. Bereal, a self-described political cartoonist, is painterly, sophisticated and explosive. Over the decades, it has only become more confrontational, grotesque and darkly satirical, exploring themes of gun violence, racism, police brutality, corporate greed, complicity, the military industrial complex and, most recently, climate change.



Ed Bereal in his Whatcom County, Wash., studio. He is having his first retrospective at the Whatcom Museum.

Credit: David Scherrer

Mr. Bereal said a woman at the exhibition opening described him as an anarchist Boy Scout, a grand compliment. The observation is apt as one of Mr. Bereal’s greatest influences since he was a child is Norman Rockwell, the de facto illustrator of white nostalgia.

“He was probably the most political artist that I have ever known and maybe that is still true. He was showing a kind of America that was really kind of alien to me,” Mr. Bereal said. “He was on the sunny side of the street, and I was on the shady side.”

“Wanted” can be seen as a lifetime of Mr. Bereal answering the question provoked by Mr. Rockwell: What does America look like from my side of the street? Or, as the artist has personified it, what does “Miss America” look like?

Mr. Bereal’s answer is a grim, industrial spin on Lady Liberty, with skeletal metal fingers, sneering teeth and a nail crown. Miss America is Bereal’s puppet master and appears frequently, such as in the installation “Miss America: Manufacturing Consent (Upsidedown and Backwards),” where docile Americans queue to have their heads nailed on upside-down and backward by the matriarch.

Ms. Leach said that when she was planning the retrospective, she conferred with David Doll, the Bellingham police chief, the city’s mayor, Kelli Linville, City Council, the museum board and other community leaders.

“It wasn’t so much convincing the community that we had to do this show,” Ms. Leach said. “It was very important that we prepare people, especially policymakers and community leaders.” Preparation also included partnering with the [Whatcom Dispute Resolution Center](#) to train staff in how to work through conflict. The museum’s curator of art, Amy Chaloupka, said that this level of training is unusual for the museum.



Miss America is Bereal’s puppet master and appears frequently, such as in this installation “Miss America: Manufacturing Consent, (Upsidedown and Backwards)”

Credit: Jenny Riffle for The New York Times

“I can do some gallery talks, but it’s really the docents and our front line staff who are going to come across that person who walks in the door and doesn’t know what they are getting into and maybe feels confronted,” Ms. Chaloupka said.

The training was to help the staff feel equipped to talk with museum visitors about pieces like [“Exxon: The Five Horsemen of the Apocalypse”](#), — a 40-foot holographic and mirrored installation reimagining the Bible’s Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

In Mr. Bereal’s version, five figures stand at attention, each with a top half constructed from a mirrored letter and an oil spill at their feet. Together, they spell Exxon. Viewers are confronted with Donald Trump as the Antichrist, holding a Bible with an inverted cross; War wears a Nazi uniform; Plague and Famine take the shape of Ronald McDonald; Death is the Grim Reaper, and Bereal’s fifth addition, Predatory Capitalism, is in business attire. Here the bronze grenades hang with gas nozzles as male genitalia.

There is also the graphite drawing [“Miss America Presents Domestic Terrorism”](#), featuring a New York police officer with scrawled words calling him proud, courageous, loyal and racist imposed over newspaper headlines about Freddie Gray’s death.

“We’ve just set up, in that gallery, a battlefield,” Mr. Bereal said. “Our docents come in as medics.”

Weeks after the show opened, Ms. Chaloupka and Mr. Bereal said the public response had been positive. The museum hosted “Art, Politics, and Community: A Conversation Inspired by Ed Bereal’s Work” on Sept. 21, with a panel including the police chief; the mayor; Vernon Damani Johnson, a Western Washington University political science professor; and Mr. Bereal. Panelists and community members were prompted with questions about which pieces of art provoked them and what it has taught them about their own values.

“The level of honesty in the conversation and the heartfelt response from people was so true,” Ms. Chaloupka said. “It felt very natural, and urgent.”

“People were acknowledging the fact that the show is uncomfortable, and in many cases, kind of frightening,” Mr. Bereal added.

And another surprise for the artist?

“They didn’t blame the messenger,” he said. “They dealt with the message.”

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