

ART; The Long Arm of the Law Reaches Into the Gallery

By WILLIAM ZIMMER JULY 15, 2001

DESPITE its title, "Art at the Edge of the Law" at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, is more earnest than sensational. According to Richard Klein, the museum's assistant director, the show was previewed by several lawyers and members of the Ridgefield police department. They found it to be this side of illicit and recommended it to their colleagues to boot.

The idea that art isn't supposed to be comfortable but is supposed to present a challenge to established ideas has been firmly planted in our culture at least since the rise of the avant-garde about a century ago. The distinguishing factor here is the possibility that some of the art could get its makers in trouble with more than the critics.

The transgressions have different levels of severity. The paintings that Fred Tomaselli made in the 1990's with pharmaceuticals in pill and capsule form as his pigment have almost become contemporary classics. The label of one of his paintings says that what he uses ranges "from Tylenol to speed" and his patterning can get complex enough to recall psychedelic posters.

Almost every schoolchild knows that it's illegal to play around with or alter actual United States currency. J.S.G. Boggs makes money that wouldn't fool anyone including orange coins and bills with the likeness of Harriet Tubman, but Barton Lidice Benes together with Howard Meyer might be more daring: the centerpiece of the room they occupy is a bale of shredded currency and three ragged one dollar bills pieced together from the shreds. Tom Friedman has woven 36 bills into one mega bill that resembles a miniature rug.

Postage stamps fall under similar prohibitions, but because stamp images have become less and less reverential, it could be very difficult to tell a counterfeit. Michael Thompson has made several stamp series including some where he obviously thumbs his nose. His "Mad Cow," for instance, is displayed with a British cancellation. Some of the computer-generated stamps by Michael Hernandez de Luna are "Cockroach," "Viagra" and "Melissa," the latter named for a computer virus.

Distilling bootleg liquor would seem to have lost its edge decades ago when Prohibition ended. Nevertheless, there's something cunning about the room-size setup by Jeffrey Hatfield. It includes children's plastic swimming pools as brewing tanks that take the installation into Rube Goldberg territory.

Some of the transgressions are distinctly white-collar. Dennis Oppenheim's "Virus," whose chief component is plaster casts of Walt Disney characters, got him in trouble with the Disney corporation, which claimed trademark infringement. A more elaborate copyright problem ensued when a group called Ubermorgen created a Web-based art project involving material from CNN.

If a lot of the show seems rarefied, when guns enter the picture, the issues become real and personal. Tom Sachs has constructed a box based on those in which gentlemen once kept their dueling pistols, but the pistol inside is handmade. Its crudeness is emphasized, making it seem even more menacing than a manufactured gun. The same goes for a submachine gun made largely of wood. Appropriately, Mr.

Sachs also made a jerry-built testing chamber for his weapons and exhibits a shot-up telephone book that testifies to their usability. In addition, at the entrance to the museum, visitors must pass through a detector made by Mr. Sachs. Such a device, familiar at an airport, is disturbing at a museum, a place that used to be regarded as a refuge from the world.

Barry McCallum exhibits 48 manhole covers (out of 228 that were cast) made out of guns that were smelted after being confiscated by Connecticut law enforcement officials over a three-year period. It's unclear why the final product is manhole covers -- perhaps they're a social boon made from a social evil.

In a few instances, video is intrinsic to the work of art. A clipboard is the support for Michael Oatman's flat monitor bearing an animated pair of mug shots of himself, front and side views, confessing to crimes. They include minor infractions, but his monologue turns into an impassioned critique of his life. The group with the imposing name Institute for Applied Autonomy found video appropriate for presenting a cunning robot that will hand out leaflets and write graffiti as a surrogate for a human who might get arrested doing the same.

The most chilling work on the show turns out not be a gut, but a cerebral, creation. Janice Kerbel's coolly efficient plans take up a wall; photographs, maps, diagrams and text for the "Bank Job" she's plotted.

"Art at the Edge of the Law," through Sept. 9, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield. Information: (203) 438-4519.