

Anna Frlan: Interbellum III

Anna Frlan: *Interbellum III*, Ottawa School of Art Gallery,
January 10 – February 22, 2013

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Anna FRLAN: *Interbellum III*

Petra HALKES

Anna Frlan uses nothing but steel in her art making. The infinite possibilities of steel's liquid state keep drawing her back to the welding machine. To her, the magic of manipulating the flowing red hot metal more than compensates for the practical problems that the medium creates, such as moving the heavy, complex assemblages she builds, consisting of a myriad of pieces that can be as large as twelve by five feet. For a sculptor like Frlan, working with malleable metal is like touching a material life-force that flows within all living and non-living matter.

As Deleuze and Guattari famously observed: "Even the waters, the grasses' varieties of wood and, the animals are populated by salts or mineral elements. Not everything is metal, but metal is everywhere."¹ The societal uses of steel are nonetheless far from sacrosanct; in wartime in particular, metal becomes a precious commodity. Frlan, who was born in

Canada, has never known war, but as the daughter of Croatian émigrés who experienced years of war she's heard their stories and imagined the horror. In her work, she began focusing her attention on the material traces that are reminders of war's violence, such as crutches, air-raid sirens and unexploded bombs and grenades. Painstakingly welding fanciful facsimiles of such militaristic artefacts in steel, Frlan created a series of exhibitions, *Interbellum I, II and III*—all shown in Ottawa in 2012 and 2013—that collectively reflect processes of remembering and forgetting the traumas of war.

The word *Interbellum* is derived from the Latin *inter* (between) + *bellum* (war). It is a beautiful word for a time in which war is absent, a time that, logically, we can expect to be peaceful. Yet, war and violence tend to haunt the interbellum with ghosts from the past and premonitions of a violent future. Years after the peace treaties have been signed, bombed cities and seared fields continue to scar the landscape. Much later, when those scars are healed, hidden landmines and unexploded bombs continue to deal out their indiscriminate death and destruction, creating an almost mythical fear among the survivors of war.

Crutches, necessitated by war injuries, are visible long after a conflict is over. As long as they are seen, wars cannot be forgotten. Frlan's pineapples and pomegranates hark back to war as well; her fruit points to the fact that these innocent-looking, natural shapes served as models for deadly projectiles. The etymology of the word "grenade" derived from "pomegranate," demonstrates this. The turn from fruit to hand-grenade could just as easily be turned around again: a grenade or a landmine on the ground will look like a toy or a fruit, eagerly picked up by children.

Post-Bellum Support is a complex, tree-like sculpture, the largest in Frlan's *Interbellum* series. The branches of the tree look like human bones, and are held up with crutches; human fate and the fate of

nature appear entangled here. Frlan's twisted and unstable-looking tree is a heart-wrenching thing that nonetheless shows signs of regeneration. Near its base, new little roots appear, generating hope, as well as some ambiguity: when a new tree grows, the old one may disappear and a new cycle of forgetting could begin, unleashing the impulse to war once again.

Interbellum I and *Interbellum II* were small exhibitions in domestic settings, the first one in the RIA Project Room, a home gallery in Ottawa, and the second one in the Croatian embassy, located in an early twentieth-century house, during Doors Open Ottawa. In these two events, the steel sculptures came across singularly as the hardware of war, albeit in beautiful, strange shapes. They served as a material metaphor for the way traumatic memories are seared into our bodies and into the landscape.

The third, most extensive exhibition, which took place at the Ottawa School of Art Gallery last winter, begins to reflect the breakdown of war-memories over time. It is true that Frlan reminds us again that we are in an interbellum, a time between wars; *Pineapple Grenade*, the crutches and the tree have returned here. The horror of war can still be felt in these strangely emotive objects, but now they are joined by other sculptures that appear to draw away from memories of war. A dining room sideboard, *Pomegranate Cabinet*, displays grenades on its decorative, cut-out surface that includes a map of the area of Croatia where Frlan's parents came from. The formerly stark crutches, gathered here in a church-like display with votive candle holders, have begun to sprout curls, rings and other decorative outgrowths. A watermelon bomb, about to be dropped by a stork, has joined the pineapple and pomegranates. Frlan's constructions appear to have moved away from their original focus of warning us about war; they have become overly embellished, one could say *Mannerist*. This change reflects the

reality that in a prolonged interbellum, memories of war fade and are transformed.

In the present time, far-away wars continue to form a background noise in news broadcasts, but here at home, the horror of war is not felt in the flesh. *Interbellum III* shows the difficulty of remembering war and its true horrors. Drifting away from memories of trauma, the artist's creative mind becomes distracted, then absorbed in play, and finally engrossed in the byzantine possibilities of welding steel.

Now that the fear of war has lost its grip, will the interbellum end? Or can the cycle be broken? What emerges from the sculptor's rich, creative play is not a warning of the end of peace and the beginning of a new war, but the prospect of liberating steel from its belligerent functions. Under Frlan's hands, steel's organic character is freed, as is, by poetic extension (based on the sharing of mineral elements) the organic character of all living and non-living matter. A turn away from war opens up infinite possibilities of form for steel; similarly, such a turn would open infinite constructive possibilities in the world. ←

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NOTE

1. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980): *A Thousand Plateaus-Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press 2003), p. 411.

Petra HALKES, PhD, is an artist, independent curator and art critic. She has written many catalogue essays and reviews, and is the author of *Aspiring to the Landscape, On Painting and the Subject of Nature* (University of Toronto Press, 2006). Last summer Petra Halkes organized an exchange project between the Enriched Bread Artists (EBA), an artists' collective in Ottawa, and Quartair, a similar group in The Hague.

Anna FRLAN,
Interbellum III, 2013.
Installation view.
Photo: Lawrence
COOK.

