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## Artists' works send their messages

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By MYRNA PETLICKI Contributor

Evanston artist Tom Burtonwood insists that he and wife Holly Holmes aren't sending an antiwar message with their artwork. But there's definitely some kind of message in an installation that includes a metal sculpture of a bomb created to scale and covered with junk mail, plus a full-size wooden bunker façade papered over with 1040 tax forms. Inside the bunker, images of bombed out buildings rotate past.

The bunker piece is called, "The Law of Diminishing Returns, Part 2." At press time, the bomb sculpture had a working title of "Friendly Fire."

Those two elements are part of the installation Burtonwood and Holmes created for "Subtle Combat," a dual exhibition **also featuring the work of self-taught artist Robert Burnier**, at the Around the Coyote Gallery in Wicker Park.

Unofficial collaborators since 1999 when they were both students at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, the pair began their present body of work around five years ago.

World views

"Holly and I are both very politically- and socially-minded and very aware of everything that's going on in the world today," Burtonwood said. "I think it's important for artists to have a mission or to have something to gnaw on -- like a dog on a bone.

"I guess you'd look at our work and think it was an anti-war statement," he admitted. "It isn't always meant to be read that way. We try and leave it hanging and let the viewer make up their own mind. I think that's important because once you get too partisan on these things, it's easy to end up on one side of the fence or the other. Sovereign states obviously need armies to defend themselves but do you need to spend two-thirds of the federal budget doing that?"

Holmes described the Around the Coyote installation as "one of our most powerful, to-the-point pieces."

Last August, an installation the pair created attracted a lot of attention at Chicago's Open Studio Project in the Loop. It was an almost life-size cardboard battle tank covered with junk mail and advertising flyers called PRODUCTplacement. The surrounding walls were papered with similar materials.

"You had this huge tank covered with pork and beans and Budweiser," Burtonwood said. "You can imagine the kind of reaction we were getting from people."

The Around the Coyote installation includes similar miniature tanks that are for sale.

Double vision

The pair says that working together helps them complete projects, a necessity given the fact that they each juggle several art-related jobs. "We come up with an idea, figure out what needs to be done and then, whoever has a little more time starts on it," Holmes said. "Each of us does a little bit of everything."

Holmes noted that the two are fairly well matched in skills, although she admitted, "He's a better painter than I am."

"It's good to be able to trade off and help each other out," Burtonwood said, admitting, "I'll often break things and she'll get mad."

Because of the collaboration, Holmes laughed, "Sometimes it takes twice as long." Despite that, she added, "It's nice to have someone to bounce ideas off that you're close with."

Neither is concerned about the direction in which the other person might take the work. "It's only a piece of

art," Burtonwood exclaimed. "It's not rocket science."

Well, not exactly.

ROBERT BURNIER, BURTONWOOD AND HOLMES: 'SUBTLE COMBAT'

Around the Coyote Gallery, 1935-1/2 W. North Ave. Opening reception 7-11 p.m. Friday, April 6. Exhibit runs 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, noon 6 p.m. Saturdays, through May 5. Free. (773) 342-6777. [www.aroundthecoyote.org](http://www.aroundthecoyote.org).

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