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The Exhibition That Couldn't Shoot Straight

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“Robert Lazzarini: Guns and Knives,” at the [Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#), presents only six works, all of them modest wall sculptures of weapons. But it does much to persuade us that Mr. Lazzarini, born in 1965, is one of America’s most exciting young artists.



TWISTED Robert Lazzarini’s distorted sculptures of weapons are the subject of a show at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum.

All the works were made in 2008 and all continue the artist’s trademark exploration of perspective and perception via distortion and reconfiguration.

Each of the pieces — five .38-caliber [Smith & Wesson Model 10 revolvers](#) and a cluster of kitchen knives — is manufactured from the same materials as the original objects; however, they have been distorted in so many different directions that they defy standard rules of visual perspective. They are real and unreal at the same time.

To augment and intensify the experience, Mr. Lazzarini has also distorted the exhibition space. No gallery wall forms a right angle with another — all are angled and slope slightly inward or outward from the floor. He has also installed soft fluorescent lighting, which reduces shadows and further alters the viewer’s perception. The overall experience is disorienting.



Of course, Mr. Lazzarini is not the first artist to work with distortion. The [Surrealist paintings of Salvador Dali](#) are rife with distortions, including the depiction of soft, melting watches and clocks. The entire Surrealist art movement might be understood as one long experiment in visual distortion based on fantasy and dreams.

Mr. Lazzarini's use of distortion is completely different. It is not free-form or phantasmal. He's dealing with precisely calibrated distortions — developed using a computer — in which the alteration of one component affects the entire object. He's basically interested in what the mind sees and how that can be mathematically manipulated.

[In an online interview with Harry Philbrick](#), the exhibition curator and Aldrich director, Mr. Lazzarini said that he decided to distort guns and knives as part of an extended meditation on fear and violence in American society. "I found myself always going back to the guns and the knives as a kind of proxy for shooting and stabbing," he said.

But I am not entirely convinced that social commentary supersedes the artist's desire to create formal studies in the distortion of an object through obsessive attention to detail and a manipulative mode of display.

Clearly, the show would have meant something very different were the artist to have focused on more innocuous objects. But here — as in previous depictions of violins, telephones and chairs — it is the manipulation that attracts; the subject matter remains secondary.

The distortions oblige viewers to move around the pieces in the gallery, experiencing the way in which they pull in and out of focus depending on your point of view. On occasion, you even find yourself staring down the barrel of a gun. Here fear enters the mind, momentarily transforming the sculpture into a deadly weapon.

But only momentarily. The way the objects appear to float in space a couple of inches from any wall adds to their unreality. This is yet another ingenious visual trick. The artist uses thin metal rods painted the same color as the walls to hold the guns in place. You have to get very close to the wall to see them.

The installation using kitchen knives is a continuation of the artist's meditation on violence. It is meticulously crafted and assembled but less successful than the gun sculptures, perhaps because the multidimensionality of guns lends itself to more varied and interesting manipulation.

Nor do the knives appear to float alone and effortlessly in space. Mr. Lazzarini would be better off staying away from the use of reflective materials. The stainless steel blades reflect one another and, on occasion, traces of the hidden wall supports, spoiling the illusion.

Nonetheless, this is a tremendously interesting and important show. Not only are Mr. Lazzarini's distorted works becoming far more ambitious and sophisticated, but he is using his technique to emphasize the objects' social and cultural dimensions. That is a powerful combination.

“Robert Lazzarini: Guns and Knives,” Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, through Sept. 13. Information: aldrichart.org or (203) 438-4519. Reservation-only shuttle service to the Aldrich leaves Chelsea in Manhattan at 1:30 p.m. on June 21 (\$15 round trip, free for members); reservations taken until 1 p.m. at (203) 438-4519.