

Art in America

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Guns and Knives: Robert Lazzarini Suspends Disbelief

by [steve pulimood](#) 05/13/09

If New York City could be compared to Florence in the throes of the Renaissance then Robert Lazzarini could be from either world, a Renaissance maestro of yesteryear or a commercially successful artist of this year. Much has changed in the march of art history, but many formal techniques such as the study of perspective, the long-time linchpin of a fine arts education, has been abandoned for the brave new world of post-studio practice where art is made not by a practitioner but by a fabricator. In his latest installation "[Guns and Knives](#)," which is on view through the summer at the [Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#) in Connecticut, Lazzarini has created objects with show-stopping effects — they're less Medici, more *The Matrix*. This group of muscular objects, hand held weapons ubiquitous to the American eye, are carefully manipulated with accelerated and decelerated perspective—the guns have planar distortions that splay their lethal bodies like a neat deck of cards, the knives have compound sine waves, which from a distance makes them appear like writhing, venomous snakes.

On a recent day at the Aldrich Museum's Leir Gallery, a group of Manhattan collectors captivated by Lazzarini's sculptures bumped repeatedly into the gallery walls. The artist had chosen to alter the space by canting the walls, further complicating the relationship between figure and ground (a primary goal of his art). Lazzarini cites an interest in the "legibility" of the original object, but only insofar as it fuels a persistent recognition in the mind of the viewer. The various details of each of the .38 caliber Smith and Wesson handguns—the most commonly used gun in criminal acts in the United States—are so veristic, distorted though they may be, that they tempt the viewer to suspend disbelief. It's a continuous contradiction that one can actually feel -- a sort of palpable cognitive dissonance that animates Lazzarini's sculptures whenever the viewer tries to move around them, only to confront the wall in a minor collision, a smack up the side of the visual cortex.



Lazzarini has settled on two prime Warholian objects: guns and knives. At first glance, it appears as though these stunning objects require a disingenuous amount of labor. In other words, the moment one realizes that Lazzarini has not literally twisted, pulled, bent, or banged up the object in question, the impending wonder arises: How was it made? The weapons are distorted according to a mathematical algorithm. The resulting model is then built, using a plan rendered by computer and materials true to the original. Some of the fabrication techniques used to build parts of Lazzarini's work are incredible. Riveting details—or forensic clues—await the most investigative viewers; one may see a chip on the blade of a knife or a spent bullet shell leftover in the barrel of a gun, alluding to past use.

When confronted point-blank, any immediate recognition of the object of a gun as such is immediately subverted by these seemingly irrational distortions. The artist's widely acknowledged triumph in the

2002 Whitney Biennial consisted of a room of ingeniously distorted skulls and the tour-de-force elongated payphone painstakingly made of true-to-life materials. No photographic reproduction does the work justice, a limitation not dissimilar from the problems of looking at Richard Serra's monumental work. Nothing replaces the experience of these sculptures.

On one level the success of a Lazzarini's sculpture could be judged by its convulsive attempts to fail as a recognizable object. Stand at the 'correct' angle in front of Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533), perhaps the most famous anamorphic distortion in the history of art, and the infamous skull depicted will appear normal. Lazzarini's distortions, on the other hand, are complicated by the fact they "refute vision", their compound distortions are not neatly corrected the moment the viewer finds the key angle at which to 'see' it. Nevertheless this doesn't stop the mind from trying. The potentially disorientating moments during which one may try in vain to see the sculptural image corrected are dumbfounding, because as Lazzarini has remarked, "even in 20 years they won't be 'solved'." Moreover you cannot escape the fact that viewed as weapons they are literal extensions of the irrational act of murder. In a strange way they illustrate the standard critique of gun control in America: Guns don't kill people. People kill people.

Others have come close to this type of sculptural practice in a digital age: In his handling and technical facility, conceptual juxtapositions, and non-traditional materials, Lazzarini has peers in the trippy sculptures of Barry X. Ball, the spooky statues of Katharina Fritsch, and the mercurial Marc Quinn, respectively. Yet Lazzarini is decidedly more focused on perceptual phenomena; he wants to manipulate the whole environment, distort the whole human body and invert the process of seeing. In the meantime, the new sculptures presented in *Guns and Knives* are marvellous things, the ambition of their production is tempered by the normality of their scale while their active refusal of normative vision is refreshingly keen.

[Robert Lazzarini: Guns and Knives remains on view through September 13, 2009 at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. From the top: Robert Lazzarini, gun (i), 2008; Robert Lazzarini, gun (ii), 2008; Robert Lazzarini, gun (iv), 2008. All images courtesy of the artist and Deitch Projects.]