

GO & DO

ART BEAT

Francis takes his art in new direction

Mythology, fiction, history and pop culture brim with tales of great animosities. Every legendary protagonist confronts a great foe, his dark-souled flip-side, the twisted foe he drives away. Sherlock Holmes had Professor Moriarty, James Bond battled Goldfinger, Batman struggles against the Joker. Me? My personal archenemy is sculptor Keith Francis ... a man I despise more than any other.

Nah ... just kidding. When I first spoke to Francis about writing an artist profile about him, he proposed that he would really like it if — for purely theatrical reasons — I wrote about him as if we had an ugly history of mutual disdain. His suggestion, although without merit, is notable as his artwork moves in a direction that is also increasingly theatrical, in the sense of putting forth big ideas with grandiose gestures.

The first time I saw Francis's work was a couple of years back, when the Colo Colo Gallery was still on Centre Street. He was doing handsome, if somewhat straightforward, metal sculptures and textured two-dimensional works. Many were fashioned of sheet metal, aluminum, steel or copper, hammered into a formalist submission. Surfaces were purposely rusted, or torn, drilled,



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nailed, or brought to a highly brushed shimmer much like that favored by the great minimalist sculptor David Smith.

But now Francis, a native of Fairhaven who graduated from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth in 1989, is moving in a vastly different direction. He's taking bold steps toward conceptual art that is loaded with political and social context, without abandoning the finely honed skills he has garnered as a sculptor, painter, draftsman and graphic designer.

In a recent visit to his Belleville Avenue studio, I was struck by how deep he has leapt into the postmodernist pond. I was aware of a recent project in which he proposed putting goldfish into a collection of jars, marked with the names and brief biographies of slaves, from the pre-Civil War plantation era to present-day victims of the sex trade, also known as white slavery. I did not see the fish.

But what I did see deals with



"When I grow up..." by Keith Francis is made of steel plates, wood, paint, string and latex balloons. His work will be on view at Colo Colo Gallery beginning Sunday. COURTESY PHOTO

subjects of no less significance. For example, there was a series of mannequin heads covered by cement- and-cloth masks. The anarchist, the Klansman, the revolutionary, the vigilante, the gas-masked dissident and a half-dozen others were presented without comment or judgment, save for the obvious question: Why do you need to wear a mask?

In "The Abductions," which is made of hardened fabric and barbed wire, Francis addresses the kidnapping of the young women in Chibok, Nigeria, last year, and their commodification. The folds of black cloth create dark hollows, clearly meant to evoke female anatomy, and the barbed wire becomes an even more vicious

chastity belt. Those familiar with a certain barbaric practice may wince, as the suggestion of genital mutilation is there as well.

Francis could not be more timely with "Who is Watching Who." Just as the NSA comes under ever more scrutiny, he presents a pedestal-mounted sculpture made of steel, plastic and electronics that features cameras, on elongated necks, all twisting and swerving to spy on each other.

The artist has done a simple but moving painting of a young boy, painted in black and silver, in front a large white peace sign. The boy appears to be "making a muscle." But then he explained to me that when the work is displayed in the gallery, six

colorful helium balloons will be attached to the boy's clenched fist, changing the meaning entirely. It is painted on a steel door, cracked and distressed by time and nature, salvaged from a New Bedford mill that once made military supplies. It is beautiful ... formally and conceptually.

Francis will be exhibiting some of these works at the Colo Colo Gallery starting Sunday. He is also sharing with Nancy Winship Milliken the outdoor sculpture exhibition at Dedee Shattuck Gallery in Westport through August.

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