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Playful Weaponry: New Works by Bella Feldman

The pioneering sculptor elaborates on her extensive "War Toys" series, which satirizes the veneration of violence.

By Sarah Burke [@sarahlubyburke](#)



VESSEL GALLERY

Steel sculptor Bella Feldman has been an artist for 62 years.

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Bella Feldman's recent work includes a sculpture that resembles a menacing underwater mine. Two glass orbs are outfitted with sharp steel spikes and anchored to militaristic mounts made of heavy metal, then tethered to one another with a hefty chain. The piece embodies a glaring tension between force and fragility — a recurring characteristic in the 85-year-old artist's body of work.

Feldman's glass mine fits neatly into her "War Toys" series, an arsenal of combat-inspired steel and glass sculptures that she has been developing over the course of her prolific career — which now spans 62 years. The series is remarkably uniform and consistent, but also includes wildly imaginative works. Each sculpture is a fictitious piece of weaponry eduuced from the sprawling gap between the reality of war and the average American's mediated experience of it. Feldman critiques that area of ignorance by creating sadistic imaginings of aestheticized violence — alluding to a mythologized theater of war for which each of her sculptures acts as a prop.

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Vessel Gallery

Sculpture by Bella Feldman.

"War Toys" was only one of many series showcased in the Richmond Art Center's 2013 retrospective of Feldman's career (see "Reflecting on the Work of Bella Feldman," 10/16/13). The Oakland-based artist was a pioneer among women sculptors, demanding attention with her massive steel contraptions, and the retrospective was an impressive testimonial to the pessimistic playscape that her work amounts to. Since, Feldman has continued to create, and her newest works are now at Vessel Gallery (471 25th St., Oakland) in an eponymous solo show concurrently on view with a solo show by fellow local artist Ron Weil.

The show at Vessel includes a handful of Feldman's sculptures, but it is also a rare showcase of her mixed-media collage work — a practice she has maintained throughout her career but has come to focus on more in recent years. Almost ironically, these small collages are less exquisitely executed than her unwieldy industrial sculptures, but they nonetheless offer a compelling elaboration on her three-dimensional works by filling out the scenery of the world to which they allude. In the style of a retro-futurist storybook, Feldman pastes together illustrations to compose a science-fiction-like depiction of a machine-filled reality evocative of the industrial revolution.

The collages also offer an aesthetic bridge between Feldman's sculptures and Weil's adjacent charcoal dreamscapes. Although the two shows are merely concurrent solos, Weil's many monochromatic textural landscapes, made by manipulating charcoal powder with water and air, offer an apt setting for Feldman's artillery. Each painting is like a specter of smoke, evoking the oil fields central to some of the wars that Feldman critiques, and alluding, more broadly, to the turmoil latent in our environment, waiting to be released upon provocation.

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