

ART

IN THE STUDIO

Creating with broad ax strokes

Artist Ben Jackel isn't a violent person. He's just fascinated with war themes and likes to use sharp tools.

BY HOLLY MYERS

In a short video produced by LA Louver in advance of Ben Jackel's solo show, one encounters the artist taking an ax, quite literally, to one of his sculptures.

He's chipping away at a block of Douglas fir to form an enormous replica of the head of a pole-mounted weapon called a halberd, in a style traditionally carried by the personal guards of the elders of Saxony around the year 1600 — as he quickly clarifies when I mistakenly call it a spearhead. The piece, which, at 13½ feet tall, would clearly do damage if it fell on you, is titled "Pay Attention."

There's a romance to the scene that would seem to hail from a different era: the young, striking lone wolf of a sculptor, wrestling his material into submission to produce work that reflects upon mankind's tireless propensity for war. But for the machismo such a conceit would entail, it isn't actually far from the truth.

Jackel, 34, works alone for the most part, without assistants or fabricators. He uses primal materials like wood and clay, eschewing the addition of paints or glazes. (He rubbed powdered graphite across the halberd sculpture to give it a dark tint.) He loves tools. Indeed, a tour of his studio — a several-room complex alongside I-405 in Culver City that he shares with the artist Dana Weiser — is a tour of his tools as much as it is his sculpture: axes, grinders, kilns, ceramic implements and drawer upon handsome velvet-lined drawer of antique machinist gadgets collected from tool swaps around the

city.

His central themes are violence and catastrophe, whether human or natural in origin. A graduate student at UCLA in the early years of the Iraq war, he made a large Civil War cannon out of clay and has devoted himself ever since to making exceptionally well-crafted copies of historically or psychologically loaded objects such as weapons, battleships, Humvees, drones and firefighting equipment.

"I'm more interested in reality than in something I could invent," he says, standing over one of the several drone sculptures — an unsettlingly elegant work of carved mahogany — that he's made for the new show. "I'm interested in re-contextualizing an object, bringing it back to the people in a finely crafted way. When you see something so beautiful, you're kind of fooled into looking at it. 'Oh, that's great, what's it for?' It drops bombs on people. It kills women and children. Sure is pretty, though. We have no idea in this country. I have no idea — I fully admit that. It's a new world we're entering here."

It's clear from Jackel's extracurricular pursuits that his interest in war is not merely intellectual. He has a black belt in Taijutsu. He was a wrestler growing up, played hockey and lacrosse. He's skilled in archery and enjoys throwing axes. He recently taught himself to crack a whip. ("A whip is a really great thing," he says with sincere enthusiasm as he weighs it in his hand. "There's so much reach, and it's so

fast — from way over here to way over there!") He made models throughout his childhood — a skill that translates directly into his painstakingly realistic battleships and Humvees — and is an avid student of military history. "The combat warrior ethos is part of my personality," he says.

In person, however, he is mild and good-natured, strikingly guileless. Raised in Aurora, Colo., he studied ceramics at the University of Colorado at Boulder before

earning his MFA at UCLA, where he studied under Adrian Saxe and Charles Ray. With his athletic gait and clear, blue eyes, it is as easy to imagine him hiking in the Rockies as it is working seven days a week in a studio.

"I'm a nonviolent person," he says. "I do train to kill, but I've never punched anybody. When the war [in Iraq] was happening, being that age and male but not being involved — which is the last thing I would ever want: to be in the Army

under Bush — I felt like I had this responsibility to learn about it and talk about it, though in a non-judgmental way. It's horrible, but it's humanity."

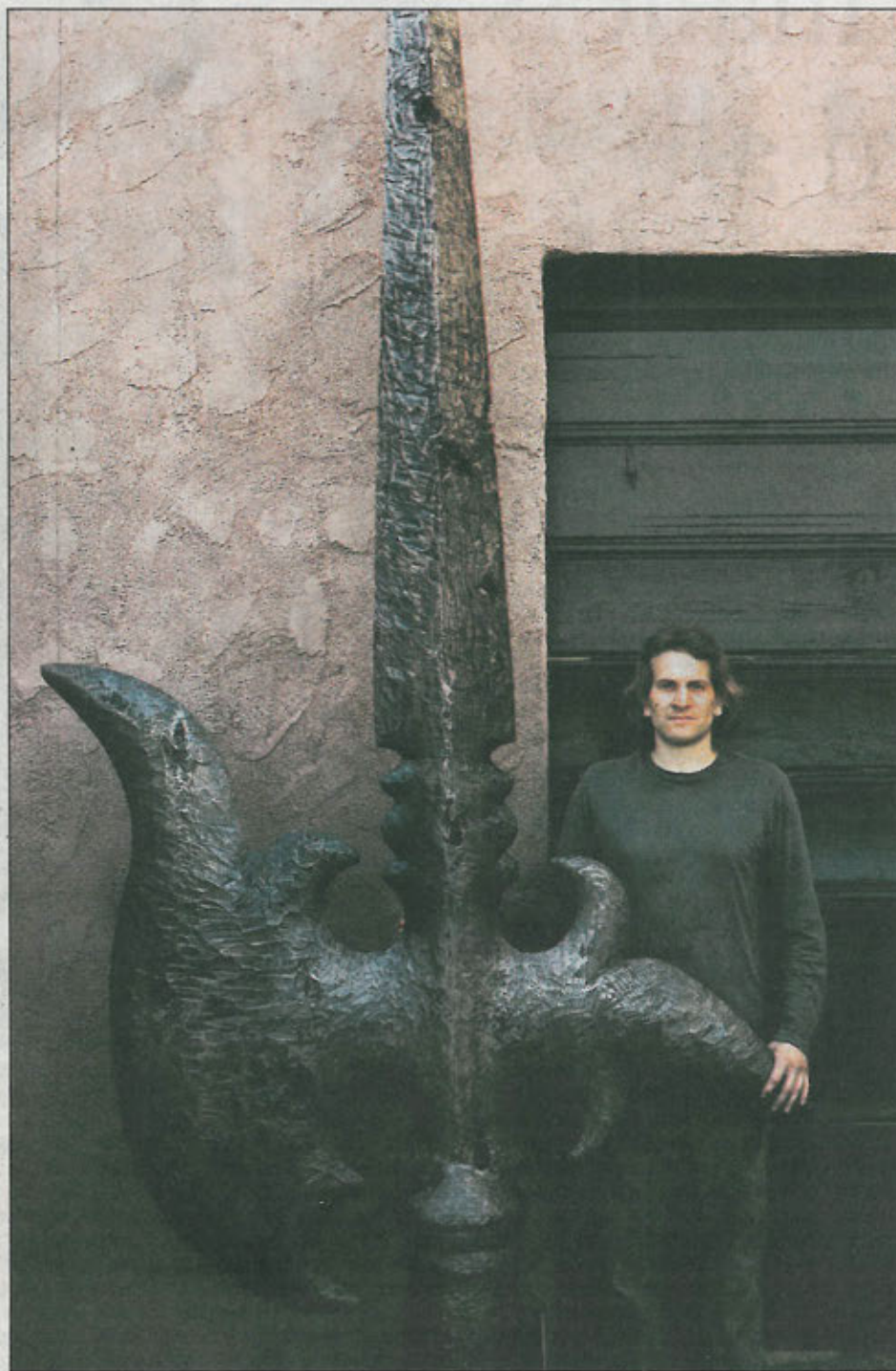
For all the research that lies behind Jackel's sculptures, it is their material presence that's riveting. In addition to the towering halberd and the drones, the show will include several clay replicas of water fixtures and hydrants — an extension of an "emergency preparedness" series that included the clay replicas of firefighting equipment (extinguishers, hoses, sprinkler heads) in Jackel's last LA Louver show, and that was inspired in part by Hurricane Katrina.

He sees fire extinguishers and hydrants as a kind of inverse weaponry: "These special protective objects that are there to help you, but to help you on the worst day, maybe." Made with a clay that turns black when fired and coated with a thin layer of beeswax, they're mysteriously absorbing objects, both delicate and sturdy, with a surface that looks more like cast iron than clay.

"I'm a material snob, absolutely," he says, "Graphite, stoneware, beeswax. Epoxy is the only junk I use, and that's just a necessary evil to glue stuff together. I love true materials. Even my cleat" — (the piece of wood that fixes a sculpture to the wall) — "is walnut. I won't let plywood touch anything I make here, basically."

The immediacy of the process — the physicality one glimpses in the video with the halberd sculpture, which he spent six months carving — is crucial, he says. "Everyone who looks at that piece is going to know that it was made by hand, one chip at a time. I love to do it, and I think it's good to bring that into this super high tech world. I mean, I have a smartphone, and I use the Internet, but I'm pushing back a little the other way. You can have both. A good balance of technology and ax work, or whatever."

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BEN JACKEL made the 13½-foot-tall "Pay Attention" out of Douglas fir.