

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Gallery reviews: Healy, Cordeiro induce horror tied to the everyday

By Kenneth Baker

September 19, 2014 | Updated: September 19, 2014 4:13pm

Sometime in the late 20th century, profit-fueled popular culture finally finished off the artistic avant-garde in America by starving it of ways to give offense.

The Australian creative team of [Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro](#) present some new works at [Gallery Wendi Norris](#) that might stir nostalgia for bygone avant-garde tactics. They treat subject matter still capable of provoking or insinuating horror in media associated with childhood, homemaking and the conference room: Legos, embroidery and whiteboard drawings.



*T+78\_white&orange* (2013), relief in Legos by Australian creative team Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, reprises images of the space shuttle Challenger explosion in January 1986. Photo: Unknown / Gallery Wendi Norris

In a series of wall-mounted Lego reliefs, such as “*T+78\_white&orange*” (2013), Healy and Cordeiro reprise images of the space shuttle Challenger explosion in January 1986, which took the lives of the seven crew members aboard.

The American space program during the fourth decade of the Cold War still embodied the prestige of aerospace industry know-how and the afterglow of the first manned moon missions almost a generation earlier.

NASA had had quite a few launch failures and spaceflight training casualties in the past, but none so spectacular or widely witnessed as the Challenger disaster. More than an occasion of grief, it was the sort of blow to American national pride that would not occur again until 2001.

Healy and Cordeiro have subjected images of the launch vehicle explosion to the sort of crude pixelation that Legos permit. Their latticed lack of definition and arbitrarily altered color evoke the source images' distance in memory, with a foreshadowing of digital imaging not yet in common use in 1986. The artists' use of Legos may also indict popular response to the calamity — or American popular sentiment generally — as unself-consciously childish.

In a series of small, tightly framed, unnervingly beautiful color embroideries, Healy and Cordeiro — principally she — have translated cropped Internet-sourced images of fuel-industry-related explosions into the material idiom of old-fashioned decorative homilies.

Finally, on several whiteboards, they have scrawled intricate drawings that reference nuclear power plants in Australia and the United States and some of the biblically inspired graphic works of Albrecht Durer (1471-1528), who also lived in apocalyptic times.

Had Healy and Cordeiro chosen source images too gruesomely familiar or fresh in public memory, such as the record of Sept. 11, of Abu Ghraib or beheadings of innocents by terrorists, any use of them would have seemed intolerably inflammatory.

Instead, like Swiss art provocateur [Christoph Draeger](#), they have worked with source matter of sufficient historical distance or ambiguity to stir the discomfort we sometimes feel — perhaps to our credit — at the magnetism of pictured misfortunes implicating shared beliefs and life ways we prefer not to ponder.

The small room at Norris contains three sculptures by Miami artist [Nicolas Lobo](#), collectively titled "[D. O. W.](#)," which probably stands for "Disasters of War."

That implicit invocation of Spanish artist [Francisco Goya](#) makes sense when a viewer realizes that Lobo has made sculptures that mimic traditional Chinese "scholar's rocks" — naturally formed objects of contemplation — using napalm, a chemical weapon used first in World War II but most notoriously by American forces in Vietnam.

"D. O. W." also brings to mind Dow Chemical, a key supplier of Vietnam War-era napalm.

Jumbling references to ancient and modern Asia and warfare, elite taste and popular historical amnesia, Lobo certifies his ambition, but he may make Healy and Cordeiro's work look by comparison more mature than it deserves to appear.