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Artforum

by Hannah Stamler

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Critics' Picks



Nancy Spero, *Maypole: Take No Prisoners* (detail), 2007, hand-printing on aluminum, ribbon, steel chain, aluminum pole with steel base, dimensions variable.

Nancy Spero

GALERIE LELONG | NEW YORK

528 West 26th Street

April 27–June 17

This exhibition presents Nancy Spero's contribution to the Fifty-Second Venice Biennale for the first time in the United States. For her large-scale sculpture *Maypole: Take No Prisoners*, 2007, the late artist transformed a maypole—that folksy emblem of rebirth and community—into a monument to violence, national culpability, and complicity. Ribbons in cheery reds flow from a central beam strung not with flowers but with aluminum tragedy masks that wear contorted, aggrieved expressions. Some have mouths agape in Munchian howls; others spew gore that darts from their jaws like sharpened daggers. On the gallery's white walls, the tangle of ribbons and ghoulish faces casts shadows that evoke lynching scenes.

The installation, conceived as a comment on the Iraq war, is paired with small gouache and ink drawings from Spero's "War Series," made between 1966 and 1970, at the height of the war in Vietnam. The selection includes *Maypole/Kill Commies*, 1967, which depicts this festive symbol topped with an American flag and weighted down by severed heads haloed in smudged red blood—a precursor to her 2007 piece. *Female Bomb*, 1966, personifies an explosive as a barren woman, with poisoned, retching skulls where her breasts and womb should be. *Helicopter and Victims*, 1967, imagines the titular aircraft as a prickly metal dragon that rains a mist of human waste and bones.

Art cannot prevent war. But Spero's dark and expressionistic work suggests that there are few things more effective at conveying its horror and malignancy.