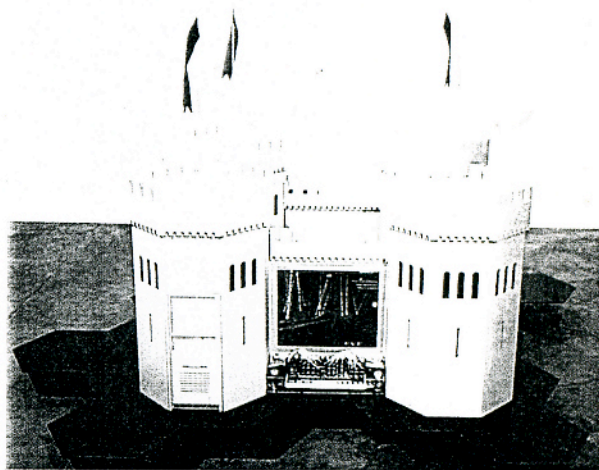


EDDO STERN *Vietnam Romance* (still) 2003 Digital video, TRT 22 min 45 sec

EDDO STERN *Fort Paladin: America's Army* 2003 Kinetic sculpture 1.82 x 1.82 x 1.52 m PHOTO NATALIE ZIMMERMAN



## Eddo Stern

◀◀ ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, TORONTO

Eddo Stern's exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario last summer carried a punch that left a surprisingly nuanced, if disturbing, afterimage. Nestled beyond the gallery's impressionist etchings and a floor below Turner's famously burning Houses of Parliament (a centrepiece of the AGO's block-

buster "Turner, Whistler, Monet" exhibition), the Los Angeles-based Israeli artist's indelicate series of video works and kinetic sculptures pounded, machine-gunned, chopped and blasted out their own strangely sublime cacophony.

Stern's videos are not easy to watch. *Vietnam Romance* pairs muzak-like MIDI samples of 1960s rock anthems with digital images of landscapes meticulously reconstructed from classic Vietnam War films. Doubly filtered through the lens of popular media, the realities of combat remain out of sight, a footnote to the eerily rendered Hollywood references.

*Deathstar*, by contrast, leaves little to the imagination. Using images poached from home-crafted animations posted on the Internet, Stern has compiled a disturbing collection of death scenarios for Osama bin Laden. A host of crudely animated bin Ladens meet as many gruesome ends in sequences that are both horrifying and morbidly amusing. The work reads like a poor man's (or, at least, poorer man's) war on terror, evidence of a disturbing folk movement trickled down from televised war imagery and political rhetoric. Embedded in the impossible twists of contemporary media, Stern's video works depict the intersection of high-tech representation and unresolved, crudely expressed cultural anxieties.

His sculptures bring these anxieties into three dimensions. *Fort Paladin: America's Army* takes the shape of a medieval castle, crafted from computer hard-drive cases and uniformly coloured hard plastic. A monitor and keyboard are mounted where the drawbridge should be. The work is described by Stern as a "castle automaton" built to master the U.S. Army recruitment/training game *America's Army*, and its keyboard is controlled by custom-built software and rapid-fire pistons. The game plays out to completion on a flat-screen monitor as the incessant hammering at the keys recalls machine-gun fire. Stern's cutting-edge software yields a robotic marvel whose questionable achievement undermines any bright, technologized future we might previously have envisioned.

Stern is an expert in contradictions, and his *Fort Paladin: America's Army* displays the technological capabilities and the violent, caught-in-the-Middle-Ages motivations that together define our current global conflicts. A former Silicon Valley computer programmer, Stern gives us work that is smart, timely and, importantly, immersed in the high-tech culture that it seems to critique. It is unapologetic about its contradictions. Stern takes considerable steps towards articulating the issues, despite the hard-edged first impressions. VANESSA KWAN