

## ART

# Out of the ordinary

## From familiar objects come disorienting visions

By Victoria Dalkey  
BEE ART CORRESPONDENT

**B**orn in Tel Aviv, Israel, Bay Area artist Yoram Wolberger reworks ordinary objects – plastic toys, cheap furniture, stuffed animals – into intriguing contemporary sculptures. His works are on view through April 23 at the Center for Contemporary Art, Sacramento.

Wolberger, who received a master's degree in fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute, has presented performances and shown his installations and sculptures in many galleries and museums, including Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, the Orange County Museum of Art and the San Jose Museum of Art.

Deconstructing domesticity and its familiar trappings, Wolberger inverts, slices or enlarges objects to make the familiar and comfortable look strange and disorienting. By presenting things so common we often overlook them, he creates a new context for his objects, and critiques their aesthetic and cultural significance.

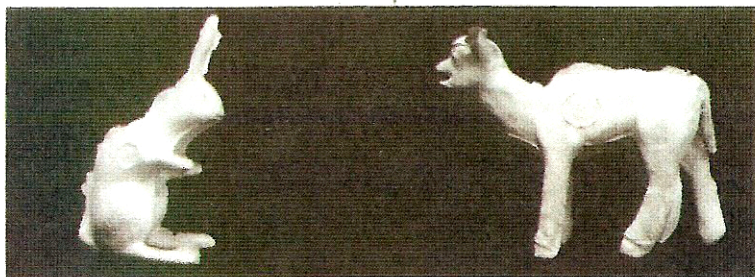
In the Center's main gallery, Wolberger calls attention to the cheapness of materials and design used in making plastic toys and figurines. By enlarging the objects to life size and leaving the excess plastic from the casting process intact, he shows us the mediocrity of their visual aspects as well as their ambiguity as cultural icons.

"Lucky Charm," a life-sized version of a Virgin Mary figurine of the type placed on dashboards, takes on an unsettling quality as Wolberger calls attention to the poverty of the statue's design and materiality. The milky white plastic, the decorative curves along the front of the robe, and the simplified molded features of the face combine to give an insubstantial quality to the figure.

It's interesting to see how little information is needed to make us recognize a familiar cultural symbol. The almost subliminal features, the hands placed in a praying gesture, the folds of the long robe add up to a generic holy mother that seems more ghost than woman.

Adding to the complexity of the piece, the casting residue left on the sculpture suggests an aura of holiness tattered by the imperfections and defects of the manufacturing process. More profane than sacred, the icon of mercy seems almost frightening when blown up to a human-size scale.

Similarly divorced from its function as symbol of heroic military action is "Toy Soldier No. 3 (Crawling Soldier)." The life-sized G.I. in combat fatigues lies in a prone position, sighting the enemy through the cross-hairs of his rifle. The sickly gelatinous green of the figure leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. The rudimentary model-



Among Yoram Wolberger's sculptures on view at the Center for Contemporary Art, Sacramento, are, top, two figures from "Petting Zoo" and, left, "Toy Soldier No. 3."

ing, kissed off so that the soldier's helmet merges with the butt of his rifle, strikes a pathetic note.

The piece reminds us of the gulf that separates conventional, socially transmitted ideals of courage and glory of combat from the gritty realities of war. Enlarged to a scale we can relate to with our own bodies, the figure becomes monstrous as we realize it is an image that feeds childish fantasies of domination and heroism. The ominously blind combatant illustrates Mao's motto that "power comes out of the barrel of a gun."

**P**athos, too, infuses "Petting Zoo," a grouping of animals that inhabit an imaginary landscape from a children's story. The sweet creatures – among them a mother sheep with her little lamb, a newborn calf, a leaping bunny – might have been snatched from a miniature nativity scene or pulled from a nursery rhyme. The matte white plastic and the generalized conception of the animal forms add up to a series of kitschy clichés that divorce us from the reality of the uses to which we put farm animals.

There is, perhaps, a comment in the piece about the disconnection of a child who plays with the innocent lamb, the cute bunny and the winsome calf before going out for a Happy Meal. But the overriding feeling is a sense of pathos for the lost innocence of childhood.

The center's smaller, rear gallery gives us a look at earlier works by Wolberger.

"Princess Set" is an installation of furniture

that has been sliced in half and inverted. In this topsy-turvy arrangement of a nightstand, dresser and vanity, the decorative sides of the pieces face inward, while the insides face out. The thrift-store bedroom set, unhinged and undone with its rough edges on display, has a kind of sly humor.

But the levity is mitigated by a sense of sadness implicit in the manufacturer's thwarted attempt to imitate the luxury of French Provincial furniture with shoddy, mass-produced materials.

A blend of pathos and humor also informs "Stuffed Musical Toys v.2," a shelf on which sit an array of battered stuffed animals turned inside out so that their cheap materials and construction are apparent. Wolberger has wired them up so when you squeeze their hands, they play a cacophonous symphony of animal sounds, Christmas carols and "Happy Birthday." This Charles Ivesian concert is quite charming and the inverted animals have a lunatic air that saves them from being too heavily-handedly sad.

### Yoram Wolberger Sculptures

**WHERE:** Center for Contemporary Art, Sacramento, 1519 19th St.

**WHEN:** Noon to 5 p.m. Thursdays–Sundays, through April 23

**TICKETS:** \$2 general, free from 6 to 9 p.m. on second Saturdays and from 2 to 5 p.m. Sundays

**INFORMATION:** (916) 554-0552