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Review: Narrows exhibit illuminates petroleum issues

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Americans have a love-hate relationship with petroleum.

We love cheap gasoline and the thousands of products made from petroleum: ink, Tupperware, putty, antihistamines, eyeglasses, toys, pantyhose, carpeting, antifreeze, and the ubiquitous lug-it-everywhere water bottles are but the tip of the tip of the tip of the iceberg

However, we are horrified by ramifications of our unadulterated petro-passion: international incursions, decades of war, terrorism on a grand scale, global warming, oil spills, pollution, illness, environmental destruction, corporate corruption, and political malfeasance to name but a few.

"Petroleum Paradox: For Better or For Worse," the current show at the Narrows Center for the Arts in Fall River, organized by The Women's Caucus for the Arts, attempts to address this schizophrenic relationship. Like the subject itself, the exhibition is complicated, ambitious, difficult, flawed and necessary.

"War Graph," by fabric artist Bonnie Peterson is a quilt of velvet, brocade and silk, lush with deep hues of burgundy, teal and red. However, the beauty of the materials does not soften the blow of her message. Using images of body bags and a heartbreaking amount of text to convey statistical information, she somberly notes the tragedy of Iraqi war dead, a war that was ultimately and dishonestly, about oil, not make-believe WMDs.

In Maeve Grogan's "Remembering," a wax, pencil and charcoal work, nine symbolic silhouettes — shark, fox, mountain lion, hummingbird, and a woman among them — asks the viewer to reevaluate relationships with each other and with the natural world, relationships that may have been damaged or absented by the rapidity with which we move through modern life.

"What The Frack?!" is a digital photograph by Brandi Merolla, featuring a battered big-eyed Kewpie-like doll, situated in a dollhouse bathroom, reacting to flames erupting from the sink and a bathtub full of black crude oil. A grinning skull peers through a window.

Sally Edelstein displays "Oils Well That Ends Well." It is a complex and sophisticated collage, utilizing retro imagery including Uncle Sam (with one arm around a flannel-shirt wearing Canadian, and the other around a Mexican, managing to be racist and nationalist all at once),

Christian crusaders, comic book Muslims, American military men, cowboys, a gasoline-drip-headed Miss Esso, John Bull, and the tiger that wanted to be in everyone's tank.

Some of the work can be clumsily heavy-handed. A pair of paintings by Michael D'Antuono is a good example. "Dependence" features the Statue of Liberty, her hair and mouth draped with protective cloth. The torch has been replaced with a gasoline nozzle, and the tablet with an oil drum. The atmosphere is dirty brown, as background chimneys billow choking smoke, and vultures hover in the air. Compare with his counterpoint work, "Independence," in which Lady Liberty is nestled in a too-blue sky, and the vultures have been replaced with bald eagles and white doves. The torch and the tablet have put aside for a wind turbine and a solar panel.

The seemingly pseudonym-named Johnny Everyman does a take on Thomas Nast's iconic Uncle Sam recruitment poster. In "Obama Wants You!," the President points to the viewer, and on his other hand, balanced on one finger, like a spinning basketball, is the earth aflame. The legend below reads; "I want you to think nothing is wrong with my energy policy!"

This exhibition features 70 artists from across the nation and there are some clunkers, but there are some real beauties that work on a purely formalist level, without regard to the political-social message. They include Suzanne Hodes' deKooningesque "Blowout/British Petroleum," Patricia Zalisko's "Elkridge" (a mostly black-and-white painting reminiscent of pre-drip Jackson Pollock), and "Drip Drop — This Is Not Water," a mesmerizing resin-on-Plexiglas wall sculpture.

"The Petroleum Paradox: For Better or For Worse" is on display at the Narrows Center for the Arts, 16 Anawan St., Fall River until May 18.