Not That Kind of Nose Job
by Randy Kennedy

July 21, 2011

EAST HAMPTON, N.Y.

IT is a truism that summer traffic in the Hamptons is insane. But the sight here two weeks ago of an old F-101 Voodoo fighter jet making its way slowly along Main Street might have set a new standard for motorized spectacle. Only the front third of the aircraft was present, and it wasn’t moving under its own propulsion. (It sat on a flatbed truck that eventually parallel parked just down from the First Presbyterian Church.) But the entry of the plane occasioned a police escort and notice in the local press.

“It’s not the usual thing you haul into the Hamptons,” said Eric Firestone, an art dealer who was responsible for the arrival. “It was 5:30 in the morning, and a cop was knocking on my door to ask me if it was mine.” He added: “I am into showmanship and everything, but that wasn’t quite what I had in mind. I had wanted to keep it all under wraps a little longer.”

The reason he had paid to have a jet fuselage hauled from Arizona to eastern Long Island was revealed fully only last Friday with the opening at his small gallery of an unusual exhibition called “Nose Job,” a group show that at first glance seems to be playing on Hamptons plastic-surgery predilections. (The gallery windows show one of Andy Warhol’s “Before and After” paintings, a deadpan riff on a rhinoplasty ad.)

But the noses that Mr. Firestone asked two dozen artists to transform were the more substantial kind that once formed the bullet-shaped fronts of military airplanes and that as such represent a high-flying footnote to the history of 20th- and early 21st-century folk art.

For generations of pilots and bombardiers from World War I through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the noses served as canvases, a means to try to humanize the machines of war. The enduring image of such nose art tends to be of barely clothed World War II-era pin-ups: Betty Grable, Betty Boop, Petty Girls (the diaphanous feminine ideals created by George Petty for Esquire magazine, with breasts that seemed to be as aerodynamic as the jets they graced).

But beginning with the first fighter biplanes, the imagery painted by pilots and crews on noses — and also along fuselages and on tails — was fantastically diverse and often morbidly funny: skeletons, skulls, sharks, dragons, Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Dagwood Bumstead and, later, Alfred E. Neuman and Bart Simpson. Sometimes the works were as simple as a sweetheart’s name or a state mascot — an Arkansas razorback snorting smoke, chugging past a road sign pointing toward Berlin.
A Vietnam War pilot quoted in “Aircraft Nose Art: From World War I to Today,” a 1991 book by Jeffrey L. Ethell and Clarence Simonsen, theorized that the impulse to personalize warplanes with art was “deeply related to the very primitive magical notion that, once you have named something, you have control over it.”

Mr. Firestone, who opened his gallery last year after several years as a dealer in Arizona, began to think about a contemporary take on the tradition after spending time at a sprawling lot for aircraft castoffs known as a bone yard outside Tucson. He enlisted the Manhattan curator and writer Carlo McCormick, who was fascinated by the history of nose art — which deeply influenced the much more pervasive culture of car and motorcycle painting — though Mr. McCormick initially doubted that he could hang an entire show on the idea.

Then he began to talk to artists he knew, several of whom — Richard Prince, Raymond Pettibon, Kenny Scharf — are, as Mr. McCormick said, “well past the point in their careers of being interested in small out-of-town summer group shows.”

But they all turned out to be extremely interested in tapping into the history of nose art.

So piles of nose cones were bought from the bone yard, and an artist list began to come together that mixed art-world heavyweights with emerging artists and established figures from the graffiti world like Lenny McGurr, better known as Futura 2000, who was given the signal honor of taking on the F-101 Voodoo fuselage, which is being shown in Mr. Firestone’s backyard because it is far too big to fit in the gallery. Working on the jet with a spray can and a stencil one recent afternoon, Mr. McGurr recounted his time in the Navy at the end of the Vietnam War, when he worked on the aircraft carriers Kitty Hawk and Constellation, preparing jets for their pilots. His job on the Voodoo, a kind of trippy, pixelated camouflage, did not look like anything that would pass military muster. “Mission accomplished,” he said, appraising it over his reading glasses and smiling.

“Once the artists got hold of the nose cones, they seemed to treat them almost like fetish objects,” said Mr. McCormick, who added of the show, which is heavily male, though it does include three women, “It is, yes — though I wish you wouldn’t use the word — pretty phallic.”

The artist Dan Colen plays with the association devilishly in his piece, which is simply an all-white nose cone with tubes of lipstick sitting nearby that women used to cover the cone in an eruption of red kisses, a three-dimensional version of Mr. Colen’s lipstick paintings. Ryan McGinness comically feminizes the military hardware by employing two gold-painted nose cones as breasts on a Matisse-meets-Mummenschanz painted female figure.

Mr. Pettibon, whose piece uses a frayed fiberglass nose cone as a kind of homage to his father, Regis Charles Ginn, a B-17 navigator during World War II, said in an interview that in working on it he became preoccupied not only with airplane art but also with the messages soldiers painted on bombs and missiles, intended for recipients who would never live to read them.

“Mine, I guess, is more of an apology,” he said. “It’s not in the spirit of sending it off with a wish to hit any targets, whatever they might be.”

And the message on his cone, written in his signature ragged-elegant script, describes a man who probably never expected to be eulogized on a piece of military salvage. Despite his military assignment, he was, as Mr. Pettibon writes, not the kind to “drop bombs on anyone.” And he “couldn’t navigate you to Disneyland neither.”