

‘Love Me Tender’: artistic meditations on money

“Love Me Tender” at Bellevue Arts Museum is a witty and thoughtful collection of works made solely from coins or bills. Through May 26, 2013.

Money — it rules the world. Most of us hunger for it, and few of us think we have enough. “Love Me Tender,” organized by Bellevue Arts Museum, brings together the work of 24 artists who create art from money.

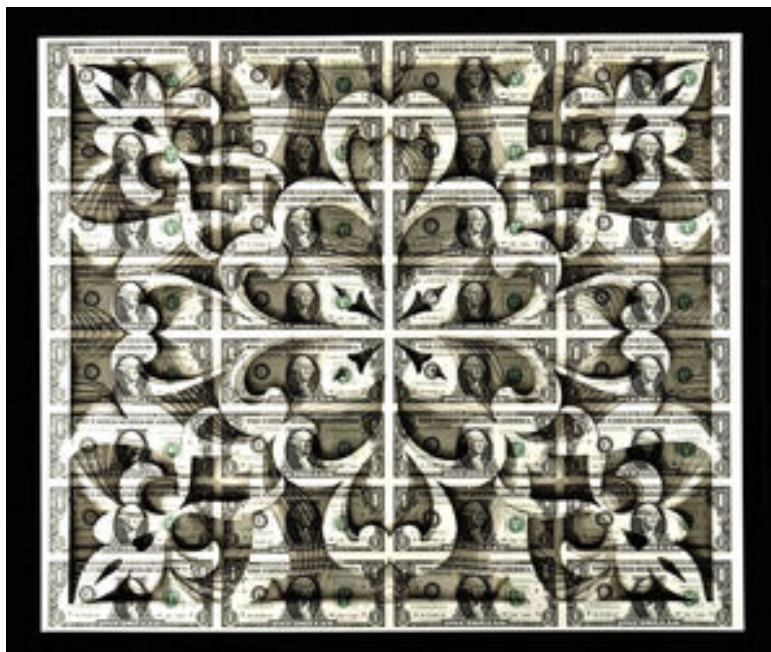
All the art is made from coins and bills, and the diversity of this collection is stunning. From

tiny rings to a collage that measures almost 20 feet high, there are surprises in every gallery. The exhibition offers witty as well as penetrating social commentary presented with artistic mastery.

These artists face challenges unique to their medium. Laws in most countries disallow the defacement or mutilation of bills and coins. Artists who mangle, cut up, draw on, or otherwise alter legal tender are subject to criminal prosecution.

Yet intellectual-property laws protect an artist's freedom of expression. It's murky territory, but not enough to stifle the artists despite the fact that a number of them have been tried or faced lawsuits.

Among the humorous pieces are those by James Charles, of San Francisco, who defaces United States bills. Depicted on his reworked \$5 bills are a monkey face, Col. Sanders and



Scott Campbell's "Ornamental 7" is carved from a thick stack of uncut currency.

others. He's also adroitly reworked the words at the bottom of the bills to reinforce his wry commentary on our moneyed society.

Scott Campbell, a well-known New York tattoo artist, uses stacks of uncut sheets of U.S. currency as thick as 2 feet. With the precision of a woodcut print artist, he slices into the stacks, creating three-dimensional images of astounding complexity. Campbell spent months in a Mexican prison to study tattoo art, and that interest is reflected here. See if you notice the skeleton head and look closely at the Virgin Mary. These works, of course, raise questions about the relationship of the sacred to the profane.

Stacey Lee Webber's "Craftsmen Series" includes a full-size ladder made of copper pennies and a sharpened crosscut saw made of silver dimes and quarters. Her hammer and plumb bob are made of pennies, and the tape measure incorporates silver dimes and quarters. Is she suggesting we can all work with money to make it, or is she commenting on the dignity of manual labor?

Banksy, Great Britain's renowned street artist, offers British £10 notes on which the head of Diana, Princess of Wales, has been substituted for the portrait of the Queen. When he threw the bills out to a street-fair crowd, some in the throng tried to purchase goods with them. Wiser folks kept the bills knowing their altered value would be far greater on the art market than their face value in the marketplace.

Maximo Gonzalez, an Argentinian now working in Mexico, meticulously cuts currencies from around the world into tiny fragments. He pastes these onto paper, creating images that offer cryptic comments on the relationship between money and power. Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, the Spanish conquistadors, and the Pope are among those depicted in his works.

The collages in Christopher Wilde's series, "Disaster of War (after Goya)," are simply beautiful, yet like Goya he offers strong moral judgment. And so it is with the entire exhibit — unexpected art that has much to say and much to enjoy.