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[Forget Jeff Koons: Try a Pomegranate...](#)

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Late August is slow-as-mud in the art world while many galleries are closed and saving their juice for the big September kick-off. Sure, you can gawk for a few more weeks at the Jeff Koons exhibition at the MCA - rumored to be the most expensive ever mounted there, and undoubtedly the shiniest - but you can also experience the Anti-Koons, namely Barbara Koenen's low-tech, disordered, laboriously-encrusted and fascinating little installation titled MUSE, on view through August 30th at Finestra Gallery.

Getting there is part of the experience. When was the last time, if ever, you visited the Fine Arts Building on Michigan Avenue, an 1885 landmark and art colony complete with a hand-operated elevator and the motto "All Passes - Art Alone Endures" emblazoned over doorways (obviously, from the days before Styrofoam, Dick Clark, zebra mussels, and other equally persistent substances)? A bona-fide elevator man - who looks as though he's endured quite a bit himself - will crank you up to the 5th floor, where the diminutive art space gleams at you from across the tiled hallway.

Finestra is a gallery the way Marshall Field's (oops, make that Macy's) windows might be galleries: you peer in through the glass (finestra = window, get it?) at Koenen's mad roomful of objects, papers, time-lines, shelves, plastic doll-eyes, giant blackboards, chalk scrawlings, stacks of books, and other assorted flotsam. A few hours a week, the closet-sized space is actually open to walk in, but that's not necessary, and gaping like a voyeur is kinda fun. It takes a moment to adjust your eyes to the clutter Koenen has strategically amassed but once the visual sprawl settles, you notice many pomegranates, and many grenades.

Koenen, who holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute and created a gumdrop-studded bovine addition to the "Cows On Parade" extravaganza in 1999 (her cow lives on in a Berwyn supermarket. In the fruit section. After being moved from atop the sausage case), first began exploring grenades as part of a personal response to 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror. She's also created a series of "War Rugs" painstakingly delineated in spices on the floor (think, sand mandalas of Tibetan monks) inspired by actual Afghan textiles in which tanks, guns, and bombers have replaced traditional iconography. That led to a creative riff on how American crafts might be similarly influenced by war. The result? Crocheted "grenade cozies," some of the most sardonic little political commentaries you'll ever see (there are several in MUSE and at www.barbarakoenen.com), incongruously merging house-on-the-prairie handiwork with weapons of chaos and death.

But there was an additional ironic twist to the artist's grenade obsession: Koenen discovered they were named after the juicy, seedy red fruit, and that in fact "grenade" is the same word for

pomegranate in at least six languages. Odd, considering the fruit - which figures prominently in art, myth, and many religions - is also ancient fertility symbol in seemingly every culture on Earth (Don't take my word on this, just type in "pomegranate and fertility" and see what pops up). Hence, the umpteen pomegranate facts Koenen has collected and scrawled on the blackboards. Some of these are quirky (in 1989 the USDA stopped collecting data on pomegranates. Hmmm.) while others merely shocking (in 2005 there were 190 new pomegranate-flavored foods and beverages introduced to the marketplace. Yikes.)

Still, you may ask, does this murky confluence of fruit and explosive, in what has to be the largest assemblage of pomegranate-meets-grenade-artworks ever conceived, have a real point? And the answer is yes. For one, Koenen noticed that the recent, very aggressive marketing and rising popularity of pomegranates as "the newest life-saving food" paralleled the declaration, escalation, and aggressive marketing of the War on Terror. She makes no overt political statements about this coincidence, content to let you follow the dots and draw your own conclusions. But the paranoid amongst you will want to chuck out those costly bottles of POM immediately after seeing this show.

Secondly, and perhaps more important, is that pesky idea of the Anti-Koons. Here is an installation that bravely and wildly exposes the creative process, throws it in front of your face, in all its messy, hand-made, stream-of-consciousness glory. It's literally like peering into the mind of an artist, and in this case an extremely talented, witty, thoughtful one. Like it or hate it, there's not nearly enough of that sort of experience around.

Finestra Gallery 410 S. Michigan Avenue Suite 510
Through August 30
Wednesday 5 - 7, Friday and Saturday 12 - 6, and by appointment