A Fruitful Take on the Frailty of Human Life

By Michael O'Sullivan
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The trio of short, slow-motion video works by Ori Gersht on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden are like splatter films, with everything but the splatter left lying on the cutting room floor. There's little in the way of exposition, buildup or character development here. Only shocking climax. (Parental advisory: Although the works are unrated, they contain mayhem by gunfire, explosion and saw.)

Black Box: Ori Gersht

Through April 12 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue at Seventh Street SW (Metro: L'Enfant Plaza).

www.hirshhorn.si.edu.

Hours: Open daily 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Admission: Free.

Program: The artist will talk about his work Feb. 17 at 7 p.m. Free.

I should mention one other thing. They star, in no particular order, a pomegranate, a vase of flowers and trees.

"Pomegranate" looks benign enough at first. Almost like a painted still life. Red and ripe, the fruit of the title hangs from a string, next to a head of cabbage. Below them sits a melon, along with other produce.

All of a sudden, bang! A bullet tears across the frame, ripping the pomegranate nearly in two in an arterial spray of crimson juice, seeds and flesh. Like a pendulum — or a convict on the gallows — its broken body swings slowly in one direction, then the other, blown by the violence of the impact. A minute or so later, it's all over. Fade to black.

Similarly, "Big Bang II" features an innocent-looking vase of flowers. There's the sound of a siren from an off-camera emergency vehicle, and then boom! The vase blows up before your eyes, in a floral evocation of a suicide bomber. It will come as little surprise to learn that the 41-year-old artist was born in Tel Aviv and is no stranger to the kind of violence his art evokes.

Heavy stuff.

Gersht's "The Forest" is less violent but just as disturbing. As the artist's camera pans an idyllic stand of tall trees, first one then another of the woodland giants is felled by an unseen woodsman, each onetopping to the ground with a flailing of helpless limbs and a final, shuddering thud familiar to fans of football's instant replay.

There's no warning for when the peaceful green scene will be interrupted next, save for an ominous quickening of shadows and a sudden rustling of leaves. It happens again and again.

The Hirshhorn's press materials describe Gersht's art thus: "The artist's work encourages viewers to reflect on the power of natural beauty and how it is affected by human intervention." So there's a subtext about the destruction of the rain forest?

With all due respect, that's horse muck.

Gersht's work here is all about human mortality and the frequently all-too-random, though inevitable, way that the grim reaper strikes us down. Those traditional still lifes evoked by "Pomegranate" and "Big Bang II"? They're known collectively as vanitas paintings, in which fruit and flowers in their prime are symbolic of the ultimate impermanence of our own lives.

That pomegranate, that bouquet of flowers, those trees? They're you and me, baby.