

## Charles Krafft Is a White Nationalist Who Believes the Holocaust Is a Deliberately Exaggerated Myth

What Will Happen to One of the Northwest's Preeminent Artists—Whose Nazi Imagery Has Always Been Considered Ironic—Now That His Views Are Not a Secret?

BY JEN GRAVES

**T**he question is hard to get your head around: If Charles Krafft is a Holocaust denier, what does that say about his revered artwork? What exactly does he believe happened, and didn't happen, during the Holocaust? How should collectors and curators—or anyone who sees his work—reassess his art in light of what he's been saying lately?

Krafft, a revered elder of Seattle art, is a provocateur. He makes ceramics out of human cremains, perfume bottles with swastika stoppers, wedding cakes frosted with Third Reich insignias. Up-and-coming artists continue to admire him. Leading curators include him in group shows from Bumbershoot to City Arts Fest. His work is in the permanent collections of Seattle Art Museum, Henry Art Gallery, and the Museum of Northwest Art, and it's been written about in the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Artforum*, *Juxtapoz*. It's also appeared on the cover of *The Stranger*.

In 2009, I included his daintily painted ceramic AK 47 on a list of the 25 best works of art ever made in Seattle, and called him “the Northwest's best iconoclast.” AK 47 is part of Krafft's *Disasterware* series, injecting the homey crafts of European ceramic painting with violence and catastrophic events. At the time of its creation, pretty much everyone thought Krafft was being ironic—poking holes in the fascist and totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century. He said as much in an interview in *Salon* in 2002.

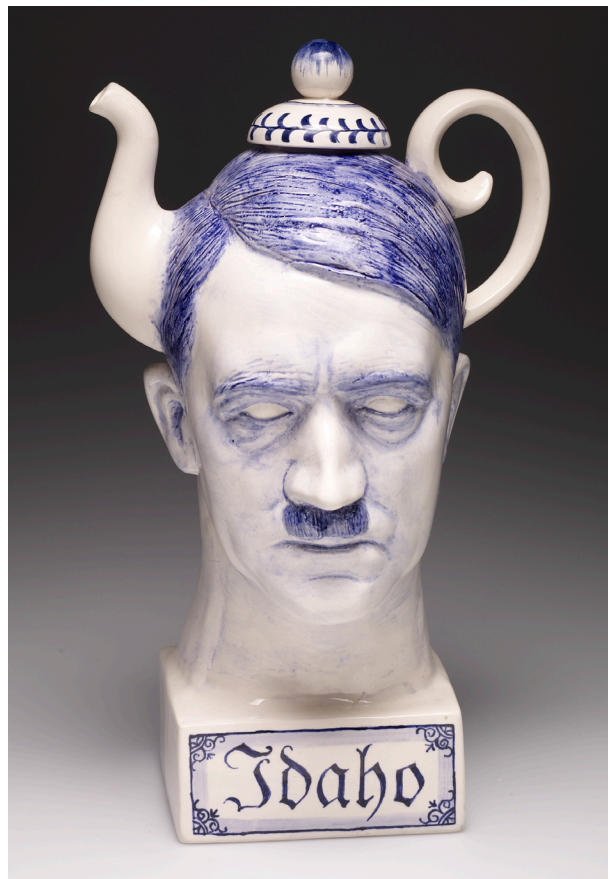


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**CHARLES KRAFFT'S HITLER TEAPOT** Hitler Idaho was purchased by a Jewish collector, now dead, who later gave it to a museum in San Francisco. The curator there speculates that if the collector were still alive and knew Krafft's current views on the Holocaust, he would smash it.

“For some reason, art has to be this earnest, serious, even Freudian, exploration,” he told *Salon*. “But it doesn't necessarily have to be that at all. Art that's funny seems to get dismissed just because it is funny. But I've always had a knack and a penchant for going toward humorous irony.”

Now, a decade later, some of Krafft's more

than 2,000 Facebook friends would be hard-pressed to detect humor in his increasingly sinister posts. On January 14, for instance, Krafft posted, “Why amongst the monuments glorifying the history of this nation in Wash DC is there a museum of horrors dedicated to people who never lived, fought, or died here? The USHMM [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum] was erected before there was ever a monument to the 465,000 Americans who died in WWII. And no one did enough to save the Jews of Europe?”

When I wrote to Krafft back in May, letting him know that a reader had asked whether he was a Holocaust denier, I added, “I suppose you don’t have to answer that, but I guess I’d like to know.” This wasn’t the first time I’d heard the rumor, but I found it impossible to imagine that the swastikas on Krafft’s work might reflect genuine spite toward Jews—i.e., that there might not be so much difference between Krafft’s swastikas and Hitler’s. After all, that could mean this self-taught, former Skagit Valley hippie artist was using the guise of art and irony to smuggle far-right symbols into museums, galleries, collectors’ homes, and upscale decor shops like Far4 on First Avenue.

That first time I asked Krafft whether he was a Holocaust denier, he refused to answer. “Unless it has some relevance to art that I’m currently exhibiting which you would like extra information about to review or comment on in *The Stranger* I see no reason to answer the loaded question ‘Are you a Holocaust denier?’” he wrote.

But you can find Krafft narrating his philosophy in his own voice just by doing a little googling. On July 28, 2012, he participated (not for the first time) in a podcast produced by the white nationalist website The White Network, whose tagline is “Whites Talking to Whites About White Interests.” According to The White Network’s “about” page, “We recognize that different races and ethnic groups cannot live together in peace on the same soil, that Whites cannot and should not tolerate being governed by non-Whites.” The description goes on to say: “Jews are not White. They are obsessed with their own group’s best interests, not ours. Our network is and will always re-

main by, for, and about the best interests of Whites, and only Whites. We are uncompromising on this point. We do not hesitate to identify and criticize Jews and will not allow them to hide amongst us.”

On the podcast, Krafft says, “I believe the Holocaust is a myth,” and that the myth is “being used to promote multiculturalism and globalism.” He says he believes the Christian story of the sacrifice of one man (Jesus) is being trumped “by this new secular religion of the sacrifice of six million Jews. And the museums, memorials, monuments, study centers, Holocaust chairs at the universities—it’s all part of the promotion of a new kind of, like I said, civil religion maybe... We’re the heretics in a new religion that’s being promoted and built up and being embraced by governments throughout the United States and Europe.”

Krafft mentions people “sitting in prison because they dared to go up against this

### **Friends say Krafft has laughed in private at the liberal-leaning art establishment he’s fooled.**

thing,” and says, “It’s not just the Jews that are promoting this thing. Yeah, it’s their little myth. But we’re going to be rounded up not by Jews, we’re going to be rounded up, if it comes to this, by people just like ourselves.” He says, “The Jews have gotten white people to turn against themselves,” and that Holocaust revisionism is “a good weapon to use against the people who are trying to replace us.”

Krafft, who is now in his 60s, has always had an edge to him, and it’s been sharpening in recent years. “I drifted into white nationalism as a result of reading a book about a Romanian archbishop who was charged with crimes against humanity and subsequently deported from the United States,” Krafft explains on the podcast. (According to the *New York Times*, the archbishop’s past “included membership in a group called the Iron Guard, a fascist movement that was the Romanian parallel of the Nazi storm troopers in Germany.”) The archbishop’s story “intrigued me and I started investigating this case,” Krafft says on the podcast, “and the deeper I got

into it, the more I realized that the charges were trumped up. That led me to investigating the Holocaust, and I went through that into becoming aware of the writings of Kevin MacDonald and some of the intellectual leaders of what we call the white nationalist movement.”

The particular topic of the podcast was whether white nationalists could be more successful as a movement if they hid their beliefs on the Holocaust or homosexuals. Krafft said he didn’t think a person’s sexuality should matter to white nationalists (the two others on the show disagreed), but said that the truth is more important than white nationalist strategy, and therefore he and his fellow white nationalists should not hide their beliefs about the Holocaust.

Krafft’s website, from which he sells most of his artwork, does not contain any of his copious commentary about the Holocaust.

To clarify his views, last week I asked Krafft over e-mail, “Do you believe Hitler’s regime systematically murdered millions of Jews?”

Krafft wrote back, “I don’t doubt that Hitler’s regime killed a lot of Jews in WWII, but I don’t believe they were ever frog marched into homicidal gas chambers and dispatched. I think between 700,000–1.2 million Jews died of disease, starvation, overwork, reprisals for partisan attacks, allied bombing, and natural causes during the war.”

That was the entire e-mail. I followed up: “The number I’ve always read is 6 million Jews killed. I just want to clarify that it’s your belief that 700,000 to 1.2 million Jews died total.”

Krafft did not answer the question. He only sent a link to a story about exaggerations in the original numbers of Jews reported killed at Auschwitz. That story, called “New ‘Official’ Changes in the Auschwitz Story,” appears on a website called Institute for Historical Review.

Wanting to understand more, I asked Krafft over e-mail to explain the development of his beliefs. He reiterated that he didn’t get interested in World War II until he read about the Romanian archbishop in 2000, and said he continues to research the case, including a trip this December to the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in

New York City. He wrote:

Understanding the nuts and bolts of this complex civil case, the Romanian history behind it and its geopolitical ramifications ultimately served to awaken my racial self-awareness as a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant). Most people don’t understand the difference between White Nationalism and White Supremacism. White Nationalists don’t want to reign supreme over any other race. Symbols associated with White Supremacism like swastikas, shamrocks, the Celtic cross etc. aren’t embraced by White Nationalists. White Nationalism doesn’t have a symbol.

On Facebook, Krafft has posted links to claims that death-camp photography was doctored and that the US Holocaust Memorial Museum fraudulently displayed a gas chamber door. “Holocaust studies is an academic echo chamber,” he has written.

**K**rafft’s Facebook posts got the attention of Tim Detweiler, who showed Krafft’s work several times during his tenure as director of the Museum of Northwest Art. He’s not sure how to feel. “If you were a Nazi sympathizer and selling Hitler paraphernalia by the side of the road, you’d be killed,” Detweiler said. “But he’s selling it at the highest-priced stores and at galleries all over the country... It would be like if Kara Walker came out after doing all these years of pickaninnies”—Walker is an African American artist who makes cartoonish silhouettes of horrible scenes from slavery—“and said, ‘Oh, through my research, I’ve found that the slave trade was not as bad as we thought—the numbers were exaggerated and the slaves had more choice than we thought.’ What would you think of her work then? I mean, I don’t know. My head’s spinning, to be honest.”

According to old friends of Krafft’s interviewed for this story, Krafft has laughed in private at the liberal-leaning art establishment he’s fooled with his art. In response to that accusation, Krafft said, “I would ask the person who told you they have seen me laugh about ‘fooling’ curators to be more



specific and tell you which curators they saw me laughing at.” More than one person tells the story of Krafft privately laughing at curator Timothy Burgard, who is in charge of American art for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF).

In 2003, Krafft made a ceramic teapot in the shape of a bust of Hitler, with eerie holes for eyes. A Jewish collector named Sandy Besser, now dead, bought the Hitler teapot and added it to his overtly politically themed collection, which he later donated to FAMSF, where it went on display in 2007. Burgard wrote about it in a catalog as explicitly and clearly antifascist. “These blind-looking eyes also evoke associations with... the world turning a blind eye to the horrors of the Holocaust.”

Reached by phone last week, Burgard said Krafft’s change of heart on World War II raises larger issues about artists’ intentions, “both expressed and concealed... and how those do or don’t dovetail with their public reception and interpretation.” As an experiment, Burgard showed the Hitler teapot to a colleague who had never seen it before and the colleague agreed with Burgard’s original interpretation. What does it mean that when Krafft made this portrait of a demonized Hitler, he was actually beginning to spread the word that the demonization of Hitler has been greatly exaggerated?

Another question: Will the museum get rid of the Krafft? That’s unlikely, Burgard said, explaining that he values the perspectives brought by artworks, maybe even more so when they’re reminders of attitudes we’d forget at our own risk of repeating them. The label on the wall will probably have to change. Burgard said that if Besser—the original collector of the Hitler teapot—had thought the sculpture rehabilitated Hitler’s regime, he’d probably have smashed it.

Burgard was able to find a note he received from Krafft in 2008. “I enjoyed your essay on ‘The Content of Teapots’ in the Besser Collection catalogue,” Krafft wrote. “You certainly did your homework on the context of my ‘Hitler Idaho’ teapot.”

The open question of how to treat the teapot in the future “deserves to be examined fully and critically in the public domain,” Burgard said.

Later, I asked Krafft what he thought of

Tim Detweiler’s comparison to Kara Walker. “The difference between me and Kara Williams [*sic*] is that she gets to play the race card and I don’t because I’m an unregenerate white heterosexual male,” Krafft protested. “Has Kara Williams [*sic*] ever not cut a race based silhouette? Does she even know that the first person on record as a slave owner in America, Anthony Johnson, was black?!”

This is a case of trying to use one detail to discredit an entire history. I don’t care whether the first slave owner in America was black. I’m not falling for it.

Krafft’s friends say it’s exhausting to argue with him because of his ability to cite everything he’s read. He’s been a poet and an artist since the 1960s and a proven rabble-rouser since high school, when he was expelled by a headmaster who said, according to a story Krafft delights in repeating, “Charlie puts people on edge and keeps them there.” But lately he’s taken his experiment in putting people on edge further than ever before, and his friends, other artists, and even people who sell his work are hitting their limits.

“We’re all scratching our heads, and there are lots of us. We always said he’ll do anything to provoke attention, but no—that’s not it. It’s real. It’s an ideology now,” said Hans Nelsen. Nelsen is a woodworker on Vashon Island who’s known Krafft since the 1960s and feels extremely torn on the subject, because he loves Krafft as a friend but is horrified by some of his beliefs. The two men agree, Nelsen said, that global greed is out of control and linked to a corrupt banking system, but they diverge in that Nelsen does not see that system as a Jewish cabal.

When I asked Krafft about this, he scoffed. “The idea of ‘friends’ wringing their hands over what I think about anything strikes me as comical. I think Jewish overrepresentation in national and international finance is uncontroversial. I would call this a fact not a ‘cabal.’”

Another old friend, Tacoma writer Peggy Andersen, said she had to stop socializing with Krafft. “I told him, ‘When I hang out with you, I feel like I’m endorsing something.’... His main thing is that the Holocaust is an exaggeration. I say, if they only killed 10,000 people because they were Jew-

ish, it would still be a holocaust, jackass.” As Andersen and I ended our interview, she said, “Be sure to say I love Charlie.”

A longtime friend who insisted on anonymity said, “It’s not only anti-Semitic stuff, it’s also racism—you know, blacks and women and anything that is held dear by the liberal establishment. And I can see a reaction against holier-than-thou attitudes, I mean, yeah, of course. But...”

Other friends, like Larry Reid, coauthor of the 2002 monograph on Krafft, *Villa Delirium*, just sort of look away. “I try not to pay too much attention,” Reid said.

On Facebook earlier this month, when a friend named Fred Owens unfriended Krafft and called him a bigot, a discussion arose in which Krafft told his critics they could sell off their works by him at Seattle ArtResource on First Avenue if they didn’t want them anymore. But Jena Scott at Seattle ArtResource recently stopped accepting any Krafft works for consignment, because she found his e-mails increasingly upsetting. “I’m just sad about it,” Scott said. “He’s an intelligent, articulate guy who I respected throughout the years, and it just makes me sad. Everybody’s sad, and you can’t talk to him about it because it’s not going to make a damn bit of difference.”

Owens was motivated to speak on Facebook after playing online chess with a close Jewish friend from Boston, who simply asked Owens why he had a friend like that. “I realized that I could not continue playing chess with Harvey unless I did something about Charlie—it became simple for me,” Owens wrote to me in an e-mail. Owens made another, broader, important point, too: We should “not just blame Charlie for this but the entire arts community of Seattle which has proven to be soft-headed. As I said when I wrote about this, it would never happen in Brooklyn or Boston—people would just kick his ass down the block. But Seattle has a misguided kind of false tolerance going on here, so there is a lesson for all of us in this.”

Krafft is not a simple case, and nobody who knows him seems to be enjoying this moment. His personal kindness and generosity to friends and other artists is well-known. He’s a Buddhist; I had to interview him by e-mail for this story because he’s on

a long pilgrimage in India.

Maybe what’s hardest to accept is that a man so totally, radically, fist-pumpingly opposed to ideology—a guy you wanted to root for at the end of a bloody, painfully ideological century—himself seems to have succumbed to an ideology.

Yoko Ott, the curator who invited Krafft to be in the *Softly Threatening* exhibition at Bumbershoot in 2006—where he contributed the swastika wedding cake—remembers visiting him in his studio and wondering what to think.

“I did confront him, like, ‘Do you consider yourself a neo-Nazi or sympathetic to that?’ And he said no, that he didn’t,” Ott said. “And then he laughed and said, ‘But would that frighten you if I were?’” ■