



German blacksmith Manfred Zbrzezny looks at one of his apprentice working in a workshop on the outskirts of the Liberian capital Monrovia. — AFP photos



Photo shows AK-47s, bazookas and other deadly arms displayed before being hammered, filed and welded by German blacksmith Manfred Zbrzezny and his apprentices.

Blacksmith turns Liberian civil war arms into art

German blacksmith Manfred Zbrzezny and his apprentices hammer, file and weld in a steamy, dark workshop on the outskirts of the Liberian capital Monrovia, surrounded by parts for AK-47s, bazookas and other deadly arms. In another lifetime, these weapons were the cause of untold misery in a nation scarred by ruinous back-to-back civil wars, but now they are being transformed into symbols of hope for Liberians. Since 2007, Zbrzezny and his team at Fyrkuna Metalworks have been gathering parts of weapons decommissioned during the disarmament process after the conflict ended ten years ago to turn them into ornate flowerpots, lamps, furniture and sculptures.

"It was strange from the beginning to work with weapons or instruments of destruction and suffering. The first two years I was working on this it remained very strange to me," Zbrzezny said. "When I had a piece in my hands I would think about what was happening now to the perpetrators who used these weapons, and what was happening to the victims, and I would put the piece down to go drink a cup of coffee because it was a little bit oppressive." Today, as he holds each weapon part, Zbrzezny is able to focus on its potential for bringing healing to the people of Liberia.

"I do some thinking on how to transform it into something different, how to transform something that was destructive into something constructive, how to transform something negative into something positive," he said. Deep psychological and physical wounds remain in Liberia after two civil wars which ran from 1989 to 2003, leaving a quarter of a million people dead. Numerous rebel factions raped, maimed and killed, some making use of drugged-up child soldiers, and deep ethnic rivalries and bitterness remain across the west African nation of four million people.

Zbrzezny, who had worked as a blacksmith in Italy and Germany, came to Liberia in 2005, two years after the end of the rebel siege of Monrovia that brought a fragile peace to the west African nation. He failed initially to make money out of his trade until in 2007 he was approached by the owners of a riverside restaurant who asked if he could put his skills to transforming the parts of old weapons into a marine-themed banister. The project was such a success that he began making other pieces for the restaurant with parts from rocket-propelled grenade launchers and sub-machinegun barrels-then still commonplace in Monrovia.

He began collecting weapons parts from a German charity involved in Liberia's disarmament process and made a business out of transforming instruments of war into candle stands, bookends, bells and bottle openers. "So it was by chance that I got into this. Now I employ five young Liberians who are learning the trade at the same time," said Zbrzezny, who calls his work "Arms into Art".

Zbrzezny, who is married to a Liberian woman who is expecting their second child, says most of his customers are expats, with few Liberians buying his wares. Keen to expand his work, Zbrzezny has been trying to convince the United Nations mission in Liberia to donate its weapons scrap.

rebels in Sierra Leone in exchange for "blood diamonds" during a civil war that claimed 120,000 lives between 1991 and 2001. Meanwhile a generation of traumatized children who witnessed untold horrors in Liberia are now struggling to come to terms with their country's violent past as adults.

Emmanuel Freeman, 28, one of Zbrzezny's apprentices, was a child during most of the conflict and saw both of his parents

Leaving the past behind



Photos show items made from AK-47s, bazookas and various weaponry.

One of Zbrzezny's most ambitious projects was a "peace tree" fashioned in 2011 from weapons parts on Providence Island, an iconic part of Monrovia where freed slaves from the United States landed in the 19th century to found the new republic. Momodu Paasawee, the caretaker for the area where the tree is exhibited, said it had become a symbol for reconciliation in post-war Liberia.

"Seeing this tree reminds Liberians that the war has ended and never should we return to war... Tourists and Liberian students come here to see the tree," he said. "Sometimes people come here believing that this is a real tree but I have to tell them that this is a peace tree made out of the barrels of guns."

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to probe war crimes and rights abuses between 1979 and 2003, and particularly during the brutal conflicts that raged in 1989-96 and 1999-2003. The commission said a war crimes court should be set up to prosecute eight ex-warlords for alleged crimes against humanity but the government is yet to implement the recommendations.

A decade after the war, no money has been made available and the only Liberian to face trial is Charles Taylor, and that was for his role in neighboring Sierra Leone's civil conflict, not that in his own country. The former leader is appealing a 50-year prison sentence handed down in May last year for supporting

slain. "They were killed by guns. These are the same guns I am transforming today into something else," he said. "I am excited, happy and very pleased to do that. But 'sometimes when I am holding the scraps it reminds me what I saw during the war'," he added. — AFP

In 'Gravity,' a cinematic feat amid the cosmos

It's the 13-minute shot heard round the world. Festival audiences in Venice and Telluride have been floored by the lengthy opening shot to Alfonso Cuarón's 3-D space odyssey, "Gravity," which plunges moviegoers into space and leaves them reeling in weightlessness. When the film premieres Sunday at the Toronto International Festival, the lore of Cuarón's balletic beginning is sure to only grow. "It's the idea of trying to create a moment of truthfulness in which the camera happens to be there just to witness, and respecting that moment in real time," Cuarón said in a recent interview.

The Mexican director and his longtime cinematographer, Emmanuel Lubezki, beginning with "Y Tu Mama Tambien" and up to their last film, the gritty science-fiction thriller "Children of Men," have been renowned for their propensity for long, unbroken, beautifully choreographed sequences. A four-minute uncut scene in "Children of Men" captured a playful conversation scene in a car suddenly ambushed in a forest by dozens wielding clubs and guns, and then car-

ried on through the escape and beyond. For it, Cuarón built a track inside the car for the camera to move forward and backward.

The shot at the start of "Gravity" similarly moves from banality to mayhem, ending in uncertainty. Several astronauts (Sandra Bullock, George Clooney) are repairing a space station and bantering breezily with their NASA dispatch in Houston (voiced by an unseen Ed Harris). When a cascading storm of satellite debris caused by an asteroid rushes past, the space station shatters and the astronauts are stranded in space.

Cuarón and Lubezki capture it all seamlessly with a camera floating around the characters, moving variously into close-up and wide shots. It's, as Cuarón calls it, "a continuous moment." "We feel like sometimes the language of close-ups and intercuts abstracts the characters from the environment," says Cuarón. "We wanted the environment to be as important in weight as the characters." Variety hailed the shot as having "completely immersed us in the beauty and

majesty of a dark, pitiless universe." The Hollywood Reporter called the film, which Warner Bros will release Oct 4, "the most realistic and beautifully choreographed film ever set in space."

There are several other minutes-long takes in "Gravity" of startling uninterrupted clarity, but the opening shot is the one cinephiles will drool over. Considered bravura feats of filmmaking prowess, long takes are the stuff of filmmaking legend with famous practitioners including Orson Welles ("Touch of Evil"), Alfred Hitchcock ("Rope"), Martin Scorsese ("Goodfellas"), Robert Altman ("The Player") and Michelangelo Antonioni ("The Passenger").

Cuarón doesn't like to draw attention to his long takes, which have been roundly inducted into that cinematic tradition. The director, who claimed not to know how long the first shot of "Gravity" is, fears turning into what he calls "Look, mama! No hands!" filmmaking. "That's something I worry about sometimes," he says. "If it catches the attention of people, I'm not sure it works."

Advances in digital technology have opened up new realms for long takes (the 2002 film "Russian Ark" was made in one 96-minute Steadicam shot), but Cuarón had particular challenges operating in simulated zero gravity. He and visual effects supervisor Tim Webber created what they called "The Lightbox": a large cube surrounded by LED lights inside of which Bullock and Clooney were rigged to mimic weightlessness.

It was complex work, trying to stay faithful to the reality of movement in space. But Cuarón wanted an immersive experience, partly inspired by documentaries of astronauts on the moon like "For All Mankind" - films that didn't have the luxury of cutting to a close-up. Instead, Cuarón's camera at times drifts into the perspective of Bullock's engineer character and then floats away "almost as if you're another astronaut following the journey," he says. Though Cuarón revels in such choreography, even he was surprised by the size of the task. He started expecting to make a simple chamber piece with just two characters. It ended up - as his collaborators often reminded him - taking four and a half years. — AP

French chef Alain Ducasse rejects the easy 'wow' at Le Meurice

In "the prettiest dining room in Paris," hidden behind gilded glass doors at the opulent Le Meurice hotel, Michelin-starred French chef Alain Ducasse is not interested in spectacle. As Ducasse and his head chef, Christophe Saintagne, launch a new menu that eschews over-worked, over-decorated and overly pretentious food, understatement is even the order of the day in the centrepieces - an heirloom tomato set atop a copper mold.

In an interview days before Le Meurice Restaurant's reopening on Monday, the entrepreneur whose empire includes over 20 international restaurants said he wants the cooking, stripped bare of excess and reduced to its essence, to do the wow in the light, bright dining room that overlooks the famous Tuileries gardens.

"We're not going to give you something showy here, we're going to give you flavors, tastes, products, seasoning, cooking. Justice," said Ducasse. "It will be a clear message on the plate so that when you finish the plate it's clear. There is no confusion in tastes," he said. "The wow effect is the taste." The two chefs already collaborate at the Plaza Athenee's three-star restaurant, but that hotel, also owned by luxury hotel operator Dorchester Group, is currently undergoing a partial renovation.

Opening restaurants and experimenting with new menus are challenges Ducasse said he thrives on, adding he would be "very frustrated" if he had to limit himself to just one restaurant. "I want to tell a different story here, a contemporary French cuisine in a very, very Parisian address, very, very elegant, because I think it's the prettiest dining room in Paris," said Ducasse, one of France's most trusted voices on haute gastronomie.

Decorated in the ornate, feminine style of Louis XVI - beheaded just down the road in the Place de la Concorde - the dining room features light grey marble, tasselled white silk curtains, a pastoral ceiling painting and a gilt frieze, all elements poised to compete with any excessive flourishes on the plate. "On the plate we don't require anything more than taking care of the products and their cooking, their radicalism, their essence," Ducasse said. "There's nothing superfluous." The focus on the essential is also quickly apparent on the menu. "John Dory, turnips, figs" reads the description of one dish. "Seabass, fennel, lemon" reads another menu item.



Alain Ducasse

More focus on vegetables is another hallmark. A puree of green black turnip tops dots the plate of John Dory, their peppery flavor playing against the figs' sweetness. A sweetbread is studded with delicate pieces of tomato confit. "Everything that pushes up out of the earth I love. Everything under the earth, root vegetables, I love to cook," said Ducasse. The simple things, and their flawless execution, are what most attract the celebrated chef who still enjoys cooking at home with produce from his garden. His last home-cooked meal? Ducasse is modest. "It was a fish I bought at the market with vegetables from the garden," he said. "You need a good gardener and a good fisherman. The cook is not required." — Reuters



Cast and crew of 'Gravity,' from left, director Alfonso Cuarón, actress Sandra Bullock, producer David Heyman and writer Jonas Cuarón pose for a picture during a photo call at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival in Toronto yesterday. — AP