An nkisi figure is an awe-inspiring object. The nails hammered into the body evoke disturbing sensations. Foremost is the sensation of pain whose distinct tactile quality Bob Rizzo’s “warrior” enforces in a dramatic and almost theatrical way.

Constructed from hundreds of found objects, Rizzo’s work belongs to a series of sculptures he calls “totems.” The term alludes to the realm of the primordial. It conjures images of an archaic, mythic past which he thinks we seem to have left behind but which still haunts us. Rizzo does not aim to rework the figure’s history but, rather, indulges in the colonial imagery of nkisi, most prominently, the image of nkisi as an object coming from the “heart of darkness.” In other words, The Warrior addresses the power of the fetish.

Joseph Conrad’s famous novel about an Englishman riverboat captain traveling down the River Kongo for a Belgian trading company aimed to confront the reader not only with the brutality of colonialism, but also with the rawness, savagery, and “evil spirits” of the human psyche. Underneath the thin varnish of civilization are powerful forces into which people can tap for creative and beneficial purposes. But these forces remain dangerous as does the fearful appearance of nkisi.

In the “global flow” of imperialism and colonialism, nkisi figures became prominent mediators in the interaction of cultures and identities, even well after their heyday at the turn of the twentieth century. As such, they illustrate what happens to a spiritual form or image when its original function is changed, new materials are used, and it is aestheticized as a work of art. But whether the nkisi image gives rise to political responses, or prompts rather formal aesthetic echoes, nkisi forces the beholder to react to its image. What is your reaction?

—Peter Probst, Professor of African Art and Visual Culture, Tufts University