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Placing Guns in the Hands of Artists

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by Emily Colucci



As reports of the October shooting in a Washington State high school ricocheted through the news, New Orleans's [Jonathan Ferrara Gallery](#) opened a powerfully resonant and undeniably timely group exhibition called *Guns in the Hands of Artists*. Organized in conjunction with the New Orleans-based citywide contemporary art biennial *Prospect 3*, the show features work from over 30 artists who used decommissioned handguns and rifles taken from the streets of New Orleans via the New Orleans Police Department's gun buyback program as their inspiration.

The works in the exhibition, by both local and national artists, are presented through a wide variety of mediums, including photography, prints, sculpture, and video. The pieces confront the place of guns in American culture, and often reference real instances of gun violence. Generic Art Solutions's *One Hot Month*, for example, is a silkscreened collection of 27 photographs of victims of gun violence in New Orleans in August 2002 layered underneath eerie photograms of handguns.

Based on a similar show mounted in 1996 during a time when New Orleans had the infamous honor of being the murder capital of the United States, the exhibition's overwhelming quantity of gun-related art renders the issues of gun violence inescapable and unavoidable. It also brings those issues into a visceral realm, impossible not to

feel, as evidenced by R. Luke DuBois's *Take a Bullet for This City*, which is programmed to fire a blank every time a shooting is reported in New Orleans.

The first iteration of *Guns in the Hands of Artists* appeared at Jonathan Ferrara's former gallery, Positive Space the Gallery, in the Lower Garden District. The show was the brainchild of artist Brian Borrello, who contributed two gun sculptures to the current exhibition. As Ferrara remembers, "The context of that show was the murder rate was escalating in the mid 1990s in New Orleans. Brian chose to put this exhibition on to take the discussion about guns and gun violence in our society into the realm of art, using art as a means for dialogue and an access point."

A striking and newsworthy concept, the exhibition was featured in the *New York Times*, *Time*, and *Good Morning America*, which Ferrara almost missed because back then he was "waiting tables until 4 o'clock in the morning." While the exhibition garnered significant media attention, Ferrara remembers, "from an exhibition perspective, it was heavy on guns and kind of light on art."

Eighteen years later, as a much more experienced gallery owner, Ferrara decided to revisit *Guns in the Hands of Artists*. "The idea had been welling up inside me and every time something would happen, I would think, *You need to do something*. What do you do? What do individuals do in this situation? Having done this exhibition almost 20 years ago, I thought, *That's what I can do*. I remembered how it worked the last time and felt compelled to revisit it."

This time around Ferrara decided to involve government entities in the organization of the show. He reached out to everyone from the City Council to the Mayor's Office to the NOPD. While an active member of the New Orleans community, the grueling red tape-filled process to acquire the guns for the exhibition took about two years. Ferrara explains, "I leaned on my political connections to intercede on my behalf with the NOPD. It still took me probably six to eight months to just get to the point where we could get into the evidence room to meet with the police department and select the guns."

In January 2013, Ferrara, along with Brian Borrello, finally entered the NOPD's evidence room in order to select the guns for the project. "You walk in there," recalls Ferrara, "and there's a huge impound room that smells like reefer, full of impounded weed. Then there's a thousand bicycles and finally, you go into the gun room and there's just guns everywhere. They said, 'Choose them.' We ended up getting 186 guns: 160 handguns and 26 sawed-off shotguns."

Continuing to wait for a letter of approval from now-former Chief Ronal Serpas of the NOPD and eventually, finding himself maneuvering through the bureaucracy of the city of New Orleans to release the guns, Ferrara finally received the chosen weapons in early 2014—only to find that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) got involved and blow-torched the guns before handing them over. He gave the artists the option of either working with the ATF-demolished guns or taking a gun bought by Ferrara as long as it was on the decommissioned list, and Ferrara says many of the artists took on the challenge of working with the torched guns.

Artists in the exhibit range from nationally recognized figures such as Mel Chin and Deborah Luster to younger emerging New Orleans locals; Ferrara felt it was important to

reflect the national scope of gun violence. Asked about his process in finding the artists, Ferrara responds, "This is not a New Orleans issue so why should it only be New Orleans art. It's a national issue that affects every region of the country. I tried to work with artists from that perspective."

Not only does *Guns in the Hands of Artists* feature artists of varying genders, races, and ethnicities, but Ferrara also commissioned artists who specifically did not typically work with guns in their artistic practice—like Nicholas Varney, a jewelry designer known for working with Hillary Clinton and Liza Minnelli, who created a 18-karat gold and diamond-encrusted bullet. "I wanted to challenge artists to use guns as raw materials for their art in a way that was not already part of their oeuvre or aesthetic," says Ferrara. "I wanted to challenge people who were painters or sculptors to take these foreign materials and incorporate them into their practice to make a statement about guns and gun violence."

An artist himself, Ferrara also constructed a sculpture titled *Excaliber No More* for the exhibition, imbedding a shotgun in stone. "Until I did my piece, I didn't feel completely at ease with the exhibition," he says.

Though it took a lengthy odyssey to receive the guns from the NOPD and the city, Ferrara acquired a Mossberg shotgun for his sculpture with unbelievable and almost terrifying ease. Since the private sale of guns is legal in Louisiana, he simply purchased a gun found online for \$300 cash right in his gallery. As he remembers, "It took me about two seconds to get the gun and 15 minutes to have a conversation about the Second Amendment. No restrictions, no record, I could walk out the door and do whatever I wanted."

Before placing the shotgun in stone with help from the employees at Mediterranean Tile, Ferrara felt he had to shoot the gun he purchased. "It's a total rush," says Ferrara. "It would be artistic heresy and a falsehood to buy the gun and the rock and just insert it. I felt I had to have a physical relationship with the power of the gun and then suppress it."

In addition to the exhibition, which is open until January 25, *Guns in the Hands of Artists* also features an essential educational component, motivated by a question from NOPD Weapons Control Officer Earl Johnson, who asked Ferrara, "So you're doing this exhibition in a white gallery on Julia Street, how is this going to affect kids in the hood?" Attempting to answer that question, the gallery is partnering with Central City's Youth Empowerment Project (YEP), an organization working with juveniles from age 7 to 24 who have been through the juvenile justice system, to organize both a monthly series of panels livestreamed from the gallery on gun violence and a youth-focused studio series.

Planning both a book and a documentary about the exhibition, Ferrara foresees *Guns in the Hands of Artists* as a traveling exhibition. As Ferrara states, "The next stage is for it to travel. What better place to have this conversation emanate from than New Orleans, which has always been a leader in murders. Why can't we take the lead in opening a dialogue about guns and gun violence?"

Reflecting on the success of the exhibition so far, Ferrara reveals, "Watching it over the last month, we've had a lot of viewers that are not art people. The art people love it and the non-art people love it. There's a visual and/or conceptual beauty to the works. The interesting part is once you hook the viewer into the aesthetic, they open their mind in a

different way that they wouldn't have been able to before. Art is the access point to potentially changing the conversation."