

Loria, Keith. "Art with a bang: Fairfield University Art Museum aims to spark conversations on guns," *HAN Network*, 28 June 2018.



Art with a bang: Fairfield University Art Museum aims to spark conversations on guns



As a way to give voice to those who have been the victim of gun violence, a series of artists are taking part in #UNLOAD: Guns in the Hands of Artists, a new exhibit currently on display at the Fairfield University Art Museum, which runs through Oct. 13 in the museum's Walsh Gallery.

The exhibition is part of a nationwide initiative to generate conversation about guns and gun violence.

The idea for the show first developed in 1996 in New Orleans, when artist Brian Borrello was tired of the rising news stories about gun deaths in his city and wanted to do something about it. He teamed with Positive Space the Gallery owner Jonathan Ferrara on the first show, with every piece in the exhibit created using decommissioned guns, taken off the streets of New Orleans via the city's gun buyback program.

"We worked with the mayor's office and the police to take guns off the street and gave the decommissioned guns to artists asking them to address the issue through their art," Ferrara said. "We wanted to take the conversation about guns and gun violence out of a highly-polarized context and bring to artists a means of conversation."

The exhibit was a critical success and received lots of positive exposure through the national media.

After the exhibit, Ferrara began noticing a rise in mass shootings over the years, starting with the devastation at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012.

"I decided to revisit the exhibition, but on a much higher level," Ferrara said. "My career had changed immeasurably over the last 20 years and that of the other artists as well. In 2013, I produced the next alliteration of the show, and we had 186 firearms from the gun buyback program — 160 handguns and 26 sawed-off shotguns."

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But he wanted to do even more and created the Guns in the Hands of Artists Foundation, which looked to take the show elsewhere. Over the years, it has been re-activated in galleries, art centers and gun trade shows in Washington, D.C., and Portland, Ore., and the project has inspired similar efforts in other cities nationwide.

Earlier this year, Ferrara teamed with #UNLOAD, a Connecticut arts-based initiative that seeks to drive consensus around the divisive issue of gun violence, to bring his exhibit to our state.

"We feel this is a good exhibition for our art museum because we believe in the power of the arts to ignite change in society and stimulate thinking and open discussions about difficult issues," said Carey Mack Weber, assistant director of the Fairfield University Art Museum. "It's an exhibition I would have been excited to curate myself but excited to get these amazing works from a remarkable group of artists curated for us."

This show features a myriad of artists, with painters, glass artists, sculptors, photographers, video artists, poets, and those in other media.

Among the artists taking part in the Connecticut show are Generic Art Solutions, Neil Alexander, Luis Cruz Azaceta, John Barnes, Rob Bechet, Andrei Codrescu, R. Luke DuBois, Margaret Evangeline, Jonathan Ferrara, Rico Gatson, MK Guth, Marcus Kenney, Deborah Luster, Bradley McCallum, Adam Mysock, Ted Riederer, Paul Villinski, Club S&S (Stephen Paul Day & Sibylle Peretti), Robert C. Tannen, Nicholas Varney, William Villalongo, Sidonie Villere and John Schuerman.

"What we are trying to do is use art as a mirror for life. The artists are posing the questions and the viewers are the ones forced to come up with the answers and thoughts on the process," Ferrara said. "We're aiming to stimulate the conversation and get people thinking. When you're in a room of art made from guns, it's kind of hard not to."

One of Weber's favorite works is a photograph by Kenney, who is normally a sculptor, but saw an opportunity to be a shutterbug for a day.

"He was given a decommissioned gun, which he put on a table in his home, and a day later he saw his six-year-old daughter outside with a bag over her head so she wouldn't get wet in the rain, and she was dancing around holding the gun," she said. "It is such a chilling photo as it speaks to accidental gun death. What if it had been a working gun?"

Other artists designed sculptures around the guns, some took photos and others got really creative with different mixed-media ideas. One thing Ferrara thought was important was to have the stories of the artists included as part of their artwork.

"Because it's such a specific intention on the part of the artists, I wanted that intention to be front and center and not leave room for interpretation," Ferrara said. "In these artist statements, the viewer can look at the work, read the statement and know what he or she was saying."

Although Weber doesn't normally like to put a lot of text on the walls of the museum, she agreed with Ferrara and felt for this exhibit, it was necessary.

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"The artist statements are so powerful and interesting and bring so much to the work, we added them because we all felt they just had to be there," she said.

On Sept. 12, the museum will host a panel discussion entitled, Gun Violence in Connecticut: Realities and Paths Forward, featuring panelists such as Brett Peterkin, statewide coordinator for DOJ Project Longevity, and Jeremy Stein, executive director of Connecticut Against Gun Violence.

A Closing Night Party will take place on Oct. 12 with the world premiere dance of a new work by Movement Art Is, commissioned by the Quick Center for the Arts.

In addition to the exhibit, Ferrara released a coffee-table book entitled "Guns in the Hands of Artists," which features artwork from the show along with essays, whose authors include U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Richard Ford, and Grammy Award-winning rapper Lupe Fiasco.

"The content was to create moderate, sensible conversation about the issue of guns and gun violence using the book as a format," Ferrara said. "This can be shared in classrooms, offices and living rooms across America."