

Dunne, Susan. "Artists #UNLOAD in Fun Exhibition at Fairfield University," *Hartford Courant*, 26 June 2018.

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Artists #UNLOAD In Gun Exhibit At Fairfield University



William Villalongo's artwork fuses a baby doll head onto a gun. It is part of the exhibit "#UNLOAD: Guns in the Hands of Artists."
(William Villalongo)

If you give guns to artists, what would they do with them? The answer: They create art that comments on the never ending escalation of U.S. gun culture.

An exhibit at Fairfield University — “#UNLOAD: Guns in the Hands of Artists” — is a collection of artworks made with weapons accumulated in New Orleans in a gun buyback program. The exhibit originated in the 1990s, led by artist Brian Borrello and gallery owner Jonathan Ferrara, and has been remounted and is traveling nationwide. Mary Himes and Helen Klisser During brought the exhibit to Connecticut. The two are co-founders of unloadusa.org, a nonprofit organization that uses and encourages artistic expression to open dialogue about gun culture.

Himes, the wife of U.S. Congressman Jim Himes (D-4th District), grew up in Canada, in a house where guns were owned. Her father and brothers were duck hunters.

“I’m not opposed to all guns in any way, but it’s fascinating to me to try to understand American gun culture,” Himes says.

A large percentage of artists in the exhibit have personal experience with firearms, Himes says.

“Forty percent of the artists are gun owners and 40 percent have been impacted by gun violence. We want to foster inclusive conversation among owners, safety advocates, Republicans, Democrats, independents, students, adults. We need to broaden the conversation to include people we really haven’t been talking to. A gun-safety advocate, talking to other gun-safety advocates, doesn’t get us anywhere.”

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She began her gun advocacy after the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre.

"I joined the board of Connecticut Against Gun Violence. It was hard work but very gratifying and led to better laws at the state level. On the federal level, we haven't made any progress at all. It's tremendously frustrating," she says. "I felt like I couldn't keep doing the same thing over and over again hoping for a better result. Someone described that as the the definition of insanity."

So she got involved in activities separate from the political arena where her husband works.

"The political world is totally polarized and toxic. It's difficult to have thoughtful, respectful conversations in the political realm," she says. "The realm of the arts brings diverse people together to have tricky and challenging conversations. We hope we hear each other out, form a consensus, lead to positive change."

In the exhibit, artists use the bought-back guns and work them into a variety of media — drawing, sculpture, photography, found-object installations — to comment on the astronomical body count of gun violence as well as commenting on guns themselves.

The exhibit's co-founder, Ferrara, inserted a rifle into a stone, a la King Arthur, and called it "Excalibur No More." His working material wasn't a decommissioned gun but a firearm he bought himself, and he admits owning it was exciting.

"Before inserting the shotgun into the rock, I knew I had to go shoot the shotgun, otherwise it would not be an authentic experience," he writes. "I started shooting and I must say it was a total rush ... adrenaline flowing, heart pumping, sweat rolling down my face. The sheer power of the gun scared me and excited something within me at the same time."

However, tragedy is the overriding theme of the pieces on exhibit. The most horrifying pieces in the show connect gun culture with children.

John Schuerman's installation has a teddy bear at a child's table, where sits a broken handgun painted in primary colors. Above the table is a drawing of a house. He relates a story that took place in the house.

"My neighbor's 5-year-old son found a loaded handgun in the laundry basket and shot himself dead," Schuerman writes. "His mother's screams were the loudest things I've ever heard come from a human."

The piece has a tragically ironic title: "Plaything."

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A photo of a child pointing a gun skyward was taken by her father, Marcus Kenney, who owned the gun. "She was playing with the pistol and pretend-shooting into the air," Kenney writes. "It could have been a loaded gun."

Luis Cruz Azaceta's mixed-media is a carry-on bag holding a teddy bear, faux cocaine and a gun. Adam Mysock's artwork is embedded in six holes in the wall. On bullet casings in the holes, he created tiny portraits of six children killed by guns in New Orleans. Neil Alexander photographed his naked son holding a gun, then again when he was grown. The boy and man point guns at each other in the gallery.

William Villalongo welded a baby doll head onto the barrel of a gun, and placed the artwork on a soft red pillow. What is the artist treating so tenderly? The baby? Or the gun? The work is called "Sleeping on Reason."

Carey Mack Weber of the university museum said one work instantly draws in kids: a gumball machine by the collaborative Generic Art Solutions, filled not with candy but with plastic bubbles full of bullets.

Other artists are John Barnes, Rob Bechet, Andrei Codrescu, R. Luke DuBois, Margaret Evangeline, Rico Gatson, MK Guth, Deborah Luster, Bradley McCallum, Ted Riederer, Paul Villinski, Robert C. Tannen, Nicholas Varney and Sidonie Villere.

An affiliated exhibit, "Art of the Gun," will be at Artspace New Haven in October. At that exhibit, Connecticut artists will use decommissioned, broken-apart guns accumulated in a buyback conducted last December in Hartford. An aquarium full of Hartford gun parts sits at the entrance to the Fairfield exhibit, as a peek at the show to come.

#UNLOAD: GUNS IN THE HANDS OF ARTISTS is at *Walsh Gallery in Quick Center for the Arts at Fairfield University, 1073 North Benson Road in Fairfield, until Oct. 13. Related events: unloadusa.org.*