

I.M.A.G.I.N.E. PEACE NOW



The Innovative Merger of Art and Guns to Inspire New Expressions of Peace Now

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FOREWORD

Michael McMillan

Associate Curator

Fuller Craft Museum



"...the end goal of "I.M.A.G.I.N.E. Peace Now" is not only to advance common sense firearm policies, but also, for the promotion of peace."

American society has prospered through a shared belief in hard work, the potential for upward mobility, and a deep-seated philosophical and emotional commitment to the core principle of personal liberty. However, events in the country today demonstrate that societal peace and personal safety are not inevitable byproducts of a commitment to freedom. In reality, the country struggles to accommodate peaceful discourse with regard to the spectrum of moral, social, and political perspectives competing against one another in American society. As a result, citizens often voice their contentions and fulfill personal agendas through the callous brutalization of their neighbors and authorities.

The most notable manifestation of the assault on personal safety has been the epidemic of gun violence. "I.M.A.G.I.N.E. Peace Now" is a timely place marker to reflect on this challenging state of affairs, as the metalsmithing community has rallied to push back the darkness precipitated in American society by pervasive violence and the wanton disregard for human life. That said, the end goal of "I.M.A.G.I.N.E. Peace Now" is not only to advance common sense firearm policies, but also, for the promotion of peace.

The moving content of this ambitious project emerged from the creative flames lit by the 1996 exhibition "Guns in the Hands of Artists." Organized at Positive Space Gallery in New Orleans by artist Brian Borello and gallery owner Jonathan Ferrara, the show featured artists who ingeniously reworked decommissioned street weapons (attained through a city of New Orleans buy-back program), to respond to the savagery carried out with guns in the mid-1990s.

News of their artistic accomplishments was documented by the media and ultimately highlighted in the New York Times. The NYT article came to the attention of trauma surgeon Matthew Masiello, S.W.A.T. Commander Lieutenant Phil Dacey, and attorney (now judge) Derwin Rushing. Dacey was the head of the guns buy-back program for the city of Pittsburgh, while Rushing's wife Darlene was the head of educational programming at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, where a metalsmith named Boris Bally had been a former instructor. With this web of connections in place, these three individuals moved forward with Bally in an endeavor meant to echo the success of "Guns in the Hands of Artists."

Through the Pittsburgh Metals Society, the Carnegie Museum of Art, and the enthusiastic support of others, the exhibition "Artists of a Different Caliber" opened at Carnegie Mellon University's Hewlett Gallery in 1997. The organizing and jurying committees were composed of an influential mix of artists and curatorial figures in the crafts and decorative arts. In 1998, this showcase of accomplished technical and conceptual metalsmithing would also make its way to the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts in Racine, Wisconsin.

Tragically, the gun violence situation in America has only escalated since these exhibitions. The killing of students at Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook Elementary School, police-related shootings in Missouri, Minnesota, and Louisiana, and group-targeted killings in Orlando and Charleston have demonstrated that gun violence is a reality for individuals of every skin color, sexuality, religion, and socio-economic status. Boris Bally has recognized these heartbreaking circumstances, and "I.M.A.G.I.N.E. Peace Now" is his grand response. It will both challenge and entice viewers at East Carolina University and the Society of Arts and Crafts in Boston. It is fitting that the updated conversations encapsulated in "I.M.A.G.I.N.E. Peace Now" are again expressed through metalsmiths because they have the capacity to create these original objects of weaponry, as well as the skills to rework them for artistic purposes. Furthermore, this exhibition is pertinent for a field that has seen emotionally charged narrative content exemplified in greater complexity over the last 20 years.

Recognizing both the social context and the development of the project, the artists, jurors, curators, and publication designer of "I.M.A.G.I.N.E. Peace Now" explored this imperative topic with a balanced mix of sincerity, enthusiasm, and accountability. The hard work and collaboration that produced this exhibition were done in a manner reflective of the peaceful discourse the contributors hope to see adopted in American society to resolve this national problem.

ESSAYS

THE GUN AS MATERIAL

Ian Alden Russell

Curator

David Winton Bell Gallery

Brown University



"The artists selected for this exhibition know all too well the qualities, functions, and implications of guns as a material and a force in society, and their works demonstrate a deep sympathy with the pain guns continue to inflict on communities throughout the world."

Reflecting on the process of rendering his iconic mobiles, American sculptor Alexander Calder once said, "A knowledge of and sympathy with the qualities of the materials used are essential to proper treatment."¹ Penned over seven decades ago, these words are eerily present in the works presented in "I.M.A.G.I.N.E. Peace Now." The artists selected for this exhibition know all too well the qualities, functions, and implications of guns as a material and a force in society, and their works demonstrate a deep sympathy with the pain guns continue to inflict on communities throughout the world.

Firearms are not inert media. They are neither paint nor canvas, neither paper nor pencil. As mechanisms, tools, and manufactured objects, they rely on a broad and twisted ecology of industries, legislators, lobbyists, government operatives, and marksmen. The artists included in the exhibition celebrate a contorted optimism – bending, warping, shattering, and transforming the form and, perhaps, the function of guns.

Nancy Fouts inverts a Spanish-made J. Cesar automatic pistol, replacing the pistol grip with a wooden pipe bowl and adding wood, feathers, and beads extending from the barrel to become her work "Peace Pipe". In "Checking the Cost of Gun Violence", Harriete Estel Berman implicates a revolver in a statement of accountability, becoming the handle of a check-writing machine processing the cost of mounting deaths from gun violence in America. Red ink leaks out, blood pools, amid a scatter of bullet casings. A direct gesture of challenge and resistance to the norms of guns in American life, Hoss Haley's sculpture "Pinch" presents a Colt Police Special rendered inert by a C-clamp pinching the barrel shut. Johanna Dahm and Johanna Stierlin's collaborative work "Hand in Hand" juxtaposes an inverted World War I- and II-era military pistol and a wax cast replica painted in skin tone and adorned with human hair. Using the technique of moulage – the art of creating mock injuries to train medical or military personnel – the work perhaps prompts the question of whether the gun has been injured by the application of humanity to its form.

This exhibition is indebted to the National Rifle Association, countless Senators and Representatives, companies such as Smith & Wesson, police departments across the country, the branches of the armed forces, and all those who take up firearms against their fellow humans. Without their tireless efforts and sacrifices to perpetuate the economics of gun manufacture and gun use, none of the artwork in this exhibition may have been possible.

¹ Alexander Calder. 1943. A Propos of Measuring a Mobile, Unpublished Manuscript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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ESSAYS

Jillian Moore

Metals Artist



"Through the process of creative disarmament, these new objects can pursue multiple avenues of discourse – eroding, recontextualizing, and dismantling the totemic role of the gun in American culture. We have to start somewhere."

UNMAKING

We think of metal as such an inviolable material. Along with "stone," we use "bronze" and "iron" to describe the technological advancement of civilizations. All of our worldly possessions made of metal will last long past our more organic bodily expiration date. We commemorate things that are fleeting, experiential, and sentimental with objects made of metal to try to tether them to the material world, making them somehow more tangible. Slip a great grandmother's ring on your finger, put an antique spoon in your mouth, hang an old horseshoe over your door, and you'll experience an existential grounding. That's why there's a potency to metalsmithing as an art practice. The cutting, forging, and casting of metal is so deeply pleasing because it imparts this power to the maker. There is deep satisfaction in the crunch of a sawblade through sheet metal and the grinding rhythm of the file – because metal does not take suggestions readily. It must be persuaded to lend its weight to your purpose, to bend or stretch or shine.

Because of this, I understand what is so seductive about the weight of a gun in the hand.

And because of this, I have a profound resentment for the employment of this material I love for an undeniably malignant purpose.

Guns are prescribed for the various cowboy afflictions of inferiority, braggadocio, and rage. We use the phrase "America's gun problem," as though it were something that just happened to us. But the dangerous conflation of liberty and weaponry is a congenital condition that dates back to our bloody birth as a nation.

How do we even begin to approach something so intractable?

Each maker and metalsmith in "I.M.A.G.I.N.E. Peace Now" was given a gun to take into their studio, to perform the symbolic ritual of neutering an implement of violence, to commit themselves to the act of "unmaking." They have persuaded these objects that were once guns to become other things. It is a first step in demystifying and disempowering them. Through the process of creative disarmament, these new objects can pursue multiple avenues of discourse – eroding, recontextualizing, and dismantling the totemic role of the gun in American culture. We have to start somewhere.

SONYA CLARK
Earthbound
Thread, gun
Wrapping
6" x 4" x 2"
Photo: Taylor Dabney



We smelt the metal from the earth, harness its malleability and shape it into a design that seems to yield power. But, that power is false. It only serves to bring our bodies back to the earth.