

Mary Himes and  
Helen Klisser During



The **A**RT of  
**CONVERSATION**

How two women are using art to encourage civilized discussion about gun safety



Deactivated guns acquired at a gun buy-back program in Hartford partially funded by #UNLOAD. The decommissioned gun pieces were brought to Artspace, New Haven for the “knolling,” where they were arranged by a studio assistant of Tom Sachs, a contemporary artist born in Westport.

**WE AMERICANS ARE CONFRONTED WITH TWO ANTAGONISTIC REALITIES: WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO KEEP AND BEAR ARMS—GUNS BEING A CORE SYMBOL OF OUR LIBERTY—AND WE HAVE A GUN VIOLENCE PROBLEM THAT NO AMOUNT OF CHILDREN'S BLOOD WILL INDUCE THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS TO ADDRESS. SO WHAT DO WE DO? WE ARGUE. AFTER EVERY MASSACRE, DEMOCRATS PRESS FOR NEW GUN CONTROL LAWS AND REPUBLICANS COUNTER WITH ASSERTIONS OF THEIR USELESSNESS. "THE ONLY WAY TO STOP A BAD GUY WITH A GUN," GOES ONE POPULAR GUN RIGHTS POSITION, "IS WITH A GOOD GUY WITH A GUN." WHO IS RIGHT? WHAT WOULD REDUCE THE KILLING WHILE PRESERVING THE SECOND AMENDMENT? UNFORTUNATELY, ANSWERS HAVE BEEN IN SHORT SUPPLY SINCE 1996 WHEN REPUBLICANS IN CONGRESS, BACKED BY THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION, EFFECTIVELY SHUT DOWN GOVERNMENT RESEARCH INTO GUN-DEATH PREVENTION. JAY DICKEY, THE ARKANSAS REPUBLICAN WHO LED THE EFFORT, CHANGED HIS MIND AS GUN KILLINGS MOUNTED. "RESEARCH WILL LEAD TO A SOLUTION," HE SAID IN 2015. "[GUN VIOLENCE] IS AN INSIDIOUS SOCIAL PROBLEM THAT WE HAVE IN AMERICA, AND IT'S GETTING WORSE, IN MY OPINION."**

**W**e do know that tough gun laws work in other developed countries, such as Germany, where gun ownership is high and gun crime is remarkably low. After mass shootings in 2002 and 2009, horrified Germans spoke with a unified voice in favor of restrictive gun laws that include a national gun registry and psychiatric testing. But unity of opinion never materialized here, not even after Sandy Hook, where in 2012 twenty children and six adults were murdered by a lone gunman armed with a semiautomatic rifle and two semi-automatic handguns. In the aftermath of Sandy Hook, President Obama called on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to resume studying gun violence, but Congress hindered that directive by drawing the purse strings tight. (The CDC did manage to produce one report, but research has not continued.) In 2015 House Speaker John Boehner defended the lack of appropriations with the dubious semantic argument that “a gun is not a disease.” The CDC also studies traffic deaths, and nobody complains that a car is not a disease.

So we argue to the usual stalemate—on Facebook and Twitter, in the news media, at dinner tables, in the halls of Congress.

How, then, do we proceed? Two Fairfield County women, Mary Himes of Greenwich and Helen Klisser During of Weston, want to reframe how we talk about guns. As things stand, we talk about guns in terms of politics, as inevitably we must; in doing so, Mary says, we fall into the usual “boxing match,” in which people trot out their arguments and return bruised to their corners. But what if we looked at guns through the lens of art—what if art could stimulate fresh angles of approach to this most divisive subject? In the stubbornly optimistic view that it can, Mary and Helen have created #UNLOAD: Arts Trigger a Conversation, a vigorous little foundation that puts on art exhibits, plays, dance and spoken word performances, poetry slams, and children’s art workshops, among other events.

“Our hope is that by bringing the conversation into the realm of the arts, we are providing a more welcoming space, less for debate than for conversations and listening,” Mary says. “And hopefully, we can come to consensus.”

“With art, it’s open to interpretation,” adds Helen. “It’s not hostile.”

“We’ve had Republicans reach out to us and say they want to get

involved,” Mary notes. “There’s a silent majority of Americans who are gun owners, possibly Republican or Independent, who have felt for a long time that they are not welcome in the conversation that the gun safety people are having. We need people to feel heard.”

The women know there are limits to what they can do. “We’re not trying really hard to reach out to survivalists, with an arsenal in their home,” Mary says. “So we are not getting the trolls—yet.”

## ANGER INTO ACTION

We’re sitting in Helen’s Weston living room—a bright, airy space decorated with abstract art—as the aroma of baking bread drifts in from the kitchen. Hung on a nearby wall are Helen’s striking photographs of Haiti, which she took shortly after the catastrophic earthquake of 2010. “I’ve always been interested in art and social

consciousness,” she says. Helen is the New Zealand-born daughter of Dutch parents who founded a popular artisanal bakery based in Auckland (her father, Johan, survived the Holocaust by hiding out in Amsterdam less than a mile from where Anne Frank was keeping her diary).

In these parts, Helen is an arts powerhouse, having cofounded the Connecticut Arts Council and served as gallery director of the Silvermine Guild Arts Center in New Canaan and as artistic director of the Westport Arts Center. She remains a curator and an advisor to private collectors.

Mary’s life has long straddled art and politics. A native of Montreal, she graduated from McGill University in Montreal and from Parsons School of Design in New York, where she studied environmental design; later she worked in retail-design and magazine publishing. She is married to Jim Himes, who has represented our corner of the state in the U.S. Congress since 2009. “My family is a family of duck hunters,” she says, “so I grew up with guns in the house. I’m not opposed to all guns in any way.” After Sandy Hook, Mary joined the board of CT Against Gun Violence, an advocacy group that has played a role in getting legislators to pass new gun laws—laws that have expanded the list of banned assault weapons, banned high-capacity ammunition magazines, and established universal background checks. “Connecticut really has led the country in creating sensible legislation,” Mary says.

**AMONG THE MOST DISTURBING  
PIECES IN THE SHOW IS ADAM  
MYSOCK’S “THE LAST SIX,  
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THE SHEETROCK—WITH THE  
TINY FACES OF CHILDREN  
PAINTED ON THEM.**

**opposite page:** Artists of all ages who attended a workshop at Artspace, New Haven, were invited to create new artwork using parts from decommissioned firearms collected in an #UNLOAD-funded gun buyback in Hartford. The final exhibition, #UNLOAD: Pick up the Pieces will be presented at the Ely Center for Contemporary Art. **top row:** Natalia Maria Padilla Castellanos, Jahmane West, Margaret Rolke **second row:** Christian Ayala, Darcy Hicks, Dave Coon **third row:** Katie Heinlein, Miggs Burroughs, Kim Weston **fourth row:** Kobe Randolph, Christina Spiese, Raven Von Kohler

But at the federal level, the stalemate has endured. The great post-Sandy Hook effort, launched by senators Joe Manchin, Democrat of West Virginia, and Pat Toomey, Republican of Pennsylvania, was a modest bill to strengthen background checks. It failed—despite a range of polls showing that 90 percent of Americans favor just the kind of background checks that Manchin and Toomey proposed. “When there are that many Americans who feel strongly about a piece of legislation and it doesn’t pass, the legislators aren’t hearing them,” Mary says. “At that point, I just felt frustrated about the lack of progress—and I felt you can’t keep doing the same thing over and over and hope for a different outcome.”

Connecticut seemed particularly fertile for #UNLOAD, given its history of gun manufacture and (alas) gun massacre, not to mention its love of the arts. “But I realized that I have absolutely no professional expertise in the area of exhibits,” Mary says. “And I knew Helen During would be the perfect partner.” Even so, the dynamic duo got shut out early on. Their goal was to mount an art exhibit with guns as the theme—following on a now historic exhibit called Guns in the Hands of Artists, first put up by a pair of New Orleanians, artist Brian Borrello and artist-gallery owner Jonathan Ferrara, in 1996. “We went to MoMA, we reached out to the Wadsworth, the Aldrich—nobody wanted to touch it,” says Helen.

“Too toxic,” Mary says. “That was three or four years ago, and for whatever reason, they weren’t ready.”

Not long after the Las Vegas massacre of October 1, 2017, Mary and Helen approached Peter Van Heerden, executive director of the Quick Center at Fairfield University, about putting on a new iteration of Guns in the Hands of Artists. He said yes. (Though the Quick Center’s Walsh Gallery was booked solid, he agreed to open it for the summer, when it’s usually closed.) #UNLOAD: Guns in the Hands of Artists will run through October 13, so there’s still time to visit. “Unlike a lot of colleges these days, Fairfield University really embraced a very difficult conversation,” Mary says, noting that the university held panels on gun issues in conjunction with the exhibit. “As Jesuits, they see the value of rigorous discussion.”

“It’s a very serious show,” Helen says. “But you won’t leave weeping. You’ll leave feeling you have a voice.”

“A key point about the exhibit,” Mary adds, “is that 40 percent of

the artists are gun owners and forty percent have been impacted by gun violence.”

So what kind of art are we talking about? Several pieces are constructed with decommissioned guns. In “Epitaph,” artist Paul Villinski has taken an old shotgun and attached aluminum butterflies to it. Villinski’s artist statement that accompanies the piece makes clear where he stands: “Guns fundamentally do one thing: destroy life—take something away. Art does the opposite.” This guns-into-art idea echoes the Biblical ideal, set forth in Isaiah, of turning swords into plowshares.

A piece that young viewers gravitate to, assembled by Matt Vis and Tony Campbell, is a vintage gumball machine that dispenses 9-millimeter bullets in little plastic casings, like prizes. Jonathan Ferrara’s “Excalibur No More” consists of a 12-gauge shotgun driven into a

boulder, like the storybook sword. The idea concerns the breaking of a cycle of violence: This weapon will stay put. But before Ferrara stuck the gun into the stone, he took it to a range in order to fully engage with the gun experience: “I started shooting,” he writes in a statement accompanying the piece, “and I must say it was a total rush.”

Among the most disturbing pieces in the show is Adam Mysock’s “The Last Six, Under Six, Murdered by a Gun in the Sixth,” which at first glance seems to be a series of random bullet holes in the gallery wall. But when you peer close, you see the bullets themselves lodged in the sheetrock—with the tiny faces of children painted on them.

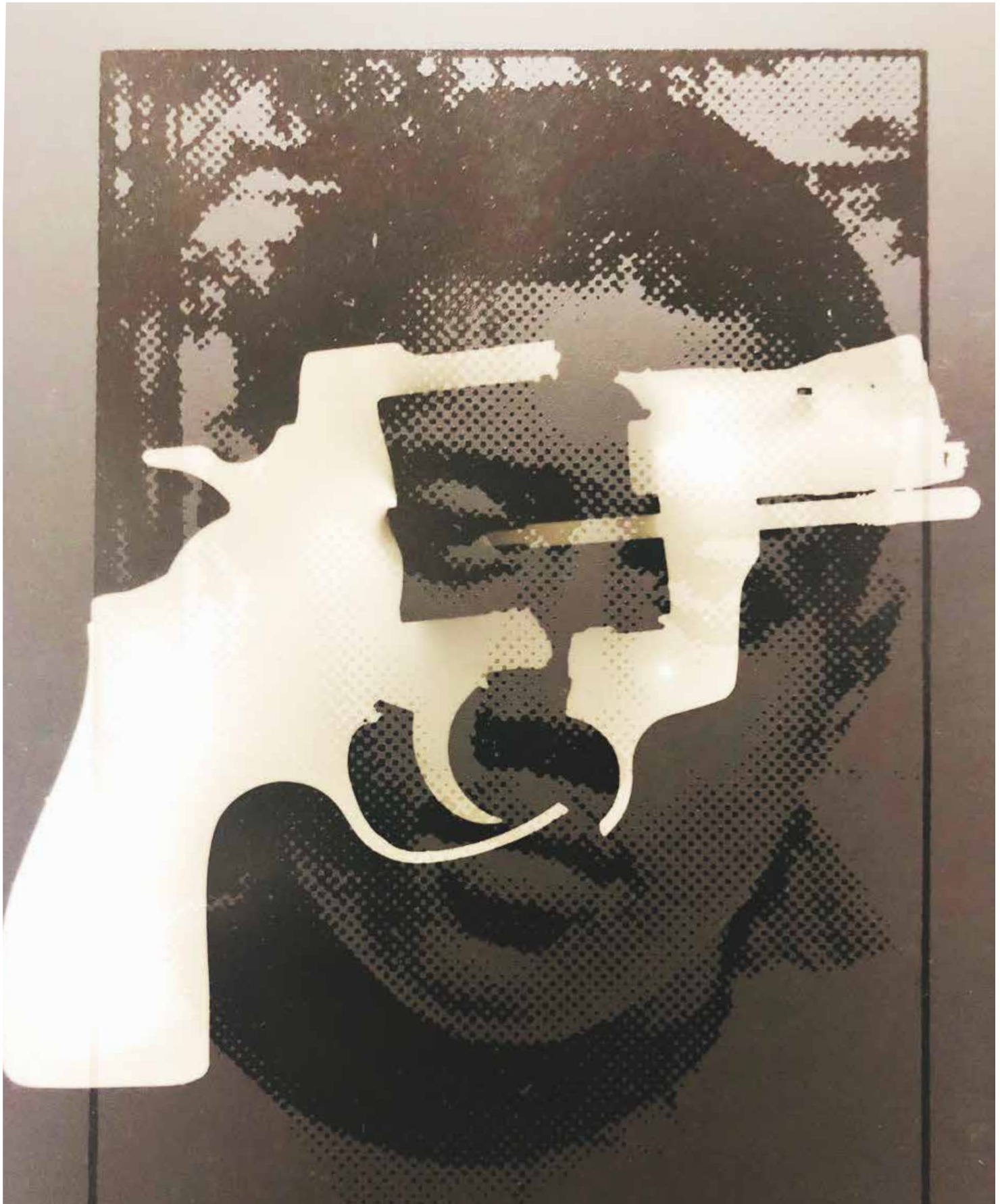
Guns in the Hands of Artists was actually the second show that #UNLOAD sponsored.

The first, a lively one-nighter in March called Up in Arms, took place at artist Lee Milazzo’s capacious studio in Stamford. Lee and his wife, Cindy, owners of Samuel Owen Gallery of Greenwich and Nantucket, curated the exhibit of some twenty pieces, seeking work that would be open to interpretation. (Shepard Fairey’s “Gun Mandala,” for example, is a lovely patterned target—but since a mandala traditionally represents the cosmos, one might imagine that violence itself is in the crosshairs.) Still, Lee doubted whether the two hundred attendees would talk constructively about guns, as Mary and Helen hoped; he foresaw instead a roomful of vocal gun-control people “and then some pro-gun people, sitting quietly, sipping a cocktail, who’d then get in their cars and say, ‘Man, I can’t believe all those liberals.’”

But the exhibit had a novel feature—a platform that allowed viewers to text their responses in real time to three display monitors. »

**“WE’VE HAD REPUBLICANS REACH OUT TO US AND SAY THEY WANT TO GET INVOLVED,” MARY NOTES. “THERE’S A SILENT MAJORITY OF AMERICANS WHO ARE GUN OWNERS, POSSIBLY REPUBLICAN OR INDEPENDENT, WHO HAVE FELT FOR A LONG TIME THAT THEY ARE NOT WELCOME IN THE CONVERSATION THAT THE GUN SAFETY PEOPLE ARE HAVING. WE NEED PEOPLE TO FEEL HEARD.”**





COURTESY OF THE JONATHAN FERRARA GALLERY



**opposite page:** Generic Art Solutions' silkscreen "One Hot Month," from the #UNLOAD: Guns in the Hands of Artists exhibit  
**top:** #UNLOAD: Guns in the Hands of Artists exhibit at Fairfield University Art Museum, Walsh Gallery  
**below:** Artist Marcus Kenney's "Girl with a Gun," 2014 Archival pigment print

"I would say about 75 percent of the comments were anti-gun," Lee says. But there were also viewers who quoted Clint Eastwood. "There was an immediate awareness of different perspectives on the same works," Helen remarks. Lee noted that in Fairfield County people tend to be guarded about their political opinions "and never really drill down to the point. But here," he says, "I felt we really had a conversation without getting in anybody's face. It's amazing how this topic speaks to people."

Helen says that audience reaction is critical to #UNLOAD's mission, as it is to art in general. "It's never just about a picture on the wall. It's about audience response, participation, discovering what that image is about. Sure, it can be about the pure aesthetic. But for me, it sings once there is audience engagement."

### OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES

Until recently, young voices had gone mostly unheard. Then, on February 14, a troubled teen opened fire at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killing fourteen students and three staff members. The classmates of the dead spoke out, and did so with a moral force that led to actual change—stiffer gun laws in Florida and elsewhere (though nothing, again, at the federal level). #UNLOAD has taken care to include children's voices, through art workshops conducted by artist Jahmane West and artist-visual literacy specialist Darcy Hicks. (Hicks' brother, Tyler, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist who has captured some of



GIRL WITH A GUN IMAGE COURTESY OF THE JONATHAN FERRARA GALLERY

## #UNLOAD: UPCOMING

Where to continue the conversation

### RIGHT NOW

#UNLOAD: Guns in the Hands of Artists, an exhibit at the Fairfield University Art Museum, Walsh Gallery in Fairfield, through October 13.

### OCTOBER 11

#UNLOAD: Pick Up the Pieces, art made from or inspired by decommissioned guns, presented in partnership with Artspace. At the Ely Center of Contemporary Art, New Haven, through November 11.

### OCTOBER 12

A dance performance commissioned by the Quick Center for the Arts will debut at the closing night party for #UNLOAD: Guns in the Hands of Artists at 7 p.m. in the Quick Center. For tickets, 203-254-4010 or email [boxoffice@quickcenter.com](mailto:boxoffice@quickcenter.com). Ticket includes cocktails and dance party.

### NOVEMBER 1

#UNLOAD recommends: *Thousand Pines*, a play by Matthew Greene, at the Westport Country Playhouse. The drama, premiering at the Playhouse, explores family grief in the wake of a school shooting. Runs through November 30.

### TO BE ANNOUNCED

An #UNLOAD-sponsored night of storytelling; and perhaps a night of poetry.

For more information, visit [unloadusa.org](http://unloadusa.org)





**above:** Opening of #UNLOAD: Aiming Higher, a teen art exhibit at the Blends Gallery in Bridgeport: Congressman Jim Himes, Mary and Helen, Darcy Hicks, #UNLOAD's director of education programs and #UNLOAD artist and partner, Jahmane West • Semi-automatic from the Hartford gun buyback program



**above:** #UNLOAD director of education programs, Darcy Hicks, (standing, third from right) and artist, Jahmane West, (standing in yellow) with teen students installing #UNLOAD: Aiming exhibit



**above:** Hartford Deputy Police Chief Brian Foley with Helen and Mary, picking up decommissioned gun pieces acquired from an #UNLOAD-funded gun buyback program in Hartford • #UNLOAD supporters from Westport at the March for Our Lives rally in Washington, DC.

the most memorable war images of our time.) “All school children are affected by this,” Helen says. “All school children have lockdowns. It’s not just areas of urban violence.” At a workshop the previous day, a thirteen-year-old named Lily had made a painting of a girl entering school. We see the back of her head and the smoky color she’s headed into. It’s titled, “Warning: Possible War Zone Ahead. Hazard.”

“These students, they have all sorts of stories,” Helen continues, scrolling through her photographs of the workshop. “His grandfather was shot dead in Mexico ... Her father died a month before she was born—shot dead at a bar in Bridgeport.”

“I think stories are really critical to what we’re doing,” Mary says. “People aren’t persuaded by facts, right? People are persuaded by narrative—and then you weave in the facts.”

Helen says, “Even yesterday, seeing these kids open up and respond with their stories by making art—it might be a drop in the bucket, but it makes a difference.”

Among the spoken-word events that Helen and Mary have in mind are a night of storytelling modeled on the Moth Radio Hour, bringing together, for example, a gun owner, an ex-gang member, an emergency room doctor to tell their true gun stories. They plan as well to hold grassroots events in people’s homes, “mini-Moths” that would prompt conversation, and art nights in which a curator would present works for discussion. “One of the goals for #UNLOAD,” Mary says, “is to create a blueprint here in Connecticut and export it to other states.”

But what can art really do, given the national psychology? “Our nation was born at the end of a musket,” historian Walter Isaacson writes in the “Guns in the Hands of Artists” catalogue. Guns run through our lore, from the backwoodsmen and the Wild West outlaws of old America on up through the Dirty Harrys, Die Hards, Missions Impossible and other pleasurable violent dramas that Hollywood produces. A gun is self-reliance, it’s potency. (“All you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun,” said D. W. Griffith.) “There’s this hero

mythology in America—the individual hero who will take on the bad guys and solve the problem,” Mary says. “The gun is the perfect implement. It allows the hero to exist and succeed.”

Art has reflected these things—Warhol’s guns are “sexy, sleek, sculptural,” Helen points out—but increasingly the art of the gun has turned darker, reflecting disturbing realities that the artists clearly want us to think about. (Among those realities: our gun murder rate is about twenty-five times higher than the rate of other developed countries.) The poet W. H. Auden suggested that art can’t do much

to effect change: “Poetry makes nothing happen.” Helen and Mary disagree. “A dear friend of mine who is a major art collector and philanthropist said precisely that”—that art can’t change things, Helen says. “It annoys and disappoints me. And then I think, ‘You know what? You can think that, and you can do nothing.’ But I keep sending him pictures of #UNLOAD events. I might be able to turn him around.”

Art doesn’t change things with the speed of a lightning strike, Helen and Mary note, but art does last as a kind of collective truth in great works like Goya’s “Disasters of War” series and Picasso’s “Guernica.” Closer to our own experience are the protest songs of the sixties and Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, whose minimalist design provoked furious

debate (critics called it “a black gash of shame”) before it came to be acknowledged as a masterpiece, and a healing one at that. These works impart something we need to know or feel. They charge the air. They get people talking—and that’s what #UNLOAD is really all about.

“Painters painting, writers writing, people speaking—these are ways, through the arts, of just loosening up that knot. Because, at the moment, we are in a knot,” Helen says. “If you’re a sailor, if you pull too tight on a knot and you keep pulling on it, it’s never going to undo. You have to loosen both sides of the knot, right? Somehow you have to gently loosen it, and I think the arts can do that. They have that magic.” **G**



Gun components that artists used to create artwork that will be on exhibit at the Ely Center of Contemporary Art in New Haven October 11 through November 11

**“IT’S NEVER JUST ABOUT A PICTURE ON THE WALL. IT’S ABOUT AUDIENCE RESPONSE, PARTICIPATION, DISCOVERING WHAT THAT IMAGE IS ABOUT. SURE IT CAN BE ABOUT PURE AESTHETIC. BUT FOR ME, IT SINGS ONCE THERE IS AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT.”**

**—HELEN DURING**

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