

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO

Gallery 400 (MC 033)
College of Architecture and the Arts
400 South Peoria Street
Chicago, Illinois 60607-7034

Arresting Images

"Taking Aim at Weapons"

by Fred Camper

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ARRESTING IMAGES at Gallery 400, through September 30

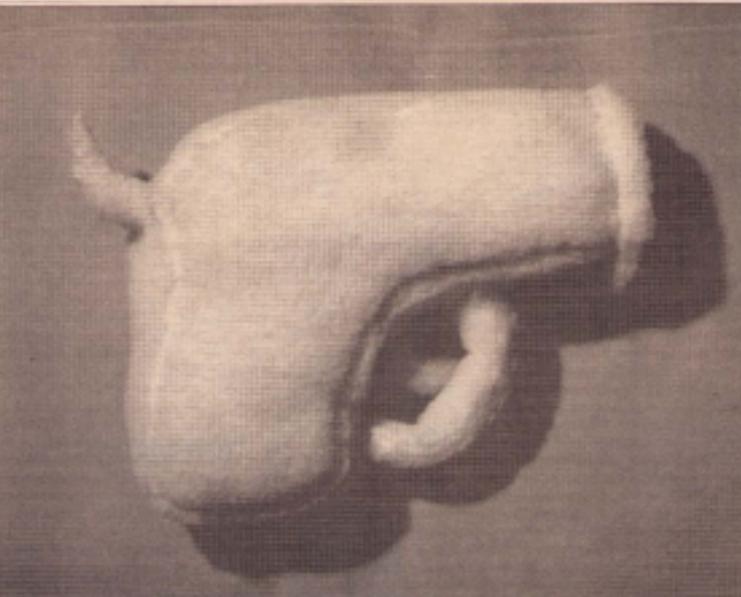
By Fred Camper

TAKING AIM AT WEAPONS

I approached "Arresting Images," a show described by Gallery 400 as "dealing with the use and abuse of weapons in our society," with trepidation. Art that engages current political and social issues tends to take predictable, even boilerplate positions. Would anyone expect an exhibit on weapons to include works that are pro or anti-violence? Not that I'd want the gallery equivalent of a slasher film, but we know weapons are abused in our society; what more can artists tell us?

As it turns out, plenty. Many of these 35 pieces by 23 artists are complex and thought provoking. Most of the best pieces acknowledge a fascination—sometimes the artist's own—with guns, or violence, even while condemning it. This is appealing to those of us who subscribe to the myth of Pogo's immortal aphorism: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Carrie Karla Indick sought diversity, and she found one photographer, Nancy Floyd, whose subjects in an ongoing series, "Stopping Power," are proud women gun owners. Carolyn Seal, *Smash and Win*, .357 Magnum, and Smasher shows a smiling woman holding a large gun in a honey-licking living room, dog at her feet, TV and fireplace behind—sewing this reminds us that guns are accepted parts of many homes and lives. In a written statement visible on the wall, Seal declares that she's comfortable with



her gun and is ready to use it against an intruder. Some might cite statistics that guns in homes are far more likely to kill family members than criminals, but the photo and statement accurately represent a familiar American attitude.

When other artists here depict guns, they often try to debase their potential for injury, transforming them into something else or absurdly covering them up. Oddly, this approach can create an aesthetic contradiction: guns' natural projective power is set against the artists' con-

cerns for them. Bradley McCallum in *Adversary* encloses a handgun (which he obtained from the New Haven police) in a block of Lexan, a transparent material similar to Plexiglas. Printed on one side of the block is the mournful statement of a woman whose son was killed, and on the other are the words of the man charged with the murder, who speaks of the thrill of shooting, of the "adrenaline running through you." By positioning the gun between the two texts, McCallum declares it an object carrying diametrically different meanings for different people.

In *Vinyl Gun and Vinyl Rifle*, Victor Oroton preserves what appear to be guns encased in vinyl carrying cases that at least temporarily eliminate their threat. But each gun's shape, clearly visible through the vinyl, still projects into the surrounding space, as one's eye follows the direction in which the barrel is pointing. John Arndt goes further in obscuring guns' power: he's encased a gun in carmine. Describing *Gun* in a statement available along with other artists' statements of intent in the gallery office, he says he purchased a handgun "from a neighborhood youth. That night I slept with the gun beneath my mattress. The next day I went to my studio and embedded the gun in a block of fresh cement." *Gun* shows no trace of a weapon; instead it sits inertly as the

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gallery floor, almost devoid of force, asserting no directionality at all. Annetta Kapon also defuses guns' potency in *Stuffed Guns*, two gun-shaped fabric sculptures that look very much like furry children's toys; they have triggers, but their barrels are stuffed with more fabric. They could be taken as a wish that all guns were so fuzzy and harmless, or as a comment on violent "his" and "hers" toys, since one is baby pink and the other baby blue.

In *Shotgun* Ochoa takes a radically different approach, making the power of guns visible by showing what seem to be the effects of an actual shotgun blast. What is apparently the inner mechanism of a shot-

gun is mounted on one wall, and on a nearby wall, directly in the line of fire, are a large hole and many smaller abrasions, an almost beautiful forest of marks; spent shells lie on the floor beneath. More viewers than might care to admit it will wish they'd been there for the "action" (Ochoa in his statement speaks of "simultaneous attraction and fear"). Art traditionally has used symbolic and representational codes to comment on reality; but like many of the other artists here, Ochoa apparently feels that such indirect approaches are insufficient for the reality of a shooting. The "arrestless" direct *Shotgun* introduces a disturbing reminder of the power of guns into the genteel, white-walled gallery setting.

The strongest works in "Arresting Images" combine direct invocations of destructive power with the familiar artistic strategies of displacement and ironic distancing, revealing our culture's contradictory attitudes toward violence. Jodi Darby's *Exploding Children's Toy* is a fury teddy bear in what looks like the

standard plastic packaging—except that wires are visible in the bear's front, and transparent plastic in its back reveals more wires and a stick of "dynamite" (actually chalk wrapped in red tissue paper). The teddy is identified as "Boomer" on a label Darby designed herself; it also includes diagrams from physics books presumably related to the toy's "operation." By presenting a classic cuddly gift as a bomb, Darby suggests a sickness at society's core; in her statement she speaks passionately about parents who kill their children in our "throw-away-no-deposit-return country."

Davis & Davis dramatize domestic violence in *Tearful/Earful*, part of a series called "Modern Romance" in which this husband-wife team photograph themselves in posed situations. This photo shows Scott Davis in profile yelling into the ear of Denise Davis, who's slicing an onion; she has tears streaming down her cheeks. One thinks immediately of spousal abuse, yet the onion and the woman's straight-ahead gaze suggest

that the man isn't really upsetting her—that she's manufacturing her tears. This seems a metaphor for the emotions people fake, and in fact the "tears," which are too regularly spaced to seem real, are applied glycerin, further removing the scene from actuality. The effect of this artifice is finally a bit like that of Kapon's furry guns: in the Davises' postmodern treatment, violence is defused to the point of silliness.

Similarly, Ian Pollock and Janet Silk turn bullets into flowers in *Bouquet*. Photographs of an exploding bullet, fired through gelatin meant to simulate human flesh, are mounted within a large red rectangle painted on the wall. The bullet, a Starfire

Hollowpoint, has a peeled-back head that looks like a flower in bloom; at the same time this work, like Ochoa's *Shotgun*, is directly related to actual acts of violence: the number of photographs equals the number of people murdered by guns in Chicago this year. Since photos are added to the wall regularly as the number of deaths rises, what appears to be a decorative design is actually a gruesome body count.

The show's wild cards are two works titled *Weapon* by Gary Lang. These truncheonlike rods of black rubber (one of which consists of two phallic shapes connected by a chain) have aluminum spikes protruding from their ends; to view them is to think of torn flesh. But Lang does not attempt to reduce or contain their threat, nor does he seem ambivalent about them. They have the power of African fetish objects—or of S&M torture devices. Spike projecting in all directions, these works present themselves proudly, with no apologies. They're derived from an actual weapon, a spiked baseball bat Lang made to protect his loft; but clearly he also likes these powerful reminders of the pleasure violent thoughts can evoke.

Four large photographs by Anne Rowland helped clarify the exhibit for me, tracing our fascination with weapons to its cultural source. In each case Rowland's final print is made from a negative of a photo of a

classical Greek sculpture taken from a book and combined with other negatives of shots of photos or drawings. *Nike With G.I. Joe Arms and Accessories* shows a stone Nike with photographically added mannequin forearms holding guns. The armless Artemis in *Artemis With Grenade* has hands of white dotted lines, one

about to throw a grenade. Red lines have been added to *Amazon Backwards on Horse* to form the outlines of two arms grasping a pistol in firing position. These works reminded me that the ethos of individual heroism in classical Greek sculpture, which inspired Roman sculpture and the Renaissance, remains at the root of our culture. Rowland's humorous, intentionally crude additions are oddly perfect outgrowths of these fragmentary works: her add-ons underline how these figures project themselves aggressively into the space around them. Her works recall the way that so many other pieces here reach into the surrounding space, and the way that violence begins: as a proud assertion of the primacy of self.

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