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The Curator Archiving Gun Violence Through Art

Seven years after Susanne Slavick's exhibition *Unloaded*, the curator continues to update a Facebook page dedicated to artworks and texts that examine the impact and proliferation of firearms.

Jasmine Liu



Floyd D. Tunson, "Hearts and Minds" (1993-1995) (image courtesy the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center at Colorado College)

In 2015, Susanne Slavick, an artist, curator, and professor of art at Carnegie Mellon University, organized *Unloaded*, a group show of over 22 artists. The purpose of the exhibition was to probe the culture of widespread access to guns and its consequences. Some of the works were explicit about their subject matter: Everest Pipkin's "162 Free Guns," for instance, was a book aggregating every free "gun" that could be downloaded from the creative commons online in May 2017, including a model gun that could be 3D-printed and a laser gun from a video game. Nina Berman photographed the "Come and Take It" rally in San Antonio in 2013, where hundreds of gun owners protested a local ordinance that banned guns in public parks by proudly and openly displaying their weapons in patriotic gear. Mel Chin arranged eight AK-47s into the shape of a Maltese cross in a 2002 piece entitled "Cross for the Unforgiven."

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Other works in the show were more abstract. Jennifer Nagle Myers's "[A City Without Guns](#)" (2015–ongoing) was an arrangement of found sticks, each of which appeared vaguely reminiscent of a gun. Slavick's own "Romantic Resistance" was an installation of 15 circular panels, each adorned with a bead from a pearl necklace and pierced by a bullet hole. The show ultimately toured 12 cities and collaborated with organizations such as [CeaseFirePA](#), [Moms Now](#), seven years later and as [gun violence soars in America](#), Slavick continues to update a [Facebook page](#) she created at the culmination of that touring exhibition, where she posts artwork, poetry, plays, and op-eds that are relevant to the themes she explored in *Unloaded*.

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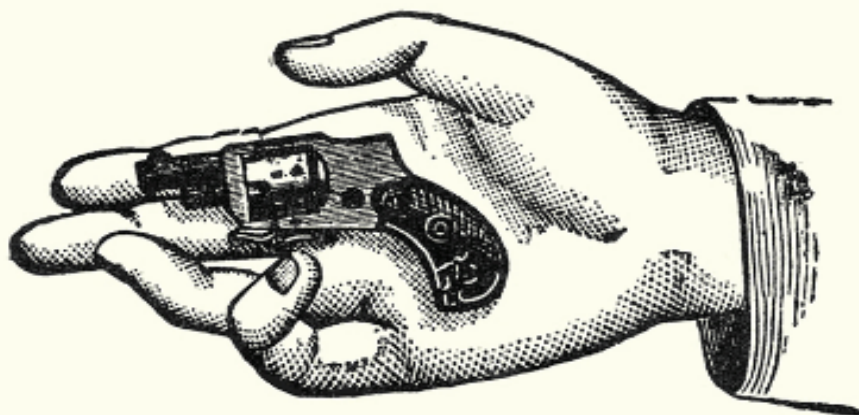
Susanne Slavick, "(Re)Setting Sights" (2002), screen prints on Stonehenge, 22 x 30 inches each (image courtesy the artist)

“I don’t know what else it takes to move us. Yes, these recent shootings have moved bipartisan legislation,” Slavick told Hyperallergic, referencing the [passage of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act on June 23](#). Among other things, that law will require more rigorous background checks for younger gun buyers and allocate funding for school safety. But it stops short of enacting gun control measures that many reform advocates have been demanding for decades.

“The measures that have been approved, while welcome, are just so inadequate, and so relatively indirect to the scale and nature of the problem, which is just generally that access to guns is too easy,” Slavick said.

A NEW MODEST
PROPOSAL
For preventing the
CHILDREN
O F
AMERICANS
From being a burden to
THE GUN LOBBY OR THE REPUBLIC
A N D
For making them defend themselves
with their own
G U N S.

By the Grand Old Party.



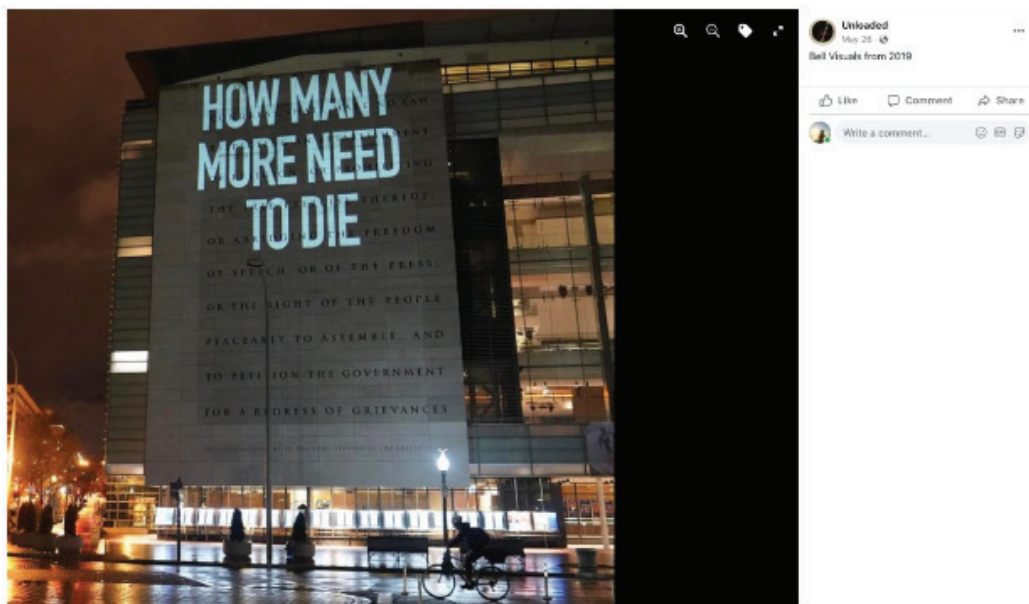
Detroit, Printed by R. Standfest
MMXXII

Ryan Standfest, *The Sleep of America Produces Monsters* no. 1: "A New Modest Proposal" (2022), letterpress, 8 x 5 inches, edition of 50 (image courtesy the artist)

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One recent image Slavick posted in late June comes from Ryan Standfest's series *The Sleep of America Produces Monsters*. The title is a play on both Francisco Goya's 1799 print "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" and the observation that "they call it the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it," attributed to George Carlin. Printed by letterpress, the off-white pamphlet modernizes Jonathan Swift's A Modest Proposal, an unrelenting satire of austere and dehumanizing attitudes toward the Irish poor published in 1728. In Standfest's version, it is a "modest proposal" not for "preventing the children of poor people from being a burden to their parents or country and for making them beneficial to the public," as Swift had it, but rather "for preventing the children of Americans from being a burden to the gun lobby or the republic and for making them defend themselves with their own guns."

A graphic shows a trigger-ready hand cradling a palm-sized pistol. Standfest's print suggests that Republicans and the gun lobby hold a malicious disregard for the lives of the American children comparable to English colonizers' indifference to rampant poverty and hunger in Ireland in the early 18th century — an indictment of a status quo in which the people come second to corporate interests and party politics.



A post on the Unloaded Facebook archive (screenshot Valentina Di Liscia/Hyperallergic via [Facebook](#))

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A grainier, almost spectral image on the page is an installation shot of Floyd D. Tunson's "Hearts and Minds," a monumental, multi-panel work made over multiple years in response to the police killing of the artist's youngest brother. The multi-media collage includes two Jasper Johns-esque targets at the center, buttressed by tondos of Black men and \$50 bills behind bars. After developing the central panel and showing it at a gallery in Denver, Tunson decided that he wasn't quite done with the piece. "I realized I felt like I had more to say," he recounted. Eventually, "Hearts and Minds" would grow to three times its original size, with more paintings and cutouts of skulls; bone, fabric, and cardboard bricolage; photographs; and renderings of the faces of Black men.

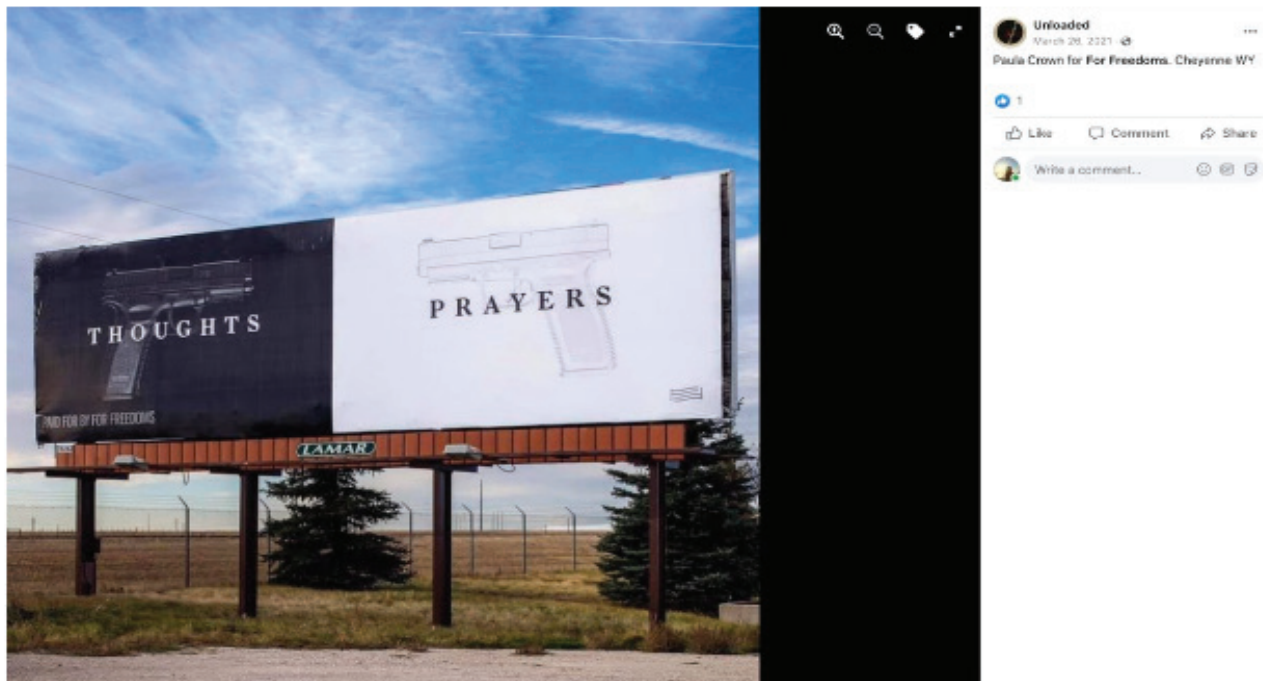
"Sadly, this is still relevant," Tunson said. "I could still add more parts to it. What's going on in society in relationship to this has not come to an end."



Mimi Smith, "Bang Bang" (1990) (image courtesy the artist)

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Mimi Smith's "Bang Bang," finished in 1990, is a visual representation of the statistic that someone in the United States dies at gunpoint every 16 minutes (the frequency has only risen since then). It's a clock face decorated with Art Deco-style gun barrels and Pop Art-yellow strips that mark the passage of every quarter-hour with the factual, serif pronouncement: "Bang, Bang, You're Dead." The work seems to have a Tarantino-like attitude to gun violence: It's rampant, it's a matter of fact, and it can even be made to look cool. But the ironic distance of "Bang, Bang" is an expression of Smith's revulsion to this contemporary social reality. "Guns are an awful horrible thing in this country. It makes me sick every time I hear of another incident," she wrote in an email.



One post shows artist Paula Crown's billboard for For Freedoms. (screenshot Valentina Di Liscia/Hyperallergic via [Facebook](#))

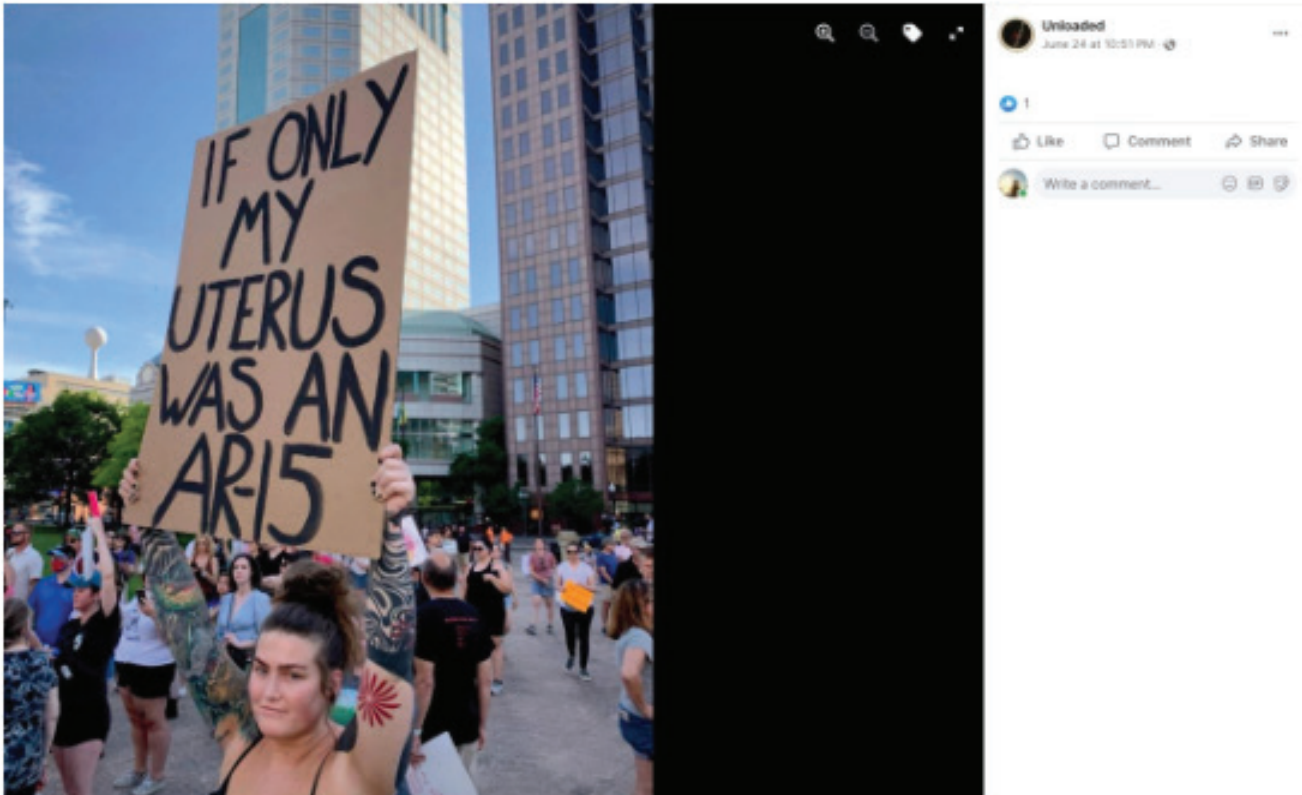


Arthur Simms, "Portrait Of An Angry Man With A Gun" (1992), rope, wood, glue, screws (photograph by Charles Benton, courtesy the artist)

Slavick also posts news articles, op-eds, and poems that touch on the alternatively banal and spectacular reality of gun violence in American life. An article from [Rolling Stone](#) marked 1.15 million deaths since the assassination of John Lennon in December 2019. "Enough of the gun, / the drama, and the acquaintance's suicide, the long-lost / letter on the dresser, enough of the longing and / the ego and the obliteration of ego," read a few lines from Ada Limón's "The End of Poetry" — originally published in the [New Yorker](#) and reposted by Slavick.

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On the day the Supreme Court officially delivered its *Dobbs* ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade*, Slavick [posted a photo](#) of a protester carrying a plain cardboard sign reading, “If only my uterus was an AR-15.”



A post from the day of the Supreme Court’s ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade* (screenshot Valentina Di Liscia/Hyperallergic via [Facebook](#))

Another recent repost Slavick made was of Kim Phuc Phan Thi’s opinion piece for the *New York Times*, [“It’s Been 50 Years. I Am Not ‘Napalm Girl’ Anymore.”](#) Thi, who was iconically captured fleeing a napalm attack in South Vietnam in 1972 by Associated Press photographer Nick Ut at the age of nine, wrote about the dual trauma and empowerment that photograph brought her. She also proposed, in the aftermath of the mass shooting at Uvalde, that it was perhaps time to take, and show the American public, more explicit photographs of the consequences of the ready availability of guns. Slavick says she has been thinking about this question a lot lately, as “horrible” as it is.

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“I want the show to last beyond its physical space and dates,” Slavick said of her growing digital archive. “It’s a way of extending the show to artists and ideas beyond what I can include as a freelance curator in a particular time and place. It’s a way of growing the community around the idea.”