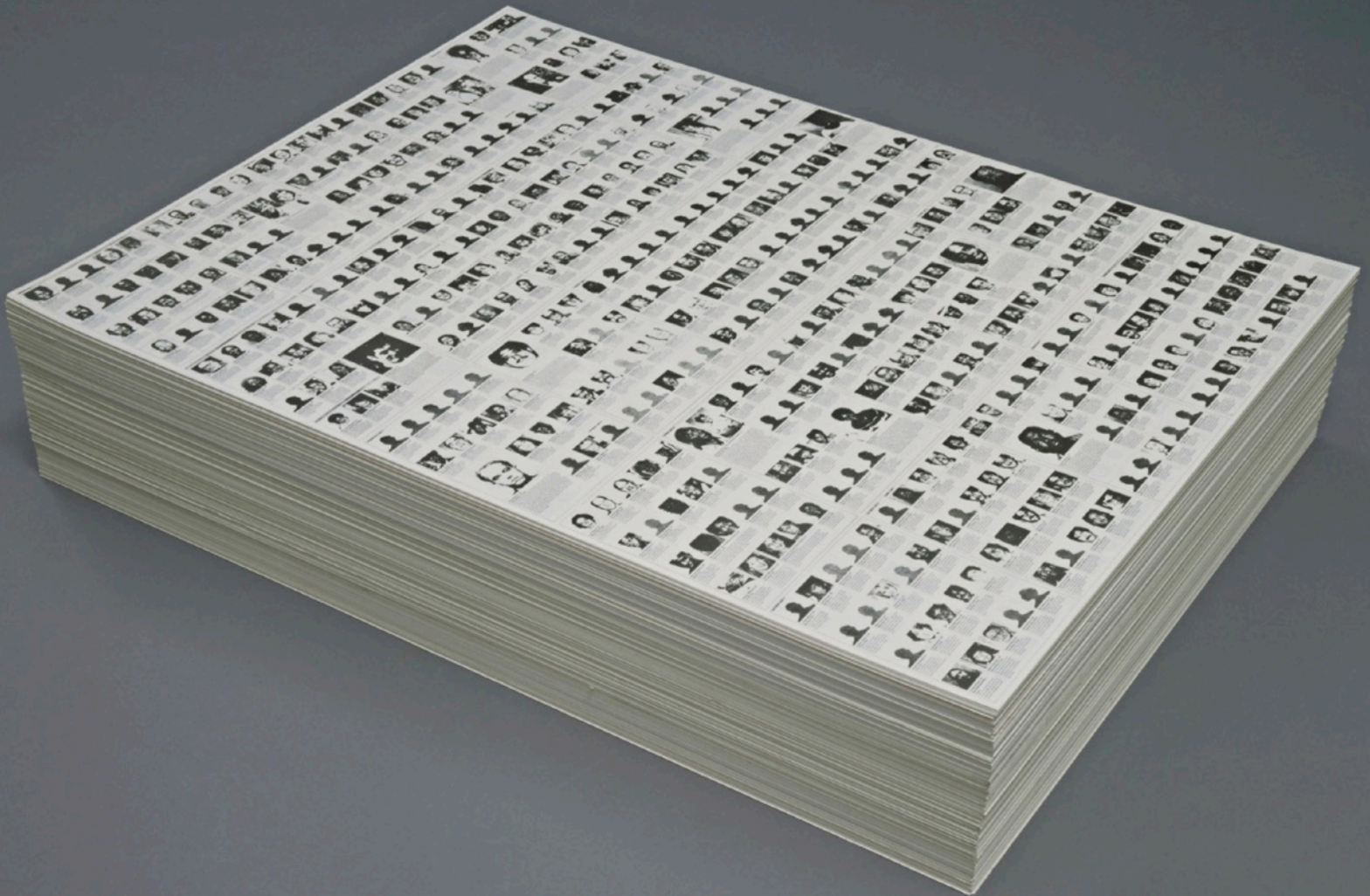


EDUCATION GUIDE

AMERICAN EPIDEMIC

GUNS IN THE UNITED STATES

September 10, 2021 — February 20, 2022



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (Death by Gun), 1990, print on paper, endless copies © Felix Gonzalez-Torres.
Courtesy of The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

This guide serves as a viewer supplement to the exhibition *American Epidemic: Guns in the United States* and can be used for engaging with the exhibition virtually or in person. The guide includes information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, classroom activities, and suggested readings. You may learn more about educational programs at the MoCP [here](#). To schedule a virtual tour of the exhibition or print viewing with your class, please visit [here](#).



Andres Gonzalez, *Dekalb, Illinois*, 2019

The MoCP is supported by Columbia College Chicago, the MoCP Advisory Board, the Museum Council, individuals, and private and corporate foundations. The 2021-2022 exhibition season is sponsored in part by the Philip and Edith Leonian Foundation, the Efroymsen Family Fund, and the Illinois Arts Council Agency. *American Epidemic: Guns in the United States* has been generously supported through the National Endowment for the Arts.



INTRODUCTION

Gun deaths and injuries in the United States are a major public health crisis. Every year about 40,000 Americans are killed by guns. Yet, gun violence is not singular. It encompasses many types of violence—suicide, domestic assault, mass shootings, accidents, police violence, community violence—that are exacerbated by the ease of availability of firearms. *American Epidemic: Guns in the United States* features ten artists who examine the role guns play in American culture, structural violence, systemic racism, and an increasingly militarized police force. This exhibition not only explores the complex array of issues that arise with the increased presence of guns in American society, but also advocates for an intersectional understanding of how gender, race, and militarism affect the larger conversation around gun control in this country.

ARTISTS FEATURED

Carolyn Drake (American, b. 1971)

Nancy Floyd (American, b. 1956)

Andres Gonzalez (American, b. 1977)

Stephan Foster (American, b. 1992)

Deborah Luster (American, b. 1951)

Zora J Murff (American, b. 1987)

Felix Gonzalez-Torres (American, 1957–1996)

Hank Willis Thomas (American, b. 1976) and
Kambui Olujimi (American, b. 1976)

Renee Stout (American, b. 1958)

Opposite: Andres Gonzalez, *Founders Memorial Library*, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois, 2019

DEFINING AN AMERICAN EPIDEMIC

The term “epidemic” is often used when referring to widespread disease or illness, as we hear in conversations around the global Covid-19 crisis. However, the term can be used more broadly to apply to a variety of quickly spreading threats to public health. In this exhibition, the curator uses this term to draw attention to the rising amount of gun deaths and injuries in the United States.

In the US there are approximately 120 firearms per 100 residents. To put this figure into perspective, the next two top civilian gun-owning countries are Yemen, with 52 firearms per 100 residents, and Serbia with 39 firearms per 100 residents. Our two closest neighbors, Canada and Mexico, have 34 and 13 guns, respectively, per 100 residents.¹ It is estimated that currently 39 percent of American households contain at least one gun. And research shows that a higher gun prevalence is associated with a higher rate of gun deaths and injuries. A gun in the home makes homicide three times as likely, suicide up to five times as likely, and accidental death four times higher than in non-gun owning homes. These, among many other reasons, are why Julius Thibodeaux Jr, strategy program manager at Advance Peace, calls gun violence “the forgotten pandemic.”



Introductory Questions for Discussion

- What immediately comes to mind when you think of guns in the United States? How do you feel physically and emotionally when approaching this topic? What influences might have shaped your perceptions before coming to this exhibition?
- What are some ways that guns in the United States might play a role in your life, directly or indirectly?
- In 2020–21, there was a significant increase in gun sales in the United States. What might be some of the motivations behind this surge in civilian gun sales?

1. BBC News, “America’s Gun Culture in Charts,” April 8, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41488081>.

Key Theme

Guns and American Culture

The ubiquity of guns in American culture is explored in the work of many artists in this exhibition. **Renée Stout**, **Hank Willis Thomas** and **Kambui Olujimi** explore how US children are indoctrinated into gun culture from birth through toy weapons that are marketed to young boys especially. Also considering violence as a backdrop to our national psyche is **Felix Gonzalez-Torres**, who created an installation of stacked posters titled “Untitled” (*Death by Gun*) in 1991 after reading a *Time* magazine article that chronicled deaths by firearms in the US during a one-week period. His stacks of papers in a gallery setting showcases the sheer volume of gun deaths in the United States.



Renée Stout, *Baby's First Gun*, 1998

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHT

NANCY FLOYD (American, b. 1956)

Nancy Floyd's *She's Got a Gun* project began with the purchase of her own handgun in 1991 to feel closer to her late brother who aspired to be a gunsmith before he was killed in Vietnam. After being introduced to her local gun community by visiting shooting ranges and reading, “Women & Guns,” magazine, Floyd began to photograph other woman gun owners in an unsentimental and objective way. **Floyd's straightforward approach to photographing her subjects and the texts she pairs them with illustrate the varied relationships between gun owners and their firearms.** The individuals in Floyd's pictures represent a variety of gun users who use their firearms for professional, recreational, and self-defense purposes. The subject's expressions and positions help to articulate their relationship to their gun, and how this object may play a key role in their own identities as women.



Nancy Floyd, *Gail with .45 caliber Colt Gold Cup National Match*, 1994

Questions for Looking and Discussion

- Consider the way Floyd frames her images. What do you notice about the information in the background of the images? How does the setting of each portrait inform the way you understand the person portrayed?
- What assumptions might you be making about the people and their relationship to their firearms, based on their body language and facial expressions?
- Nancy Floyd's images are displayed alongside statements from the subjects of her photographs. In this image, the statement reads, “It's a shame that one has to break the law in order to protect themselves, but I'm willing to take that chance. If trouble comes to me, I don't intend to just sit there or lay there screaming 'help me.' I'm going to grab, as fast as I can, for my loaded weapon. And believe me, I have made up my mind that in order to protect my life I will shoot to kill.” Why might it be important to learn more about of people's relationship to their guns? Why might the curator of this exhibition choose to feature work from this perspective in the exhibition?
- These photographs were taken between 1993-2008. What has changed in the conversation around guns since this time—culturally or socially—that might affect the way that you read these images?

Key Theme

Guns and Power

An intersectional analysis of gun deaths and injuries in the United States is critical to understanding the complexities of the guns in the United States and how different communities are impacted. **Zora J Murff** and **Stephen Foster** both visualize how concentrated areas of violence are a result of decades of policies and institutions that were designed to cut off marginalized groups of people from services. From the topic of police violence to histories of neighborhood segregation, many artists in this exhibition consider the gun as a representation of vast American inequities.



Zora J Murff, *Implement*, 2019



Zora J Murff, *Intersection*, 2019

“By interweaving past and present, body and the landscape, my aim is to investigate how institutional and racial violence manifests and persists, and what role photography has played throughout.”

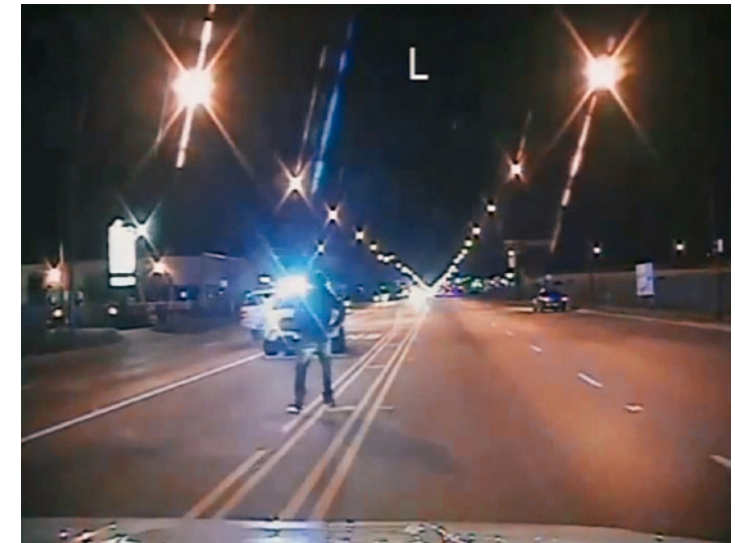
—Zora J Murff

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHT

ZORA J MURFF (American, b. 1987)

Zora J Murff creates work about complex histories of systemic racism and white supremacy in the United States in his series, *At No Point In Between* (2019). Inspired by the shooting of Laquan McDonald by police officer Jason Van Dyke in Chicago in 2014, Murff’s project exposes how cycles of oppressive systems lead to severe injustice.

Murff photographed in North Omaha, Nebraska—a place, like many American neighborhoods, where racist practices such as redlining have created a decades-long ripple effect and caused more BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) youth to be affected by gun casualties than their white counterparts.² Coined in the 1960s by sociologist John McKnight, redlining is a term used to describe the ways banks in the mid-twentieth century withheld investments in areas using demographics as a metric. This often meant that BIPOC and immigrant neighborhoods suffered disproportionate denial of services for no other reason than the skin color or nationality of the borrower.



Zora J Murff, *A point (4)*, 2019

Evidence of slow, structural violence that causes lasting harm to neighborhoods is reflected in Murff’s streetscapes of North Omaha. Images of boarded-up buildings and homes are paired with evidence of departed businesses and views of the highway that was deliberately built to disrupt the heart of the neighborhood, and which displaced hundreds of Black families in 1975. In one central image, Murff appropriates the image of Walter Scott running away from police officer Michael Slager moments before he was killed by the officer. Murff was a social worker before he took on photography, and his images are about the layers of systems beneath what we see. He states: “We’re inside of systems that do really nasty and tragic and brutal things to people. On some level, we all keep participating in them. What does it mean to participate in it and want to change it?”³

2. Everytown Research & Policy, “The Impact of Gun Violence on Children and Teens,” 5.29.2019, updated 1.8.2021, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/the-impact-of-gun-violence-on-children-and-teens/>.

3. Hodor-Lee, T. by A., Hodor-Lee, A., Photography by Zora J Murff, Murff, Z. J., 4, P. N., & 4, N. (2020, November 5). Zora J murff’s photography will Have you questioning your beliefs. Document Journal. <https://www.documentjournal.com/2020/11/zoraj-murffs-photography-will-have-you-questioning-your-beliefs/>.

Questions for Looking

- What do you see in each image? How does it make you feel?
- Consider Murff’s photographs of buildings and places in relation to his photographs of people. How would you describe the feeling of the portraits compared to the landscapes?
- What do you think the artist is trying to say through the combinations of portraits, landscapes, and photographs from archives?
- Ask students to consider their own associations or assumptions between guns and race in the United States. What might be some of the ways these perceptions are formed?

Key Theme
Guns and Power



Carolyn Drake, *The number of Americans killed by police officers in 2019, 2020*

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHT

CAROLYN DRAKE (American b. 1971)

Every year, police in America shoot and kill more than 1,000 individuals—a disproportionate number of whom are people of color. Inspired by a Washington Post article that reported the full number of people murdered by police in 2019, Carolyn Drake procured old police uniforms from eBay and cut them into small tiles. She then created this quilt comprising 1,004 fabric squares—one for each person killed by police that year. **Drake does not include names or specifics of the individuals killed, but rather lets the repeating swaths of fabric relay the vast number of victims of police brutality, their alikeness suggesting the victims' relative anonymity.** The quilt's rigid grid pattern contrasts with the unevenness of Drake's handiwork, adding a human touch to the institutional nature of the fabric and the quilt's gridded design, as she simultaneously undermines the symbolic power of the dark blue fabric by recontextualizing and destroying it.

Questions for Discussion

- What are your first impressions of the quilt? What words would you use to describe the way it makes you feel?
- What mood do the colors and textures convey?
- When and where do you normally encounter quilts? Why might the artist choose to make a quilt to address the complicated nature of violence and law enforcement?
- Carolyn Drake is a photographer but worked with textiles to create this piece. Do you think the artwork communicates an idea or story in a way that images cannot?

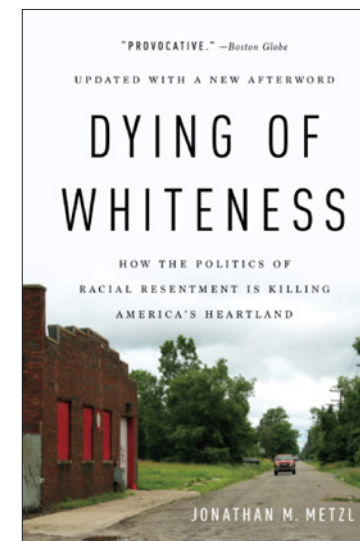
RECOMENDED READING AND PUBLIC PROGRAM

Dr. Jonathan M. Metzl

Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland, 2019

Jonathan Metzl is a Professor and Director of the [Center for Medicine, Health, and Society](#) at Vanderbilt University, a Psychiatrist, and the Research Director of [The Safe Tennessee Project](#), a non-partisan, volunteer-based organization that is concerned with gun-related injuries and fatalities in America and in Tennessee. Dr. Metzl will present a lecture on **Monday, October 4, 2021 at 6 p.m. CT in-person and live-streamed**. Metzl has provocatively asked, "Who gets to carry a gun in public? Who is coded as a patriot? Who is coded as a threat, or a terrorist, or a gangster? What it means to carry a gun or own a gun or buy a gun—those questions are not neutral. We have 200 years of history, or more, defining that in very racial terms."

To learn more and register, please visit <https://www.mocp.org/events/>.



Key Theme

The American Phenomenon of Mass Shootings

57 percent of today's teenagers say they fear a school shooting.⁴ Whenever mass shootings occur in schools, it typically generates intense—and fleeting—conversations about gun control. These tragedies draw the most attention from the media, even though they account for a very small percentage of deaths and injuries by gun. Nevertheless, the shootings seem to shock the country into a brief period of determination to reform gun laws, even if major policy changes do not materialize. Notably, a significant portion of schools in the US were temporarily closed in March of 2020 to prevent the spread of COVID-19. That month was the first March to pass without a school shooting since 2002, the year most 2020 high school seniors were born.⁵

4. Jill Rosenthal, E. G., SEIU and the Center for American Progress, Jarsulic, M., Weller, C. E., Reidmiller, K. K. and D., Christian E. Weller and Richard Figueroa, Sabini, D. B. and C., Roberts, L., Pathak, A., Maggie Jo Buchanan and Stephanie Wylie, Moh, V. N. and K., Buckles, M. I.-R. and M., Ives-Rublee, D. R. and M., & John Halpin, M. B. (n.d.). Homepage. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/>.

5. Sophie, S. (2020, April 14). March 2020 was the first march without a school shooting in the U.S. since 2002. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-first-march-without-school-shooting-since-2002-united-states/>.



Andres Gonzalez, *Norris Hall, Virginia Tech. Blacksburg, Virginia.*, 2019



Andres Gonzalez, *Columbine 1999 Senior Class*, 2019

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHT

ANDRES GONZALEZ (American, b. 1977)

Andres Gonzalez's project *American Origami* (2019) probes the cyclic problem of school shootings in the United States and their impact on communities and the nation at large. Originally created as a book, *American Origami* weaves together photographs, interviews, and forensic documents to examine the recurring tragedy of mass shootings and the lingering aftermath experienced by the communities in which they occur. Gonzalez started the project soon after the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut, which left twenty first graders and eight adults dead. For over six years Gonzalez visited seven of the deadliest school shootings in recent decades: Columbine High School (1999; 15 deaths, 24 injuries), Red Lake High School (2005; 10 deaths, 5 injuries), Virginia Tech (2007; 33 deaths, 23 injuries), Northern Illinois University (2008; 6 deaths, 21 injuries), Sandy Hook Elementary (2006; 28 deaths, 2 injuries), Umpqua Community College (2015; 10 deaths, 8 injuries), and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High (2018; 17 deaths, 17 injuries).

The project's title comes from the Japanese tradition of folding 1,000 paper cranes as a symbol of hope and healing in response to death and disaster. It also evokes ideas of repetition and transformation, appropriate for school shootings, which seem to continually occur. Gonzalez also includes texts of speeches given by US Presidents Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump immediately following mass shootings—public comments that reveal the difficulty of reconciling and finding comfort after such events, as well as the inadequacy of platitudes such as offering “hopes and prayers.” Taking particular interest in the memorial objects left at the scene by mourners, most of whom do not know the victims, Gonzalez contemplated the rituals around healing. For Gonzalez, the fact that most of the communities have catalogued and preserved the objects while keeping those archives entirely out of public view is an interesting parallel to how we try to paradoxically remember and forget these events. Similarly, the ordinariness and quietude of his unpeopled landscapes conceal the harrowing history they hold.

Questions for Looking and Discussion

- Do Gonzalez's photographs add anything new to the conversation around school shootings that you had not thought about before? Would you know these images were related to school shootings without reading about his work and only seeing the images?
- How do Gonzalez's images differ from images we see in the news about mass shootings? Why might he choose to keep his images minimal and without a lot of detailed information about the incidents?
- What do you believe are the root causes of school shootings? What solutions might we be able to put forth to create positive change?
- How often, if at all, do you think about this topic in your daily life?

For detailed information on the political back-and-forth on gun policy in the United States, please download the timeline [here](#).



Nancy Floyd, *Lily Mendoza with .380 Sig Sauer, On Target Shooting Range, Laguna Niguel, California, 2019*

DEEPER READING GUN POLICY AND THE SECOND AMENDMENT

The Second Amendment is the part of the US Constitution that addresses the rights of gun ownership in the United States. It ambiguously reads: “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” Whether that statement in fact guarantees the rights of individuals to bear arms or only individuals in militias is at the core of the gun control debate. At the time of the writing of the Second Amendment in 1791, militias were used commonly to protect from uprisings by enslaved people—further evidence of how deeply US gun policy and ideology is rooted in racism. Today, many Americans cling to the notion that a person’s right to bear arms is the greatest protection of their individual liberty and a safeguard of democracy. Yet no other democracy in the world protects any such right to the extent that the United States does, and the US remains much more reluctant to enact gun control legislation than other developed nations.

TAKE A STAND ACTIVITY

This exhibition is meant to highlight some of the many complicated nuances of gun ownership and to be a space where people can reflect upon their own feelings about the topic. The *Barometer: Taking a Stand on Controversial Issues* exercise was developed by [Facing History & Ourselves](#) as a teaching strategy for encouraging students to understand where they fall on difficult topics and how to engage in respectful dialogue with others who perhaps do not share in their beliefs.

In a room with a lot of space for movement, ask students the question: “Should we keep the Second Amendment—the right to bear arms—in the US Constitution?” Students should place themselves in the area they identify with. One side is a line for “yes” and the other side is a line for “no.” Students can also stand in the middle, closer to the answer they are leaning towards. Ask students to take turns on each side explaining their positions, citing specific data or studies when possible. Students are able to move from one area to the other if their position changes while hearing others explain their opinions or reasonings. End the exercise when all students have had time to speak and encourage students to consider whether or not their views shifted while hearing others’ perspectives.

For more detailed instructions, please visit <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/barometer-taking-stand-controversial-issues>

Closing Questions for Discussion

- Although it is impossible for any exhibition to delve into every issue relating to gun ownership and violence in the United States, the ten artists featured in this exhibition consider the implications of guns in our country through important historical, intersectional, and compassionate lenses. How might we look beyond gun violence to the human challenges that are behind the worst of what we do to one another? Is artmaking a way to encourage discussions on complicated topics such as these? What are some other ways?

Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in this Guide

VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

VA:Re7.2.K-12 Perceive and analyze artistic work. Visual imagery influences understanding of, and responses to, the world.

VA:Re8.K-12 Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work. People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

VA:Re9.K-12 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. People evaluate art based on various criteria.

VA:Cn11.K-12 Relate artistic ideas and works with social, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding. People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.

SOCIAL SCIENCES STANDARDS

SS.CV.1.9-12 Distinguish the rights, roles, powers, and responsibilities of individuals and institutions in the political system.

SS.CV.6.9-12 Describe how political parties, the media, and public interest groups both influence and reflect social and political interests.

SS.CV.8.9-12 Analyze how individuals use and challenge laws to address a variety of public issues.

SS.H.3.9-12 Evaluate the methods utilized by people and institutions to promote change.

SS.H.7.9-12 Identify the role of individuals, groups, and institutions in people's struggle for safety, freedom, equality, and justice.

SS.H.8.9-12 Analyze key historical events and contributions of individuals through a variety of perspectives, including those of historically underrepresented groups.

SS.H.11.9-12 Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.