My Dear Americans

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My Dear Americans

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Related Media

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Abstract

*My Dear Americans*

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*My Dear Americans* is a multimedia project that includes photographs, video work and interactive installations. The pieces in this project are in response to gun violence in the United States. This body of work is influenced by my perspective as a mother and as a Mexican immigrant living in the US for the last eight years. Through the use of multiple materials, I provoke the audience to think specifically about gun laws, white privilege and the effect of gun violence on children. This work draws on propagandistic artworks, and has been influenced by Felix-Gonzalez Torres, Jenny Holzer and activist artists and groups such as Barbara Kruger, The Yes Men and The Guerrilla Girls.
My Dear Americans, William Harris Gallery, April 2 – 19, 2019  
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My Dear Americans

I remember exactly what I was doing the moment I learned about Sandy Hook’s tragedy. In fact, all the residents of Newtown, Connecticut also remember what they were doing at that moment and refer to that day as 12/14, invoking another traumatic event worthy of flashbulb memories, 9/11.¹ Sandy Hook was my first encounter with the American “tradition” of mass shootings. I had moved here the year before to escape the war between drug cartels in Mexico but being no stranger to social violence did not prevent

me from worrying. Could gun violence ever touch me? The fear was familiar, but the uncertainty was different from what I was used to. It meant being wary of any random civilian with a gun, not just of gang criminals. However, as horrifying as it was, Sandy Hook’s shooting didn’t prevent me from sleeping at night, like the 2018 mass shooting at Parkland’s Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School did. There is an important difference; I became a mother in 2015.

Many of my works are a result of my concerns as a mother and as an immigrant. In “Mommy, what is this?” (2018), my son holds a fake bullet while making a sign with his hand. The sign could be thought of as a V for victory or the peace sign, but the presence of ammunition might make the viewer ask, “at what cost?” The 16 x 20 inches lambda transparency sits on a light box on the floor as part of a video installation. The decision to put it on the floor was because it creates a reflection, where the hand gesture can be appreciated upside down. This is a symbol for down-peace, which means disliking people for their actions. It’s similar to a thumbs down. By using a light box designed for advertising purposes, I intend for the work to feel promotional and propagandist. The bright backlit light box also highlights the illusory bullet. The plastic seam can be seen clearly in the image. I want people to consider whether laws are actually protecting them, or not. While in the state of New York there is legislation that does not allow fake weapons to appear real (i.e., it is against the law for stores to sell black replicas of handguns) the irony is that most states make it possible for an 18-year-old to buy an AR-15 rifle.

Mommy, what is this?, 2018, from the series My Dear Americans
According to *The Washington Post’s* ongoing analysis, more than 150,000 children have experienced school shootings since Columbine in 1999, and 30,000 children have been killed with guns since then in the United States.⁴ Shootings are the second leading cause of death in children, and the first cause of death among black children.⁵ “Guns are a complicated issue here,” is a phrase that I constantly encounter and why I created these reductive works, in an attempt to shred the issue into pieces. Jenny Holzer also works in a reductive style, as her source material are ideas that she presents using text. Her series “Truisms”⁶ is a series of one-line sentences sorted in alphabetical order that speak of a wide range of ideas, from “Abuse of power comes as no surprise” to “Don’t place too much trust in the experts” to “Fear is the greatest incapacitator”, Holzer’s “one-liners” appear as concise and clear statements that invite the reader to keep thinking about their meaning. Since the inception of this work in 1978, these “Truisms” have been presented sometimes as a group and other times as single sentences in outdoor projections, on LED screens, on posters and even on t-shirts. In an interview, Holzer refers to these as “one-liners”⁷, a term that might sound simplistic but that speaks of how one single idea can help us think in a different way.

In my piece “Extreme White” (2018), a 36 x 24 print on canvas hanging in the center of the wall, a white gun is photographed on a white background, which leaves little distinction between where the gun stops and where the white background begins. However,

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the object resists completely blending into its environment, as it dominates most of the frame and feels heavy. Furthermore, the gun has been painted with glow-in-the-dark paint, making the white background black and the gun electric green when the lights are off. The piece is labeled so that the materials used are available for the viewers to recognize, however viewers are unable to experience the work in darkness because the glow-in-the-dark paint is blocked by the gallery lights. The intention of my own “one-liner” is to offer the viewer the opportunity to scrutinize white privilege.

*Extreme White, 2018, from the series My Dear Americans*
Many times, white people are unaware of aspects that contribute to white privilege, because it is not disadvantage to them, however it is real and affects everyone. Since 1982 white males have been responsible for more than half of mass shootings in the United States.\(^8\) According to a study at Ohio State University by sociologist Scott Duxbury, the media is 19 times more likely to be sympathetic to a white shooter, and call him “mentally ill,”\(^9\) in comparison to black males who are immediately thought of as perpetrators, even in cases of self-defense or protection of others.\(^10\) “Extreme White” (2018) is a piece that might look obvious and simple, but it is also a piece in which the viewers are blocked the opportunity to appreciate all the characteristics it offers. By not allowing viewers to see how the work transforms but letting them know that it does, I give them a disadvantage, and trigger the audience to think about how white privilege feels like.

The United States is the developed country with the highest rate of deaths due to gun violence.\(^11\) There are 6 countries that produce half of the deaths by guns in the world, the US is the only developed country on that list\(^12\). Other developed countries have changed laws after tragic mass shootings. After the school massacre in Dunblane, Scotland in 1996, where 16 children were killed, the United Kingdom passed a ban on the ownership of all

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handguns. According to a 2013 article in CNN.com by Peter Wilkinson, this ban gave Britain “some of the toughest anti-gun legislation in the world.” In 1996, Australia banned rapid-fire weapons after a man killed 35 people in a tourist area in Tanzania. And just a few weeks ago, New Zealand’s promptly announce of a change in their gun laws, after the shooting that left 49 dead, is a reminder that when laws are not working, they have to be changed.

In the United States, 96 people die from gun violence each day, amounting to 35,040 each year. The mass shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999 with 13 killed, is usually remembered as one the of the worst gun related tragedies in the United States; however, it isn’t by far. Many more lethal mass shootings have occurred since then. Last year, 17 people, mostly students, were killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. In 2017, 58 were slaughtered at an open concert in Las Vegas, Nevada and 26 were murdered at a Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. In 2016, 49 at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida were shot. In 2012, 20 children and 6 adults were assassinated at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. In 2007, 32 were killed at the State University of Virginia, usually know as Virginia Tech Mass Shooting. And the list goes on.

In the installation “Template (96 die from gun violence each day in the US)” (2019), I wanted to show how lives are being treated as disposable, and how desensitized to gun violence we’ve become. This piece, which grows during its time in the gallery and requires the audience’s participation, is comprised of several stacks of 96 paper sheets each. The papers in the stack are redacted copies of an original condolence letter sent from President Barack Obama to the parents of a late soldier.\(^{17}\) I’ve modified the text as if it were a condolence letter sent to the relatives of a gun violence victim, with the stamped date of each day and interchangeable spaces for the names of the victim and the victim’s relative, and for the relationship to the victim and the victim’s pronoun. Obama was the president who fought for harder gun reforms but was blocked by Congress each time\(^{18}\). Guns are protected by the constitution within the second amendment, but it is something that the people of the United States could change, as other countries have done and proved successful. The header used in the template is reminiscent of the Presidential White House seals. It is in fact a modified version of a coin made in 1864, which was the first place that included the phrase “In God We Trust”.\(^{19}\) I’ve changed the phrase and the year, to “In Guns We Trust” and 1791, the year in which the second amendment was signed.


Dear [salutation] [first name] [last name],

We were deeply saddened to learn of the loss of your [relationship] [first name] [last name]. Our Nation will not forget [pronoun] sacrifice and we can never repay our debt to your family. A simple letter cannot erase the pain of losing a [relationship], but we hope you take solace in knowing that [pronoun] brave service to our second amendment exceeded all measures of selflessness and devotion to this country.

We pay tribute to [first name] not only as a guardian of our right to bear arms but also as the true embodiment of America’s spirit of service to a cause greater than ourselves. We offer our heartfelt sympathy and pray that God’s grace gives you comfort as you grieve. In life, your [relationship] was a shining example of all that is the best in our land. In rest, may [pronoun] find the peace we all seek.

Sincerely,

We the People

Template (96 die from gun violence each day in the US), 2019, from the series My Dear Americans

One stack of 96 letters is added to the gallery space each day of the exhibition. The installation starts with a few letters pinned to a calendar made out of corkboard tiles in the wall. During the opening night of the exhibition, the rest of the 96 letters of that day are distributed to the audience. It is their choice to participate by pinning up the letters or by
throwing them on the floor. Either way, the installation increases everyday with one stack a day to symbolize the 96 people who will die each day. As the exhibition continues, the paper piles up on the floor as the corkboard tiles become insufficient to hold it anymore. The audience is forced to step onto the paper sheets, which reinforces the idea of waste. By the end of the exhibition, the installation will have grown to 1,728 sheets, representing the amount of people who will be killed by guns in 18 days.

Installation of *Template (96 die from gun violence each day in the US)*, William Harris Gallery, April 2 – 19, 2019
Installation of Template (96 die from gun violence each day in the US), William Harris Gallery, April 2 – 19, 2019
“Template (96 die from gun violence each day in the US)” (2019) is in conversation with “Untitled (Death by gun)” by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who in 1990 presented a stack of printed posters containing the names and portraits of more than 400 people killed with guns during one week in May in 1989.20 The stack lay on the gallery floor and was replenished everyday during the installation. Gonzalez-Torres saw the richness of having the audience’s participation, which allowed the viewers to interact with the piece and to take a poster home. In this way the audience became another conduit to promote gun control. In an interview, Gonzalez-Torres recalls a quote from George Bernard Shaw: “Besides torture, art is the most persuasive weapon.”21 In my installation, the audience also interacts with the piece. By doing so, they must confront their civic responsibility knowing that each piece of paper represents one person who has been killed, while guns are protected by the constitution.

As an immigrant, I do not have the civic right to vote, yet my American son is affected by the decisions of other citizens. My foreign status informs my opinion about civilians’ use of guns. Still, I want my audience to remember that I also speak as a mother and that I’m concerned for the danger that my son is exposed to. In the video installation, “Your Fucking Right Is My Biggest Fear” (2018), what starts as a whisper turns into an outpouring of my deepest frustration. The self-portrait is composed by the audio of my voice and the single repeated phrase, “Your fucking right is my biggest fear.” The phrase moves, grows, shrinks and breaks in an attempt to mimic the emotion of my voice, an

action that is reinforced by the font, size and color of the text. I use grey for a whisper, red when I yell and blue when I cry. Fonts are bold when I’m angry and become thinner as I burst into tears. It is a call to people to step into the helplessness I feel every time there is news about children killed by guns.

The 95 seconds video is presented in a room where spectators can experience my fear as their bodies catch parts of the projection while moving around. A set of two projectors installed over pedestals and controlled by a touch screen laptop allows the video to be projected over opposite walls. The touch screen laptop has been installed in the back wall in order to force the viewer to walk across the room to hit play. The participation of the audience is an important aspect of this work; it is their decision to hit play, as it was my decision to immigrate to this country.

Installation of Your Fucking Right is My Biggest Fear, William Harris Gallery, April 2 – 19, 2019
In her book *Hold It Against Me*, Jennifer Doyle discusses affect in contemporary art, and raises an interesting question: “does an artwork represent feeling?” And if so, “whose: the artist’s or the viewer’s?” In this work I’ve created, I become exposed and vulnerable. The breaking of my sobbing voice also breaks the text phrase. All this affects the viewers, whom at the end become participants with their own emotions.

I’m an immigrant making a harsh criticism of the country that I have called home for almost a decade. I’m certainly not the first immigrant to become a vocal critic, and I’ll hardly be the last. In 1958, Swiss-American photographer Robert Frank’s influential photo book, *The Americans* offered a critical view of American society. Frank’s perspective as an outsider allowed him to find a portrayal that greatly differ from what Americans thought they represent. His Americans were lonely, melancholic, divided and seemed to have already given up on the American dream. Frank wasn’t interested in perpetuating a romantic depiction but in showing the raw and real struggles of the time. The name of my thesis project initially drew from Frank’s book, but I changed it to show my perspective and my concern for this country. I already fled from home once, this time I would like to stay.

In his book *America*, Jean Baudrillard calls America a “primitive society” in comparison to Europe and offers criticism and praise in a diaristic style. Baudrillard seems torn between admiring and criticizing the places and people he finds during his travels.

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around this country. Sometimes I also feel torn between love and despair. For many Mexicans, immigrating to United States is a dream come through. I grew up admiring the United States and what the American dream used to represent for me; however, now that I live here, I feel danger, violence and fear of death. It is hard for me to think of guns as protection, tradition and a civic right, especially when it means putting children’s lives at risk.

Installation of *Your Fucking Right is My Biggest Fear*, William Harris Gallery, April 2 – 19, 2019

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My exhibition has been planned to challenge the passivity of a gallery visit and to encourage audience participation. The goal of this involvement is to have viewers understand the ideas behind each work. By installing the works in a U shape and in a confined space, viewers become trapped in my perspective. Furthermore, each piece offers an opportunity for the viewer to have a different experience and to reflect on a particular idea related to gun violence. The first piece of the installation, “Extreme White,” is a piece in which viewers cannot appreciate all its characteristics. Audiences might try to block the light in the gallery with their hands, in order to visualize the effect of the glow-in-the-dark paint, but this action won’t be enough. The frustration they might feel because of this could relate to the frustration I’m showing in the video, and also with the frustration that arises
from the inability to stop the paper templates from growing. For its part, the bright light box "Mommy, what is this?" has the job of luring viewers into the video work, as it is installed in front of the entrance of the video installation.

My Dear Americans, William Harris Gallery, April 2 – 19, 2019
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The last piece of the exhibition is a postcard, that gallery visitors can use to mail their Elected Officials to advocate for gun control. The front of the postcard shows “Mommy, what is this?” (2018). The back of the postcard contains a short letter with the phrase “No more children should die from gun violence. I support gun control.”, along with fill-in-the-blank spaces for the names and contact information of them and of the elected official(s) they would like to mail the postcard to. A mailbox and the mail addresses of the senators and the representative of New York’s 25th District have been provided for reference. When the exhibition ends, I’ll put stamps and mail the postcards. I’m using the template strategy again, but in a hopeful way, by inviting the audience to join me in my activist efforts.

My Dear Americans, William Harris Gallery, April 2 – 19, 2019
These works are meant to be raw, confrontational and emotional like interviews with parents who have lost a child in a mass shooting. However, I recognize that representation will never be enough, because no piece of art will be able to successfully share the experience of losing a loved one. What I can do, however, is draw from the admiration I feel for all the parents who keep standing after losing a child due to gun violence and use my art to encourage audiences to advocate for harder gun reforms.

*My Dear Americans*, William Harris Gallery, April 2 – 19, 2019
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