

Weaponizing Peace

A new exhibit showcases art transformed from guns.

BY BRANDON YU

AFTER HER FIANCE was killed in an armed robbery in 2017, San Francisco-based artist Tsungwei Moo grieved in a specific, if unorthodox, way. She began creating, using the parts of guns.

It was a striking juxtaposition—weapons tainted by violence transformed into art. For Moo, it was a means toward hope, even healing. This summer, *Art of Peace*, an exhibit at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts that will feature one of Moo's works, aims to do the same. The show, a traveling program of the Robby Poblete Foundation, consists entirely of artworks made from the parts of dismantled guns.

"It's a tough topic," Susie Kantor, YBCA's associate curator of visual arts, says about the subject of guns. "People don't necessarily feel comfortable talking about it. But when you bring them this way through art, it kind of opens up that conversation."

Kantor references Columbine, the infamous school shooting that occurred two decades ago that seemed to usher in a new era of a country wracked by increasing tragedies involving gun violence. Soberingly, conversations and action around reducing gun violence have become more fraught and polarizing.

Art of Peace serves as a way in to a common ground, not only through the show itself, but also through the entire enterprise behind its mission. The YBCA presentation is the fourth iteration of the exhibit started by the foundation, which funds and facilitates gun buybacks in partnership with local law enforcement.

Following its inaugural show in Vallejo last year, which used guns from a buyback in Solano County, *Art of Peace* has quickly gotten legs. A subsequent exhibit took place in Oakland before word spread to Georgia, where there was a third *Art of Peace*.

The new show in San Francisco stems from a partnership with United Playaz, a nonprofit that has, for 25 years, worked with youth in the city to disrupt cycles of violence. The exhibit's pieces—featuring works by local guest artists that will be auctioned off—utilize all of the nearly 400 firearms collected last June by United Playaz.

"When I created the program, the intention was not just to confiscate and destroy," says Pati Navalta Poblete, the foundation's executive director and founder (she is also editor-in-chief of *San Francisco* magazine). "I really wanted the message to be about transformation and hope and awareness."

The mission is deeply personal for Pati. She named the foundation after her late son, who was shot to death during a robbery in 2014. For two years following Robby's death, Pati completely avoided Vallejo, her home for more than 30 years, and the site of her son's murder.

She suffered symptoms of PTSD and grieved through the writing of her memoir, *A Better Place: A Memoir of Peace in the Face of Tragedy*. But, eventually, she needed to return. "When something like this happens, the perpetrators, they've taken enough," Pati says. "They've already taken my son. They've taken the potential of what his life could have been. And to take away a place that I called home—it was too much." The foundation brought her back in hopes of preventing gun violence and bridging divides. Robby was killed by an illegally obtained gun that was resold on the streets. In cities that are reeling from gun violence, that tragic cycle can be difficult to address, even internally.

"It's a hard subject... because there's so much trauma," says Rudy Corpuz Jr., the founder of United Playaz. "And there's a lot of people in our community who feel really uncomfortable because of the Second Amendment, which I understand. I'm not against the Second Amendment. I am against senseless gun violence."

Corpuz references his own past, when robberies in which he took part would result in guns being stolen and used in other crimes. "One gun that we can get off the streets potentially can save the whole planet," he says. "But at the same time, one gun that kills a person can be the whole opposite."

In *Art of Peace*, that kind of immeasurable impact of loss and of what can be potentially saved manifests through deceptively moving works of art—such as "Return to Nature," a tree made of rifle stocks, bullets and shell casings. Poblete's goal is make *Art of Peace* a touring national exhibit that visits other major cities reeling from shootings—and a common ground for gun control and violence-prevention measures.

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From left: "Resurrection" by Natasha McCray and Shameel Ali; a detail of "Robby's Arc" by John Ton; "AHIMSA," a projector of peace activists, by Constantine Zlatev.



"Return to Nature" by artists Clody Cates and Gaige Qualmann

