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Ideas ricochet like bullets through Lucien Smith's 'Scrap Metal'

By ALICE THORSON
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Lucien Smith was 10 years old when the Columbine High School massacre took place in Colorado in 1999. He'd barely finished art school when James Holmes opened fire in a theater in Aurora, Colo., and Adam Lanza went on his rampage in Newtown, Conn.

Gun violence is the daily diet of Smith's generation — born in the years of the Gulf War and reaching maturity as American troops moved into Afghanistan and Iraq after the 9/11 attacks — and it's one of the most hotly debated issues of our time.

Some see guns as nothing but deadly. For others, including participants in the semiannual Knob Creek Machine Gun Shoot in West Point, Ky., guns are also a source of fun.

Remnants of the event are on view in Smith's exhibit, "Scrap Metal," at Bill Brady/KC.

Months ago, when Smith asked Brady to retrieve some of the objects used for target practice at Knob Creek, the artist envisioned the shot-up vehicles and propane tanks as art — readymades in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp.

Yet when Duchamp introduced a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool as art a century ago, he professed little interest in the aesthetics of these everyday items.

Smith's "readymades," in contrast, with their varied colors and patinas — at first glance the propane tanks could be easily mistaken for ceramic vessels — are notable for both their formal beauty and their visceral charge.

The power of Smith's sculptures stems from their balance of contradictions. They were "created" in a spirit of fun, but it is difficult not to equate their riddled carcasses with human bodies.

Ideas ricochet like bullets through this show. Displayed with the shot-up propane tanks and a rusted Chevy pickup, Smith's ink-jet print of an old MasterCard ad with the text, "It's a bit like saying please with a gun in your hand," speaks to a corporate-culture comfort level with guns that is now unthinkable in the aftermath of Newtown and the Trayvon Martin shootings.

American gun culture could not be further removed from the refinement of Japanese sumi-e ink painting, a gap Smith seems to bridge with his use of camouflage patterns to contain the sumi-inspired brushwork of his large paintings in the Brady show. Their splattered drops of black paint set up a formal resonance with the sculptures, echoing the random patterns of the bullet holes.

The paint splatters also bear similarities to the dots of watery foam in Japanese master Hokusai's woodblock print "Great Wave Off Kanagawa," which Smith has cited as an inspiration. The Hokusai influence can also be seen in the wavelike rhythms animating Smith's swaths of paint, applied with a broom.

Two of the large paintings are titled for Bible verses. Taken from the books of Ecclesiastes and Isaiah, their underlying themes of death and afterlife further bind the paintings to the violent array in the room. As surrogates for guns and religion, the objects and the paintings represent a potent American mix.

Art history sits firmly but lightly on Smith's shoulders — Andy Warhol made camouflage paintings; drips and splatters are part of the heritage of abstract expressionism — and in "Scrap Metal" he continues his penchant for mixing art historical references with the vernacular.

The manipulated guitars he recently showed at the Half Gallery in New York included one titled for Mark Rothko, whose floating lozenges also come to mind when viewing the shot-up washing machine doors at Brady titled "Spin Cycle." Smith admires sumi-ink painting but comes to the discipline not with a brush but a broom.

Smith's work has been billed as "a chronicle of exploration as he negotiates with existence" and a reminder that

“an artist’s trajectory is a sensory reflection of individual experience.”

But what makes his work meaningful is the way it channels the broader culture; in this case, bringing us face to face with what guns do, regardless of motivation, and with the gun violence that is entrenched in American culture.

It’s on the news and threaded through our history, books and films. Smith’s blasted pickup truck, for instance, harks to the bullet-ridden Ford V8 driven by Bonnie and Clyde, whose story inspired a film that opened the door for a new era of graphic violence in American movies. Their “death car” is now enshrined in the National Museum of Crime & Punishment in Washington, D.C.

Smith’s title for the pickup — “The Sound of the Engine Still Running and for the Last Time They Locked Eyes, Together Again in the End” — invites the viewer to invent a narrative. But the truck’s appearance ensures that the narrative will feature a quintessentially American ending: death by guns.

To reach Alice Thorson, call 816-234-4783 or send email to athorson@kcstar.com.

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