

Linda Lighton

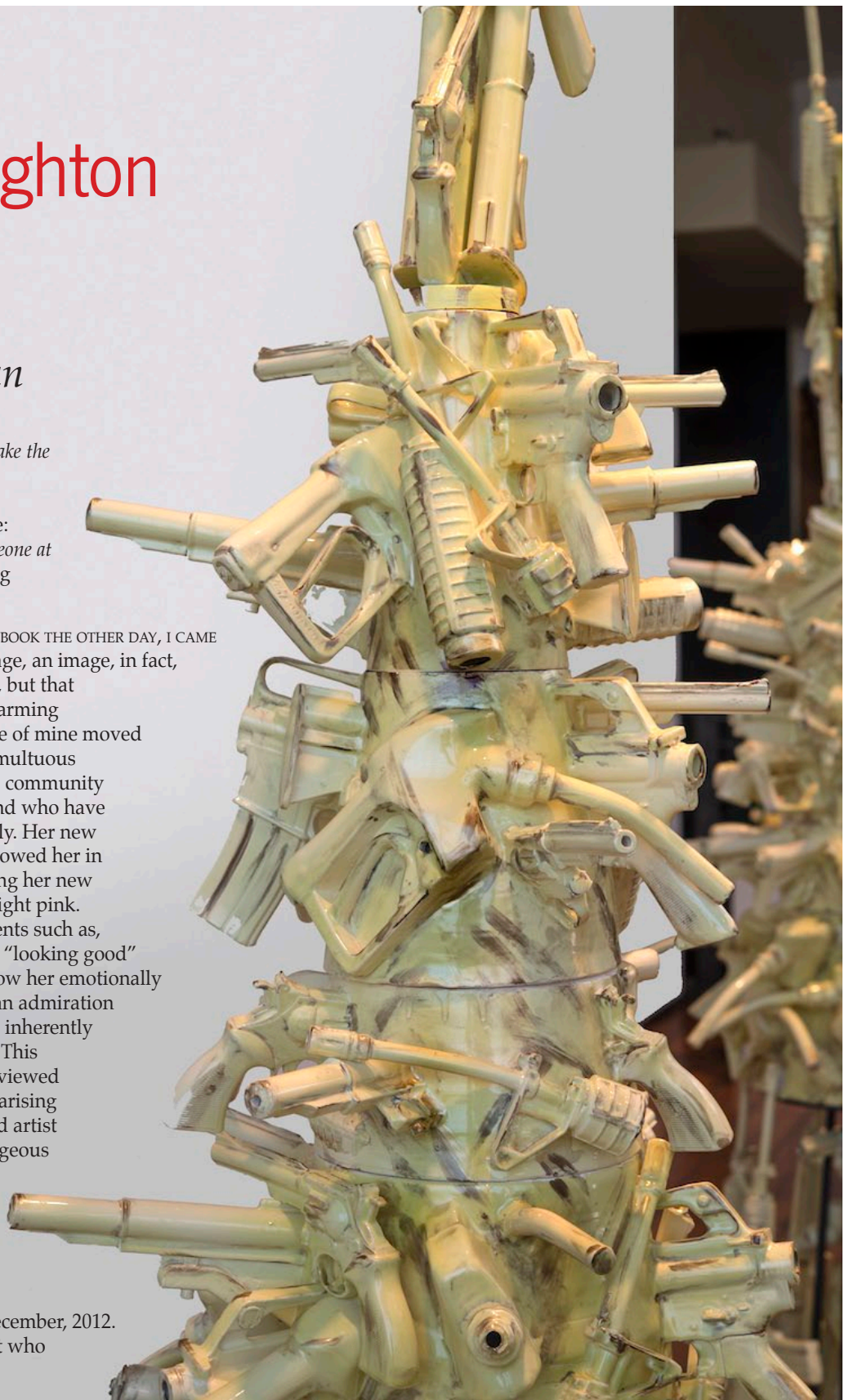
Taking Aim

*A Review by
Tanya Hartman*

*An eye for an eye will only make the
whole world blind
~ Mahatma Gandhi
To paraphrase another sage:
No one can think and hit someone at
the same time ~ Susan Sontag*

SCROLLING THROUGH FACEBOOK THE OTHER DAY, I CAME across a troubling image, an image, in fact, that I found offensive, but that many others found heartwarming and funny. An acquaintance of mine moved to the Southwest after a tumultuous divorce. There, she found a community of people who love guns and who have inspired her to feel similarly. Her new Facebook profile picture showed her in a mini-skirt, proudly holding her new automatic rifle, which is bright pink. Many people wrote comments such as, "let the healing begin" and "looking good" but I was left wondering how her emotionally raw state may have led to an admiration for objects that I think of as inherently aggressive and dangerous. This dilemma, of how guns are viewed in our culture and how polarising those views can be, inspired artist Linda Lighton in her courageous and compelling exhibition *Taking Aim*, on view at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri, US between 2 November through 22 December, 2012.

Lighton is a prolific artist who creates without reticence.





She has always addressed social and cultural topics, but her subject matter was less about the US specifically and more about infinite nuances of sexuality, repression, gender, power and desire across cultures. In recent years, the scope of her vision has moved outwards from the bodily and the autobiographic to more universal and abstract contemplations on the spirit and the ephemeral (in work titled *Luminous*). Having in some manner addressed numinous, gentle and collective interpretations of death and the after-life in *Luminous*, Lighton has now turned her attention back to the corporeal but, in this instance, her focus is on violent death, on death as robbery rather than journey. The violence that Lighton references in the exhibition is directly connected to a materialistic love of weaponry and a disconnection between easy trigger fingers and tragic consequences. In this show, Lighton links gun violence to violence against women and then connects both ideas to capitalist greed. And thus, *Taking Aim* is an exhibition that is directly and specifically about American culture.

Like all of Lighton's sculptures, the work in *Taking Aim* is both formally seductive and conceptually subversive. Walking into the airy, front gallery at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, the viewer is confronted by an enormous arsenal of ceramic weaponry. AR-15s and 44 calibre handguns coexist grotesquely with lipstick tubes so amplified in scale as to suggest mortars. Glinting malevolently throughout the visual cacophony are metallic bullets, which act as



Facing page: *I Don't Want a Bullet to Kiss Your Heart (Detail)*.
Border: *Love and War: The Ammunition III*. Ceramic, glaze, china
paint, lustres. Sizes vary.


Below left: *Cause and Effect*. 2011. Ceramic and glaze.
24 x 23 x 26 in.

sinister punctuation within the verbiage of forms. What is the viewer to interpret from all of this? The guns are literally guns, casts from originals and there are so many of them and in such disarming colours. And the work is formally beautiful, the glazes lush, translucent and tactile, with drips and splatters that beg to be investigated and stroked.

Immediately and through formal decisions, Lighton forces the viewer to become an unwitting participant in the dilemma that is at the heart of American culture today: that we are attracted to violence and want to caress it, be close to it, albeit through the safety of movies, television tabloid journalism and art, but we are also repelled by literal violence and we want to reject it. Hence, she has made her guns utterly literal because if the guns were not literal casts, the disjuncture between the fantasy of violence (the beauty of the colours and the seductive luminosity of the glazes) and the literal, physical manifestation of violence (the mundane, clunky forms of guns) would lose power.

Recently and regrettably, Lighton and her family members have experienced gun violence. One morning while driving through an urban area, the artist's husband witnessed a shoot-out at a gas station that left two young men murdered. And, the doors and window frames of the artist's studio were shot up by automatic gunfire and a tenant in the same building





had her car vandalised, all the windows smashed by a barrage of bullets, some of which were left embedded in the car's armature. These occurrences created a portal through which the artist crossed. Once through, her perceptions of the world in which she lived were altered. Rather than assuming that because she did not see guns daily, they were not there, she realised that guns and aggression are always there, seething beneath the surface of quotidian routine. In this way, the new work is connected to the artist's older work that addressed sexuality using hybrid, botanically inspired forms.

In Lighton's dreamy, gorgeous, sexually charged earlier work, she asserts that sensuality and erotic longing are always just under the superficial membrane of the conscious mind.

In *Taking Aim*, she is emphasising that belligerence and violent impulse lie just under our collective consciousness, barely concealed and regularly erupting in terrifying spasms of destruction. To

express these ideas, the artist has built her own portal, constructed of hundreds of cast ceramic guns. Titled *I Don't Want a Bullet to Kiss Your Heart*, it is the centrepiece of the exhibition and dominates the room in which it is displayed. Glazed in lush and muted yellows, it has a buttery sexy surface that contradicts itself in its evocation of bone and pus. The choice to glaze the sculpture yellow is intelligent and supportive of the exhibition's main themes. Across cultures, yellow connotes sunshine, wellbeing and natural splendour but also madness, toxicity and illness.

Cadmium, lead, chrome (and in the past, urine) are the toxic elements used to create the colour. Yellow is also the colour most likely to leap forward and to catch a viewer's attention. And thus, the yellow glaze that Lighton uses is an expression of her belief

that guns in our culture capture our attention, leaping

forward to enthrall and to promise the wellbeing of self-determination and liberty.



These promises, however, hold no more weight than the bright, iconic yellow of the smiley face and can lead to poisonous violence, cultural madness and death. The guns that comprise the sculpture lean towards each other in an arc through which one may walk. The evocation of an arc, or a majestic portal has portentousness evocative of the architecture of tyranny (such as triumphal arches). And how are tyrants raised up? Through fear, supported by violence.

Formally, the works in the exhibition balance the thick, the chunky and the awkward with delicate and almost ethereal forms, in this way contrasting the vulnerable with the brutal. In *44 Magnum Mandala*, glazed white pistols create an unbroken, circular chain. Again, the artist uses colour to advance her overall thesis. In many cultures, white is the colour that connotes death. Thus, an unbroken circle of loss, created by guns, rotates before the viewer's gaze. Lighton, however, is not content to focus only on guns. She connects their proliferation to greed, to unfettered consumption and to misogyny. Throughout the exhibition, gas pump handles interlace with firearms and lipstick tubes. Hybrid pieces evoke the chaos that results when violence, sexism and id monstrously intermingle. The artist's titles are powerful and startling: *Hit Me, Candy-Coated Fear and Greed, Lipstick and Bullets*.

The artist writes that she has grave concern over the excessive number of guns in the US. *Taking Aim* was her "best hope to provoke a conversation about this difficult and loaded topic". She has more than exceeded her intentions. This is an exhibition that confirms the status of visual art as a powerful catalyst for compassion and change.

Facing page: *44 Magnum Mandala*. 2011. Ceramic, glaze and steel. 22 x 31.5 x 3 in.

Above: *I Don't Want a Bullet to Kiss Your Heart*. 2012.

Ceramic, glaze and steel. Approx. 101 x 96 x 28 in.

Left: *Candy Coated Fear and Greed*. 2011.

Ceramic and glaze.

44.5 x 22 x 9.5 in. Variable.



Tanya Hartman was educated at The Rhode Island School of Design and at Yale University. She now teaches painting and drawing at the University of Kansas and has received numerous awards including two Hall Center Creative Work Fellowships and a Fulbright Research Fellowship to pursue post-graduate research in Sweden, as well as others. Other honours include a grant from the Puffin Foundation and various teaching awards at Yale University and at the University of Kansas including the TIAA-CREF Award for Excellence in Teaching and an award for outstanding teaching at the graduate level from the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas.