

## Art Review: 'Two Smoking Barrels' at Marshall Arts provides two takes on gun violence

BY: Fredric Koepfel

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Dusty Mitchell, "Target," ink on paper. From "Two Smoking Barrels" at Marshall Arts.

-HIDE CAPTION

Marianne Moore begins her poem "To a Steamroller" with these lines: "*The illustration/is nothing to you without the application./You lack half wit./You crush all the particles down/into close conformity, and then walk back and forth on them.*" The steamroller is, Moore tells us, large, heavy, single-minded and indiscriminate.

Viewers may feel a bit steamrolled by "Two Smoking Barrels," a two-person exhibition that addresses issues of America's gun culture through March 21 at Marshall Arts. The artists involved are Morgan Page, an assistant professor of art at Lyon College in Batesville, Arkansas, and Dusty Mitchell, who lives in Mountain Home, Arkansas. Mitchell has degrees from Arkansas State University and the University of Michigan and in 2011 appeared on Bravo network's "The Next Great Artist."

Art that makes social and political commentary can have a steamroller effect, often going for the solar plexus punch or the roundhouse to the jaw. The dilemma that artists face, if they acknowledge it, is whether to emphasize the message at the expense of coherence and esthetics or to try and find a balance among all elements. Too far in the first direction, and a piece amounts to nothing more than raw graffiti or the expression of a concept; too far in the other risks diluting the propositions or emotions. After all, protest or political art has something to say.

Mitchell has a lot to say, but most of it is obvious, falling under the label of Clever Without Being Emotionally Involving. His take on the appalling series of school shootings that wrack America is such devices as a melding of a toy school bus and a military tank; or a trio of school lockers, one outfitted as a gun safe; or a school-crossing sign on which the children depicted in silhouette carry assault weapons. In the cumbersomely titled "Plan B (Plan A = Plan B x C where C = total # of classrooms)," the artist alters a Playmobil schoolroom set so the tables and chairs are turned over, toy children lie on the floor and blood is spattered everywhere. More effective is "Target," a virtuoso piece of ink-on-paper drawing in which a law enforcement target for practice shooting shows a man with his right hand outstretched in greeting. That's an image ripped from the headlines.

While most of the objects in Mitchell's portion of the exhibition are recent, he draws on 2004 for "New Glory," a large reproduction of an American flag made from toy soldiers, firefighters and police officers. It's the one piece of his that creates a memorial tone — our country's flag made of toy figures of those who defend it — though on the other hand, such a work of obsessive content elicits the emotion-flattening response, "Boy, that must have taken a long time!" or, even worse, the soul-destroying "Cool!"

More reserved, more thoughtful and all the more powerful is Page's series of photographic images called "Field Guide to Landscape." These commemorate a wide range of spots where gun violence ended lives, from the well-known — Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas, Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden in Jonesboro, Arkansas — to the obscure or forgotten, including a "Wild West gunfight" in 1899 in Hot Springs, Arkansas. An accompanying brochure describes the events, while audio stations provide background, though the images, rendered in a variety of styles, largely speak for themselves. Particularly poignant, because the artist gives voice to the anonymous, are two scenes in Audubon Park in New Orleans, where the body of an unidentified man

shot in the head was found in September 2012.

In a sense, “Two Smoking Barrels” provides lessons in different approaches to the use of political and cultural content in artwork. Page’s method is intuitive, expressionistic — one could even say poetic — and profound. Mitchell’s manner is visceral, provocative and manipulative. You pays yer money and you takes yer choice.

### **Morgan Page and Dusty Mitchell, ‘Two Smoking Barrels’**

Through March 21 at Marshall Arts, 639 Marshall. Call 901-679-6837.

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