



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Gun Vision: The Ballistic Imagination in American Art from Homer to O’Keeffe

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This book project critically explores the relationship between art and arms in American culture from the Civil War to World War I, a period during which ballistic phenomena acquired new metaphorical meanings that implicated seeing with shooting in powerful and unprecedented ways. I have coined the term *gun vision* to designate that catalytic metaphorical relationship and the rich cultural discourse it produced—a discourse forged amid the technological revolutions of modernity, and yet so commonplace today as to seem primordial or timeless. Whenever we “shoot” a photograph, peer through a gun “sight,” or feel physically riveted by “bullet time” special effects in a Hollywood movie, such discourse speaks through us, but any number of other visual forms can similarly conflate or closely relate the act of looking with the explosive potential of ballistics. The discourse’s pervasiveness in our time bespeaks the naturalization of violence in American culture, including art, but it also reveals an important modern innovation in aesthetics and perception. Since the late nineteenth century, when the market for images became exponentially more diversified, industrial, and competitive through mass media and mechanical reproduction, artists have increasingly leveraged their ballistic imagination in order to make an impact and attract attention. The guns spectacularly pointed in our faces in recent works such as James Rosenquist’s *Blue Nail* or Clint Eastwood’s *Dirty Harry* (directed by Don Siegel), for example, belong to a tradition established by Winslow Homer, Charles Schreyvogel, Edwin S. Porter, and other post-Civil War artists whose works I examine. Although American artists were by no means alone in pursuing such ballistic effects, the peculiar configuration of historical factors in this country—frontier ideology, imperialism, and an extraordinarily productive arms industry—made the United States especially conducive to the invention of gun vision. That invention is the subject of my book.