



Recession by Gun

By

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Last week my girlfriend and I went to buy a “deal-buster” dishwasher for our house. It was one of those packed-aisle days where people rush in trying to get the cheapest deals of the year and we were right in the middle of it. We had spent the entire morning driving from place to place in a total rush with no luck in finding something we could afford on a shitty budget. Between the yelling at other drivers and making plans to see our families for the upcoming holiday season, we chatted about President Barack Obama making plans to announce his troop addition to the war in Afghanistan. Talking about the war is a normal event between my girlfriend and I. In fact, it seems like conversation about the war is everywhere these days. Every radio and TV station describes what is going on in the Middle

East as if we are talking about local high school football games. You can read about the war in great detail in almost every newspaper and blog out there without even realizing the gravity of the situation or, for that matter, the truth. Clothing stores even have a claim to the war momentum as they sale goods referencing uniforms of the armed forces. Store advertisements that spur buyers to purchase in the name of prosperity are now more exciting than they are controversial. We also have Hollywood feeding our needs of violence in powerful dramatic big bangs adventure movies where machines try to take over the world. It seems like everywhere we go the idea of violence is near and that everyone wears a gun around their neck. Violence has become so prevalent that we forget about its presence, in almost every way. So, why is it when an artist paints a gun on the side of a building and calls it a mural, the shit hits the fan.

As my girlfriend and I were looking at the different styles of dishwashers with incredible features and colors, a boy with a cowboy hat, black boots and spurs jumped out of the next aisle with his toy cowboy pistol and started shooting. After realizing that we were not really interested in his game he walked off slowly while we continued to debate about how we were going to ever pay for our first dishwasher. Against my own intuition to start asking the kid about his toy my girlfriend reminded me

that I was not his father and that we should leave the child alone. I wonder if he was aware of what his play-assault on perfectly innocent strangers meant? I wonder if he understood the power of his tool and the symbol that tool represents now that we are a society based in the fear of everything? What if in fact he was a disgruntled ex-cashier of the store who was coming back for revenge? The child's action is not unlike any other boy, including my own at that age, but do we have to stop and talk to him about it. What do we do with the symbol of his play now that the world knows what it means? What do we with a gun?

If you turn on a television there is no doubt you will come across some sort of advertisement or dramatic representation that involved a gun so why should we even care if an artist takes that same symbol and uses it to represent what is happening in his own life. Violence is an everyday part of our culture and has always been but do we need to hide behind it or forget to ever talk about it? Do we leave our child's conversations about violence to the pros, the movie and advertisement industries? Do we only try to vent our frustrations about violence when the symbols of the violence are so direct that it hits us in our face? While some will argue that the mural painted on the back of a Fan District storefront in Richmond, Virginia is a comment on suicide or promoting gun

violence, its creator Hamilton Glass has no idea how his comment on his own loss could be taken so far.

Hamilton Glass' mural titled *Recession* was installed on the back of a Main Street store in Richmond in early November 2009 and then was taken down not even a month after it was installed. The owner of the store where Glass' installed his mural removed *Recession* in early December 2009 to start over again with another painting. Once Glass had installed the mural that looked out onto the parking lot of a popular coffee shop in Richmond, it came under heavy criticism from the local district association, propelled by complaints from a neighborhood business. Glass acknowledged that the problem with his mural started when the owner of a nearby bed and breakfast claimed that it was offensive. The controversy surrounding the mural quickly landed in the regional news and in online community chat forums like Facebook and Myspace. Unexpectedly, Glass' mural had initiated a sensitive discussion, one that Glass describes as "a needed conversation that reflects our present time." Why did that discussion become so explosive?



On the back of a building, Glass' mural spanned the length and height of the building, depicting a man in a white-collar shirt and a black blazer holding a gun to his head. The stark contrast of the white background with the black suit and the grey face and gun flashed with Glass' addition of a bright red tie. The mural was made to stand out and the gun was made as a symbol. Glass says he uses the gun over and over in his other work as a "symbol of a gun and not actually a gun." With this mural Glass wanted to use the gun to start a conversation about the many problems and fears we face in our nation, including economic stress. As Glass states very plainly about this work, "*Recession* is a picture depicting stress." Who can argue with that?

Hamilton Glass recently moved from Philadelphia, PA to Richmond, VA

with his wife. Even though Glass' family has been in the Richmond area for some time he still feels like he is new to what Richmond has to offer. Like people across the nation, Glass has felt the headache of our contemporary financial troubles. When the recession hit Glass lost his own job as an architect. Now, Glass says he makes his way as a full-time artist and continues to create his own work in various forms.

As for the mural, Glass says it comes from his own misfortune noting, "there are people now who can care less about the recession. It (the recession) dramatically reflects my life. It also reflects what my art is about right now. I just thought that since I was in it, the recession would be a great thing to paint about."

One of the main problems with public art is that its interpretation will inevitably change when it lands into the public eye. Artwork will be taken out of context and put into subjective definitions that change for each person. Murals will mutate in meaning from their original comment and become hearsay. This is what public artists have to deal with. So, is it the fault of Hamilton Glass that the meaning of his work has changed and who is responsible for that change?

I found out about this work through facebook. A friend posted a link to a local article talking about the mural while it was still up on the building. The comments that

followed on this post were both aggressive and complex. Some readers wondered how the artist could do this and demanded the removal at once. Others wanted to defend the nature of art saying that since it is an artwork we need to respect the viewpoint of the artist. Some commented that it was a poor shot at poking fun at suicide while other wanted to know how to tell their children what it meant. “To them I was advocating suicide. I just don’t understand why they think I am cool with that picture. There is nothing cool about that symbol.” Glass knew that the image was not a fluffy response to a life made up. The life he wants to point to and make a comment on is real, with some people suffering, some dying, and others waving guns around like they are fucking John Rambo. Still some who never actually saw the mural in person were not about to ever give it a chance. One facebook post said, “even as an artist, that would be disturbing to me and I wouldn’t want to explain that to my kids.”

What Glass does not understand is how people can say his image goes too far or becomes too offensive. For Glass he was not at all talking about suicide or gun violence. But, Glass seems open to the interpretation. Glass now wants to address the content of his mural with a second mural he hopes to install as soon as he can. He is open to the possibilities of further conversations, and, if people need to talk to

their children about this type of imagery, he is happy to start the conversation. “Let’s be honest and say that you’re not in front of your children 100 percent of the time. Your children see this all the time. It (the mural) was supposed to be a way to start a conversation and is meant to be an eerie image. Eerie images get people talking. We (Glass and Adam Bell, the building’s owner) knew there would be people who didn’t like it, but we wanted to get people asking about what it meant. If your child is old enough to know what a gun means, he or she is old enough for that conversation and I am happy to help.”



Glass has another sketch ready for Bell’s building. But, Bell has agreed to run the new sketch by the neighbors for

approval. This gesture from the building's owner begs further investigation and comment. What would happen if your hood owned you?

There are many questions to the problem of public art, but a larger question comes from the other side of the tracks. What would happen if we allowed any viewpoint, imagery, statement, comment, or free expression to be viewable in the eyes of the public? Glass asked this question himself during a recent Thanksgiving TV advertisement campaign by PETA. The commercial titled "Grace" was planned to air on major TV stations during the Thanksgiving 2009 holiday. PETA tried to use the family holiday as a time to comment on the cruelty of animals and to ask people to question what they were doing. This ad caused a massive push back from TV viewers and never officially made it into the national discussion.

Glass agreed with the decision to not include this commercial during the holiday time slot time saying that it was too much for a family oriented weekend. But for Glass, his work on Main Street does not go that far. He is not trying to be cruel with his composition but only comment on his own situation and our own present economic trials. For Glass, his mural is an extension of the discussion already going on and his symbols are not unusual to the public debate.

If our language includes a hyper-radical conversation on gun violence, why not let the artist deal with the subject too? If we are to understand what the symbol of a gun means, who is to say that one viewpoint should not be included in the debate. Glass wants to continue his conversation. Glass hopes to get access to the same place where his last mural once stood. He is excited about the opportunity the building's owner has once again given him and hopes his sketch can pass the approval of Bell's neighbors. Even though Glass says his new composition will continue to be a comment on our times and still reference his dynamic style, the new image will not have a gun. The new image will be a continuation of what Glass feels is his voice.