

DAVID ADEY  
THERE BE DRAGONS







## REAL DRAGONS AND IMAGINED FEARS: GUNS AND THE ART OF DAVID ADEY

By Robert L. Pincus

“Things are not always as they seem; the first appearance deceives many.”

PHAEDRUS (15 BCE - 50 CE)

The divide between appearance and reality: Is there a more age-old issue in the arts and perhaps every realm of knowledge? The two can dovetail, but more often they diverge.

Though an ancient Roman like Phaedrus surely never envisioned guns created with 3-D printers, or for that matter 3-D printers at all, he didn't have to for his comment to be relevant. Guns made in this way are potentially deadly weapons that can resemble toys. Or, more accurately, they look like components of toys, given they are mostly plastic and can be printed in cheerful colors. Their appearance is far afield from the reality of their function.

Like many others I suspect, my knowledge of guns is fairly abstract. So, seeing is believing; it's revelatory to match the function of these weapons to their appearance, which is one of the many intriguing things that David Adey accomplishes with his new work for the exhibition, *There Be Dragons*. Store bought guns are one of the tools he uses to make them and so is the 3-D printer which has yielded the segments of guns integral to many of these works.

For Adey, the project began as an inquiry into the world of guns, as a way of learning about an aspect of our culture that has gained immense prominence and notoriety in recent decades. But he thought it was important for his project to be rooted in experience, the realities of gun culture, as much as any research. He received training in the use of guns and passed the needed test for his purchase of them. The weapons he chose: an AR-15 rifle, a Glock 34 handgun and a 12-gauge shotgun. His entire enterprise has been his way of

getting beyond the mere appearance of the world of guns to their deeper realities.

A preview of a short documentary film by Andrew Norbeck and Jared Callahan, which chronicles his process, will be on view in the exhibition. At one significant moment, it pictures the making of the formative piece in this project. Adey took a bundle of cedar posts out to the desert and shot away most of the middle of this eight-foot-tall block—aptly titling the work *2,127 Rounds*. And because this sculpture is so narrow at the middle, it seems both massive and delicate all at once. It also impresses itself as an emblem of the force of gunfire, the violence it can visit on objects or people. Adey uses the shards of this sculpture to create another, along with four by fours and parts of 3-D printed guns. These are sculptures that embody his concrete experience with guns and become large scale visual symbols of it.

The works in *There Be Dragons* are representative of his persistent interest in the appearance of things, the reality behind appearances and the divergence between the two. For more than a decade, this focus has been evident, beginning with intricate works in which he altered and reassembled fashion and consumer culture photography centering on women and their objectification. The gulf between appearance and reality was also central to the large-scale wall mounted works in an ambitious 2013 project seen in the exhibition *Hither and Yon* the following year. He created a scan of every inch of his body, but the results didn't resemble the human form; nor were they intended to. The imaging was performed with a 3-D camera from an Xbox 360 gaming system, which divided the visual information into small triangles; then the form of the body was flattened, with the assistance of software, and divided into a diptych, measuring ten feet high and four feet wide in each of its symmetrical halves.

The title of this massive composition, *Hide*, is significant to an understanding of it. The double entendre embedded within his use of this word is deft. Skin as hide is one connotation.

The other is about the way the work functions in relation to portraiture. If this is a self-portrait, it's one that conceals instead of reveals, that disguises what it depicts. We might say it offers the reality of the body, but not its appearance. What we see is an abstraction of the human form rooted in visual fact.

*Hide* is highly relevant to the works in *There Be Dragons*. Consider a series of 15 elegant mixed media compositions that contain the same tantalizing divide between what we see and the information behind it. The source of the colorful shapes within them is the downloaded 3-D model of the lower receiver of the notorious AR-15, the semi-automatic weapon so prevalent in recent mass shootings. In commercially manufactured weapons, this is the portion of the infamous assault-style rifle that contains the serial number, and is restricted by local and federal laws. And as with the visual information Adey employed in his body scans, the three-dimensional version of this form is translated into two, using software. And just as the body becomes unrecognizable by being flattened, so, too, does the form of the lower receiver. In its place, you are looking at elegant arrangements of form and color. The art pleases while it simultaneously deceives.

The one word titles for each work in this series—*Boom!* *Pow! Bang!* and the like—echo such '60s sources as Roy Lichtenstein's Pop paintings and the campy Batman television show. The implication is that the unreality of the cartoon violence, implicit in these titles, matches up with the seemingly remote relationship of the plastic forms in these works to guns. As much as these wall reliefs don't resemble 3-D weapons, their forms are derived from the lower receiver as well as laser cuts from *Hide*, in wood. Thus, there is a layering of shapes and materials as well as, in symbolic terms, of weapon and body parts. Moreover, this series is emblematic of a considerable legal and national debate. The central questions in this debate have been: how widely should the data required to produce such weapons be accessible online? And if they are easily available, will that

availability increase gun violence? This public conversation is the backdrop to a question that Adey posed, during our conversation about this work: "How many steps away from the original can the work be and still be legal?"<sup>1</sup>

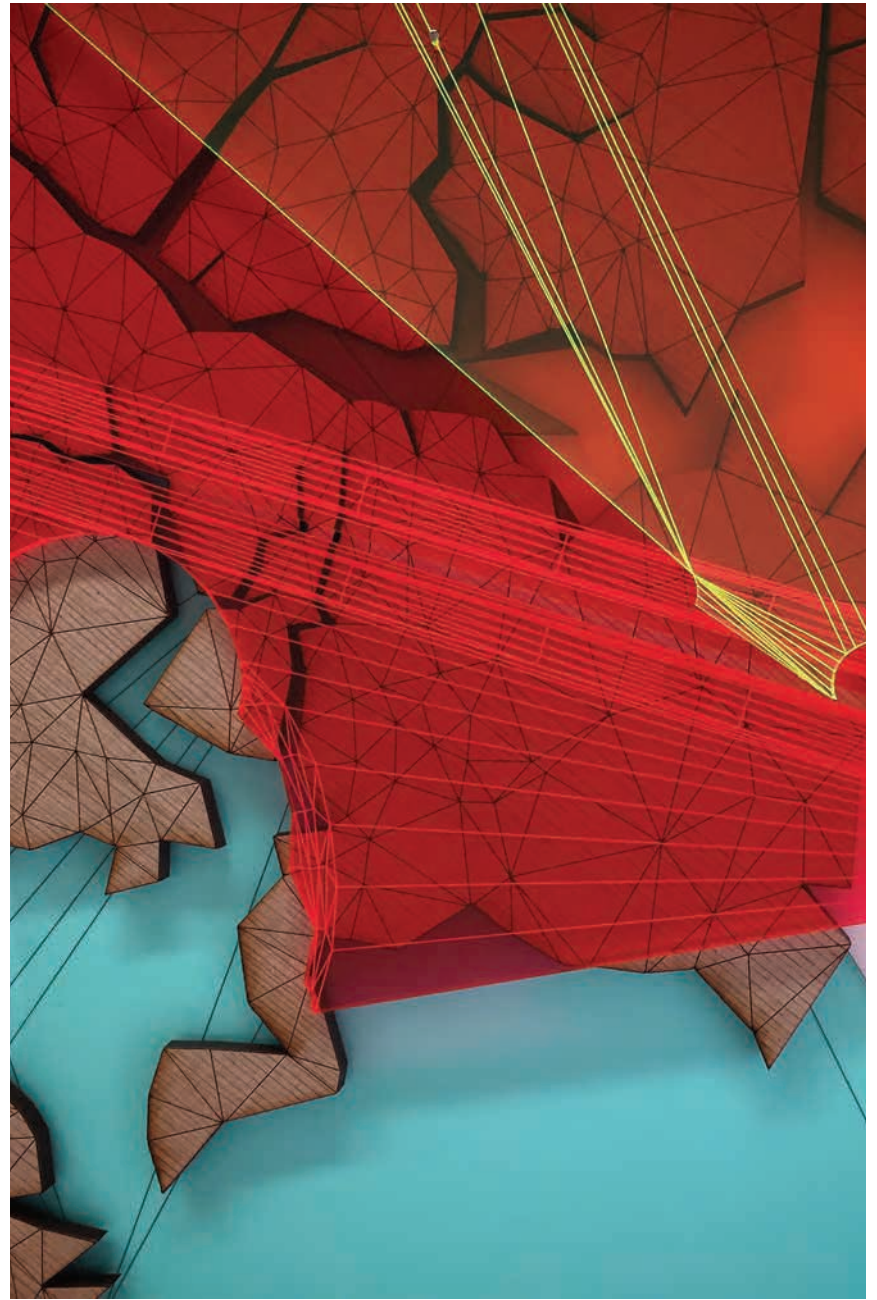
There are 15 of these striking and seductive reliefs, underscoring the centrality of the AR-15 to this work. He employs the number again with a series of cedar posts or columns, straight edge in design, which incorporate colorful elements of the 3-D printed AR-15 embedded in them like decorative flourishes.

In thinking about *2,127 Rounds* and by extension all of these works, Adey has characterized them as "high modernism meets the Wild West." This apt description of the sculpture, which has relevance to this exhibition in its entirety, also points to a larger facet of American culture: we are still tied to the frontier mentality about guns. "In America," as the enduring novelist Nathanael West wrote in 1932, "violence is idiomatic."<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this is just as true in 2018. Yet as a culture we still somehow see guns as an antidote to our fears, the answer to them. At least a sizable portion of our society sees them this way. This is the point of the exhibition's title: *There Be Dragons*. The dragons being, in Adey's words, "that which we do not know and are fearful of, an undefined threat we need to defend against."

Of course, undefined threats can take many forms, perhaps imaginary ones. Medieval folk thought dragons were as real as horses or cows. Adey doesn't make light of such fears. Rather, he looks at guns and gun knowledge from different vantage points, holding them up to imaginative scrutiny. Guns and parts of them appear in fresh guises in these works and in the process, we can see their reality clearer.

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1. This comment by David Adey and subsequent remarks by the artist are from interviews with the author, July 25, 2018 and November 28, 2018.
  2. Dickran Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene: 1920-1940*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in Association with the University of California Press, 1978. 132. The comment by Nathanael West originally appeared in "Some Notes on Violence," which was published in *Contact*, in October 1932.







# DAVID ADEY

## THERE BE DRAGONS

JANUARY 12 TO FEBRUARY 23, 2019

### QUINT GALLERY

5171 Santa Fe Street  
San Diego, CA 92109  
quintgallery.com

All works by David Adey: © 2018 David Adey

Robert L. Pincus PhD, who served as an art critic for The Los Angeles Times and The San Diego Union-Tribune, has published widely about contemporary art and artists for more than three decades.

### Exhibition Checklist

*pictured cover*

#### **2,127 ROUNDS** (detail)

2018

western red cedar, shot with 2,127 rounds from a Winchester pump-action 12 gauge shotgun (Serial Number: 12AZX61555), Glock 34 9mm Semi Auto pistol (Serial Number: BEND121), and a Smith and Wesson M&P Sport 15 AR-15 rifle (Serial Number: TF06566)  
96 x 18 x 18 inches

*pictured interior*

#### **2,127 ROUNDS** (on location)

same as above

#### **HOMELAND** (detail)

western red cedar 4x4s, 3-D printed AR-15 lower receivers

#### **2,127 ROUNDS** (detail)

same as above

#### **POP! AR-4** (detail)

acrylic, western red cedar

32 x 24 x 2.5 inches

#### **RED DRAGON** (detail)

western red cedar, 3-D printed gun parts



David Adey on location shooting with AR-15.

Photography by Andrew Norbeck.