

carla

Mildred Howard at Parrasch Heijnen Gallery

September 16, 2020
Text by Jessica Simmons



Mildred Howard, *Ten Little Children Standing in a Line (One Got Shot, and Then There Were Nine)* (detail) (1991). Mixed media installation (brass bullet casings, copper glove molds, photomural), dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and Parrasch Heijnen Gallery.

Depicting an act of targeted violence, the first sightline of Mildred Howard's retrospective exhibition at Parrasch Heijnen Gallery registers like a sharp blow to the viscera. Situated in the middle of the room, 15 pairs of subtly patinated copper hands stretch skywards from a low white plinth. Behind their craning fingers, a blank wall adorned with a radiating grid reads as a minimalist bullseye. This grid is in fact composed of a barrage of expelled bullet casings, which have punctured the surface of the wall with excruciating, mathematical precision. While physically unscathed by the bullets' trajectories, the hands nonetheless appear to reach up in abject terror—an urgent, coordinated gesture of surrender. This installation comprises the first small gallery of Howard's exhibition of poignantly relevant work, made over the course of four decades. As a point of introduction, it offers an uncanny perspective shift indicative of Howard's ability to probe subjective truths: upon facing the installation head-on, the viewer is positioned as the assailant, suggesting our complicity in the unfolding cruelty and confusing our primal urge to empathize with these absent bodies. This distressing vantage point begs the question: whose truth are we witnessing?

Chillingly titled *Ten Little Children Standing in a Line (One Got Shot, and Then There Were Nine)* (1991), the hands and grid are paired with an enlarged newspaper photograph to form a discrete installation. Functioning as the installation's coda, the photograph, positioned perpendicular to the bullet-ridden wall, recounts a merciless act of violence: two young, Black South African children flee an unseen horror while gingerly carrying the body of their befallen peer, 13-year-old Hector Pieterse. Pieterse was one of the hundreds of schoolchildren ruthlessly murdered by police during the Soweto Uprising of June 1976, which erupted in response to the mandatory adoption of Afrikaans language instruction in schools, an apartheid-era policy. While Howard created this installation the same year of apartheid's legislative revocation, the work's pertinence extends far beyond the specific event that it recounts. By subtly implicating the viewer in a gruesome yet unseen act of violence, Howard uniquely captures the pain and twisted barbarity that sits at the heart of the extrajudicial killing of innocent people. Upon stepping into the gallery, with the atrocious circumstances surrounding Jacob Blake's shooting by police fresh in my mind, the work's somber tone lodged in my throat like a heavy stone.

Like many of the works in this exhibition (which span from 1978 to 2020), *Ten Little Children* deftly mines concrete sociopolitical realities—particularly

histories of racial injustice—while simultaneously embracing oblique forms of abstract representation. As a whole, Howard’s expansive oeuvre of work revels in the intersection of social critique and poetic liminality. By embracing abstraction and non-specificity, she inhabits the shifting sands that exist between language, meaning, and collective memory, thereby illuminating hidden kernels of historical truth.

The second, larger gallery presents a diverse array of work that includes gesturally abstract photographic collages, paintings, a tapestry, and conceptual, found-object sculptural assemblages. Collectively, these objects reflect the ways in which Howard wields her materials as tools for not only interrogating truth but for examining whose perspective defines it. On the far wall, six hand-blown glass sculptures—each representative of a punctuational symbol—stand out for their subtle references to language as the vehicle of truth (*Parenthetically Speaking...It’s Only a Figure of Speech*, 2010). By concretizing these abstract and (quite literally) marginal forms, Howard points to punctuation as the hidden motor that empowers language—and thus, subjective truths—to bloom, pivot, and breathe.

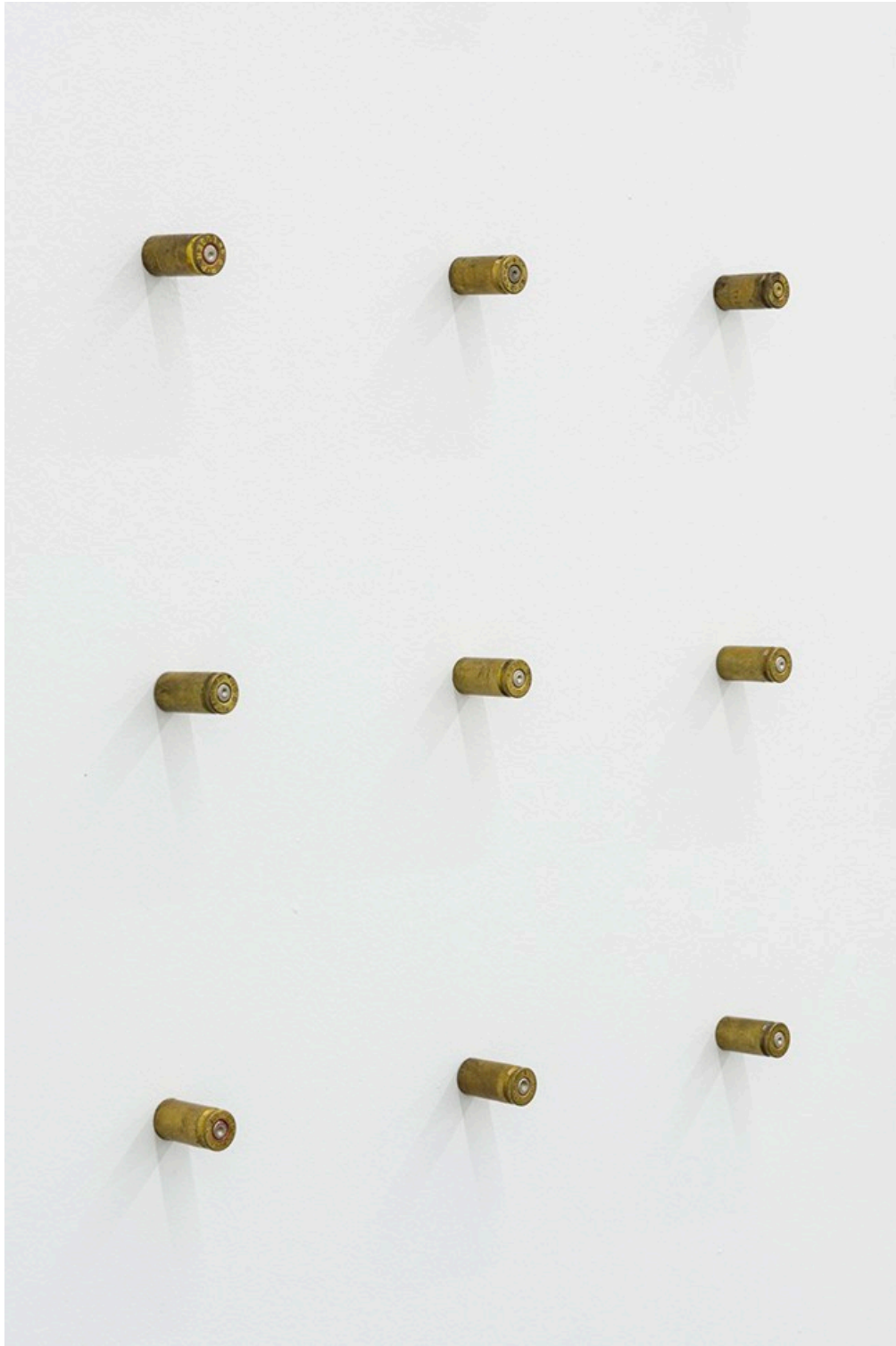
Deepening this inquiry, the work *Volume I & II: The History of the United States with a few Parts Missing* (2007) comprises two hefty American history books splayed open on a shared pedestal. A symmetrical pattern of deep, gaping holes, stretching from page to spine, maims each book as if they were assaulted by wandering bullets from *Ten Little Children*. Through this destructive, subtractive gesture, Howard indicates omitted histories—those myriad perspectives glaringly absent from dominant historical narratives that tend to otherwise flatter their victors. Reminiscent of a Rorschach inkblot with their distorted symmetry, these disfigured pages with missing language expand on a previous demand: whose truth is missing?

In Howard’s work, holes become ripe with meaning: abstract voids standing in for instances of violence, absent bodies, bullet markings, bygone memories. Embedded within the historical tome, these holes also become notational—textual markings suggestive of the malleable subjectivity of historical truth.

Mildred Howard: A Survey, 1978–2020 runs from August 15–September 26 at Parrasch Heijnen (1326 S. Boyle Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90023).



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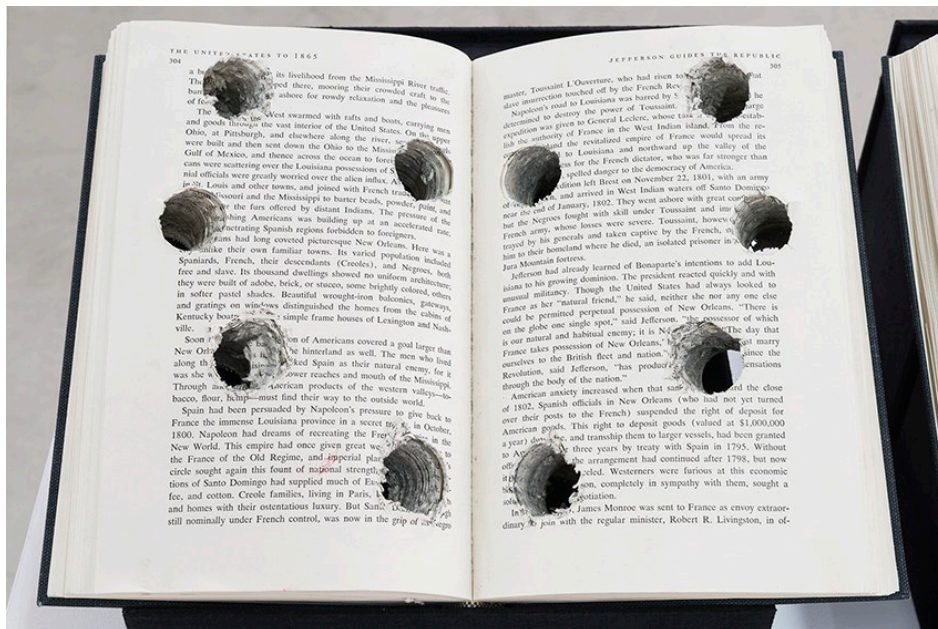


(JOH-1) JOHANNESBURG, South Africa, June 16-KILLED IN CLASH WITH POLICE-Two young Soweto students carry the body of another pupil after he was killed by bullets in a bloody riot with police in Soweto, South Africa Wednesday. Police battled 10,000 black high school students in the segregated township near Johannesburg after pupils went on a rampage to protest the mandatory use of the Afrikaans language in the schools. The language, derived from Dutch, is used by descendants of the Boer settlers. At least six persons were reported killed and 33 injured. (AP Wirephoto) (See AP AAA Wire Story) (rgt41107atr/arcus)1976

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Mildred Howard: *A Survey, 1978 – 2020* (installation view). Image courtesy of the artist and Parrasch Heijnen Gallery.



Mildred Howard, *Volume I & II: The History of the United States with a few Parts Missing* (detail) (2007). Modified books with holding cases, 13.25 x 9.50 x 2.50 inches each. Image courtesy of the artist and Parrasch Heijnen Gallery.



Mildred Howard, *Parenthetically Speaking...It's Only a Figure of Speech* (installation view) (2010) Hand blown glass, 9 pieces, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and Parrasch Heijnen Gallery.