

# Chicago Tribune

## When a gun problem becomes a problem for art

**Christopher Borrelli**

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

*[cborrelli@chicagotribune.com](mailto:cborrelli@chicagotribune.com)*



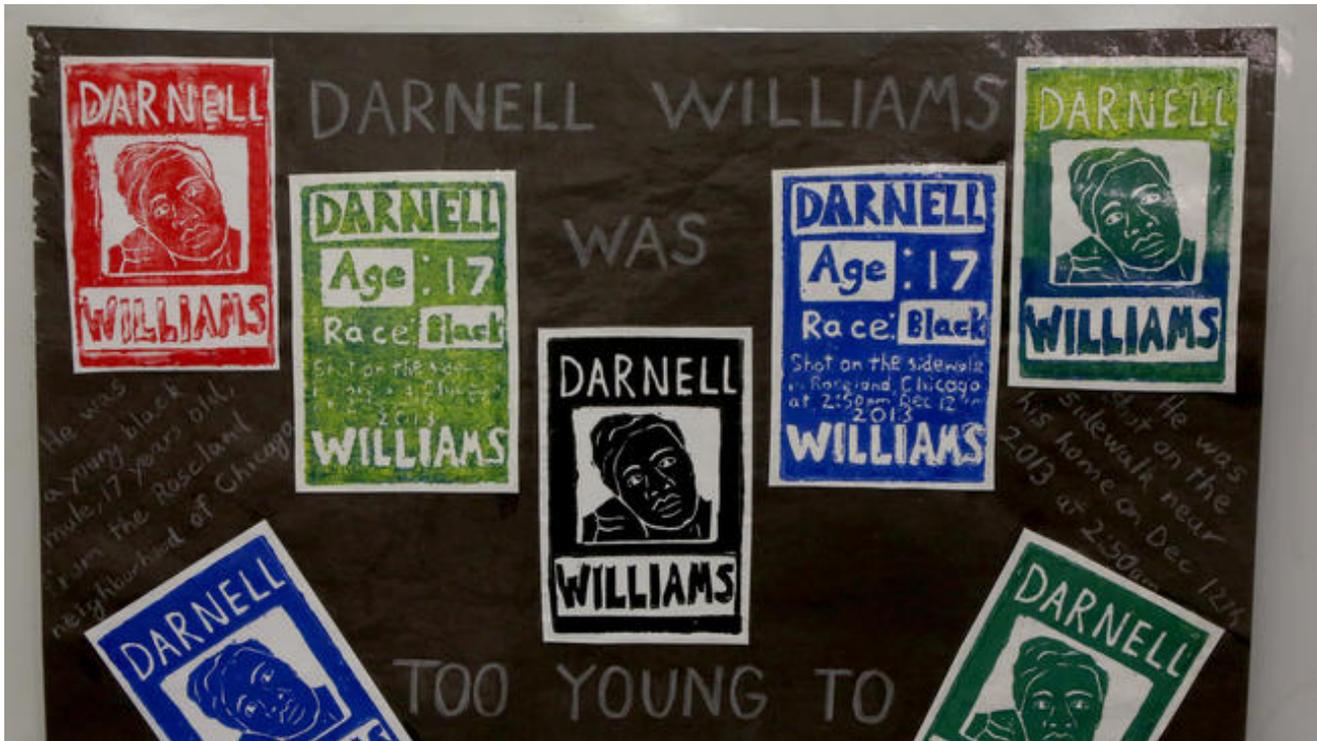
(L to R) Christopher Love, 18, Briana Johnson, 17, Jameale Pickett, 17, Allan Green, 19, Sharrod Hill, 17 and DeAngel Groves, 15, holding up some of the art works created by students. (Nancy Stone, Chicago Tribune)

New work about Chicago gun violence examines a question: Have we turned a problem into an art genre?

Laurie Glenn, a Chicago public policy activist and founder of the politically minded arts group ThinkArt, dropped her leather bag into a chair. We met in a conference room of the Woods Fund of Chicago, a grant-making foundation on Wacker Drive with an eye on social justice issues. Glenn, who also runs the social justice-minded consulting firm Thinkinc., was there for a strategy meeting, "to talk influence-building." I was there to steal her for a second, to look at the artwork she would be installing in River North's Josef Glimmer Gallery.

The show's theme was familiar:

Youth violence in Chicago.



The Chicago Angels Project at Uplift Community High School on Wilson Avenue in Chicago asked students to make prints featuring a person who died through gun violence in the Chicago area. (Nancy Stone / Chicago Tribune)

In fact, everything about the show felt familiar: Glenn, who was organizing the exhibit and not creating the works herself, told me that "you can never do enough" on the subject of young people being murdered (and I agreed); she said that the work itself was powerful (and I agreed); she said that a city reveals its priorities in where it spends its attention, and Chicago needed to do more as a city, and as a citizenry, to address youth violence (and I agreed). Then, a bit tired of the pieties, I wondered aloud if art about this topic was feeling routine?

She smiled tightly.

Not exploitative, or even fetishistic, I said. Just, however well-meaning, too casually created?

Too much like a genre?

Therefore, too easily ignored? I said I didn't know the answer myself, but I couldn't help but wonder.

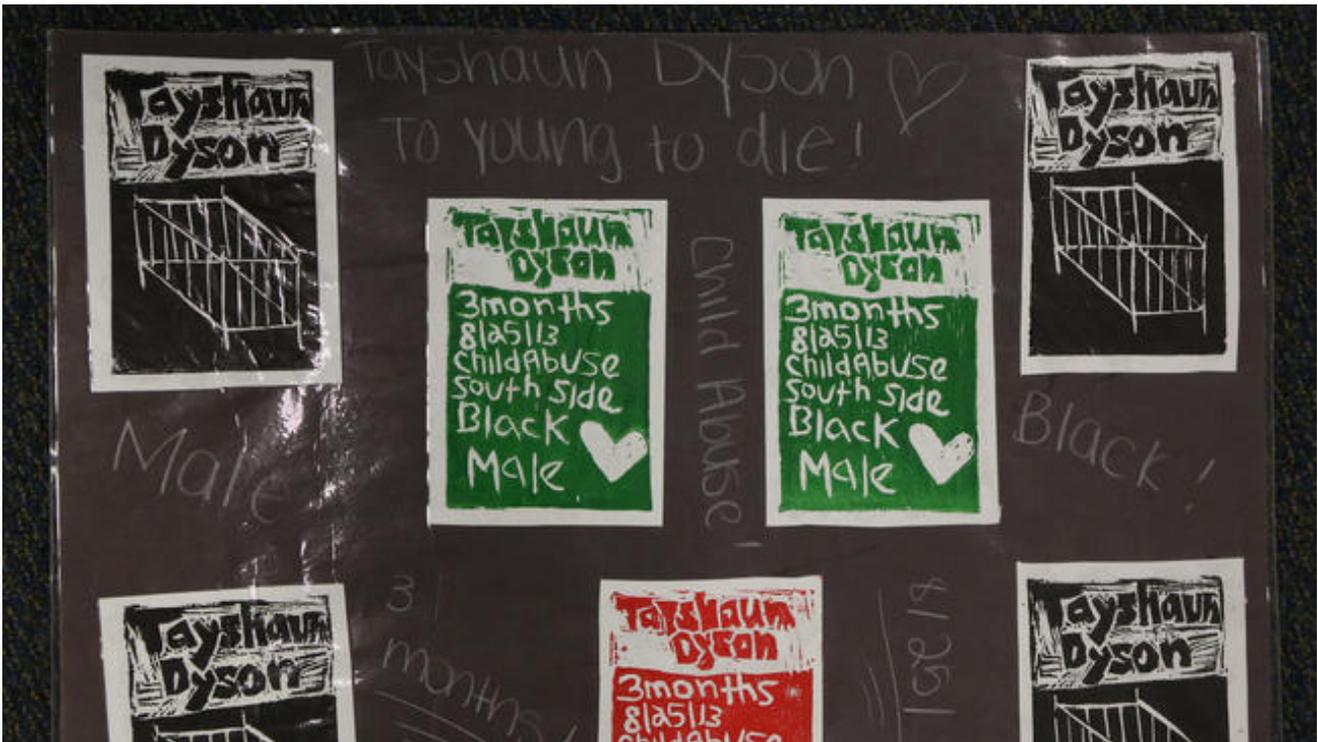
She smiled tightly.

She said her show was an homage to life, not an homage to death, not another act of miserablism. Then she pulled a number of the works, each on laminated construction paper, from her bag and spread them on the table before us. She reached for a piece that, like the others, appeared to have been carved in

wood and stamped onto paper, an etching of a boy's head. Half of the figure was red, half was blue. Above the image were the words "Don't Shoot," beneath was "I Wanna Live," and at the edges, statistics about the teenager who was represented by the image: name, sex, age, neighborhood (Woodlawn), cause of death (gunshot).

"Beautiful stuff," she said. "Picasso-esque. No, I mean, Miro-esque. Or, maybe, Matisse?" She picked up the image of a thin man standing before what appeared to be a giant red sun. "This one is almost like German expressionism. And this one, it says here the person (in the image) was Tony Morgan, he was 19 and shot to death in Englewood. Also, he was shot in the face. Just a stunning, stunning piece."

Actually, the artists are students from Uplift Community High School in Uptown.



The Chicago Angels Project at Uplift Community High School on Wilson Avenue in Chicago asked students to make prints featuring a person who died through gun violence in the Chicago area. (Nancy Stone / Chicago Tribune)

Laura Mullkoff, their art teacher, asked her classes in 2012 and 2014 to go online and find background information about young people who had been killed the previous year, assemble a few facts about the victims, then carve (into linoleum blocks) small memorials. She did this with 200 students; they produced roughly 200 works, each a different carving in honor of a different teenager killed in Chicago (often shot to death). The exercise, going into Glimer alongside works by professional artists addressing youth violence, is called "The Chicago Angel Project." The show opens Thursday. The student pieces will be sold for \$50-\$100, with most of the profits going to Uplift (and the rest to anti-violence nonprofits, including CeaseFire).

And Glenn is right.

The show is meaningful, thoughtful; the works are compelling, even Picasso-like, and definitely touching — carvings of tombs, cars at the intersections where shootings occurred, a few baby cribs (representing abuse-related deaths). And the text that accompanies the images is horrifyingly prosaic: "Killed in alley behind Church's Chicken," "Stabbed," "Cause of Death: No Cause." As you enter Glimer, one entire wall of the gallery, 8 feet tall, 24 feet long, will be plastered with every one of the memorials from the Uplift students. Which, as Glenn predicts, "will come together to form a powerful image."

Hold that thought.

Because across town, in Noble Square, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday night at the Free Street Theater in the Pulaski Park Fieldhouse, there is another powerful, heartbreaking work about teenagers and violence vying for your attention. It's called "Track 13" and has been playing to standing-room audiences. It was created by performer Ricardo Gamboa and the Young Fugitives, a theater ensemble of young Chicagoans that Gamboa founded in 2013. They tell the story of Deonta Mackey, a 16-year-old Chicagoan shot to death last year by the off-duty cop he was trying to rob. The piece is a hybrid: some dance, some scripted theater.

Perhaps most intriguingly, the cast addresses — comes right out and wonders, in meta fashion — about the overfamiliarity of artwork addressing the deaths of young black and Hispanic kids in Chicago. Gamboa, who also studied art at New York University and has worked with the Barrel of Monkeys troupe, told me: "I wouldn't say we're questioning the authenticity of other works on this subject, but we are questioning whether we are creating a kind of scripted consciousness out there. And, actually, we do straight-up ask if this stuff is exploitation. Are we participating in it? I grew up on the South Side, I'm brown, and I just think there are a lot of dynamics to consider when artists address social tragedies, you know? I'm not questioning anyone's sincerity — man, I'm the sincerest guy you'll ever meet — but are we turning this into a genre where lower-class communities are constantly asked to offer up their vulnerability and trauma?"

Later he sent me an email: Arts groups "need to interrogate the ethics and effects" of their good intentions. In other words, let's question the collective impact and, as he puts it, "radiant affect of art works like this."

But to answer his question:

Yes, the tragedy of youth violence in Chicago, as a subject, has become a genre, for good or bad, complete with its own tropes and a predictable loop of responses, hand-wringing and despair. Indeed, you might say two shows about youth violence — both earnest, both moving, in two different media, existing in Chicago at the same moment — suggests the richness of that genre. I like that "Track 13" questions the impact of its own efforts, and I like that "The Chicago Angel Project" is straight-forward enough to be an uncluttered memorial.

I met last week with a few of the students who created the "Angel" works. Jameale Pickett told me his piece honored a Woodlawn teen shot to death at the same age as Pickett's father was when he was shot to death (and that Pickett is now): 17. Sharrod Hill, also 17, said: "I picked Leetema Daniels, who was 17, shot (in 2013) at Central and Race. I played football against him, and he was a cool guy, and a lot of people in Chicago know somebody who got shot to death in Chicago, but not everyone *knows* them, right? Not everyone gets on the news."

Deangel Graves, 15, said her piece was about a 3-month-old girl who died in the line of gunfire. "When Miss Mullkoff said we were doing this, I said it was depressing. 'Do we have to remind ourselves about

dead people?' Then I thought that girl's parents would be proud, that someone understood her life wasn't nothing."

As Mullkoff reminded me, the project was never intended for an audience, "just to empower (the students) to think about how violence affects them." The Glimmer show, which was going to be called "Too Young to Die" until organizers learned of a photo exhibit on the same subject with that title, came about when Mullkoff ran into Glenn at the Victory Gardens Theater production of "The Gospel of Lovingkindness," playwright Marcus Gardley's story about the cycle of inevitability and heartbreak that defines gun violence in Chicago.

Now, part of that cycle is art, a lot of art.

And the usefulness of any art, about anything, is never clear.

Hallie Gordon, director of Steppenwolf for Young Adults, told me that before her group created the 2013 show "How Long Will I Cry? Voices of Youth Violence," it went into communities that had experienced a lot of violence and based the script on interviews with residents, who were often overwhelmed by and appreciative of the finished work. And yet, she said: "Throughout the whole process I got really flustered because, naively, maybe, I started to realize I wasn't going to solve anything here. As a somewhat privileged white person, I wasn't a credible messenger to offer a solution, but, ultimately, I could offer support to voices who were." (Next season, Steppenwolf's youth theater will take as its theme what it means to be an ally.)

But if the only outcome for art about this is empathy, that may not be enough, either. Reading Tribune Newspapers reporter Jill Leovy's engrossing new "Ghettoside," a nonfiction account of murder investigations of young black men in LA, I came upon an almost tossed-off idea that I thought should be pasted up across Chicago's North Side: "Take a bunch of teenager boys from the whitest, safest suburb in America and plunk them down in a place where their friends are murdered and they are constantly attacked and threatened. Signal that no one cares, and fail to solve murders. Limit their options for escape. Then see what happens."

Shaming, though, would expend the genre even faster.

So I called Gardley, who lives in Chicago and based "Gospel" partly on his experiences growing up in West Oakland, Calif. He didn't know if this was becoming a little too routine either. "That's a hard question, but we need to raise it," he said. "If there's not change, and there's a lot of art about (youth violence), is this art just not doing its job? If you are moved by traumas but not moved to create change?" You're describing stasis, I said.

Exactly, he said, and told me about the "Gospel"-based community outreach sessions that he had on the South Side last summer. "The people I was talking to, they knew how to engage, they knew how to say the things I wanted to hear, as an artist, about gun violence. They watched the show, then were like: 'Enough of this. We don't want to talk about violence. We want another vision here.' They wanted to see beyond this stuff. They wanted to know how to get onstage! I thought, 'Of course. Because that's where the power is.'"

*cborrelli@tribune.com*  
*Twitter @borrelli*