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Modern twist: Turning guns into manhole covers

By Christine Hanley, Associated Press writer

HARTFORD, Conn. -- More than 11,000 illegal guns will be back on the streets this spring.

Sort of.

The same city where Sam Colt introduced firearms over a century ago has melted down a huge collection of confiscated guns and sculpted the iron into customized manhole covers in an art project on gun violence.

At first, the 228 covers will sit in piles outside the Wadsworth Atheneum, a centerpiece of "The Manhole Cover Project: A Gun Legacy," an exhibit by artist Bradley McCallum that opened yesterday.

When the display ends in March, the covers will go to the streets, many around the Atheneum, near schools and in neighborhoods that have been hit hard by gun violence.

The manhole covers were made from melted-down iron from 11,194 illegal guns that were confiscated or turned in since 1992, when then-Gov. Lowell P. Weicker ordered that they be destroyed rather than sold at auctions.

The inscription on the covers seeks to pay tribute to both the legacy of the Colt family and the problem of gun violence, with the message "Made from 172 lbs. of your confiscated guns," encircled by the Colt motto "Vincit qui patitur." It translates as either "He who perseveres is victorious" or "He who suffers conquers."

Mr. McCallum and other project backers consider the covers a memorial to victims of gun violence, as well as a perfect metaphor for turning a street weapon into a street utility -- an up-to-date version of the beating of swords into plowshares.

"Hopefully, this project will serve as a catalyst for dialogue that will address how we can manage guns in an instructive way," Mr. McCallum said.

The covers also serve as a frame for the other major part of the piece: riveting audio testimonials from people affected by gun violence, including victims' relatives, witnesses and trauma doctors.

The testimonials, recorded by student interns, can be heard from speakers mounted on four pile-ons interspersed among the piles of manhole covers, on 30-minute loops that play simultaneously.

"It's like buying a book or a magazine," a voice from one pile-on speaker says about the accessibility of guns. "It's very easy to get one. And if you don't have the money, you can find someone who does."

"I can't walk alone because I get scared," says another voice, from a young man who got caught in the middle of a gang fight. "I feel like I'm going to get caught in the crossfire again."

Mr. McCallum, of Portland, Maine, presented his idea to the Atheneum about two years ago, offering it as a contemporary complement to the Sam Colt exhibit that the museum was putting on display.

He was backed by the museum and the Connecticut Childhood Injury Prevention Center, which is run by Connecticut Children's Medical Center, as well as grants from local and state arts groups. The project cost an estimated \$52,000.

The medical center said it wanted to help curb the amount of gun-related deaths among children.



Garry Lapidus, associate director of the prevention center, said 320 young people in Connecticut have been killed by guns since 1988, most in the major cities.

In Hartford, once home to one of the country's biggest firearms manufacturers, gunshot wounds are the leading cause of death for teens 15 years to 19 years.

But Marie Pelligrini, of Naugatuck, said everyone, even people who think they are safe in the suburbs, should be more aware of the problem. She was one of the people who provided testimony, and was on hand for the exhibit opening.


Ms. Pelligrini said she didn't think gun violence would play a role in her life until her son was shot through the chest last year in Hartford, after getting lost on his way home from a Hartford Whalers game.

"The guns are out there. And they're killing. And they're killing," she said, choking back tears. "And the next person could be you."



Photo by The Associated Press

This is one of 228 manhole covers cast from the 11,194 guns confiscated in Connecticut in recent years. The project is part of an anti-violence exhibit at Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum.

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