

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Artistic Elegies for the Victims of the Pulse Nightclub Shooting

In a vibrant and beautiful tribute, John Gutoskey has made 49 unique monoprints, one for each victim.

Sarah Rose Sharp June 13, 2018



Detail view from *PULSE Nightclub: 49 Elegies* by John Gutoskey (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

YPSILANTI, Mich. — Elegies often come in the form of poetry, and are a time-honored form of lamentation, used as a method of mourning the dead. It makes intuitive sense, then, that print artist [John Gutoskey](#) seized upon this idea to create “visual elegies,” in the form of 49 unique monoprints, as a way of processing the [Pulse nightclub shooting](#), an attack by a murderous gunman on a gay club in Orlando, Florida, that claimed the lives of 49 victims and wounded 53 others.



PULSE Nightclub: 49 Elegies, installation view

“I began working on this a few weeks after [the

shooting], because I couldn't form words, really, to express what I was feeling," said Gutoskey at a group meditation gathering to commemorate the two-year anniversary on June 12 of the shooting, at 22 North in Ypsilanti, where the full collection of prints, *PULSE Nightclub: 49 Elegies*, is on display for the month of June.

"As I often do, I retreated to my studio, and decided I would make a monoprint to honor each of the victims — who I did not know personally. I decided that would be the best way to work through what I was feeling. It really allowed me to look at that event through a bunch of different lenses."

It is significant to note Gutoskey's use of monoprint for the project — in a context where an edition of 49 prints was to be produced, many print artists might choose to leverage a more replicable print form. Gutoskey's decision to make each print as a unique one-off emphasizes the personal and individual nature of the loss of each victim, though the works aren't assigned to specific people, nor titled individually.



Detail view from *PULSE Nightclub: 49 Elegies*

The images ring the gallery, broken by the architecture into batches of seven; Gutoskey tended to develop the imagery in subsets of five to seven prints at a time, and this lends a sense of visual cohesion to the group as a whole. Indeed, what emerges, as the prints ring the gallery, resembles a kind of minor arcana of queer tragedy (almost literally —

there are 56 cards in the minor arcana of a standard tarot deck). Rather than the traditional suits of wands, pentacles, cups, and swords, Gutoskey's recurring motifs are crows, robins, disco balls, and halos that also bear sinister resemblance to targets. A *mélange* of anonymous figures, lifted from anatomy textbooks, wander this landscape of combining and recombining imagery.



"In the months previous to the killings, robins built a nest outside my studio," said Gutoskey. "I watched them hatch their eggs, and I watched them fledge, and then about a week after the murders, I found one of the parents dead at the base of the tree." According to Gutoskey, robins symbolize compassion, with various myths associated with their red breast

Artist John Gutoskey with the installation, prior to the meditation gathering on June 12, the anniversary of the massacre.

feathers including the notion that they were stained in the process of plucking thorns from Christ's head, or singed red from flames as they carry water to the parched souls in hell.

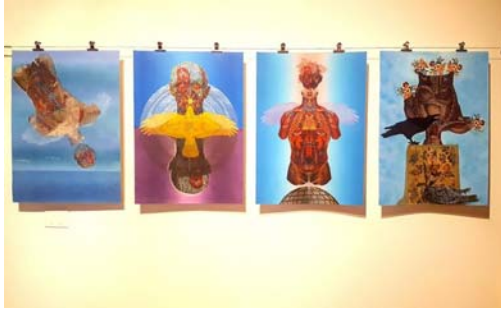
“I decided I would use the robin as a symbol for the gay community's response to the killings,” said Gutoskey. “And I thought a good sort of yin-yang to the robin would be the crow.” Gutoskey perceives crows to be “queer birds,” based on numerous characteristics — their intelligence, their communal nature, and the fact that they “love sparkly stuff.”



Crows and disco balls, which Gutoskey characterizes as “the gay egg,” are among the recurring motifs in the series.

The exhibition is also replete with Catholic imagery — a nod to Gutoskey's personal religious background — and Buddhist motifs, among the more abstract or pagan symbolism. Crows spiral from the chest of a meditating Buddha, or flock from a broken disco ball, or tornado from a splayed torso. Gutoskey's carved-block elements interact with collage pieces from botanical catalogues and cards, creating gentle visual puns (“I'm always good for a fruit or pansy joke while I'm working,” he quips). Despite playing across a range of imagery and palettes, the final presentation is extremely unified, successfully presenting a crowd of individuals. Gutoskey's tribute is as vibrant and beautiful, and shot through with

chaos, as the victims whose lives and bodies were broken to pieces two years ago — and perhaps offers those who continue to live with the tragedy a visual language with which to express their grief.



Detail view from *PULSE Nightclub: 49 Elegies*



Detail view from *PULSE Nightclub: 49 Elegies*

PULSE

Nightclub: 49 Elegies continues at 22 North (22 N Huron St, Ypsilanti, Mich.) through June 30.

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