



# High calibre

**Pete Muller** discusses the virtues of photojournalism and his document of Oklahoma's annual automatic machine-gun expo. He talks to **Oliver Atwell**

**TRYING** to keep track of the political hot potatoes tossed around by a nation's government can be somewhat bewildering. In 2013, former US Navy reservist Aaron Alexis walked onto a historic naval base in Washington, DC, and opened fire. He killed 12 employees before police shot him dead. Like similar events that preceded it (the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 that took the lives of 12 students and one teacher being a famous example), both US political parties – Republicans and Democrats – were quick to seize on the story. US President Barack Obama used the opportunity to call for stricter gun-control laws and did his utmost to fend off Republican howls of Second Amendment rights. The fact is, gun crime is something that is likely to taint the world's perception of the US for many years to come (in 2012, murders by firearm totalled 8,885, with more than 12,000 estimated in 2013).

It's with all this in mind that Pete Muller

began his project Machine Gun Americana. It's a photo essay that addresses a serious issue like gun ownership, yet manages to do so in a refreshingly non-judgemental and accessible manner. The set-up for the project is simple: every year, the state of Oklahoma holds the Full Auto Shoot & Trade Show (OFASTS), a recreational family event that celebrates the power of military artillery. Against a backdrop of lush rolling hills and cloudless blue skies, families can spend the day concentrating their fire on numerous targets and abandoned cars.

'I've been interested in gun issues for a number of years,' explains Pete, from his home in New York, 'and this can often find me working overseas. For example, I've been working in Africa for the past five years. All of my years of experience have drawn me to develop an interest in the relationship between guns and institutional structures in society. I have a theory that the weaker the institutions, or the less

trusted they are – I'm talking specifically about security institutions here – the higher calibration you see of gun-affirming attitudes. It's a way of saying that if people don't see the police or security services, or they see them but don't trust them, then they're more inclined to own and provide their own measures of security.'

## APPROACHING THE SUBJECT

Prior to Machine Gun Americana, Pete had produced work motivated by these ideas in conflict-scarred lands such as South Sudan (a project about armed cattle raiders) and areas of Somalia. Yet as Pete's ideas started to develop a more concrete grounding, he began to realise that exploring the attitudes of his own home nation could serve to give his ideas a more defined and global shape.

'In the process of my research, I came across some YouTube footage of the OFASTS,' says Pete. 'The video showed essentially what I show in my project – men, women and young kids getting together to fire fully automatic weapons.'

'I was initially more interested in looking at the breadth of these events across the US. But this event was the first I discovered and it became the focus. The event seemed to encapsulate all I wanted to say. That said, I didn't have any particular ambitions when I contacted them. I talked to the organiser and explained that I was an American photojournalist who had mostly worked in conflict zones in Africa, and told him that I'd like to attend OFASTS and take pictures. I was very honest with him. While we had differing opinions when it came to guns, I knew it was important to

**Story Rush, a kindergarten teacher from Greenwood, AK, fires an M1919 Browning .30 calibre machine gun on the first night of OFASTS**

**‘There’s something oddly nostalgic about the whole thing – it’s like a fair. The people who attend are devoutly Christian’**

be respectful to gain his trust.’ Machine Gun Americana was shot over the course of one week. Pete arrived three or four days before the launch of the event and spent much of the time talking to the event organiser and logistics team who are responsible for setting up the grounds.

‘I think a lot of the reasons why these people choose to attend OFASTS is because they see it as harmless fun,’ says Pete. ‘Many of the visitors have a romantic fascination with these guns, either in a militaristic sense having watched a lot of movies, or from the perspective of military history because there are a lot of old guns there. In this sense, and I don’t mean this to be insulting, there’s a bit of a boyish thing going on with a lot of the grown men there. They really want to get hold of these powerful guns and shoot them. There’s a big disconnect from what these weapons of destruction are actually intended for.’

Pete points to the level of catharsis that many of the attendees experience when firing such a powerful weapon. After a hard week at work, what more exhilarating release could there be than to send a bullet flying through the air at supersonic speeds?

‘I didn’t want viewers of the project to come away feeling that they’d witnessed something horrific,’ says Pete. ‘There’s something oddly nostalgic about the whole thing – it’s like a fair. The people who attend are devoutly Christian. There’s no alcohol served, although you can bring your own six-pack and drink it in your RV at sundown. There are certainly no sexualised marketing campaigns, so no women walking around in bikinis. It’s oddly wholesome.’

**THE NATURE OF PHOTOJOURNALISM**

Looking through Pete’s catalogue of projects, it’s clear that he is a photographer who is, as he says in his own words, fascinated by stories, particularly those concerning the individual consequences of war, poverty and social unrest. Photojournalism is a storytelling device and it’s a field that Pete effectively uses to highlight the issues that concern him.

‘In my opinion, photojournalism should aim to do two things,’ explains Pete. ‘The first is to create documents that are, in an intellectual sense, consistent and sequenced elements of a story that’s unfolding some place. When I work, I take a strong interest in making sure that I’m capturing as much of the environment as I can in order to create something that’s journalistically sound. In that way, I can tell a story.’



‘Second, pictures should aim to create an emotional connection between people who may not necessarily know anything about one another or the context within which the pictures were taken. If you can harness that emotional connection and pair that with journalistic intuition and practice, you’ve hit upon the power of photojournalism.’ One of the elements so crucial to photojournalism is knowing when to

shoot and when not to shoot. Some photographers can come back from an event with just a handful of images. Some can come back with hundreds.

‘Over the past year, I’ve been consciously trying to pare down the number of shots that I take,’ says Pete. ‘It forces me to be more aware of my compositional standards and decisive moments. That said, I’m still coming back with a couple of hundred

**Above: A girl peers into the turret of a tank outside the shooting range. The tank was operational and available for rides at a cost of \$70 per person**

**Below left: Visitors and exhibitors in a firing area that specialises in sniper rifles**

**Below: Ryan, April and Olivia Ireland have their portrait taken at the show**



ALL PICTURES © PETE MULLER

images at the end of the day. Being conscientious about what you shoot is an important exercise for photographers, particularly ones of my generation and younger. I’ve worked hard to understand a bit more about the process and construction of images, rather than running around saying I’m going to shoot 2,000 images and hope there’s something in there.’

It’s important to note at this juncture that Pete actually shoots 75–80% of his images on an old Canon EOS-1D camera, the first full-frame DSLR Canon made back in November 2001. It’s a camera that, for obvious reasons, has its limitations. Pete can take six or seven images before having to wait around 40secs for the camera to process all the pictures.

‘It’s actually a great virtue for me,’ says Pete. ‘It means I have to be very selective with what I want to shoot.’

**GUN WORSHIP**

In Pete’s observation, Machine Gun Americana seemed to make more of a splash overseas than it did in the US. There’s still something about witnessing liberal attitudes to gun ownership that can surprise societies with stricter laws.’

‘There are so many historical relationships between the US and guns,’ says Pete. ‘I think in a historical sense the reason why it was interesting to shoot in Oklahoma is that places like this were the frontiers. Frontiers were lawless, dangerous places that largely had an absence of central authority. If you lived in a settlement and in a frontier like Oklahoma, you were pretty much out there on your own. You had to provide your own food and security, and the environment was not necessarily conducive to those things.’

‘I think the historical evolution of that social configuration created dynamics where people developed a reliance on guns. And as things progressed, guns became an integral



**YOUNG GUNS**

**ONE OF** the stand-out images from Machine Gun Americana depicts a small child peering down the scope of a high-calibre assault rifle. Naturally, it’s the image that people will gravitate to, but Pete is keen to clear up some issues surrounding the image.

‘I knew people would pick up on that image,’ says Pete. ‘This type of imagery of very young children being involved in this type of event naturally raises concerns. In a very iconographic sense, it demonstrates the perpetuation and attachment of these dangerous weapons being passed on and

inculcated into a new generation. I get it and I see why the image is powerful for people, including myself. But the context is so important.

‘I consider myself a journalist in this regard in that I make pictures and pride myself on being journalistically sound. The guy you see in the picture is not the child’s father – he’s a safety expert. He’s there to monitor the child and ensure that he can have this experience in a safe way. There’s a lot of judgement that’s bound up in it, and as a journalist it’s crucial that I try to reserve my own.’



part of survival. I guess it developed in ways where we became much more militaristic as a country. It created this hyper-breed of historical relationships with guns that has been exacerbated by a cultural impulse that worships violence and war.’

So what else is there for Pete to explore about our relationship with guns?

‘I shot a project last summer in Detroit about concealed pistol licences and the armed private security militia,’ says Pete. ‘Last year, Detroit filed for bankruptcy, and that means the civil service and public service standards are at their nadir. There are no police there. A private firm has stepped in as an armed group who contract themselves out to anybody who has the means to employ them.’

Being around so many guns, Pete must have a clear understanding of his own relationship with weapons. The answer will probably come as no surprise after reading this article.

‘I’m not a gun person,’ Pete says with barely a pause for thought. ‘I’ve never owned guns or grown up around them. Honestly, the gun stuff is not for me.’ **AP**