

# Dancing the divide

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## *Living in Divided States* at Antioch's Herndon Gallery

By Brittany Erwin

**Photo:** Michael Casselli's 'US/THEM' from *Living in Divided States* at Antioch; photos: Sylvia Newsome

A large disco ball twirls slowly, scattering reflective light over the Herndon Gallery, Antioch College's on-site art space. But this is no celebratory dance party. A closer look reveals the words "Us" and "Them" on opposite sides of the sphere, forever divided. This is Michael Casselli's "US/THEM," part of the *Living in Divided States* exhibit running through Feb. 11.

Mark Reynolds, director of marketing and communications, summarizes in a press release, "One month after a heated presidential election, the Herndon Gallery...[asks], 'In these most divisive times of recent memory, where hate-filled rhetoric divides and fractures community and our sense of belonging...what has become of us? We are a nation divided and deeply entrenched. What does a post-election America look like? Where do we even begin?'"

To begin addressing this, over 50 artists—many of them local—have contributed a variety of compelling artistic works in a multitude of mediums, which stress resolving the division "has to start with listening," Reynolds says.

Co-curators Jennifer Wenker and Rodney Veal emphasize this exhibit is not for passive observation. “We envisioned the *Divided States* project as less of a gallery exhibit and more of an art/civics laboratory or an aesthetic town hall space where we could deliberately and honestly listen to one another deeply without planning a rebuttal or defensive response,” Wenker explains. With large-scale works, pieces that move along interactive displays, videos, and listening stations sponsored by WYSO’s *Community Voices*, their vision has been made manifest.

“Just like a great dinner party, this project needed the interesting and vital diversity of voices at the table; otherwise, the conversation is flat and one-dimensional,” Veal notes. “This is an immersive and interactive environment that will change with each repeat viewing.” Having already visited once, I certainly plan to go again and would urge readers to do the same.

Originally conceived as a forum for both conservative and liberal artists, the election results coupled with Antioch College’s mission to, as Wenker says, “advance social and environmental justice through the fearlessness of the arts,” dictated a different approach. “We immediately felt a palpable shift in the way we needed to curate the project—less binary—amplifying all of us who were marginalized and not heard,” Wenker says. “They needed to speak our truths.”

Both curators felt the urgency and responsibility of giving a space to those who have been disregarded. “It’s absolutely critical in these times to have a multiplicity and diversity of personal lived experiences shared and heard, particularly of those who have not been heard, who have been marginalized and ‘othered’ and whose rights and liberties are being so callously dismissed in our contemporary climate,” Veal emphasizes.

Though the “US/THEM” disco ball sets the tone, it is one of many works designed to leave a lasting impression. As I wandered through the two-story experience, I was moved, engaged, enraged, and contemplative. The right-hand wall is peppered by bullets spelling out the phrase “To protect and serve,” an unsettling juxtaposition of the protection and violence performed by police. Veal muses on this piece by Harry Sanchez, Jr., saying, “He poses a challenging question about our complicated relationship with the police. The beauty of his work is that it poses questions rather than indictments.”

These questions become especially poignant in this context, where, just across the room, various objects—a hooded sweatshirt, sneakers, a pink toy car, a toy gun—serve as stand-ins for black lives that have been ended by police. Among those named: Alton Sterling, Jamar Clark, India M. Beaty, Mario Woods, Laquan McDonald. The events leading to their deaths—selling CDs, attending a birthday party, holding a fake gun, walking away from police, walking toward police—line the floor. Next to the bullet words looms the larger-than-life “Suite for John Crawford III,” written by Umvikeli G. Scott Jones and painted by Antioch students Sylvia Newsome and Kathryn Olson. This is “a massive and immersive...17-foot wall of text,” Wenker says.

Readers will recall that Crawford was gunned down in a Beavercreek Wal-Mart holding a toy

pellet gun while talking on his cell phone. The haunting piece will be performed live in the gallery on Jan. 13.

As mentioned, the show offers upcoming events and ample opportunities to interact. A chalkboard wall asks gallery goers, “What does a Divided States look like to you?” Thoughtful responses abound, with scrawlers giving us varied opinions. “Not enough active listening,” reads one. “This [the exhibit], so sad!” reads another. And finally, the devastating, “Couldn’t tell ya—it’s all I’ve ever known.” When you visit, the board awaits your response. Another interactive opportunity in the form of a student’s desk resides upstairs and poses the question, “What are you afraid to tell me?” Envelopes, pens, pencils, and paper are provided.

Visitors can view striking videos, like Kelly Gallagher’s “Do You Want to go for a Drive?” which deals with sexual desire and consent. Visitors can also listen in on first-person stories from WYSO’s *Community Voices* series. And still, there is more to see and experience.

In addition to the works on display, there are five upcoming events. These will include musical and dance performances, extended dialogues, and a dinner—“The Longest Table,” which is both a community meal and dialogue first organized by Up Dayton.

“There are so many powerful works,” Wenker summarizes. “It all resonates.”

So, please, visit this experience with open mind, heart, and ears. Our country needs US.

*Living in Divided States will be on display through Saturday, Feb. 11 at the Herndon Gallery in Antioch’s South Hall, 1 Morgan Place in Yellow Springs. The gallery is open Monday through Friday, noon to 5 p.m., and Saturday, 1–4 p.m. For more information, please visit [AntiochCollege.edu/Campus-Life/Herndon-Gallery](http://AntiochCollege.edu/Campus-Life/Herndon-Gallery).*

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