



JUN 05 2015

VIETNAM USA

## PLAYING WITH GUNS AND BALLISTICS GEL: INTERVIEW WITH THE PROPELLER GROUP'S MATT LUCERO

BY DENISE TSUI

The Propeller Group is a multidisciplinary, multi-platform art collective based in Ho Chi Minh City and Los Angeles. Together, artists Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Phunam and Matt Lucero create ambitious projects that cross the boundaries of visual art, advertising and film. Recently, *ArtAsiaPacific* sat down with Lucero to chat about the group's forthcoming show and their new work currently showing in the Central Exhibition at the 56th Venice Biennale.

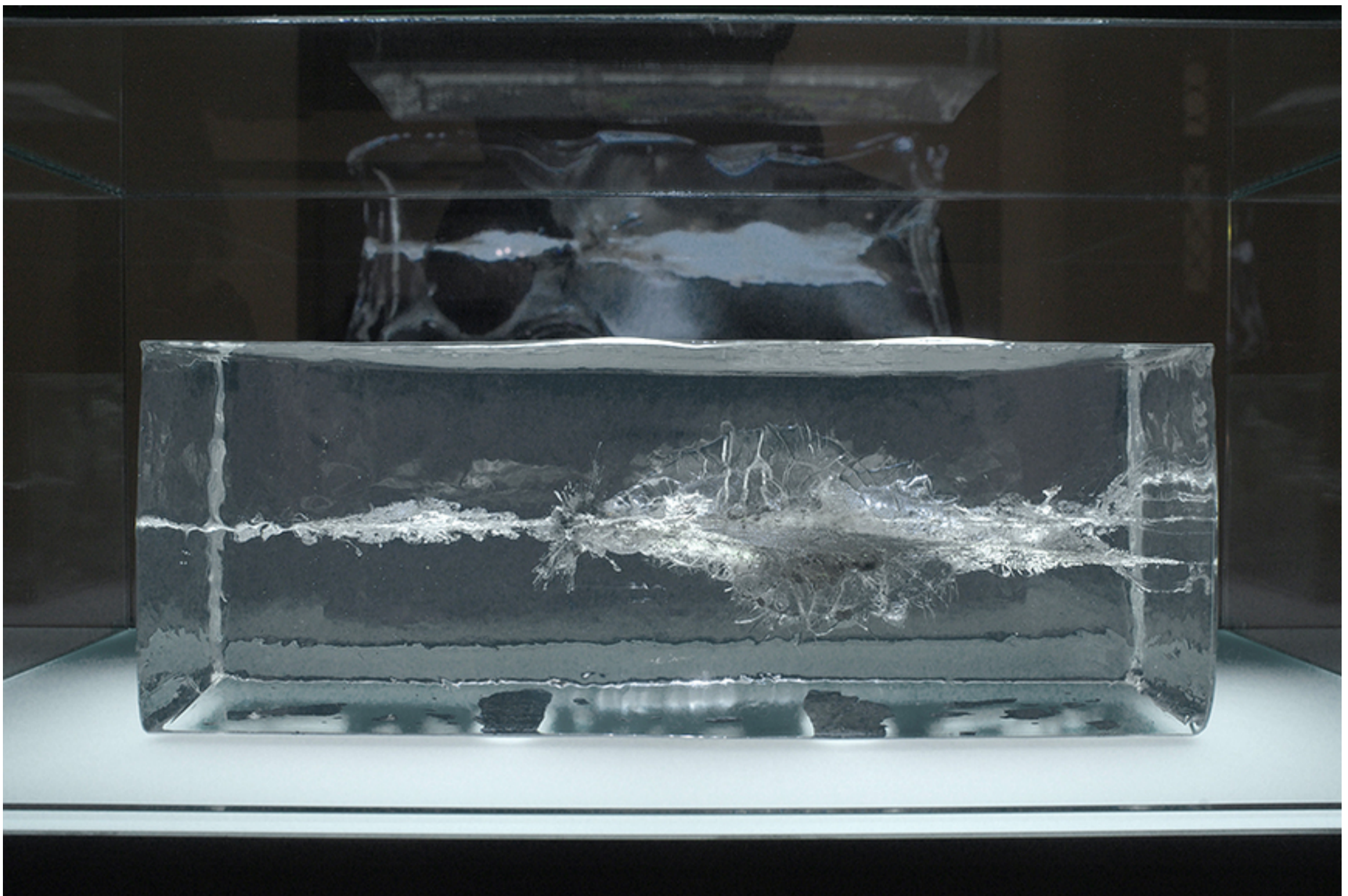
***Can you tell me about The Propeller Group's work *The Ak47 vs The M16 (2015)*, which is currently on view at the Venice Biennale?***

We have been working on this project for a year and a half. We took an M16 and an AK47—the two main assault rifles that were used [by the United States and Vietnam, respectively] in the Vietnam War—and pointed them at each other. Then we shot [a bullet from each rifle] so that they would collide [and fuse]. We really wanted to capture a fused projectile—to have two bullets from opposing sides fuse together into this stalemate of a moment. That's what we were striving for. We worked with a ballistics lab in the US to make this happen, and what we are showing in Venice is a small part of [a larger] project.

In the Venice installation, there is a gel block—which is basically like a slab of gelatin that ballistics engineers shoot bullets into—that simulates the density of human tissue. We managed to create the collision of bullets inside the gel block, so that it captured the moment of impact. So it's like a freeze frame. We also captured it on high-speed film, so the documentation of the moment is also on display [at Venice].



The Propeller Group. (Left to right) Phunam, Tuan Andrew Nguyen and Matt Lucero. Courtesy The Propeller Group.



**THE PROPELLER GROUP**, *The AK-47 vs The M16*, 2015, fused AK-47 and M-16 projectiles encased in ballistics gel with metal stand and LED light fixture. Installation detail from "All the World's Futures" at the Central Pavilion, 56th Venice Biennale, 2015. Photo by E.G. Schempf. Courtesy The Propeller Group and James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

***It sounds almost impossible.***

We thought it was not going to be possible! In real life, statistically there is something like one in a billion chance of [the collision] occurring. Even the ballistics lab had been like, "Yeah . . . It's not going to be easy guys. It's not something that you can just whip up."

In the lab, we were able to shoot the rifles once maybe every 12 or 15 minutes. The engineers gave it a 50/50 chance. We had no idea when or how [the collision] was going to happen. When we started getting open-air collisions, we dialed it in and kept going. [In the end] it only happened during a short period of time on one day, and the rest of the time we struggled to try to make it happen again. Surprisingly, we got about 21 of these collisions inside the gel blocks.

The camera that we used [for the project] films at 100,000 frames per second. We also shot with a camera that films at one million frames per second. It was such a beautiful image getting a bullet flying through the air—but we're talking about a fraction of a second, and to pinpoint where that collision was going to happen was crazy! These are things that are humanly impossible. Our eyes are just not meant to see this!

***What crossed your mind when you first saw the bullets collide in the ballistics lab?***

We had no idea what was going to happen when the collision took place. I have a background in physics, so when I saw it for the first time I immediately started thinking of the Big Bang theory. I started thinking of creation and myth. This stuff is all mythology. History is mythology. It's also sort of like the Large Hadron Collider, [which is used to] collide subatomic particles to find new particles that would help explain the beginning of the universe. It's like unpacking a historical moment, and seeing what that unpacking looks like.



**THE PROPELLER GROUP**, *The AK-47 vs The M16* (detail), 2015, fused AK-47 and M-16 projectiles encased in ballistics gel with metal stand and LED light fixture. Photo by E.G. Schempf. Courtesy The Propeller Group and James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

### ***What was the impetus behind the work?***

For us, it was to speak of a historical moment—that time of the Cold War and the Vietnam War, specifically. But also [to speak about] where we are today with this notion of opposing sides. The definition of “utopia” is great—it means a good place but also “no place.” And that kind of philosophical paradox, I think, underlies all of our work. We are really interested in philosophical paradoxes.

### ***Where did the guns come from?***

They are period guns, so they do have a history, although not the specific kind that we wanted. We originally wanted them to come from the Vietnam War, but it was far too difficult to borrow such guns, because they are all in private collections now. The ballistics lab that we worked with uses these test gun barrels that are scientifically calculated to get very precise when shooting; however, once you use the real weapon there are so many variables—like the triggering and all the various mechanics. It gets very wild and out of control! It was too difficult to try to minimize the risk of damaging these irreplaceable guns.



**THE PROPELLER GROUP**, *The AK-47 vs The M16*, 2015, fused AK-47 and M-16 projectiles encased in ballistics gel with metal stand and LED light fixture. Installation detail from “All the World’s Futures” at the Central Pavilion, 56th Venice Biennale, 2015. Photo by E.G. Schempf. Courtesy The Propeller Group and James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

### ***So will the project be exhibited elsewhere after Venice?***

The Venice installation is just a small part of the overall project. The exhibition that we have [planned] for the full project will be held at Grand Arts, in Kansas City, Missouri. They are the ones who have been helping to produce and fund this project. It will be the final exhibition for Grand Arts, because they are closing soon, after 20 years [of operation]. So we have been fortunate to work with them for their last exhibition. The exhibition will open in August, and it will contain a lot of remnants of the experiments we have done [for the project], including performances of the collisions, the fused objects, the gel blocks and films. So there’s quite a lot of material that we are digging through right now, and the tentative title is “A Universe of Collisions.”

### ***How did the project come about in the first place?***

A curator friend of mine in Los Angeles introduced us to Stacy [Switzer] at Grand Arts. I didn’t know who she was, but my friend insisted we meet her, because Grand Arts helps produce ambitious projects like ours—which are really difficult to do without a lot of support. So we met with Stacy and gave her a few different crazy ideas.

It was a long process. Initially, the proposal was that we would be in a gallery

space with a giant, bulletproof vitrine in it. And we would have guns that we shoot at each other every day, and the collisions would happen in the gallery. However, in terms of liability, it wasn't possible. But that was the initial idea that we presented, and from there we sort of unpacked everything.

*The 56th Venice Biennale will be on view until November 22, 2015.*

*The Propeller Group's exhibition at Grand Arts, Kansas City will run from August 7 through to September 5, 2015.*

*Denise Tsui is assistant editor at ArtAsiaPacific.*

© 2016 ArtAsiaPacific

[Credits](#)

[Log In](#)

ArtAsiaPacific

GPO Box 10084

Hong Kong

[info@aapmag.com](mailto:info@aapmag.com)