

CAR BOMBS TO COOKIE TABLES

THE YOUNGSTOWN ANTHOLOGY
SECOND EDITION

EDITED BY
JACQUELINE MARINO



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MAKING SOCIAL ART IN YOUNGSTOWN

By Jennifer Vanderpool

At the end of spring quarter 2010, I sat in the University of California at Santa Barbara's Art Department computer lab and read over my thesis one last time before I hit "send" and submitted the final draft to my committee. I stared out the window as the sinking feeling of *What's next?* crept over me like the marine layer rolling in over the campus lagoon.

Facebook. It might not have the answers, but at least it would distract me for a few minutes. I mindlessly liked a few posts, and then a repost titled "America's Most Dangerous Cities" grabbed my attention. I knew what I would find but read it anyhow. And there it was, my hometown—Youngstown—illustrated by a stunning picture of a hulking, collapsed mill backlit by a glorious Midwest sunset. Youngstown, an apocalyptic place underscored by text and image. This notoriety made my heart hurt a little, but I needed to get on with life after graduation. I didn't think about this photograph until a year later when I was invited to create an exhibition for The Butler Institute of American Art. At that time, I produced large-scale painterly installations that enveloped spectators in an imaginary world of sculptures, animations, and sound art. Unfortunately, there wasn't a budget to develop this type of exhibition for the Butler. This situation presented a challenge. As I thought about how to proceed with the show, I realized my knowledge of Youngstown was limited to childhood memories. I remembered looking out the car window at the lovely historic homes along 5th Avenue, and the lurching remains of Youngstown Sheet and Tube. Those recollections became the images that I used to begin exploring the community. I knew there was more to Youngstown than being one of "America's Most Dangerous Cities," so I started Googling.

I found news stories on crime and corruption, articles on poverty and failing schools, photographs of hometown heroes, and winning sports teams. I continued searching and discovered

Bruce Springsteen's ode to the mill workers and their city. The visual images portrayed in his lyrics reminded me of that childhood memory of the rusted mill. I then spent time reading about the industrial history of the Mahoning Valley. While there were plenty of stories about Youngstown to investigate, I was still looking for a topic that would further my understanding of the city and complement my visual practice, which at the time questioned themes of gender equality and the portrayal of women in popular culture. I have always been fascinated by my grandmother's youth during the '50s when women wore swing dresses and twin-set cardigan sweaters and started to struggle for equality. I eventually discovered Mullins Manufacturing, the company that designed and fabricated modern kitchens, and through its advertising, sold a middle-class lifestyle to women of my grandmother's generation. I decided this topic would be community-responsive to Youngstown while furthering the narrative of my practice.

Hometown Stories: Youngstown Steel Kitchens opened in January 2012 at the Butler. It included historic Youngstown Kitchens' advertisements selling domestic bliss to homemakers displayed with my wink-and-nod mock ads created from the same vintage imagery. The 1953 "Mullinaries" singing salesman's TV advertisement played on a period television. The exhibition also included the 1950 salesman training film *The Last Word in Automatic Dishwashing* and my animation with stills crafted from a process similar to the prints that I then animated.

The Mahoning Valley Historical Society lent the Butler a steel kitchen sink and salesman's kit, which fascinated visitors at the opening. An elderly gentleman who had been a salesman for the company told me that he read about the reception in the *Vindicator* and asked his daughter to drive him over to see the show. While I spoke with him, a woman waited patiently to share her story with me. She told me her husband had been a doctor, who in the '60s attended a medical convention in Calgary, Alberta. There was much excitement at his hotel, not about some medical

breakthrough, but about “The Queen” deciding to pay a surprise visit to the city on her tour of Canada. If the hotel provided tuxedos and some guidance, would the doctors agree to be presented to Queen Elizabeth? Of course, they all agreed! When the woman’s husband was introduced as a doctor from Youngstown, the queen remarked, “I have a Youngstown Steel Kitchen in one of my homes.” I must have had a bemused expression on my face, but her son standing behind her nodded, his head affirming the truth of her story.

From the experience of creating *Hometown Stories*, I learned that both making art and understanding the histories of communities are integral to me. This interest led me to develop a social art practice, which eventually brought me back to Youngstown. In 2019, I created an exhibition at the Tyler History Center that is part of *Untold Stories*, an ongoing community-specific and site-responsive social art project taking place at museums in the Midwest where each exhibition is a case study of the community.

Untold Stories at the Tyler History Center was a social history of Youngstown. The exhibition narrative employed outmoded industrial images and used them as allegories to question neighborhood decay and renewal, segregated and integrated neighborhoods, as well as unemployment and economic redevelopment. It included imaginary realism prints that integrated excerpted images of the cityscape, steel mills, Mill Creek Park, and of course, those fabulous Youngstown Steel Kitchens. I made a documentary investigating the deindustrialization of the community called *Steel City* and another exploring the state of the city titled *Youngstown*. I also curated archival materials from the holdings of the Mahoning Valley Historical Society into the show. Each visual art medium (prints, poetic documentaries, and archival objects) uniquely presented Youngstown. Together in the exhibition, these mediums created a dialogue that enriched the narrative and enabled visitors to explore the story through different visual modes.

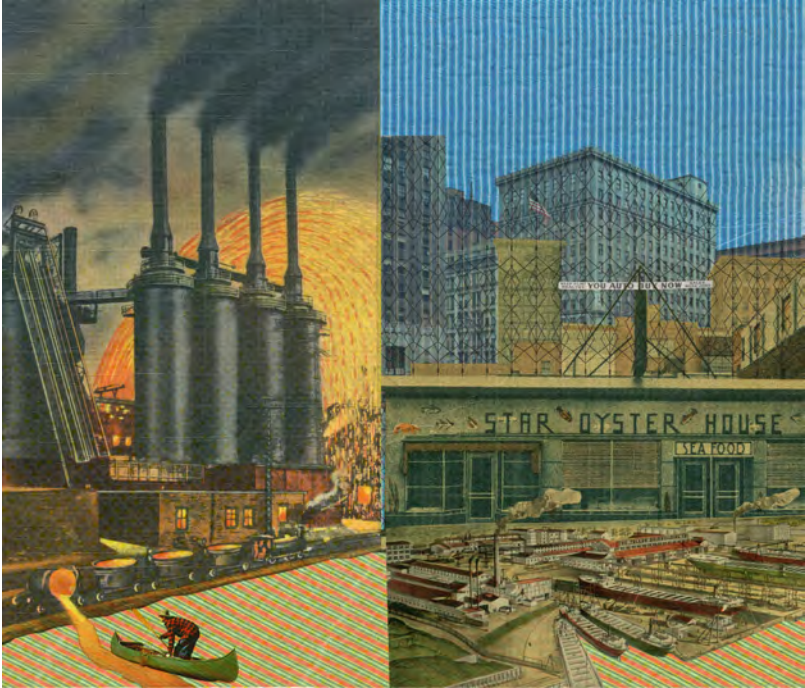
An essential component of a social art practice is outreach. I worked with the Tyler staff to identify a theme in the *Untold*

Stories exhibition that we wanted to investigate further. We decided on the subject of women working in heavy industry. The “Yes, She Can: Women in Steel” panel addressed historical and contemporary questions including sexism, race, and social class.

I hoped *Untold Stories* at the Tyler helped facilitate an empathetic relationship between private recollections and public cultural memory that would increase awareness of the complexities of the city’s social problems and resulting traumas. As Bill Lawson, executive director of the Mahoning Valley Historical Society, noted in the *Steel City* documentary,

Everybody knows what the problems are in this city: crime rates are down, but they’re still unacceptable; schools still have a lot of problems both fiscally and also achievement among the students, especially in the public schools in the inner cities’ of Youngstown and Warren, but now also in the immediate outer suburbs ... Anybody that is attuned to economic development and maintaining a diverse and stable economy for a community has to look at what is going on now and say, “The time is now to act,” and it all comes down to what is the political will.

Perhaps the political attitude, coupled with the community’s determination, can build a flourishing and inclusive post-industrial economy that supports thriving, integrated neighborhoods. Before that can be possible, however, we must question who is participating in the conversation. Do the citizens of Youngstown even know this conversation is happening? Do they feel empowered to participate? In the *Youngstown* documentary, Pat Kerrigan, executive director of the Oak Hill Collaborative, explained that he organized the Digital Advantage Programs to provide computer and social media skill-building classes to make the internet accessible to the Oak Hill neighborhood and create a digitally inclusive Youngstown. This effort can lead to boots-on-the-ground social media, which can—like art—invite all citizens to the conversation.



Pittsburgh to Flint, 2019

36" x 42"

Photographic Intervention Giclée Print