

# About Schmitt

A controversial German philosopher inspires a UC Irvine exhibit's exploration of 'us' and 'them'

BY DAVE BARTON

Stepping into the dark hallway leading to Omar Mismar's film installation, "Schmitt, You and Me," at UC Irvine's Room Gallery, you see a paper target peppered with seven bullet holes, each hit in areas that would devastate vital organs. It's difficult to view with perfect clarity, but in the upper-right corner, there's a complimentary, handwritten note along the lines of "Great Job!" that's signed and dated by an employee of Staple Gun Shop in Skowhegan, Maine. You can step up to the target and peer through the bullet holes, the film playing on the other side.

The film, screened on the other side of this paper, plays on a loop, its first shots showing the camera lens going in and out of focus on its subjects, two gun-store employees. Like a Central Casting cliché, the duo is middle-aged, white, wearing baseball caps (one with the store logo on it, the other with "Trump Fence Building Co. Free Installation" stitched onto the front panels) and T-shirts in various states of cleanliness or grime, and standing against a row of rifles and semi-automatic weapons. It's a picture-perfect beginning, the artist literally focusing on the two men and what they're saying.

Or, to be more specific, what they're reading. The two fumble their way through several pages from the extraordinarily complex work of German philosopher Carl Schmitt. My superficial understanding of his "friend" and "enemy" paradigm—based on my reading and curator Juli Carson's incisive, if over-written, exhibition pamphlet—is that the labels are often inaccurate ways political organizations perpetuate the separation of "us" and "them." This increasing dissociation is passed to groups of people that are within the organization, eventually leading to factions of people gathering together under one banner or another, with the end result an act of violence. What's not explained in the film is that Schmitt was an unrepentant Nazi Party member hauled in front of the Nuremberg Trials for his collaboration and that the writings are his defensive apologia for fascism and anti-Semitism.

The men mispronounce words and steamroll through the dense academic text without nuance, and at first, they have no clear understanding of what they're reading. Sections repeat more than once, with each of the men stopping and

starting as they feel more comfortable with the material, have a question for Mismar, or answer phone calls and customer queries. The artist periodically asks them to try to look at the camera as they read, but he otherwise stays relatively silent, respectfully correcting a pronunciation or offering a word definition only when one of the men gets confused and specifically asks for it.

If your initial reaction is that this sounds back-handed, that Mismar is mocking the two men he's friendly with, trying to link them and the way they make a living with Nazi propaganda, think again. In between readings, the artist leaves the camera rolling as the two men discuss fear, the purchase of guns for self-defense, and their understanding of Schmitt's words; Mismar occasionally joins in quietly as they debate the text. As the conversation inevitably leads to the Middle East and what ISIS and the U.S. want out of the conflict, you can even see their eyes drift quickly over to the artist, who is Lebanese-American. Is it an uncovered, covert racism? Discomfort over a personal conversation caught on camera? A cautious sign of respect for someone they know and clearly like? All three? Something else entirely? We're not privy to that information, and it's telling that it doesn't really matter.

As is often the case in politics, we

demonize one another irrespective of the actual facts, dividing and conquering as we circle the wagons with people who feel the same way we do. While arguing policy might be difficult in today's political climate, enough so that we often can't even agree on the same points of reference, the film seems to be saying that what is important is that we maintain the dialogue, while understanding the real (and imagined) baggage we carry into the conversation and project on one another.

As you round the corner to exit, you pass a series of mirrored letters applied backwards on the wall. A single light hung overhead hits the glass and bounces onto the opposite wall the reflection of the haunting, existential warning: "The Enemy is the Embodiment of Your Own Question." Hear the men reading as you once more walk by their images flickering through the bullet holes. The reflection, which you can see yourself fleetingly mirrored in, is of Schmitt's words, of course, and while I'm loathe to do anything with Nazis except punch them in the face, at this time, those words seem to be particularly insightful all these years later.

## "SCHMITT, YOU AND ME"

at UC Irvine's Room Gallery, 712 Arts Plaza, Irvine, (949) 824-9854; uag.arts.uci.edu.

Open Tues.-Sat., noon-6 p.m. Through Dec. 16. Free.



JEFF MCCLANE