War: Artists Respond

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ART AND SOCIETY

The power of visual art to express and to comment upon current events has been evident since the first artist picked up a stick and scratched a hunting scene on a cave wall. This artistic interpretation of culture is still relevant and important today. Whether with pen, brush or chisel, from titillation to education, artists create works that comment on society and the events of their time; and they connect their work in myriad ways to aesthetic, political and contentious issues involving their hearts and minds.

Advances in cognitive linguistics indicate that we think through the use of metaphor, a process that allows us to gain insight and delve deeper into complex subjects for a better understanding - a way of bridging the gap between what we know and what we have yet to discover. Works of art become effective mediums for investigating and defining life around us. Beyond words, visual art communicates to us in a way that plays on the senses and emotions, as well as the intellect, inspiring symbolic connection and capturing a broader audience in the process.

For much of art history, the content of visual art was at the direction of the state, the church, princes and noblemen, and wealthy patrons. As artists became independent of commissions they were free to create what was stimulating to them, including content that commented on events of the society. Recently an art teacher at Leigh High School in San Jose, CA gave the following challenge to his students:

"Choose an issue you care deeply about, and would want to... and do something about... Some ideas of things you might be interested in depicting/standing up for or against: pollution/environmental concerns, abortion rights, racism, homelessness, AIDS, religious wars, the war in Iraq, poverty, verbal abuse, bullying, depression, teen suicide, discrimination, gay rights...What do you CARE about?"

Artists will probably always have to create the pretty things with broad appeal to pay their way, but it seems to me that art and artists, being part of the social fabric, should and must be active in commenting on today's world and the problems that beset us.

ART AND WAR

Bloody conflicts have occurred between humans since before time began. War has continued unabated and unaffected by any moral or religious influences and even sometimes in the name of those influences. Many famous artists have decried the violence and human suffering that occurs during war. Francisco Goya's famous series of etchings, The Disasters of War, and his two masterpieces, The Second of May, 1800 and The Third of May, 1808, were some of the first depictions of war as a connection between killers and killed rather than as a glorious heroic event. Pablo Picasso painted Guernica in response to the bombing of its namesake city, and, although the painting was met with some criticism for its style, it has always been seen as his strongest expression of outrage against the bombing of that city and of the horrors of war in general.

During the early part of the 20th century there arose in Italy a group of artists called "Futurists", who glorified war and became popular during the fascist rule of Mussolini. The movement dissipated, however, as the First World War came to an end, and most artistic depictions of war or military became universally anti-war unless used to bolster a patriotic cause.

"WAR-ARTISTS RESPOND"

In autumn of 2006, Barry George, an artist and political activist, wanted to express his concern about the conflict in Iraq and initiated the idea for an art show. After a preliminary meeting, he moved to New York for a two year residence and training. I had been working on my piece for the show for about four months and checked with Barry to see how preparations were going. I found that no one was doing the organizing to make sure it would happen, and so I took over and began to recruit volunteers. We decided the show would not be juried so that any artist who wanted to participate could. We made it plain that any aspect of war could be explored and that art would not be rejected based upon a subjectively perceived quality.

The show, which took place at the Dougherty Arts Center during November, 2007, successfully featured the work of 63 visual artists from Central TX, and from as far away as New Zealand and NY. A total of 118 pieces, both 2D and 3D, were shown. When we chose the theme "WAR-ARTISTS Respond", no particular understanding or metaphor was intended. Although interpretation of "war" was left entirely up to the artists, most submitted pieces that were against war and specifically against the war in Iraq.
CAROL HAYMAN, an artist and an Anthropology instructor at Austin Community College. Carol's work has been exhibited in galleries in the US and in photographic expositions in Europe and South America. She states, "My aim as an artist is to create art that has a complexity that challenges the intellect and is laden with emotion that touches the soul." Maya Crosses is made from a photograph taken in Chiapas, Mexico, where the indigenous Mayan people live and the site of the Zapatista revolution, which began in 1994 with the implementation of NAFTA. The crosses mark the entrance to the underworld where the old pre-Columbian gods reside, but they are also symbols of the tree of life, as well as a Christian symbol. The local people bring offerings to them and decorate them with pine boughs, as they have done since before the Spanish arrived. This is an example of religious syncretism. It is also symbolic of the resistance to assimilation into Spanish-speaking Mexico, which is also a motivation of the Zapatistas.

CHRISTOPHER HAYNES believes it is an artist's responsibility to make comments on politics along with bringing beauty and humor into the world. Victory's Child, missing a head and a leg, cries out a brutal message of the effect of war on the innocents and bears testament to the melting down of a society that allows such violence.

For CLAUDE VAN LINGEN, future time and space has been the central concern since 1978. In writing the names of Countries of the World, one over the other, the paper was ripped, or surfaces became black. The images that resulted from this process are a metaphor and indictment for the way in which the "I am right, you are wrong" mentality has the world descending into the abyss of war and conflict. In addition, this process creates emotional and associative responses projecting thoughts about the ever/never changing human condition and events in the past and into the future.

CINDY DEBOLD lives near Austin, Texas and has been sculpting for over twenty years. One of the goals of her figurative work is to have the viewer feel the mood of the piece. Despair and Silent Scream are both sculptures from a series of women expressing different emotions. She explains, "Those of us who have only read about war can only imagine the anguish of those living through it- the fear, the frustration and the helplessness of watching the destruction of all you love.

My piece, African Refugee, arose out of my observation that the people who suffer the most from armed conflict are the least invested in the process: the non-combatants, the children and the mothers killed and damaged by the conflict. This has been painfully obvious in recent history with the conflicts in Darfur, Liberia, and Rwanda. And, whether a struggle for control of land or the government, or involving religious, ethnic or tribal strife, these conflicts have resulted in mass atrocities, starvation, and loss of the protection for women and children. I hope my sculpture can make real the tragedy for those of us who are so far removed from its effects.

CONCLUSION

The other artists in the show expressed themselves differently. Some of the pieces, used exaggerated visual metaphors, and were derisive of the Bush administration with outrageous satirical content. Some focused on the current Iraq conflict with realistic works of coffins or patriotic military personnel. There were also several abstract pieces and a life-sized welded metal sculpture of David in his battle with Goliath. But the greatest indication of the success of the show, in my mind at least, was the universal acclaim of the artists that contributed to the show. They are pleased that disclosure has devoted a part of this year’s publication to selections from the Austin show, advancing a discussion of war and its effect on society.
CAROL HAYMAN
Maya Crosses, 2003
Polymer plate intaglio prints (solar plate etchings) on paper
Flatbed Press printmaking studio
7" x 9"

CAROL HAYMAN
The Disappeared, 2003
Polymer plate intaglio prints (solar plate etchings) on paper
Flatbed Press printmaking studio
7" x 9"
CHRISTOPHER HYNES

*Victory's Child*, 2005
Assemblage: found drawer, found doll, handmade paper, enamel on paper, embroider letters
18 ¼" x 15" x 8 ½"

CLAUDE VAN LINGEN

*1000 Years from Now, the Countries of the World*, 2007
Graphite on paper
38" x 25"
CINDY DEBOLD

Silent Scream, 1994
Bronze
13" x 6" x 9"

CINDY DEBOLD

Despair, 1994
Bronze
11" x 8" x 11"