
Art Review

The Art of Shepard Fairey: Questioning Everything

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Given the recent erosion of the United States' moral reputation and economic status as a super power, the social and political criticism of Shepard Fairey's street art becomes more poignant. Fairey is a street artist who speaks out against the abuse of power and militarism while supporting people of color and women who seek equity. Abandoned buildings, empty wall spaces, and streets have become his blank canvas and target to raise his voice and pose questions. During the summer of 2007, the Jonathan Levine Gallery introduced Shepard Fairey in his first New York City solo exhibition. Thousands of viewers saw his works at the gallery in Chelsea and the D.U.M.B.O. Installation Space in Brooklyn, New York. The title of the exhibition, "*E Pluribus Venom*" (out of many, poison), parodied the Great Seal of "*E Pluribus Unum*" (out of many, one) which appears on US currency. Public interest in Fairey's works and the magnetic power of his persuasive visual rhetoric created great interest in the younger generation of art enthusiasts, critical reviewers, and collectors. Fairey's first New York City solo exhibition was sold out.

Shepard Fairey was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1970. He studied illustration art at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1991 and is currently living and working in Los Angeles. He began his street art project in Rhode Island and spent time in the neighborhood on his skateboard. He faced legal problems with using public spaces to display his street art and was arrested 13 times. His political street art quickly attracted the attention of major galleries, and Fairey made a



rapid ascent from smaller exhibitions to major galleries in New York City, Los Angeles, London, Berlin, and Tokyo.

Fairey's major works are filled with metaphors about peace, anti-war political propaganda, and visual contradictions between tenderness and harsh reality. His installation entitled *"Mujer Fatal"* (2007) is a blend of love, sensuality, and police order. Wishful thinking and reality are played out in a conflicted political arena where many nations resist the domination of a super power. They are caught in a dilemma between envying and rejecting the materialistic wealth of contemporary America. These elements are emphasized in his images, words, appropriated motifs, and patterns from older poster art, which permeate the thematic choices of Fairey's subjects. Some of his works were originally street art, posters, or album covers. Now they are in vogue in commercial galleries, part of the materialistic world they protest. Fairey's works have not diminished the strength of his original political and social messages against the traditional values of high art nor muffled the voice of protest that is his trademark.

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Fairey's "Obey" series stands out as an example of the authoritarian influence of propaganda poster art. In Benito Mussolini's fascist Italy (1922-43) the credo of the Fascist party was "believe, obey, fight" (*Credere, Obbedire, Combattere* in Italian). Fairey's posters combine elements of world history, blending fascist symbols with the communist propaganda art of the former Soviet



Union, the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, and the imperialistic goals of modern Japan (1895-1945). His poster art reminds viewers of the 1960's mythology of a peaceful and bountiful life style in America, which was envied by some and despised by others less fortunate. It takes time to digest the contradictions of Fairey's sweet young girl in *"War by Numbers"* (2007). The girl is holding a hand grenade topped with a bright red rose. She smells the rose's scent while bombers fly overhead. The juxtaposition of sniffing a rose while holding a hand grenade is so loud that the viewer can almost hear the drone of the warplanes. This poster contains psychological tension created by the conflicting images of sight, smell, and sound. Fairey

successfully blends and bonds contradictory elements in his posters.

Another example of his anti-war message that war and peace can coexist in the same society is a complex postage stamp entitled “*Proud Parents*” (2007). A well-dressed middle class White couple, holding flowers against the background of the Japanese war flag Sunburst (*Kyokujitsu-Ki* in Japanese), are lovingly and proudly caressing and admiring their baby bomb. They represent traditional American values of a happy family life. Their bomblet child was created and provided by the U.S. Treasury who brings dreams to life. The postage stamp has a value of *no cents* (no sense) and promotes the growth of the military industrial complex at the expense of *less skools* (sic). Some of Fairey’s large scale (11’ x 16’) artworks criticize the ambitious American dream of being a superpower and its naïve argument that world peace comes after bombing and subduing her enemies. He has appropriated a Norman Rockwell 1950s’ nuclear family aesthetic style of illustration.



Most artworks in his 2007 exhibition were silk screens using graphic design, printmaking, poster art, and mixed media collages. Fairey’s large scale silk screens are very impressive in their scope and size. The powerful images have a great impact on audiences and provoke psychological and physical tension, contemplation, and reflection, which pose deeper questions about contemporary society. According to Fairey in an interview by John Del Signore (2007), the real message behind his work is:

...questioning everything. So I’m picking apart some of the symbols of Americana that a lot of times people just adhere to out of some idea of this vague abstract American dream, and the way that a lot of times politicians use these hollow symbols as a way to get people to get behind ideas that normally they probably wouldn’t support if they were deconstructed.

Fairey’s role as an artist and cultural worker, demanding attention in a loud, unpleasant voice with messages designed to awaken large audiences through poster art, has been highly successful. His works contain direct and hidden political and social messages that are expressed through a limited palette using effective graphic colors such as red, black, and subtle browns as in his “*Toxicity Inspector*” (2007). His background choices are complex designs appropriated from common



fabric patterns, paper currencies, bonds, certificates, and postage stamps. Fairey successfully contrasts images of tenderness and love with strong and violent military images of bombs, warplanes, guns, and explosives.



He combines many elements including contemporary street art, punk and hippie style, decorative art motifs, and political humor. His works contain shocking visual punches to the intellect. He asks the viewers to reexamine their hollow contemporary life style and raises questions about multicultural issues, oppression, exploitation, prejudice, and discrimination that the world is trying to resolve. It is through the stimulation of a mass art form, such as posters, that Fairey provokes and demands each individual to question and deconstruct monolithic systemized institutional authorities. Most of his works deal with current events including the Iraq War and the

rising cost of oil, which is sometimes referred to as black gold, and the 2008 American presidential race. In one of his artworks entitled *Greetings from Iraq* (2008), his anti-war travel poster message invites the viewer to visit a desert-like nation beset by civil war and occupation: "Enjoy a cheap holiday in other people's misery." In the *Cost of Oil* (2008), the American consumer stands proudly in front of his gas guzzling Hummer (a.k.a. Humvee) on a road dripping with oil. The driver, wearing a tee shirt proclaiming the dominance of the USA as an oil hog, is holding a gas hose which radiates the overwhelming power of fuel against an imperial Japanese rising sunburst.



Since Fairey's 2007 Brooklyn exhibition, Americans have been involved in the process of selecting presidential candidates with each one promoting his or her version of change to make amends for the failed policies of previous administrations. Elections are promoted as the panacea to all problems, domestic and global as well as internal and external. His poster "*Rock The Vote*" (2008) asks viewers to empower themselves and take part in democracy. Fairey was involved with Barack Obama's successful campaign to get out the vote, which resulted in Obama's election as the 44th president of the United States, the first person of color to hold this office. Fairey's posters of Obama, "*Hope and Progress*" (2008), were displayed in campaign locations across the nation. His artworks call on the conscience of everyone to promote democracy through voting. Individuals have to speak out and not be part of the silent majority. Being patriotic requires those who can vote to make America the best nation it can be to benefit the rest of the world. Fairey's art reminds us that Americans of all colors, creeds, nationalities,



identities, races, beliefs, classes, locations, and lifestyles must incorporate hope, believe in change, and work together towards progress.

Fairey's street art helped him to fulfill a personal dream of reconciling love and war. He tries to awaken the sleeping silent majority by questioning every aspect of authority. Individuals should empower themselves by adding their personal voices to the democratic process. Fairey has empowered himself and others through his expression, and his voice continues to develop in his early life as an artist.



Exhibitions

Shepard Fairey has exhibited his works in US cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia, and in other countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Denmark, Japan, Hong Kong, and Australia. His artworks have been commissioned and are in collections in the New Museum of Design, San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Children's Museum, Holly Solomon Gallery, and the California Anti-Tobacco Campaign.

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Reference

Del Signore, J. (2007). Shepard Fairey, street artist. Retrieved November 10, 2008, from http://gothamist.com/2007/06/21/interview_shepa.php