



Working stiffs' photos counter activists' protests

'Artists Interrogate: Politics & War,' Milwaukee Art Museum

By JAMES AUER, OCT 27, 2004

Sarah Kirk, the Milwaukee Art Museum's newly appointed associate curator of prints, drawings and photography, has assembled a diverse, diverting, surprisingly well-balanced survey of graphic work devoted to artists' statements about war and politics.

Images in this group exhibit are drawn largely from the museum's permanent collection.

There are, of course, the expected art-world protests against government-sponsored violence. Mark di Suvero makes no bones about calling President Lyndon B. Johnson "a murderer." Warrington Colescott finds conspirators and torturers galore in his wildly inventive foray "Underneath the Oval Office."

But there also are marvelous contributions by "official" photographers, some associated with the U.S. Army's Signal Corps, which point up the human cost of war without indulging in polemics. A simple hospital scene from 1914-'18 breaks the heart with its depiction of wounded soldiers in a war-damaged church.

Indeed, in this chronicle, the working-stiff humanists on the spot frequently come off better than the high-minded activists in their studios.

A few examples:

American photojournalist W. Eugene Smith's World War II photograph of a helpless infant, severely wounded during the battle for Saipan, sums up the awful human cost of battle more effectively than any amount of politically motivated philosophizing. "We hoped," Smith is said to have written later, "that the baby would die."

So, in color rather than black-and-white, does Larry Burrows' superb "Reaching Out," in which a soldier struggles against being airlifted out of a battle situation while his buddy lies, helpless and shattered, in the foreground.

The enlarged photograph is a miracle of flawless composition and hard-boiled compassion, as perfect in its color balance and detail work as any Renaissance-era frieze.

Burrows, among the braver photojournalists of his era, was killed in Vietnam in 1966 while doing his job. Sometimes individual pictures, informative in themselves, fail to cover the enormity of a specific situation. Ben Shahn's sensitive portrait of "J. Robert Oppenheimer" aptly expresses the physical and emotional exhaustion of the nuclear physicist who worked on the Manhattan project, which gave the U.S. government the atomic bomb, only to end up being denied security clearance because of his political beliefs.

It's a creditable effort, but Oppenheimer's personal crisis, a sensation in its day, continues to spawn books that explicate the nuances of the case. Shahn's image is merely the tip of a personal and ideological iceberg floating in a sea of continuing controversy.

Another working artist who makes a major contribution is The Milwaukee Journal's Pulitzer prize-winning cartoonist Ross Lewis, who was in the vanguard when it came to recognizing the threat posed by the rise of Adolf Hitler. His panels from the early 1930s still resonate today.

Equally powerful, albeit after the fact, is Bertolt Brecht's "Storm Trooper," a poem that attempts to penetrate the thinking (or lack thereof) behind popular support for the Holocaust.

There are artworks that appear to endorse a kind of moral equivalency between the United States and its enemies. One is **Archie Scott Gobber's** "Doers," which suggests that America as a whole looks differently upon "Evildoers" (the Taliban and al-Qaida) than it does upon "Wrongdoers" (the financial officers of Enron and WorldCom). Well, in fact it does. For all their stupidity, greed and malice, the corporate-suite crowd never murdered, in a single morning, nearly 3,000 people whose only offense was getting to work on time.

Finally, speaking of Sept. 11, there's an immensely moving book, produced collaboratively by a group of New York artists who lived through that unforgettable day, that is ultimately as disconcerting, and as disorienting, as the day itself. It is accompanied by a soundtrack that recaptures, in an unforgettable montage, the love and terror engendered by the attack on the twin towers.



Doers, 2004 edition of 24 (paper: Somerset, Soft White, paper size: 30" x 38.25", image size: 26" x 35.25")

Recognized for his graphic POP art style and satirical messages, Gobber has created a list of ideological enemies that have terrorized America and the world. He then juxtaposed it with a list of mainstream, "white collar" institutions that have corrupted and damaged the financial stability of our country. Printed in retro colors over a pale cream field designed to look like a faded and stained sheet of antique paper, the word colors bounce the eye from warm to cool while being contained within coffin-like shapes of a pale green and magenta decorative border that evoked the feeling of old wall-paper.

"The initial idea that led to the print *Doers* was simply two lists. One listed ideological enemies that directly or indirectly brought terror to the United States, the other listed white-collar criminals who caused serious damage to some of our major, most trusted financial institutions. Words of similar weights are placed across from one another to allow the viewer to compare and contrast 'evildoers' and 'wrongdoers'. The lists function not only as words, but as color and rhythm studies that bounce the eye from warm colors to cool while being contained inside the coffin-shaped, rebel flag like outer structure. The sober subject is then surrounded by a fresh green floral motif that winds around creating pleasant pattern and sinister missile shapes. Conceptually, if unable to read, *Doers* is merely a flag design for a new nation in our world."

-Archie Scott Gobber