

Art Business News

May 2003

CREATING SOLUTIONS FOR THE ART MARKETPLACE

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"Yellow Ribbons" by Robert Cenedella was painted in response to the first Gulf War and is featured in this month's article on art created in response to war.

"Boy Fishing" by Winslow Homer, 1892, is a painting currently on view at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, through June 22 in the exhibit, "Casting a Spell: Winslow Homer, Artist and Angler." Learn more about this exhibit and others on page 56.

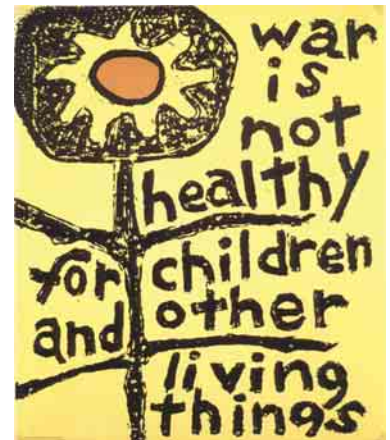
trendsetters

Art At
War

▲ "Guernica" by Picasso



▲ "Gods and Generals. Antietam Campaign, Leesburg, Va., Sept. 5, 1862" by Mort Kunstler



▲ This poster was one of the works on view at the recent exhibit at Track 16 Gallery.

BY LAURA MEYERS
ABN Contributing Editor

In times of war, art stands at a crossroad between armed conflict and a battlefield at home for the public heart. Artists can be witnesses to war, historians of war or protestors against war. Today, with American troops on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, artists and the art-going citizenry alike are focusing more attention on both the art of combat and the art of anti-war.

"We judge our civilizations by two things: the wars they win and the art they produce," said Marita Holdaway, owner of the Benham Gallery in Seattle, which recently showcased works by three international lensmen who have aimed their cameras at the human cost of war.

Indeed, added Barry Blindermann, director of the University Galleries at Illinois State University in Normal, Ill., "War has been the subject of artists since time immemorial, going back to Assyria." From ancient images of conflict in Assyria, Egypt, Greece and the Roman Empire to Francisco Goya's graphic series of etchings "The Disasters of War" to Jacques Louis David's "Death of Marat," artists have rallied both for and against war.

From the 20th century, perhaps the most famous image is Picasso's "Guernica," commemorating the bloodshed visited upon that small Basque town by Hitler's war planes supporting General Franco and his troops in the Spanish Civil War. Picasso painted a chaotic scene in black, gray and white of twisted wreckage,



▲ "Violence" by Magdalena Martinez Franco, 2001

moaning birds and neighing horses, whose faces reference the horror and barbarism of war.

Anti-War Art

The current call to arms has drawn spirited reaction across America, including its arts communities. At galleries, museums and university exhibition spaces throughout the nation, exhibits across the political spectrum have rallied emotions in this time of war. Tanks, bombs and guns are the principal weapons of war, but art is often used to engage a battle for the hearts and minds of the American public.

For her part, Seattle art dealer Holdaway wanted to play a role in the public discourse in the weeks leading up to the second Gulf War. "The idea of this show is to get people to think about alternatives to military action, though I didn't want to do something with bloody bodies," noted Holdaway. Inspired by a previous show of photographer Simon Norfolk's haunting landscapes with bombs exploding, Holdaway exhibited Didier Ben Loulou's color

photographs of Jerusalem, where inhabitants live in daily fear of violence, and Gabriel Valansi's shots of bombers, battleships and other war machinery, as well as Norfolk's images of war-torn Afghanistan. Holdaway said, "Nothing shows the true face of war like photography."

Holdaway is not alone in mounting an anti-war art show. In January, Track 16 Gallery in Santa Monica hosted the first outing of a traveling exhibit "The Anti-War Show—The Price of Intervention from Korea to Iraq," from the collection of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics. In March and April, the *Nation* magazine corporate gallery showcased New York Social Realist artist Robert Cenedella's caustic political commentary and anti-war paintings in a show that will travel to Chicago's Aaron Galleries later this year. Also in Chicago, the Museum of Contemporary Art presented "War (What Is It Good For)," on view through May 18, featuring works by artist H.C. Westermann and others who question the idea of war. Westermann's work draws upon his combat experiences in both World War II and the Korean War. His "Death Ships" series memorialize the deaths of his fellow soldiers and the artist's disgrace and disgust at what he'd witnessed.

Works by Westermann have been rediscovered and embraced by critics after a long period of being ignored, in part because of their political content. "In America, you take a lonely path as an artist when you are a social commentator," noted Cenedella, who studied with the celebrated German Expressionist artist-commentator George

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TRENDSETTERS **W**ar Art

▲ Propaganda posters such as this one by James Montgomery Flagg from World War I are a popular sell (\$400), particularly during this time of military action in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Grosz. “My role as a social commentator is the same whether we’re at war or we’re at peace, but I felt an urgency to paint ‘Yellow Ribbons’ during Desert Storm.”

Today, many artists are putting brush to canvas for social comment. At the Illinois State University Galleries, an open call for a hastily-curated “Ready for War” show in January yielded nearly 200 submissions, including “agit-prop” artist Josh MacPhee, whose B-52 plane drops bombs with the names of all the countries the U.S. has pummeled. “I thought that by mounting a show like this, in the Heartland, it would make a difference,” explained Blinderman. “Many of the works weren’t done for this war—they were done years ago.”

The homefront battle continues at the Katonah Museum of Art in Katonah, N.Y., when its “Pietro Costa: Conflicts and War” exhibit opens May 11. Costa has created seven glass and neon cylinders, each with a simple word to symbolize, as the museum put it, “the zealous pursuit of beliefs that has been the justification for war throughout history, from the Crusades to the current terrorism in the Middle East.”

Glorifying the War Effort

But anti-war isn’t the only sentiment visible in this country’s galleries, museums and artists’ studios. Artists also have taken up paint and palette to support war efforts, to show glimpses of war and combat and to recall it in historical narrative works. Some of today’s most popular realistic painters, such as James Dietz and Dale Gallon, accurately reproduce images from the Civil War and World Wars. Earlier in the 20th century, leading artists like Ben Shahn, N.C. Wyeth, James Montgomery Flagg and Norman Rockwell lent a hand by creating military propaganda posters during WWII.

Hammer Galleries in New York



▲ “Call to Colors” by James Dietz

recently exhibited new paintings by historical artist Mort Künstler, who paints narrative Civil War imagery and is the “official artist” of the current film, “Gods and Generals.” Künstler’s images depict the battlefields and troop movements, but other works recreate the pageantry and romance of the era as well. Künstler also recreates other wars such as the Vietnam War and the Korean War.

In late March, veteran vintage poster dealer Gail Chisolm, owner of Chisolm Gallery in New York, mounted a show of 20th-century U.S. military and wartime propaganda posters. “I wanted to do something that was timely,” said Chisolm. She tried to include posters from each of this century’s wars, but the largest concentration of posters date from the World Wars.

“World War I posters are from a more innocent and naive society,” said Chisolm. Rarely is there combat or a battlefield in a WWI poster. Instead, she said, the focus was often on raising money, supporting the troops and conserving at home. “It was enough to have a pretty woman with a furling flag” to recruit enthusiastic young men to the war effort, such as the pictured “Sow the Seeds of Victory” by Flagg. Jim Meehan, partner in Meehan Military Posters, agreed. “Women were heroic figures who rallied a nation,” he said. “The symbolic figure of Columbia is common in WWI posters. She virtually disappeared in the 1920s, and by World War II was replaced by Rosie the Riveter.”

In WWII, the war was a noble cause, the enemy had a more brutal face, and military posters had become more overt and aggressive, Chisolm added. American WWII posters “equated patriotism with democracy,” according to scholar G.H. Gregory, editor of *Posters of World War II*. “They rallied the nation’s pride by recalling the marvel of the country’s institutions and its great tradition of freedom and democracy.”

Other recent exhibitions pay homage to the nation’s artists who have been witnesses to or participants in armed conflict. For instance, the Don F. Pratt Museum at Fort Campbell, Ky., the home of the 101st Airborne, is currently exhibiting paintings



▲ “Don’t Mess with the 101st” by Peter Varisano



◀ “Yellow Ribbons” by Robert Cenedella

created by soldier-artists during Desert Storm and the Afghanistan conflict. “We also show works by artists like Dietz, who has created an image for the 101st, Don Stivers and Kevin Webster, who is an active-duty Army officer,” explained John O’Brien, the museum’s director. Like each of the 80-plus Army Museums around the nation and the world, this art-and-artifact institution is a part of the Center for Military History in Washington, D.C.

In the private sector, St. John’s University Gallery in Jamaica, N.Y., recently presented “Images From the Atomic Front,” 60 works of rarely seen watercolors, oil paintings and photographs created by U.S. military combat artists and on loan from the Military Art Collections in Washington, D.C. This particular group of combat artists witnessed the deployment of the Atomic bomb in 1945, its aftermath at Hiroshima and later tests on the Bimini Atoll. “I couldn’t believe these paintings existed, uncensored,” said Denise Rompilla, a university art professor. “Some people saw in the show a valiant record of service, artists putting their lives on the line. Others saw it as a platform for their anti-war views.”

Collecting Military Art

For collectors and art dealers interested in military imagery, the marketplace is most concentrated in the historical narrative category, with contemporary artists like Dietz and Künstler recreating actual scenes of U.S. wars. “It’s a real small niche—the collectors are people with a nostalgic bent,” said Dietz.

Dietz only paints about 12 canvases a year, but he does publish the works in limited editions. His “We Happy Few,” available in an edition of 1,000 plus 200 APs that depicts the U.S. Army entering a French town to liberate it from the Nazis, sells for \$150. An image with a contemporary, post-9-11 theme, “Call to Colors,” was commissioned by the Command & General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kan. Honoring those serving in America’s war against terrorism, the 1,000 editioned prints sold out in one day, according to Dietz.

World War II imagery is very popular today, Dietz added. “The era no longer evokes as much pain,” he said. “The trend to collect this material started not with Sept. 11, but rather in 1994 on the 50th anniversary of D-Day. Then, when ‘Saving

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Art At War

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Private Ryan' and the Tom Brokaw book, *The Greatest Generation* came out, it really put World War II in the romantic category, and it became acceptable to buy these works."

The primary collectors of these works are active and retired military and their descendants, gallery owners agreed. Ty Barnes, who with Pat Patton started Patton's Gallery in Fayetteville, N.C., in 1998, observed, "Active duty collectors are our main collectors, but we also have some [Civil War] re-enactors. This group likes [the artist] Trioni, who prides himself on historical accuracy. For Civil War material, the current movie 'Gods and Generals' is helping improve that marketplace in the same way 'Saving Private Ryan' and 'Band of Brothers' helped with World War II."

Patton added, "The men are always looking for history and battles. Women prefer a more romanticized view, women as couples with officers."

Ed Kaminski, owner of the Military Art Gallery in Mt. Clemens, Mich., sells both contemporary historical narrative works



"Places the U.S. Has Bombed" by Josh MacPhee, 2002, was on view at the "Ready for War" show.

and period reproductions, the latter primarily published by Cranston Fine Arts, a military prints company in Scotland. Cranston has published reproductions of several thousand historic paintings, primarily European, but including some U.S. views of the American Revolution. Kaminski, who started personally collecting this

material in the 1980s while he was an active duty soldier, also handles works by today's top U.S. military and historical narrative artists. He is also promoting an emerging Bulgarian artist, Marii Chernev, "who is just fascinated with American history and is painting less famous historical events in World War II," Kaminski said.

In general, he noted, "many of the collectors either are or were in the military. Many want something that reminds them of their service. But the new big thing is World War II, and that's because of people in their 30s and 40s who have a father or grandfather who served in the war."

Patriotic pride cuts both ways in the art world, and current events have led to swelling interest in both the art of war and the art of anti-war, dealers and curators agreed. "We pulled our 'Price of Intervention' show together because of current events," said Carol Wells, executive director of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics in Los Angeles. "A conservative estimate of the response was that 10,000 people attended over the five weeks the show was at Track 16."

In Seattle, photography dealer Hold-

away of the Benham Gallery experienced increased attendance after the *Wall Street Journal* wrote an article about her show. "They were mostly white guys dressed in suits, not your usual gallery crowd." But whether the visitors were pro- or anti-war, she added, "the show was well-received. Keep in mind, its perspective was not anti-war, but rather alternatives to war. People seemed very moved by the images, and some have been extremely disturbed."

As well they might be, when America is at war. **ABN**

SOURCES

- Chisolm Gallery, (212) 243-8834
- Cranston Fine Arts, www.warart.com
- James Dietz Editions, 800-242-1994
- Don Stivers Publishing, (540) 882-3855
- Dale Gallon, (717) 334-0430
- Mort Künstler Studio, (516) 624-2830
- Robert Cenedella, (212) 624-2732
- Meehan Military Posters, (212) 734-5683
- Military Art Gallery, (586) 463-9466
- Naval Art Collection, 800-233-8764
- Patton's Gallery, (910) 487-5166

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