

# [in]justice

## Injustice and War



Robert Morris  
American, b. 1931  
*Continuities*  
Aquatint

The circumstance of war has often elicited artwork that draws attention to injustice. Recent conflicts are not the only ones that have prompted artists to question the concept of “just” or “unjust” wars. Spanish artist Francisco Goya famously produced a series of 82 etchings and aquatints entitled *The Disasters of War* in the early 19th century, though they were not published until 35 years after his death. Goya’s signature grotesqueries spared neither the Napoleonic forces nor the Spanish crown from culpability in the atrocities.

It was within Goya’s work that American artist Robert Morris found inspiration for his two series from the late 1980s – *Continuities* and *Conundrums*. These works utilize the same medium as the *Disasters of War* and borrow heavily from the so-called *Black Paintings*, a series of works that Goya completed during the same period as the *Disasters of War*.

The connecting thread throughout the *Continuities* etchings is an image of piled corpses that seem to draw on documentation of mass graves discovered by allied troops at the end of World War II. There are also other sinister forces negotiating the shadows among the piled bodies. Morris borrows the figures of Goya’s *Colossus*, *Saturn Devouring His Son* and *Fight with Cudgels* from the *Black Paintings*.

The giant in *Colossus* has been interpreted through various allegorical guises. A common thought is that this silent sentinel represents the sleeping giant of Spain which Goya was goading to rise up against its Napoleonic French oppressor. The *Saturn* character aligns with the other two figures, representing the senseless violence of wars wherein forces on the European continent consume and bludgeon each other. Pairing these images with the heaps of corpses, Morris both recalls the carnage of the 20th century and predicts the military entanglements of the 21st.

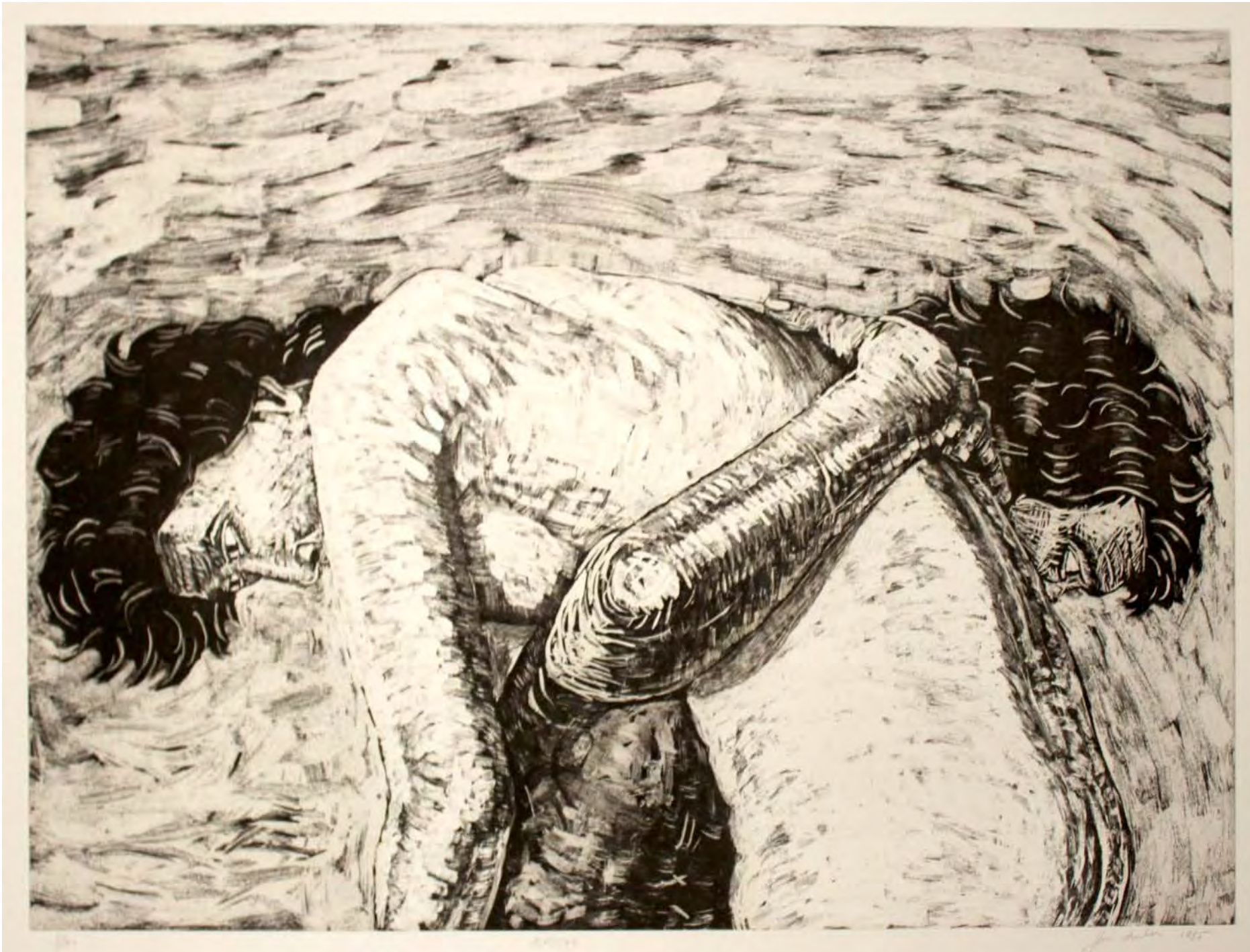
The two etchings by Judy Youngblood also take the viewer through the arc of war in the 20th century. *Calm Before the Storm* exhibits clouds of foreboding, as three figures restlessly anticipate the coming battle. Their anticipation reaches fruition with *In Those Days Even the Dogs Chose Sides*. The battle and its outcome are revealed through clearly delineated opponents, as well as a separation between visible regions of active battle and an appropriated photographic image of the aftermath of battle. The contrast between the color and black and white portions emphasizes the death and destruction of combat. Every aspect of the scene underscores the delineation of opposition and separation.

Abraham Rattner’s *Landscape with Figures* possesses an innocuous title while still exploring similar concepts as Youngblood’s work. The staccato punches of vibrant color recall explosions of artillery. The intense colors mingle with lifeless browns and blacks that compose human body parts. Parts—not actual full figures. The central figure even resembles an inverted crucifix. Many Expressionist artists in the early to mid-20th century incorporated crucifixion imagery in their works in protest to the ravages of war. That form was not necessarily a declaration of a particular religious conviction but a symbol of supreme anguish and suffering—needless suffering.



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## Hope in the Light of Injustice



Jonathan Imber  
American, b. 1950  
*Rescue*, 1985  
Monotype

One could easily lose confidence in humanity when considering some of the tragic imagery in this exhibition. Not every act in this world is a violent injustice against our brothers and sisters, however. Two of the artists represented in the exhibition offer some hope in the midst of inhumanity. The two quite similar works by Jonathan Imber are each titled *Rescue*. While the works may certainly reference the presence of racial discord, they most clearly—whether in color or black and white—acknowledge the putting aside of differences of two opposing sides. The figures are visually different, yet the one pays no heed to any “cosmetic” differences in order to rescue the other. One figure bears the full weight, the burden, of

the other. Just as Abraham Rattner references crucifixion imagery in his work *Landscape with Figures*, artist Leslie Machinist seems to create contemporary *Deposition* images in her untitled works. The idea of a rescue, found in Imber’s work is again addressed. Figures seem to be climbing from danger on a rope ladder in one work. The other image, with its Caravaggio-like tenebrism, obscures much of the scene, though it does appear that a figure is, once again, being lifted from danger.

The outstretched arms of the figure are an obvious reference to Christ. This is not a simple retelling of the descent from the cross, dressed up in contemporary garb. Self-sacrifice is acknowledged in this scene. The virtue of putting oneself in harm’s way—for the sake of another—turns all the other horrific images in the exhibition on their head. In the midst of destruction and suffering-sometimes at the cruel hands of others-there are some who offer the tenderness expressed by the figures in Machinist’s work. It is a reminder that injustice only carries any meaning when we recognize that justice is still at work in the world.