

[in]justice

Art and Atrocity in the 20th Century



Leslie Machinist
American, b. 1957
Untitled, 1989
Lithograph

One venerable tradition in the history of Western art suggests that the highest artistic achievements produce objects of pure beauty. For centuries both the subject matter and the technical skill employed in creating that subject matter exhibited a certain cultural standard for beauty. Beauty was seen as objective and the ideal for beauty, though based in philosophical theories, grew out of a common consensus. Even Greek and Roman scenes of war presented idealized and beautiful figures. It was toward the perfect and most beautiful ideas and images that humanity should aspire.

The later idea that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” may have had earlier precedents, but it was not formally pronounced until the 19th century, in Margaret Wolfe Hungerford’s 1878 book *Molly Bawn*. The 19th century was an appropriate period to acknowledge the concept of the subjectivity of beauty. The times were no less tumultuous than earlier centuries, but the style and structure of artwork was undergoing drastic revisions that continue into our present day.

Propaganda is another concept with similar traditions in art that go back millennia. The term propaganda has taken on a negative connotation, but that is not the sense of the true definition. Propaganda is used to influence the understanding or belief of the public, or a segment of it, in a specific direction. Printmaking media, in particular, have often been employed for this because of the possibility of reaching a larger audience through the broad dissemination of images.

Within a 20th century context propaganda was used to influence the German people against their Jewish neighbors, but it was also used by the United States government to encourage citizens in various ways to support the war effort to end fascism. Propagandistic art has often served in the latter fashion to spotlight contemporary forms of injustice.

This exhibition draws on various prints from the Appleton Museum of Art’s collection that examine shifting beliefs in “just” actions by society. Sometimes the best efforts of artists draw our attention to unjust acts of humans toward one another. Themes within this exhibit focus on such troubling acts as war, racism, xenophobia, and genocide. These images may not always be beautiful, but they are certainly necessary.

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Racial Injustice

Perhaps the greatest mark on the history of the United States is the oppression of those from African descent. Even after the abolition of slavery at the close of the Civil War, it was another century before entrenched segregation and racism would be challenged head on by civil rights protests and actions. One artist in the exhibition follows a tradition of politically minded artists. Allison Saar is the daughter of Betye Saar, whose assemblage works from the 1960s challenged and transformed the stereotypical “Uncle Tom” imagery of America’s past. The younger Saar has carried that mantle into recent decades in her own unique ways.

Allison Saar’s two works in the exhibit, both titled *Blue Plate Special*, are shockingly violent and commonplace at one and the same time. That is exactly the point. The segregation of African Americans was the status quo, but so was an underbelly of extreme violence against them. The severed head in these works recalls acts of lynching and murder that were not unusual in the south. And yet, the placement of the head on a plate is a clear reminder of the martyrdom of John the Baptist, whose prophetic voice of repentance was silenced by the sword.

The title recalls the heyday of diners from the 1950s and 60s. However, the “special” served up in those days was one of segregated dining. Even the pattern in the square background of one image



Leon Golub
American, 1922-2004
Facings: Black Men/Black Women, 1988

harkens to the pressed tin ceiling tiles in some of those old diners. It is a pattern that brings forth feelings of nostalgia, as well as dread.

Another artist whose work calls attention to various modes of injustice is Leon Golub. He drew attention to Vietnam, unrest in Central America, and—as seen in his monumental prints in this exhibition—racism in the United States. Golub typically worked

on a larger than life scale to grab the attention of the viewer. His typical painting technique involved grinding the pigment of his paint into the very weave of the canvas fabric. He would then scrape the surface paint away until only a ghostly remnant was left. The violence of this [de]application of the paint was fully integrated with the content of the images portrayed.

In the lithographic diptych in this exhibition—*Facings: Black Men/Black Women*—Golub tackles the topic of racial inequality. The faces seem tormented and grotesque. Though working in a different medium, it seems that Golub enacted the same type of violence on the surface of the lithographic stones as he did on his canvases. The values of the faces seem to be formed from scraping away the surface of the stone. These forms of scraping are similar to erasures. What Golub’s work may suggest is that those with power are those who write history, yet the totality of history—and all its unjust acts—can never fully be erased from view.

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Injustice and Native Americans



Leonard Baskin
American, 1922-2000
High Bear, 1973
Lithograph

Three works by the artist Leonard Baskin are part of a much larger series of portraits of Native Americans. Originally commissioned by the National Park Service to provide illustrations for the handbook that described Custer National Park—now called Little BigHorn National Park—these images were never intended to portray the so-called “noble savage.” They are not merely decorative works that reinforce the fictive 20th century representations of native peoples, as found in television and movie Westerns. Rather, they acknowledge how the artist was at once stricken by Little BigHorn’s legacy of betrayal and massacre.

What began as a simple commission led the artist into an investigation of the often overlooked treatment of the indigenous

populations of North America by the United States government. Baskin opted to neglect the dreadful activities of General Custer and, instead, focus on the character of several major figures of some of the great Indian nations. There is an enormous sense of dignity and strength in their expressions. So moved was Baskin by the experience of producing this project, that he later revisited the imagery in an additional set of lithographs.

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Injustice Through Genocide



Gabriella
One Day One Woman and One Man Took One Child
Monoprint

The injustices of battle are one consequence of war, but, all too often, wars are preceded by horrific events that bring about a call to arms. The most obvious instance of this in the twentieth century was the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis. The nine silk screen and mixed media works by artist Gabriella are a sampling of the more than two hundred works on this theme in the Appleton collection. Each work is based on photographic images of concentration camp prisoners. Some images are superimposed on others. They are printed in various color combinations and each is altered with drawn or painted additions.

The repetition of identical photographic sources, over and over, may strike a seeming similarity to Andy Warhol's use of the same medium. And, in a way, it does. Often missed by the general observer is Warhol's intended numbing, monotonous effect. Warhol created a series of

disasters which were culled from newspaper photographs of automobile accidents. The repetition of the same photographic imagery, even on the same canvas, caused Warhol's images to mimic the human response of an increasing lack of shock when repeatedly inundated by horrors.

The sheer number of prints by Gabriella recalls the masses of Jews, and others, exterminated by the Nazis. The prisoner identification number appearing on the prints of the young boy exhibits evidence of the loss of humanity inflicted upon those in the concentration camps. Yet Gabriella creates individuality in each image and forces us to confront the specificity of each human life. These images do not represent nameless and faceless individuals.

Gabriella vacillates between visual treatments that negate individuality and those that draw specific attention to an individual. The yellow stars denoting "man" and "woman" provide a general designation of Jewish victims. However, when the stars are colored with pink they make reference to the lesser known extermination of homosexuals within the camps. Even the addition of the blue-eyed boy in these images reveals the scope of the Nazi plot which encompassed extermination of even those "Aryans" who objected to the regime's policies and practices.

Much of the treatment of the photographic references in the Gabriella pieces is based in the suffering and cruelty of the camps. Representations of barbed wire and blood-like splatters of paint are immediate reminders of the horrors of the camps. Closer examination reveals passages of Hebrew text and even a specific scriptural passage in English, taken from the book of Job. This reference to the suffering of the innocent shows up throughout the series.

Also present is the Roman numeral nine—IX. At times this seems more like a flourish of abstract brushwork or graffiti. The number is actually a reference to Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* from *The Divine Comedy*. While it may refer to Canto IX, describing Dante's entrance into Hell with the poet Virgil, it is more likely a reference to the scene in which the two enter the ninth and final circle of Hell. That arena is the domain of treachery and betrayal, with Satan at its center. The understanding is that the European Jews suffered because they were ultimately betrayed by their German neighbors.