

Blue Collars;Red Hands

I draw in the raw material I process to make work from all around me. The books I read, the people I admire, movies I have seen, the music I listen to, and even the visual art I see, are all deconstructed and stored in the compartments of memory. As I begin to develop a plan for a visual work these disparate elements from various experiences populate the framework I envision.

I feel a sense of camaraderie with the individuals I am most influenced by. It is the spirit of these great individuals that inspires me, and their willingness to oppose accepted conventions. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X fought against the long accepted racist conditions in our country and the work that these men did has resulted in much progress in our society. While one would find no cue to suggest Dr. King's gentle presence in my work, individuals such as he have inspired the pieces. Although the perturbed visage of Malcolm X is evident nowhere in the visual field of my work, kindred dissent fuels every mark I make.

As I make use of the monocle, the mustache, and even Christ as visual elements in my work I satirize the culture I live in to attempt to make sense of it. Often I feel as though I am one of "history's lost children" as I recall a passage from a Chuck Palahuinik novel where the main character explains we are from a generation that has no great war, no great society, only consumerism. I suspect many of these individuals, who help me shape the form of my work, felt out of place in their own lives, as I do in mine. This would certainly explain how countercultures form within a society, exemplified by the formation of punk culture in the late 70's. The Clash was at the forefront of this counterculture, where they fused this new musical sound with their dissent toward the British aristocracy, apartheid, and many other social and political subjects. Similarly I have found success in bringing my social and political philosophy into the realm of my visual work.

Of course I am also influenced by other artists visual work. Visually I felt that the American flag was a logical place to begin my inquiry. I also realized this symbol has been woven, painted,



printed, and reproduced in more ways than I could imagine so I would need to find the most appropriate way to integrate it into my own work. Toward this end I looked at many images of Jasper Johns work, not only did his work help me realize how little information is necessary to create an image that reads as the American flag, I was also thoroughly intrigued by the way the man

paints. Johns' paintings are crafted and molded, his hand evident in much of his work. I did not want to simply brush an American flag onto a canvas I wanted to make an American flag.

As I developed iterations of the flag and various other works I began to populate these works

with characters, some I saw as villains, others are heroes to me. I had to decide whether to assert the nature of these humans in my work or allow those viewing the work to decide. My gut was telling me to demonize the demons but my aesthetic sensibilities suggested that the work could become more conceptually tantalizing if I resisted this approach. As I began to look upon more of Sue Coe's work this hesitation dissipated, she is an artist who takes a direct approach toward the desired effect of her visual narratives. She does not hesitate to use caricatures, symbols, and text to clarify the message she seeks to convey. Coe sees a problem in the world and attacks her subjects and as I looked at more of her work I was sure that I should also attack.



The problem that I see is not a simple one, but it is a clear problem that threatens the well-being of my friends and family. The problem of corporate influence in our culture and government has grown to a point where policy and legislature reflects the needs and wants of a very small minority within our American society. Various moguls, the corporate elite, and the titans of the financial industry have conspired to craft a conservative ideology that attempts to justify the destruction caused by their unending quest for more – more money, more power, and more influence on democracy as we know it. The implementation of this ideology has contributed to injustice, inequality, and financial collapses at home and abroad.

In assimilating information from an eclectic range of sources I feel I have created a comprehensive argument for why our country cannot and should not continue on its current path. My exposure to a variety of cultural, political, and economical information has also equipped me with the ability to relate the nuances of my own philosophy with confidence in my work.

Having so carefully considered the content of my work I would have to stay vigilante in selecting the media in which the pieces would be crafted. I focused on the different statements that

working in a variety of media would make about the social and political concepts in individual pieces. An oil painting on canvass elicits a very different reaction than a sketch on a paper napkin. Eventually I selected the more traditional format of an oil painting on canvass alongside works that are completed on plywood with stain and shoe-polish. Combining the oil painting with the stained plywood created an opportunity to display what is traditionally considered a higher art form eclipsed by work developed from the combination of cheaper construction materials. The positioning of works rendered with common materials in front of the more pretentious presence of a large oil painting allows me to make a statement in solidarity with the working class outside the language of the narrative in the individual pieces. In determining the layout of the individual plywood pieces I designated a number of topics I find to be very important when examining current political issues and events in our society. I found it helpful to shift scales in order to communicate several ideas while retaining an overall continuity and general sense of dissonance. I also implemented this general method in crafting my painting of the American flag, although the statements I make in the flag are represented more ichnographically with less evident narration. Taking this approach allowed me to include particular commentary that may not be readily apparent to a wider audience while applying an aesthetic look consistent with the spirit of protest throughout my work.

Any assistance my visual work can serve in raising awareness of the issues facing our democracy means a success in the aim of my artistry. If my work can spark even one dialogue or one action towards creating a more just and democratic society than my role as a visual artist in this society is justified. If I can communicate the absurdity of honoring individuals based on the vast fortunes they amass while neglecting the damage they have done to vulnerable Americans than my work has served its purpose. Perhaps my work now and in the future can help us move toward a society where individuals are valued by the degree to which they improve that society for the good of all humanity and commodities can be valued likewise.



Ryan Herberholz- **Black Flag #1** - acrylic and autobody undercoating on mdf, 24"x44" - ©2011



Ryan Herberholz - **Marauders in the Fabric** - oil and mixed media on canvas, 5'x9' - ©2012

Bibliography

Sue Coe

Triumph of Fundamentalism 2005. Photo-lithograph on gray wove paper. Signed and dated, lower right. Titled, lower center and numbered, lower left. 7 7/8" x 11 5/8" (20 x 29.5 cm). From an edition of 50 impressions.

White Flag, 1955

Jasper Johns (American, born 1930)

Encaustic, oil, newsprint, and charcoal on canvas