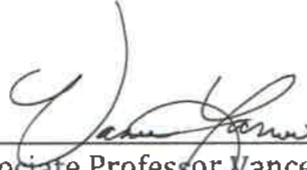


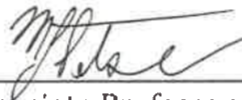
Of a Time and Place

By
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Master of Fine Arts


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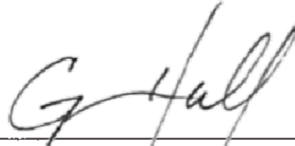


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Introduction

Patience, self-reflection and craftsmanship are all important aspects of my studio work. As technology becomes a larger part of our fast-paced lives, these traits are often lost. Advancing through life as fast as possible seems more valuable to most than taking the time to appreciate the people and things around us. I long for a time before televisions, the distractions of the internet and the twenty-four-hour news cycle. There was once a time when people could get through their days without thinking about a leader who perpetuates violence, division, and chaos. I have a nostalgia for a time that I wasn't a part of, a time I've only heard stories about, and only through rose colored glasses. The slow meticulous, and sensory approaches to making art are often the most pleasing to me.

The silhouettes incorporated into my work are used for obscurity. They often feature the mundane, ordinary people whose stories could only be imagined. Sometimes they focus on recognizable figures but presenting them in shadow forces the viewer to think about them more carefully. These silhouettes also represent the current sociopolitical climate of the United States. Events and atrocities highlighted one day will be forgotten the next. Simple ideas or phrases collected from the daily news often spark ideas for new work. Creating work about these events allows me to spend more time with them and in a way makes them more tangible. This allows me to think more carefully about what is happening around me. My work is also a type of preservation of events that will outlive their news cycle and ultimately outlive me.

Background

I have been developing my skills in printmaking since 2016 when I transferred to the University of Southern Indiana from a small town in western Kentucky. Growing up working in my family's small-town funeral home gave me an abundant amount of time to reflect on life. I wrote hundreds of obituaries for families during my time there. I witnessed thousands of visitations and funerals. I've seen more people in pain than anyone should have to bear witness to in a lifetime. There have been funerals for those without a single person in attendance, whether it be because they were hated or had nobody left. Other funerals were so large visitation had to span multiple days and it was standing room only. I have seen fights and I have seen celebrations. My unique perception of how so many people handle death and the ways in which they try and preserve someone's memory has led to a lifetime of considering what really matters and thinking about this idea of preservation.

I create silhouettes in etching, relief, lithography and other forms of printmaking that capture and preserve a brief moment in our current sociopolitical climate. Their use began as a case of nostalgia for me. They are inspired by the black plywood figures that seemingly adorned every house in my rural community as a child: cowboys leaning with one foot elevated, resting on the tree behind them, soldiers kneeling with their rifles in hand at their front, and cats slowly strutting atop a picket fence. While these silhouettes are a central influence, I have also been influenced to a lesser degree by paper cutouts and phsyionotrace drawings made popular in the 18th century. In Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* he tells the story of the first portrait drawing. Kora, the daughter of Butades of Sicyon, used chalk to trace the outline of her lover's shadow upon a wall (Pliny, the Elder et al. 283). This abstraction of the human form is in some

ways more real than a carefully rendered drawing as it marks the actual space and moment someone was there. This was a preservation of time in its most simple form. Visually my silhouettes share a likeness with some of the 19th century works by Auguste Edouart in which he presents paper cutout silhouettes atop backgrounds that are more fully realized. Jean Genovés, who sadly just passed away, also influences my work. His etchings about protests and police violence related to Francisco Franco's reign in Spain seem particularly relevant to the work I'm making about the state of America today.

Materials and Process

There is a permanence to all the methods I use in my process. That is to say, once I make a mark on stone, carve into wood, or etch into copper I choose to live with each mark. This is, in a way, a reflection of life. I have to think critically about how to proceed to achieve the image I have in mind. The surface of the matrix can continue to be altered, but evidence of the original marks is usually apparent. Additionally, there is a permanence to the prints and matrices themselves. Once created, they have the potential to long outlive me and certainly outlive their contextual relevance given the nature of the 24-hour news cycle. Much of the information we consume is done so from a device that fits in the palm of our hands. The information is instantaneous but fleeting. A simple swipe of the thumb up and down turns our worldly concerns into a type of shell game. Facts can be "alternative." Truth is just a matter of perspective and no longer requires a basis in reality. Everything said in a public space is political.

Over the past year I have both started and ended my day by consuming the news from sources of various political persuasions. I did this in an effort to try and better

understand the motivations of each side of the political perspective. It was clear that division in our country was being perpetuated and I wanted to understand why. While my own principles remain unchanged from this study, I believe I do have a better perspective of those with differing viewpoints. The transparency of both sides was evident. One side, more socially conscious with a foundation on hope, and the other more deeply rooted in fiscal responsibility and fear. Hope and fear will be perpetually at odds with one another. How a given event was perceived by each side and how it was reported on in the news became more interesting to me. This ambiguous perception is something I employ in my own work. It isn't always immediately clear what my own motivations are in a given piece. This is, at least in part, aided by my use of silhouette. Whether an event is being shown in a positive or negative light is ultimately up to the audience.

Contemporary Relevance

When comparing my work to other contemporary artists, it's impossible to ignore Kara Walker and her work with the silhouette. "Part of Walker's choice of the silhouette had to do with the fact that it was originally a highly democratic medium, accessible even to people with limited means, and that it communicated a rank inferior to that of the more distinguished medium of oil painting" (Cameron 14). This not only summarizes the appeal of the silhouette for me, but almost my interest in printmaking as well. Furthermore, I agree with her assertion that "The silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that's also what the stereotype does" (Walker). I think our goals are different, however. Kara Walker's work often has a historical context with

narratives of sexuality, violence, and subjugation but also alludes to contemporary racial and gender stereotypes. My work has more to do with the current politicization and division in the United States.

Where my work is hanging is less interesting to me than who is going to see it and what they take away. I work mostly on paper and sometimes present the printmaking matrix alongside or independently of those works. The prints are always matted in a bright white and set in a satin black frame to isolate the image from whatever else is present in the environment in which they hang. This presentation prevents outside distraction in much the same way as a “white cube” space. This, along with the separation of work allows the artworks to be respected. Further, simple frames that are uniform eliminate the dialogue I’ve heard in museums where the frame is receiving more attention than the artwork within. The woodworking hobbyist inside me would love to produce ornate tabernacle diptychs, but I feel the art is better served by a more minimalist approach.

I’m not sure that I agree with Brian O’Doherty’s assertion that the wall is the context needed to understand the world we see within the frame (O’Doherty 29). I think there are occasions when this would prove to be true, however. For instance, I have thought of presenting life-size silhouettes of workers outside the crumbling façades of factories. In those instances, the wall would provide a great deal of context to the work. The simple silhouette would turn the crumbling façade of a vacant building into a type of memorial for not only the workers, but for industry and jobs lost to outsourcing and the like. In short, it matters not whether my work is in a gallery or pasted to an

outhouse door, as long as someone sees the work and thinks about it more deeply than on a surface level.

Division

In my work I am not necessarily seeking out division, although I do consider discourse to be a pivotal part of a successful democracy. It is discourse that provides varying perspectives and can often lead to a common ground. In some of my work however, I'm not shying away from division. Some things should be apolitical. We should believe in science, and reliable sources, and not be persuaded by conspiracy and blatant lies. Additionally, my work often puts morality into question. Take for instance the piece *Sheltered*. In this trio of plywood relief silhouettes, I represent children in various positions of anguish. One child is seen grasping at their cage, another is in a fetal position, and the third is lying on the ground with their arms crossed in a withdrawn manner.



Sheltered, relief woodblock tryptic, 40 x 80 inches, 2021.

As a printmaker there is an odd feeling in not actually pulling prints from a matrix, but instead presenting the matrix itself. Not actualizing the prints is a source of personal limbo. I feel compelled to ink each block and pull the impressions, but part of their purpose is to show the cage as something that lives beyond the surface. Although unwarranted, the duplication of the images makes me feel like I'm contributing to the problem. It's as though I'm putting more kids in cages. Instead I'm seeking resolution in something I have no control over: something unfathomably cruel that was presented to me in the news only to be overshadowed by the next atrocity. When I made *Sheltered* it was thought that 545 children had been separated from their families with no way to reunite them. This count was later increased to 666 children, 128 of which were under the age of 5. Until recently our government was making no effort to reunite the children with their families. Instead third-party organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union pleaded with the government to give them any information that might lead to their reunion. For two years the Justice Department held on to information that could have helped reunite these children with their families. It took public outcry on the Presidential debate stage to force their hand. This presents the question, is the United States morally bankrupt? Beyond separating children from their families and housing them in cages, there is also this idea that property is more valuable than life. Making work about the separation of children at the border has in some ways made the even more real for me. There is cause for outrage at the children's current situation but lost on many is the long-term psychological impact. Families are fleeing their homes because of poverty, crime, and corruption, knowing full well that they could die on the journey or may forever be separated from their children once they get here. These

children that have been separated are forced to live in confinement and treated as less than human. While their situations are sure to change, the memory of their time in these cages will follow them in perpetuity. This is why in my silhouettes of these children the chain link is etched into the wood. These are scars that lie below the surface that will last a lifetime.

Following the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin, there was a great deal of peaceful protesting during the day and at night there were riots. These riots caused property damage, and I don't condone this, but property is never more valuable than life. Valuing property more than life, among other things, led to a 17-year-old kid crossing state lines with an illegally obtained firearm with which he murdered two people. As a result of the protesting and property damage the President decided to visit Kenosha to see the damage for himself despite the fact that the Governor of Wisconsin pleaded with him not to come because it would hinder efforts to "overcome division." The President used this civil unrest as a political opportunity. He didn't meet with the family of Jacob Blake. His focus was on property, not on life. He began to claim that this division, this political unrest was somehow a reflection of his political opponents "America" and not a direct result of his own rhetoric over the last 4 years. It was the President's continual call that this was "Biden's America" that led to my piece *Whose America?* This inability of the President to take responsibility for something clearly perpetuated by his own actions, and instead try to shift the blame to someone else was a blood-boiling moment for me. Walking into the frame amongst the rubble the viewer can see the President's recognizable frame. The silhouette is used for obscurity, but it's also a hope that his features will fade from my memory in time. That after he

leaves office, I won't have to think about him anymore. Presenting someone in silhouette can also make the viewer suspicious of the figure's intent. The scene is also reminiscent of an arsonist revisiting the scene of his crime. Jacob Blake was not the only victim I was thinking of when I made *Whose America?* Within the rubble there are allusions to another victim of police brutality that particularly resonated with me. Elijah McClain by all accounts was a good kid, an introvert who had done nothing wrong. Elijah begged for his life as he was strangled by police. He even told them he loved them. He was the type of person that would use his lunch breaks to go to animal shelters and play his violin for the cats. In *Whose America?* I represented Elijah as a violin with its neck separated from its body. For some these events linger in their minds forever, while for others it's just a news story that will live only as long as it's relevant.

In *Whose America?* you will also find a dead canary in the path of the President. This is a reference not only to the coal industry in American, but to the disregarded warning signs that lead to the rioting in Kenosha. We as a nation probably should have "left the mineshaft" so to speak when the canary died. Personally, the canary died for me when the President, who was a candidate at the time mocked the reporter with arthrogyrosis, a condition that affects a dear friend of mine. There have been many canaries in the past four years. What does it say about our country that more than 74 million people still supported the President in the 2020 election? I can't help but question the morality of our country. Also found in the rubble of *Whose America?* are symbols representative of the ethics violations by the President and his children. Something as simple as a can of beans can bring back to memory the time the President and his children knowingly violated federal law because they thought it would benefit

them politically. The crumbling wall in *Whose America?* is itself an allusion to the border wall the previous President’s campaign ran on in 2016 and failed to fully realize. He repeatedly used fear as a tactic to win over supporters: fear of someone trying to take your job, fear of someone trying to smuggle drugs, and fear of the “murderers and rapists.”



Whose America?, Aquatint, 8 x 10 inches, 2020.

My monotype *Herd Mentality* is a piece I created after the former President had a Freudian slip during a town-hall event. When elaborating on his belief that the coronavirus would “just disappear” even without a vaccine, he said “you’ll develop, you’ll develop herd, like a herd mentality.” What he was trying to say is that we would

develop herd immunity to the virus. Never mind countless Americans that would have to die for this to be “successful.”



Herd Mentality, monotype, 11 x 14 inches, 2020.

It's ironic that his Freudian slip directly relates to some of the work by Sigmund Freud on human herd behavior. *Herd Mentality* speaks directly to the perception many have of the former President's followers. Followers that often call those who disagree with them sheep for trusting reputable media sources and science. The print is essentially just a herd of sheep tightly packed together, moving mindlessly in one direction, but with the context of the title, as well as its presentation with other contemporary political pieces some viewers will understand my intent, but ultimately it doesn't matter if the viewer understands the piece or the moment in time it references.

Some might see the piece as representing liberals, with others seeing conservatives. The idea of the viewer bringing their own life experiences and memories into their interpretation of the piece is probably the most compelling thing to me. The work could be understood as intersubjective if the interpretation is that the viewer is traveling the same path as the sheep within the frame. We are all just helplessly following a path, with no real control, being manipulated into doing something outside our individual character.

Since the November 2020 presidential election, there have been protests and riots related to the validity of the election. One side in protest, arguing simultaneously in some states to stop the count, and in another state to keep counting, whichever argument suited their purpose at that time. After several recounts, you had the President of the United States called the Georgia secretary of state and asked him to find enough votes so that he might beat his opponent by a single vote. After countless court battles lost because of the lack of evidence, the perpetuation of the “big lie” led to the insurrection and deaths at the capitol on January 6th. This historic event has already begun to fade from our attention as other news has rolled in. Another impeachment trial, a senator abandoning his state during natural disaster. With each day events in our recent history are obscured into irrelevance. People involved in these incidents themselves become as shadowed and featureless as a plywood silhouette. They are relics of a time and place. These brief moments in history are what fuel my more recent work and give me the opportunity to carefully examine them.

In my work *ImPOTUS*, I created a life-size silhouette of the former President in his unusual stance that can be compared visually to the front half of a centaur. His

upper body leans precariously forward, while his lower half remains perfectly vertical. This phenomenon that has been attributed to his use of heel lifts to increase his height. This act of vanity or perhaps a refusal to look weak is also why he refuses to wear eyeglasses, even staring directly into a solar eclipse. His silhouette is pointing, not in an accusatory way, but instead in a manner of incitement or direction. The title itself, *ImPOTUS*, is a play on words. Impetus as defined by Merriam-Webster is a driving force, it is the “stimulation or encouragement resulting in increased activity.” Impetus is derived from the Latin, *impetere*, which means to assault or to attack (“impetus”). It is without any doubt that the former President incited the events that occurred at the capital on January 6, 2021. It was the cause for his second impeachment and the Senate minority leader acknowledged the former President’s role in the insurrection. This silhouette is not simply a reflection on the events at the Capitol but a reminder of all the times the previous President sowed doubt, fear, and violence in an effort to appeal to his base. When on display, *ImPOTUS* will be pointing at my etching, *Insurrection* to provide further context. It records an unfathomable moment in time that mere months later has been relegated to the dustbin of history. Insurrectionists presented in silhouette crowd the base of the Capitol, while others climb its walls, their identities obscured, as their efforts that day will ultimately be inconsequential and lost to time. Absent from the piece are the countless red hats from that day, the confederate flags, and the chants to hang the vice President and capture those they disagreed with.



ImPOTUS (left), plywood and paint, 75 x 42 inches

I always hope that viewers will reflect on morality when looking at my work. Over the past several years I have noticed this shift in thinking. There has been this peculiar brand of nationalism whereby many people value the superiority they perceive in our nation over the value of the people living within it. There are individuals that are “pro-life” that are proponents of the death penalty who can sleep soundly knowing we have children in cages, separated from their families. We have demonized those seeking sanctuary. Property is more important than life and country is more important than countryman.



Protest, Militarization, Escalation, Etching, 8 x 27 inches, 2021

In my etching *Protest, Militarization, Escalation*, I share imagery that has become all too familiar in recent years in the United States. A group protests peacefully, a heavily armored police force, fueled by a surplus from excessive military spending, shows up and tensions rise. The sign in the hands of the kneeling protestor reads “The world is watching do the right thing.” Morality is not so concrete that one could simply say to “do the right thing.” What I believe to be the right thing may be “the wrong thing” for someone else. While this piece was made in reaction to events of police brutality, I chose to obscure the individuals in each print in silhouette. Is the group protesting in opposition to police violence, or perhaps voter fraud? Ultimately, anyone should be able to peaceably protest without fear of bodily harm. The third etching shows an officer with his knee on the spine of a protestor and another kicking and swinging his baton. This is to demonstrate the overreaction we have seen by some police officers who have been poorly trained in de-escalation. Without vetting, and proper training, we are destined to repeat the instances of violence from our past.

Conclusion

As a result of the pandemic, I have noticed a great deal of galleries presenting their work online. While I am a big proponent of experiencing art in person, it has

quickly become apparent that having more options to see and experience the work is in the best interest of the artist and the viewer. I have attended shows and noticed limitations in accessibility. This has made it that much more important to me that my work can be seen in a multitude of ways, no matter their physical or financial limitations. I would like to think that people like my late mother, who was confined to a bed as a result of multiple sclerosis, would be able to experience the art in a meaningful way. With advancements in VR and 3D technology and seeing how galleries have dealt with openings during the current pandemic, I do have hope for increased accessibility not only for my own work, but for all art. I'm also interested in presenting my work online through formats such as Instagram and Twitter where I can get reactionary feedback that I might not otherwise. My work would then live and be viewed in the same virtual environment that most of us consume our information. It's interesting the feedback I receive when creating art that has a focus on current social and political issues whether posted to Instagram or Twitter. Depending on their political perspective for instance, a viewer might see a piece in a positive light while someone on the other side of the political spectrum views it the same way, but for a different reason. A viewer can feel empathy while another feels anger.

I want my work to draw attention to past events in hope that those moments may live longer than their news cycle deems relevant. When we lose sight of these brief moments in our history, we are more susceptible to repeat them. This, however, can be a mentally taxing endeavor. It remains important to take time away from the news and away from technology to find the joy in our own lives.

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