

C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
27 October 2020

On Saturday morning I stopped by the venerable Hungarian Pastry Shop across the street from the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine on Manhattan's Upper West Side to pick up some (admittedly unseasonal) hamantashen. They have those delicacies all year round and one does not have to wait until the week before Purim to indulge. Purim is the Jewish holiday in early spring when one eats those "pockets of Haman" (sometimes they are also called *oznei Haman* or "Haman's ears"). The feast and the pastries commemorate how the Jews were saved from Haman, a Persian official under King Ahasuerus who was scheming to kill them. The story is recounted in the Book of Esther and only rarely depicted in art. One example is Lucas van Leyden's engraving *The Triumph of Mordecai* from 1515 which, in turn, inspired Rembrandt to create his own version of the scene in the early 1640s. Fine impressions of the print show the sophistication Rembrandt had by then developed in combining the techniques of etching and drypoint.

Rembrandt, The Triumph of Mordecai

Here I am, already deviating in my Distraction. The reason I mentioned my pastry-shopping trip is that I happened to find a business card there with the message "Let —, the flyer man, post your flyers," which struck me as being serendipitous on the day when I intended to do exactly that—join a straggy wheatpaste squad to go posting, or more precisely: pasting!



On October 12, Jenny Gibbs—the resourceful executive director of our dealers' organization IFPDA who, together with her team, has brilliantly managed to produce a multifaceted range of programming for the ongoing online print fair—had invited artists David Barthold and Wardell Milan to discuss contemporary image activism. I was allowed to join them to present some examples that showed how, half a millennium ago, the new cultural technique of printmaking was instrumentalized as a means for propaganda and protest, initiating the "iconic turn" and the age of the image that we still live in today.

"Image Activism: Then and Now"

David talked about his practice of creating images meant "to remember the lost and honor the living." When he described how he posts them on the streets in Brooklyn where he lives, Wardell suggested to expand this display to his part of town in Harlem. The idea of our squad was born, and I tagged along despite the fact that I was not able to bring any fifteenth-century woodcuts along for the pasting. We stuck to David's powerful screenprints showing George Floyd, Fred Hampton, John Lewis, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and yes, also the bright young Democratic hope Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

So, there we were, walking and talking and pasting down Lenox Avenue, with Wardell and me taking full advantage of having David, the best possible teacher for such an adventure, telling us about all the dos and don'ts:



Wear old clothes since wheatpaste seeps into everything. The posters should not be wider than 15 inches (38 cm), with 13 inches (34 cm) being ideal to allow the image to remain easily readable when wrapped around a lamp post; I have to say that this is something that NEVER came up in those seminars on *Rezeptionsästhetik* (reception theory) so fashionable in 1980s art history seminars! Even better than lamp posts are signal boxes. We are also happy to report that there were hardly any shuttered businesses or abandoned buildings—even if this somewhat limited our opportunities for gallery-style displays. Lastly, be circumspect of your environment, and try not to post right in front of a police car. Having said that, we did not (and luckily did not have to) explore the legality of our actions further and, just to be on the safe side, left the mail boxes alone—the blue ones as well as the green ones.



David accompanied only the portraits of Judge Ginsburg and Representative Lewis with text, and none of his prints bear his signature. This simple non-gesture turns out to be a most brilliant way to invite people to interact with these works. Everyone expects posters on the street to be announcements or advertisements—or perhaps some clever conceptual art project. Yet by omitting the name of the artist, any passerby who notices these faces—and the strong graphic language chosen by David for these images makes them difficult indeed to overlook—has to engage with this antiquated yet powerful medium to discover its message. This is then often further relayed through such internet-based platforms as Instagram which David actively uses himself. That way, the message of the prints gets spread far beyond those lamp posts and mailboxes, thereby widening the call to remember those who were murdered and to honor those who fought for a better society, and urging us to continue the work for these truths so that they can one day become self-evident . . .



David Barthold

Wardell Milan

