

Can a rebel stay a rebel without the claws?

Ken Johnson

You will be seeing a lot more art by Shepard Fairey on the streets of New York this spring. But it won't be in the form of the illegal guerrilla strikes he has been committing since his days as a student at the Rhode Island School of Design 20 years ago, nor anything like his famous Obama Hope poster. For starters, it is in the windows of Saks Fifth Avenue, for whom he has also designed swanky red, white and black Russian Constructivist-style limited-edition shopping bags.



Courtesy of Chloe Gordon

"Guns and Roses" (2007), like much of Shepard Fairey's art, gives a nod to poster imagery, in this case Chinese.

Before the Saks campaign makes it painful even to think about this artist, who did more than any other to get our current president elected, you might consider a trip to the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston to see his first museum retrospective.

The surprise of the show — for the uninitiated, at least — will be that almost everything Mr. Fairey does, from his abstracted images of Andre the Giant to his album covers for Led Zeppelin and other bands, is visually arresting. Those who have followed his career won't be surprised, either, by his progression from aesthetic anarchist to savvy, all-purpose designer and illustrator whose street cred has been worn out by his all-too-successful commercial ventures.



From the Street to the Museum

Nothing if not versatile, Mr. Fairey can work as effectively on billboards as on laptop screens. A resourceful sampler and recycler of found imagery, he has incorporated graphic motifs and compositions from the Russian Constructivist Alexander Rodchenko, Chinese Communist propaganda, American Social Realism, Islamic patterns, neo-Classical-style postage stamps and stock certificates, as well as from the Pop Art of Andy Warhol. And in collaging silk-screened copies of many different sorts of images, words and textures, often at radically

different scales, he integrates vertiginous complexity into works of punchy legibility, partly by means of a suave color sensibility usually limited to shades of red, black and off-white.

He is clever with words too. A 2003 poster reads: "War Is the Answer! Elect Bush and Still Get Gore!"

Among his most compelling works are those revolving around images of beautiful, rifle-toting women and children from third world countries. Flowers in their gun barrels suggest a revolution of loving maternity over the Big Brotherly patriarchy represented in other images by the face of Andre the Giant, who usually appears above the caption "Obey."



John Kennard
"Arab Woman" (2006) and other works evoke the third world.

The Boston show, organized by Pedro H. Alonzo, an independent curator, and Emily Brouillet, a former assistant curator at the institute, includes works placed outdoors around Boston, presented here as domesticated tokens of the graffitilike practices for which Mr. Fairey has been arrested on numerous occasions. (This time around, he was arrested on his arrival at the retrospective's opening-night party, and he faces at least 14 vandalism-related charges and possibly 19 more.)

Despite its rousing first impact, the exhibition leaves you with a sense of dismay at the devolution of a certain avant-garde dream into a kind of visual easy listening for the college-educated masses.

The fantasy that has animated Mr. Fairey's career is that of the artist anonymously intervening in public life like a benign terrorist, unsettling collective complacency and inspiring new, critically perceptive thoughts about how the world works. His method has been to paste images and words that grab attention but then, unlike advertising and propaganda, deliver contradictory, ambiguous and vaguely menacing messages. This is supposed to have the effect of prompting epiphanies about possible alternative social realities.

It's an idea whose popularity goes back at least to the '60s, when artists like Adrian Piper and Stephen Kaltenbach inserted seemingly nonsensical ads in art magazines and other periodicals. Later Jenny Holzer pasted up her lists of Truisms, and Jean-Michel Basquiat wrote his mystifying coinage "SAMO" all over town, to similarly perplexing effect.

On another track, Barbara Kruger produced simulations of magazine layouts to incite criticism of, and resistance to, the so-called dominant culture. She also lent her talents to campaigns for the abortion-rights movement ("Your Body Is a Battleground") and commercial enterprises like Bloomingdale's (the "I Shop Therefore I Am" shopping bag), and has had her works printed on all kinds of surfaces, from mural-size canvases to matchbook covers.

Mr. Fairey has acknowledged his debt to Ms. Kruger, but he seems cheerfully oblivious to how his ideas about being subversive through art are fatally familiar, not to say naïve. They were radical half a century ago; now they are the stuff of college art history courses. Does anyone not realize that capitalism is contradictory? Is anyone's world really rocked by something that

can't be immediately categorized? Every day we are swamped with images and ideas that pretend to confound conventional thinking. That's popular culture.

What is missing from his work is a deeper, more personal and therefore less predictably formulaic dimension. What might that be?

It is not too difficult to discern the shadows of an Oedipal drama swimming below the surface. Here is the baffling, autocratic father represented most powerfully by the image of Andre the Giant (whose positive counterpart is the Good Father Obama). There is the beguiling, possibly dangerous mother embodied in many images of nameless, alluring female warriors. And the son is portrayed in pictures of Joey Ramone, Sid Vicious and other young rebels who would stand in for Mr. Fairey himself and who would depose and replace the Bad Father.

Maybe if some such psychological dimension were more consciously integrated, Mr. Fairey's work would be more like art than like canny illustration of what everyone already knows.

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