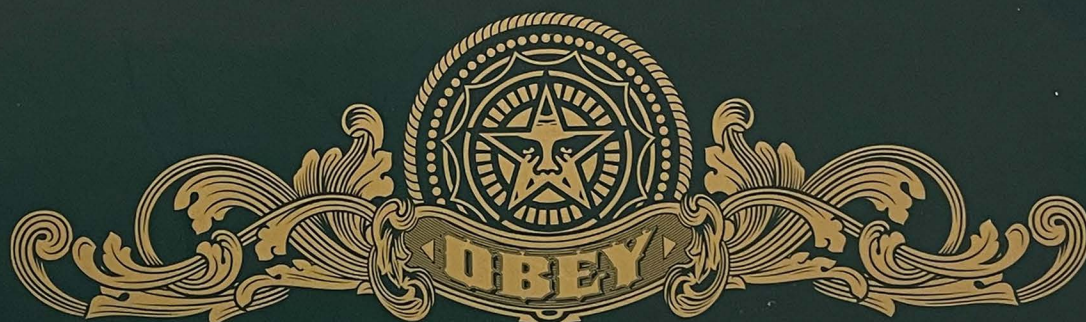


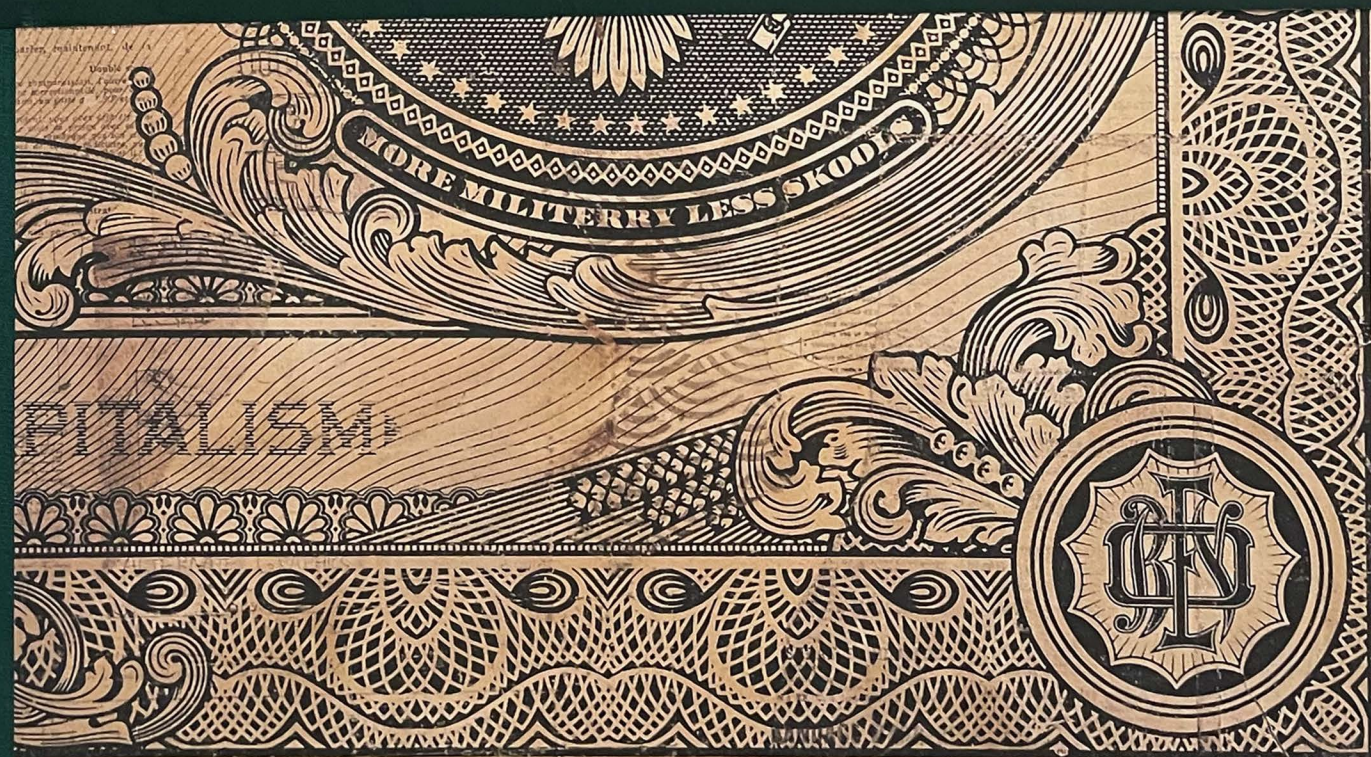
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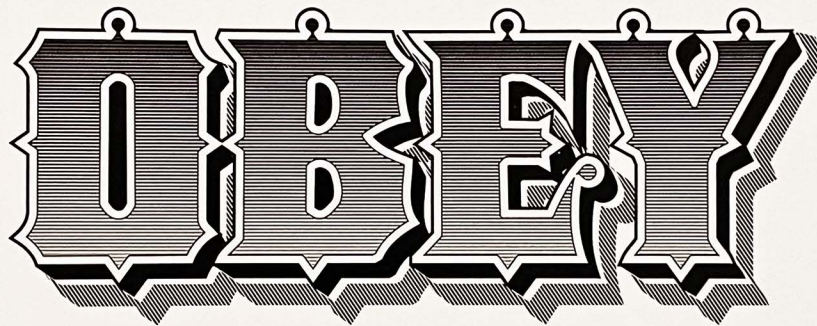


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✧ E PLURIBUS VENOM ✧
THE ART OF SHEPARD FAIREY





✱ E PLURIBUS VENOM ✱

THE ART OF SHEPARD FAIREY

SHEPARD FAIREY / SARAH JAYE WILLIAMS / JONATHAN LEVINE

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OBEY, GABBA GABBA HEY: THIS WORLD NEEDS A GIANT-EYED LONER

Sarah Jaye Williams

In so many ways, today, Shepard Fairey is the artist to beat.

He is the artist with the largest posse, a sizable and sustained public following. Hence he is arguably one of the most popular American artists at the beginning of this new century.

His signature picture, an offhand, cast-away insider's artwork made with friends some 20 years ago, is a portrait of the popular wrestling superstar Andre the Giant. By now, this image, a fixture at many rural and metropolitan street corners, has become a full-fledged campaign, an incitement for the uninitiated masses — hopping cretins, as the song goes — to take the red pill, to begin questioning and distrusting the images and slogans they face on a daily basis. Similarly, Fairey's formidable visual vocabulary of international, historical and artistic references, it's been recently noted, can be matched only by his stylistic fluidity and broad range of conceptual concoctions — from the first, quickly produced, silhouetted schemas, to today's ultra-slick, supra-pictures; from absurdist propaganda to authentic personalities; from clandestine operations to legendary precedents.

Consider, too, the most under-recognized, but formidable aspect of Fairey's art: its elusive energetic presence (try imagining Andy Warhol under his white wig in an inner-city dark alley at night without experiencing some apprehension). Fairey, a mild-mannered diabetic, is transformed into an art outlaw, a stealthy graffitist, tight-rope-walking image-maker working out some sort of precise American fantasy—a vital Yankee athleticism in the service of pre-apocalyptic salvation benefiting the entire world. Unexpectedly, two years ago, in Los Angeles, I was privileged to see a covert op in action.

Today, there does not seem to be an entity Shepard Fairey and his posse cannot or have not conquered: Old Faithful, Pepsi, Strummer, Cash, Virgin, Fox, Zeppelin, Putin, or, just last week, Obama. This seemingly indiscriminate and widespread artistic assault assures envy and contempt, which is why both arms of the law, the authorities and the counter-culture want him behind bars or otherwise neutralized.

Shepard Fairey—the artist, designer, DJ, entrepreneur, revolutionary “picleteer,” and purveyor of multicultural visual culture—composes, with appropriated imagery, entirely original pictures of the contemporary political milieu in the recent exhibition *E Pluribus Venom*. His pictorial interpretations and analyses are monumentally and momentarily dead-on, and based on an encyclopedic knowledge of mainstream and ancillary art imagery—and of course, pop culture's common vocabulary of shared visuals, experiences and metaphors.

The apparent accessibility of his images in no way diminishes its intellectual impact; critics (both impartial scholars and poorly-concealed foes) have formally debated the merits of his sometimes quite contrarian enterprises. Indeed, which one of us can manage the contradictions within one's self? His free-spirited and irreverent imagination clearly reflects his passion for the subject matter and its revolutionary intent. His artistic expression often betrays his democratic disdain for those who obscure it.

Specifically for *E Pluribus Venom*, Fairey has resurrected historical marginalia through appropriation of the ultimate image of capitalism, the steel-plated stock and bond certificate culled from the golden age of corporate piracy. Here, historical references are artistically transformed and reassembled to ignite profound skepticism, if not pessimism, about “free-market” mega-schemes.

Herein lies another of Fairey's equally challenging, subversive critiques, this time directed against what most modern artists consider to be passé notions of originality, beauty, artistic creativity, and the vicissitudes of the culture industry. Constructed with grace, precision and humor, the exhibition's meta-pictures spark the cultural imagination, each on their own terms, manifesting deeply influential picture-power in the service of artistic liberty and the independent democratic imagination.

Another major theme of this exhibition—apparent to those who shared the space with the group of artworks—is the maxim: to be vital, artists must remain a big pain in the arse while employing the core imagery that tries men's souls. The theme appears, time after time, loud and clear despite the fact that Fairey is now a fully accredited member, if not a selected leader of popular culture and the art establishment. Even when accepted by high and low cognoscenti, Fairey continues to surprise and educate his audience with his piercing insights and probing imagistic commentary. Only art that challenges the status quo has a life. The definition of great art, in Fairey's view, is delivering something the world has a real need for, forgotten truths in society's forgotten spaces. And he chastises us, his audience, for not coming to terms with this.

Yet behind the Giant operation is an artist busy at (art)work. It is apparent from the enormity of the exhibition that he is hardly ever away from work. This feels right, and it shows. Moreover, the selection of works at *E Pluribus Venom* commandingly juxtaposes a wide range of media. Another physically demanding presence in Fairey's oeuvre, paintings and prints with thick, luscious inks on heavy stock, is artistically risky. A mystery unfolds as deep black lines ink-trap the light, while amber depths of varnish reflect the light off the pictures' painstakingly rendered, handmade paper surfaces. This imagimagic appeals to the renegade in Fairey, effortlessly aligning itself with the bigger agenda of his intention.

The exhibition's lasting visual imperative, “observe”, skillfully and successfully integrated throughout the subject matter, media and message of *E Pluribus Venom*, lies at the core of Fairey's art and his worldview.

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