

Issues: Social, Political, Gender

Curator's Statement, Catherine Sullivan, Fall 2012

Presidential election years bring forth increased public awareness, discussion and debate on issues that affect and define our lives. We are asked to choose a position, take a stand and make a decision. Our vote's impact will permeate our identity, reflect our social concerns and make us responsible for our decisions. While ballot choices appear in singular names and abbreviated paragraphs, the issues cover a wide spectrum of factors relating to individual and group conscience, cultural and ethnic identity, political alignment and moral integrity. Characteristically this is a time of heightened bias, demonstration of strong beliefs and persuasive rhetoric in an often emotionally charged atmosphere. In the end, the votes are counted and a winner is declared. This may close the process for some, but does it resolve the issues?

Artists, especially printmakers, have a long history of choosing to enter visually into the political conversation. Perhaps as strongly as literal rhetoric, the visual image reflects the artist's intent, beliefs, and socio-economic status. Marxist aesthetics, for example, with its belief that economic and social conditions are integral to every part of life, gives art the ability to demonstrate conditional status as well as the ability to promote change for good. The resulting art will depend on an artist's relationship to her or his beliefs, perceptions and experience within society. If the aestheticization of politics, a term

attributed to 20th century German philosopher and critical thinker, Walter Benjamin, holds that politics is art, then art itself can become a political tool and be subordinate to a regime.

Prints for this exhibition were chosen to examine not only the artists' personal voices, but also to discern how their images compare, contrast or support a topical issue. It is interesting to note the shift time or country might make in an issue without losing contemporary relevance. John Sloan's "The Rag Pickers" is not the family unit of Norman Rockwell's "Ours . . . to fight for, Freedom from Want" but the difference in status is still an issue.

The unhappily arranged marriage in William Hogarth's "Marriage a la mode" contrasts with the loving family unit in Rockwell's "Ours . . .to fight for, Freedom from Fear", but are they the only forms of that institution? Some symbols over time achieve a certain iconography easily understood—portly men carrying bags of money is easily understood as corporate greed.

Artists who choose to engage us with the relationship of art and politics also give us their sense of culture and society. Some do so with elusive subtlety; others such as Rogelio Gutierrez in his "The Stars are Out Tonight" directly confront. As this election cycle passes into memory, the outcome of issues is still to be decided.