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Exterior of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, during Shepard Fairey's "Supply and Demand"

Entrance to "Supply and Demand" at the ICA

Shepard Fairey's original "Andre the Giant Has a Posse" artwork

FAIREY TALES
by Ben Davis

"Shepard Fairey: Supply and Demand," Feb. 6-Aug. 16, 2009, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 100 Northern Avenue, Boston, Mass. 02210

Shepard Fairey has made two artworks that have literally changed the world -- or at least, substantially affected public discourse. That's two more than most artists can claim. First, his long-running, ubiquitous "Obey Giant" campaign, inspiration for many a street artist and guerrilla ad campaign. Second, his messianic red-white-and-blue Barack Obama, which became an official campaign image last year. And between those two images is the central enigma of Shepard Fairey: How do you go from the satirical command "OBEY" to the seemingly earnest imperative to "HOPE?"

"Supply and Demand," his current retrospective at the ICA Boston, ably curated by Emily Moore Bouillet and Pedro Alonzo, sets you up pretty well to answer this question. True, it short-changes the artist's more unashamedly commercial side. But it does offer a broad spectrum of his accomplishments: There are Fairey's early patches, stencils and stickers; photos of his "Obey Giant" images on the street; examples of his more recent poster images exploring the iconography of power; works on skateboard decks; densely elaborated faux album covers; heroic images of rock stars; giant stylized stock certificates and money from his 2003 "This Is Your God" gallery show at Six Space in L.A.; a wall of the limited-edition prints he sells through his website; and, of course, a large, original Obama-poster prototype (also highlighted in a glass vitrine is Obama's official thank-you letter to Fairey in which the president -- or, more likely, some intern -- enthuses, "Your images have a profound effect on people, whether seen in a gallery or on a stop sign.")

Contrary to his many detractors in the fine-art world, the ICA show illustrates that Fairey is an artist of real ingenuity, channeling the dynamic angular compositions of Constructivism and the overloaded, wheeling sunbursts of '60s rock posters into something vivid and original. His work breathes street-smart verve, yet close inspection reveals him to be a deliberate, even fussy, artist. His large, stenciled images on canvas mimic the scale and all-at-once impact of graffiti works, painted over backgrounds of newspaper that evoke the environs of street art, where images often compete with shreds of advertising and posters. Yet these backgrounds are thoroughly woven into his compositions. His large image of an *Arab Woman* (2006), part of a series of benign female freedom fighters, has a background that includes clippings referencing the various associations, good and bad, that such an image might stir in its audience: a grinning Saddam Hussein head, references to liberal politicians like "Kennedy" and "Roosevelt," fragments of articles about "Cuba" and "Castro," and the line "Prison Stormed, 5 Hostages, 28 Convicts Killed." In the Obama canvas at the ICA, vintage clippings serve as a halo of topical references: "This Bank Your Friend," "Congress Out of Session / Also Blamed Pres Hoover," "Cromwell," "Savior Would Be Denied Citizenship."

Shepard Fairey
HOPE
2008
Courtesy of Obey Giant Art

Shepard Fairey
Obey Revolution Girl
2005
Courtesy of Obey Giant Art

Shepard Fairey
Know Your Rights (Strummer)
2007
Collection of Matthew Murphy

In the catalogue accompanying "Supply and Demand," Roger Gastman calls Fairey a "quasi-graffiti artist," since he didn't come out of the traditional graffiti scene. Probably the best description, however, comes courtesy of rapper Chuck D: "He's Warhol-Rockwell," says D, "on a radical tip." Wholesome Pop anti-authoritarianism is probably a good formula to sum Fairey up.

The Shepard Fairey story begins in 1988, when he was a student in the illustration department at the Rhode Island School of Design. In Helen Stickler's documentary about Fairey, we see the young man, cheeks still flecked with youthful acne, explain that the original, absurdist "Andre the Giant Has a Posse" stencil, featuring a grainy image of the lumbering pro-Wrestler, was meant as a sort of satirical individualist gesture. Every skater kid wanted to be part of their own skater gang, Fairey notes. The Andre image, picked because it was comical and weird, was meant as a joke on adolescent group-think. As Fairey plastered the image everywhere around Providence, however, its Sphinx-like character caused it to (as they say nowadays) go viral, attracting media coverage, buzz and admirers. Perhaps Fairey's most important move was letting -- even encouraging -- others to disseminate the image, unlike contemporaries who held onto a graffiti ethos that tags should have an existential connection to their author. Fairey has always had a keen sense of balancing the personal with the promotional.

In subsequent years, the "Giant" campaign went through various developments. Most significantly, in 1995 he reduced it to a black-and-white outline of a face with the vaguely menacing "OBEY" below it in a red box (inspired by Barbara Kruger), a word that has become a sort of brand for the artist. This new Giant was designed to abstract from the original referent, playing up its iconic, open-ended character. In the meantime, Fairey himself came to project more generalized, and sober, meanings onto his signature. These days, he cites the consciousness-raising absurdism of the Situationists as a precedent. He claims that the Giant serves as a "counterculture Big Brother," turning the tables of political surveillance. Already in a 1990 manifesto (the text is blown up and displayed at the ICA), he was arguing, in all seriousness, that the "Obey Giant" campaign is an exercise in Heideggerian phenomenology. "The FIRST AIM OF PHENOMENOLOGY is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment," Fairey declares, relating this to how the "Giant" campaign, as an ad without a product, is designed to make people question "their relationship with their surroundings" and revitalize "the viewer's perception and attention to detail."

It was this increasing sense of mission that spawned Fairey's next distinctive body of work, which in turn serves as the kind of mediator between the "Giant" and the Obama graphic. In 1997 he launched a series mimicking the style of Communist propaganda -- black-on-red images of Lenin, Stalin and Mao, adorned with the words "Obey" and "Giant," and a ghost-like, abstracted Giant-face floating in the background. My suspicion is that these references have as much to do with Fairey's growing identification with Andy Warhol -- the one visual artist that he truly seems to admire -- as they do with a serious investigation of the lingo of Socialist Realism, which by the late '90s, after all, did not really need to be exposed as meretricious. The overt justification, however, was to make people think twice about hero worship.

These "Dictators" are contemporaneous with another group of works which adopt the visual language of the Black Power movement -- images of Angela Davis, for example, or Jesse Jackson with his fist raised. Like the "Dictators," these are marked with the word "GIANT." And like them, this series seems to have begun with an experiment in code-jamming -- a work called *Giant Nubian*, engineered to make

Installation of Shepard Fairey prints in "Supply and Demand"

Barack Obama's letter to Shepard Fairey

Shepard Fairey
Obey Icon Pole
2000
Courtesy of Obey Giant Art

his viewers think it was an homage to a real Black Power figure, but actually simply a citation of "a guy from a `70s haircut book." All the same, these works can't help but seem somewhat more sincere, and relevant, than the "Dictators." It therefore inaugurates the long-running ambiguity of Fairey's production, which seems to work simultaneously in the mode of satirizing propaganda, and sincerely adopting its codes, with little noticeable change in style as he goes from one to the next. (A wall label at the ICA is reduced to suggesting lamely that the works "question how modern-day figures are represented and distributed" but that, also, "Fairey admires the guiding philosophies and defiant sprits of several subjects featured in this gallery.")

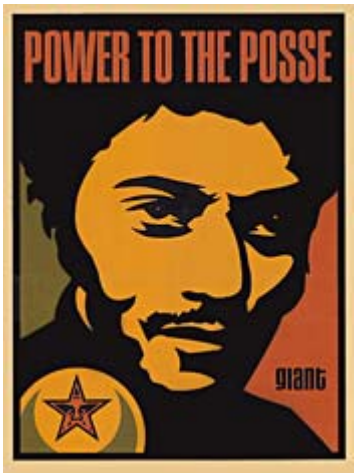
Partly, this simply represents a development in Fairey's thought over time. "I've been paying attention to politics since the mid-`90s," he says -- which is to say that politics was not a concern until deep into the "Giant" campaign. And he is quite clear that for himself, as for many others, the full-throttle horrors of the Bush years were an eye-opener, and pushed him to work that was ever-more bluntly political: *Greetings from Iraq* (2005), designed to look like an old-fashioned travel image, centered on an explosion with camels in the background and the caption, "Enjoy a Cheap Holiday in Other People's Misery," or *Evolve Devolve* (2007), featuring a windmill and an oil derrick, side by side, framed against a curdled sunset.

But mainly, the way Fairey flip-flops between absurdist spectacle (an homage to "Ming the Merciless") and fan-boyish sincerity (an entire room dedicated to posters of his favorite musicians) just expresses an unarticulated contradiction that's been there since the start. The ex post facto justification that Fairey developed for his street art -- that it makes people look again at consumer imagery -- is flawed: Ads don't actually function via mindless compulsion or "naturalization." They are openly artificial. The worst thing for an ad is not that you notice its codes, but that you not pay attention to it at all. Getting people to "look again" is precisely what ads want. Consequently, advertising might be undercut via specific political messages -- say, exposures of unsavory business practices, or health risks -- but not by nonsense. And, indeed, it was just a few short years on from the creation of the original "Andre the Giant Has a Posse" sticker before Coca-Cola was citing it to market OK Soda. These days, buzz-building guerrilla street campaigns are *the* thing for marketers.

There is, thus, more of a continuity between Fairey's commercial work -- he's run a design practice in L.A., Studio Number One, since 2003 -- and his street work than the artist, or even critics who posit that his for-profit design work betrays his "pure" graffiti work, like to admit. The whole way that Fairey considers the social value of his "Obey" campaign is in symbiotic relationship with advertising to begin with. He likes to cite Marshall McLuhan's dictum that "The medium is the message," by which he means that his street art is inherently political because it is illegal. And indeed, much of the best political sentiment in his work seems to come from this elementary connection to popular space (I'm particularly partial to his print of a smiling Officer Friendly, with the caption, "I'm Going to Kick Your Ass and Get Away With It.") Still, this is a pretty low political bar to set. Fairey's notion that leaving enigmatic symbols will "wake people up" is one so shattering to the System that goofy pop-rappers the Black Eyed Peas paid it homage in their *Where is the Love?* video (Fairey did the cover for the Peas' *Elephunk*), in which we watch Fergie, Will.i.am and the gang hit the streets with stickers featuring Fairey-esque stylized question marks, spreading their gospel of agape.

One shouldn't be dismissive of an artist who has inspired so many people to some kind of engagement. His Obama poster is certainly a unique example of how art can serve as a rallying point, channeling

Shepard Fairey
Obey Stalin
1998
Courtesy of Obey Giant Art



Shepard Fairey
Giant Nubian
1997
Courtesy of Obey Giant Art

Shepard Fairey
Obey Angela Davis
2005
Courtesy of Obey Giant Art

energy into action. But for this very reason, we should be clear what, exactly, Shepard Fairey is rallying us to. To this day, he insists that his oeuvre expresses no ideology, that its cardinal message is simply "question everything." Aside from being a lowest-common-denominator philosophy, this is doing a disservice to the urgency of his work's better messages -- his environmentalism, his anti-war views, etc. Presumably, Fairey actually wants to move people with these works. At the same time, the dictum's vague character reflects Fairey's own political vagueness. You can, as Fairey does do, throw together images of Martin Luther King Jr., Che Guevara, Subcomandante Marcos, Jim Morrison, Joan Jett and Tupac Shakur, slap an "OBEY" on them, and say, "I use figures. . . who I feel used and abused as symbols, but without telling the viewer how to feel about them." But this is really a cop out. It is participating in the ad-world idea of "revolution," divorced from its roots in actual struggle and strategy.

I'd add that Fairey's insistence on a mantra of "questioning everything" fails to take responsibility for the fact that he's not some nihilist -- he has a set of (fairly conventional) political beliefs that he accepts. When he was fomenting his Obama campaign, he originally wanted to use the word "PROGRESS." The fact that it ended up with "HOPE" was "because that's what his [Obama's] campaign wanted to push." Which is just to point out that when Shepard Fairey was asked to "Obey," he obeyed.

He's not an angry anarchist. He's not a starry-eyed radical. He is a scrappy pragmatist. "I believe in capitalism with some checks to chill out the evil, greedy element," he admits. "Capitalism is a way for hard work to yield rewards." (So all those other street artists who didn't hit it big are just lazy, right?) The ICA retrospective is pitched to portray Fairey's "Robin Hood" theory -- doing corporate design to fund experiments in popular art -- as a model of engagement. Well, there's nothing wrong with this as a lifestyle choice, but taking it as a model of social change cramps the imagination. Even the show's title, "Supply and Demand," reflects Fairey's message about "the complete inevitability of supply-and-demand economics in a capitalist society." Fair enough, we all need to make money for what we do -- but I'd still like to see a fight for single-payer health care.

Still, at the end of the day, it is Fairey's aura of idealism -- that his art actually gets out of the gallery and does stuff, that it speaks a popular language, that it feels righteous and relevant -- that has given this show such tremendous resonance. And if there is one thing that his success shows, it's that images and ideas can take on a life all of their own, and transcend their source. In the political realm, the Obama campaign has inspired hopes, demands and even activism that go far beyond President Obama's policy prescriptions, which are, after all, pretty limited. If Fairey's success has something of this effect for the art world, that's a good thing.

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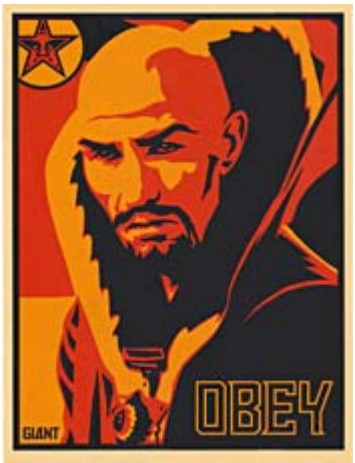
Shepard Fairey
Evolve Devolve
2007
Andy Wasserman, San Francisco

Shepard Fairey
Rise Above Cop
2007
Courtesy of Obey Giant Art



Shepard Fairey
Obey Ming
1998
Courtesy of Obey Giant Art

Shepard Fairey
Obey MLK
2004
Courtesy of Obey Giant Art

Shepard Fairey
Obey Tupac Blue
2004
Courtesy of Obey Giant Art

Shepard Fairey's cover for the Black Eyed Peas' *Elephunk*

Promotional image for the Black Eyed Peas' *Where is the Love?*, on the street