

Manufacturing Patriotism, Cultivating Nostalgia

At first glance, Ericka Walker's lithographic prints evoke bucolic images of yesteryear. An old tractor ploughs a field of golden wheat, a vine of red tomatoes glisten ready for picking and a friendly bull inquisitively watches us as the sun sets. A closer look reveals a more disturbing undercurrent. The shadows of the wheat corn have been replaced with the ominous silhouettes of heavy rifle barrels. The juicy tomatoes are entwined around the cold steel of an anti-air gun and instead of hauling a yoke, the bull is armed with a rocket launcher.

The result is a series of posters that force a double take. The shock comes from having different kinds of war imagery sharing the same ground; tanks and weaponry more commonly associated with the muddy fields of a distant far-away war are suddenly found in the fertile lands of home. The sense of unease is exacerbated further by the slogans; reproduced in old-style typefaces, their confident, defiant rhetoric – 'Victory is a Question of Stamina!' – is not quite in sync with what is depicted. Rather than confuse, however, these posters become a vehicle for messages that are both celebratory and critical, romanticizing and ironic, nostalgic and challenging.

One of the effects of juxtaposition is that it encourages the viewer to make unexpected connections. In one poster, John Deere, the inventor of the steel plow, appears in the clouds above a hulking cannon. What might the connection be? Perhaps it might be about how Deere's innovation led indirectly to the development of military machines, or maybe even about the way his company profited from the demand for increased foodstuff and agriculture during the American Civil War. In this sense, the re-connections of falsely separated images practices a rhetoric of exposé.

But Walker is careful not to condemn outright. Growing up in rural Wisconsin, her father served in Vietnam between working on a

farm and teaching agriculture at the local high school, while her grandfather was a steel mill worker who served in the Navy during the Second World War. These family connections make their way into the imagery and text of the posters; the vintage tractor owned by her Illinois relatives appears in one poster, while the image of her father's aircraft carrier emerges in another. While Walker acknowledges that there is much to criticize, there is nonetheless an undercurrent of pride here, a desire to venerate the care, dedication and talent that went towards creating war machinery or large-scale agricultural projects, regardless of their implications or their wider political context. In this sense, she invite us to pause and consider both sides of the argument. Things are not always as simple as they may seem.

But these posters are not only a comment on the politics of war and industry, and nor are they solely restricted to events of the First and Second World War. Indeed, they are somewhat paradoxically shot through with contemporary concerns. In one poster, a land gun points ominously at a farm silo with the headline 'Together We Win!' Who 'we' are and what has been won, we do not know. But underneath the headline, Walker allows a personal commentary to shine through, calling for "each other's company and understanding... especially as we are all still in the shadow of a very strange war and none of us are quite sure what to think about what we have just been through." Acting as a corollary to the defiant rhetoric of the headline, this statement betrays uncertainty about a democratic world in which mass media oversimplifies political issues and exercises a kind of propagandistic function.

It is not only the problematic relationships between war, agriculture and industry that are open to question here, but also the mechanisms by which patriotic imagery and political rhetoric work through media. Rather than wonder why Walker has chosen to re-appropriate the imagery of the First and Second World Wars, perhaps we should instead ask why these evocations of an idealized

America, produced outside of living memory, should be so familiar and comforting to us today. Posters produced during the First and Second World War are not always as innocent or harmless as they may first seem. Combining the lessons of advertising with the power of patriotism to sell the idea that the factory, the farm and the home were arenas of war, such posters conveyed and reinforced assumptions about traditional roles in a democratic society, extolling visions of an idealized America.

It is this quality of innocence and nostalgia that is under investigation here, and more importantly, its potential to engender a selective myopia. If it were not for the sense of pervasive unease in Walker's posters, they would lack all ambiguity. It is the schizophrenia of the work which induces uncomfortable critical thinking about the consequences of war production and other political dilemmas. Otherwise, we would not notice anything problematic at all. But, as with the work of popular illustrators like Norman Rockwell, nostalgic imagery can easily be said to offer a pleasant respite from the pressures and tensions of life, and there's nothing wrong with this. Except there is an inherent danger in over-romanticizing the past or immersing ourselves too much with images of a world we would like to live in, for that is one definition of nostalgia – a desire to avoid uncomfortable thinking about ourselves or the world we live in, exempting ourselves of any need to confront it as it actually is.

When looking at Walker's posters, I couldn't help but think of Shepard Fairey's iconic poster of the (then) presidential candidate Barack Obama. Fairey's poster is intriguing, not for its style, but for its surprising paucity. Rather than outlining a specific political ideology (the slogan 'HOPE' is essentially so banal as to mean anything) the poster served instead as a kind of blank template upon which Americans could project their dreams and fears, hopes and desires. Obama himself recognized the dangers of being lionized and feted before he had even been elected. While

watching a television broadcast during the election campaign, he commented to his team, "This Barack Obama sounds like a great guy. Now I'm not sure that I am Barack Obama, right?" He added, somewhat poignantly, "It wasn't entirely a joke."

Celebratory and condemnatory, nostalgic and critical, Walker's subverted depictions of an idealised America do not aim to satirise, condemn or even confuse, but rather, to reveal deeper layers of truth. They are not so much patriotic and nostalgic as they are about the ways in which we manufacture patriotism and nostalgia today.

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