



Illustrations by KURT WEBB

Exhibiting activism

An upcoming art show owes its inspiration to politics

BY JESSICA GALLIART

Smoke billows from several tall factory smokestacks planted in the body of a snarling piranha. Three jet planes fly through a cloud of smog looming over a factory.

These black-and-white images are part of "Art of Democracy," a traveling exhibit that will open at the Loyola University Museum of Art on September 6 and run through November 9 to coincide with the 2008 Presidential Election. They're also evidence of a growing movement of activist art. Artists across the country, including a small but passion-

ate group in Chicago, are creating work that speaks directly about the government, the upcoming presidential election and the Iraq War. Their work is appearing in galleries and on the streets in the form of posters, graffiti and installations.

Stephen Fredericks, founder of The New York Society of Etchers, and San Francisco artist Art Hazelwood created "Art of Democracy" to give activist artists a public venue. "I think art is incredibly impactful," Fredericks says. The exhibit will feature the work of 60 printmakers, including 25 from Chicago,

whose art explores themes of democracy, social change, and political activism.

Kurt Webb, one of the Chicago artists in the exhibit, was inspired by news coverage of the war in Iraq. One of his pieces combines an illustration of a skeleton hovering behind a soldier on a motorcycle with the shadow of text from a newspaper story about soldiers who have died in motorcycle accidents in Iraq. He says the response to his artwork has changed in recent years.

"When I started the Dance of Death series when the war started, it was a really unpopular thing to do," Webb says. "I couldn't even get those prints shown." He sees this exhibit as evidence that public attitudes are different now. "Change is in the air," he says.

Fredricks is especially enthusiastic, however, about the art being exhibited in public spaces. "If you have a piece of artwork up that's addressing an issue of political relevance, people are so keyed into what's going on right now that they're going to notice it more than if they would've a year or two ago as kind of a form of urban graffiti."

Artists, he says, have a unique ability to reach viewers. "I honestly think that if you have a piece of artwork that is very well executed, or maybe not so well executed, the chances of you getting someone's attention and making an impression are greater than some pundit on television talking about [politics]," Fredericks says. "If you slap a poster up on a kiosk, on a university campus, you've got to rely on somebody going by to see it."

Chicago is a mecca of sorts for political activism in the Midwest. It also has a colorful history of activism, including the riots during the 1968 Democratic Convention. For this reason, "Democracy" organizers were intent on showcasing Chicago artists' work. "It's most appropriate that we include Chicago artmakers," says Pam Ambrose, director of cultural affairs for the Loyola University Museum of Art. "We are in the Midwest, and it's necessary to understand that the concerns that are being expressed especially in light of the election can be more regional."

With the upcoming elections in November and a collective attitude of frustration with the Bush administration, there's been no shortage of politically motivated work. "I think that the majority of the country was resigned to politics as usual," Fredericks says. "They weren't expecting Obama. It's one of the most exciting moments in American political history in my lifetime. There's nothing to compare it to."

Art of Democracy
Sept. 6 to Nov. 9
820 N. Michigan
Ave.
312.915.7600