Arts and Leisure: Social ferment not always reflected in fermentation of artworks

by Robert L. Pincus

In 2004, Richard Serra, renowned throughout the world for massive sculptures in steel, made an image that circulated widely on the Internet. The thick black crayon is the same as in his sculpture-related drawings with their imposing geometric forms. But this image was of the hooded prisoner from Abu Ghraib who, via photography, had become an icon of the abuse and torture that Iraqi inmates suffered there. It also contained two words: "Stop Bush."

REFLECTIONS - Shepard Fairey's art has always had strong political overtones. CNS Photo by Peggy Peattie. Asked about the Abu Ghraib image, he said, "I didn't see it as part of my art. I made it for distribution on the Internet to express my disgust with Bush."

There is a revealing paradox embedded in his words. Serra isn't shy about expressing his political views, but his art is concerned with form, scale, the relationship of art to architecture and range of other things.

Going back to the 1960s, when Serra came of age as an artist, art and politics have had a paradoxical relationship. Major movements like pop art and minimalism, it's been frequently noted, produced cool art in a heated time.

It's just as true of this decade, another time of immense social ferment, that political art isn't at the forefront.

As to why it's not, the reasons are complex. Some of it may be the product of weariness with the idea that political art can have a big effect on politics. Some of it may be a long-standing reaction against the prominence of agitprop and the politically correct art, locally and nationally, in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Art follows its own momentum. Just because times are rife with issues - war, terrorism and global

warming, among many others - doesn't mean that socially topical art will be plentiful. The debate about border and immigration policies, for instance, is just as heated and fractious today as it was two decades ago, but art on these topics was more vital in the late 1980s and 1990s.

But individual artists have their own momentum, too, which can cut against the cultural grain. Shepard Fairey, who honed his approach in San Diego during the 1990s until about 2001 and continues to do so in Los Angeles, is a prime example. His work was provocative and engaging in its earlier phases and has only become more so in the last five to six years.

His roots are in guerrilla art and a panoply of 20th century graphic styles. In the 1990s, traffic signs, buildings and the like were plastered with his image of Andre the Giant. His images offered a slogan that he still employs: "Obey."

In a sense, the work was a reaction against earlier political art, since it delivered no clear message. Still, "Obey" was suggestively antiauthoritarian.

"My hope was that, in questioning what 'Obey Giant' was about, the viewers would then begin to question all the images they were confronted with," Fairey says in an interview in the book "Supply and Demand: The Art of Shepard Fairey."

This is an essential theme of the counterculture in the 1960s - questioning the validity of top-down messages in everything from media to government - that he embraces. And it's no coincidence that some of Fairey's visual sources (psychedelic posters and pop art) and cultural heroes (including Martin Luther King, Angela Davis and Noam Chomsky) hark back to those years.

The broad range of his stylistic references along with his general distrust of governmental authority gives his political work visual drama and bite. "Obey Bush Hug Bombs" (2004) looks as if it could be a propaganda poster that champions President Bush's aggressive foreign policy - until you read its text. Then, it becomes a chilling, visually subversive portrait of his rhetoric.

Fairey's sharp edge persists. Go to www.obeygiant.com to see the new poster he's done for Witness Against Torture, an organization working to shut down the Guantanamo prison camp. Or take a look at the works in his current solo show at Los Angeles' Merry Karnowsky Gallery, "Imperfect Union."

His is political art with a strong sense of visual style and emotional authenticity. Even in times when political art has ebbed, Fairey's has just the right balance of seriousness, irony and wit to fit the mood of the moment.

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