

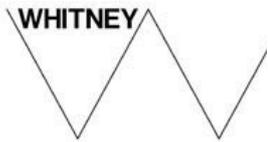
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## Exclusive: Shepard Fairey Interview

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Shepard Fairey, *Paradise Turns*, 2015, Set of three three-color reliefs on handmade paper, 40 1/2 x 30 1/2 inches each Edition of 25. Courtesy of Pace Prints

By **JAN CASTRO**, OCT. 2015

Shepard Fairey is a phenomenal, complex artist whose huge agenda is to raise people's awareness on how to end corruption and environmental destruction worldwide. With three solo exhibitions -- at Jacob

Lewis Gallery and Pace Prints in Chelsea, and at CAC Málaga Spain, his new Rizzoli book *Covert to Overt*, and giant billboard art worldwide, including the brand new *Natural Springs* on the New Jersey side of the Holland Tunnel and his OBEY label of casual clothing, Fairey is part of an activist group of international artists who each, in his/her own way, call for a sustainable future, including world peace.

Whitehot's second exclusive interview with Fairey starts here & his controversial Obama Hope poster is addressed below:

**Whitehot:** *How did you decide to focus on your mission of exposing oil companies and corruption in the United States?*

**Shepard Fairey:** When I look at a lot of political dysfunction and the disproportionate influence that various special interests and industries have, I see the fossil fuel industry as a main culprit – not the only one. When you look at how climate change, campaign finance structure, and other environmentally-destructive issues are all intertwined, the incredible lobbying power that industry has was an easy point of departure for a broader conversation. Its imagery is of interest. They're not the only villains by any means. In my work, I try to start dialogs.

I've been called a propagandist, but a propagandist says, "This is the final take on the conversation." My work is about starting the conversation. I have strong opinions, but I'm always finding out more about things, and my positions have evolved over the years.



*Shepard Fairey, Lifeguard Not on Duty, (left) HPM, 2015, 2 color relief print on hand-painted material, 41 x 30 inches, Edition of 5. Paradise Turns, (right) HPM, 2015, 2 color relief print on hand-painted material, 41 x 30 inches, Edition of 5. Courtesy Pace Prints Chelsea*

**Whitehot:** *I love the fact that you're speaking out while politicians are not. Could you talk about your ingenious uses of paper, inks, and materials to make your art?*

**Fairey:** I've always been excited by the idea that everything is an accumulation of the ideas that inform it. Sometimes street art is an accumulation of materials on a surface that gives things their charm. So whether it's metaphorically or literally, I like the idea that this might be the clear statement of the moment, but there are also layers and layers and layers of back-story. In U. S. history—the mistakes we make and the problems we face frequently have a manifestation in a slightly different form generation after generation. So I comb through old newspapers and other printed material to find things that are easy to point to, to say: we haven't been learning from the past on this issue. I'm not coming out of left field: *this is a problem*. When I work on building up the surfaces, I want to make iconic images that people can digest quickly, but I also want to add layers of things that reinforce the dominant narrative in a more

subtle way. There are new things to discover all the time.

**Whitehot:** *Both the layers and the subject matter remind me of Jasper John's American flag series. His layers used encaustic. How do you create your layers?*

**Fairey:** I'm a huge Jasper Johns fan. Johns is taking accessible imagery but treating the surfaces in a rich and sophisticated way that transcends its limitations - that idea of taking a universal language, then finding ways to re-present and make it special. Hopefully, [in my work], you're getting the full spectrum of populism and accessibility along with the artist's idiosyncratic decisions that make the work exciting.

Over sixty art works in mixed media by Shepard Fairey fill the Jacob Lewis Gallery on 26<sup>th</sup> Street in Chelsea, and twenty-three limited editions of new prints on handmade paper and on metal plates are one floor below at Pace Prints. There is a mix of iconic universal images from different eras and cultures with layered backgrounds. For example, in one, two people relax at the beach except the water is polluted and multiple oil derricks rise behind them. The headline reads: **Enjoy Paradise until the tide turns**. The labels are often ironic such as this one promising paradise and delivering pollution. There are many iconic images of women in Fairey's *Universal Personhood* series. Some of these have subversive symbols like oil derricks and some have positive slogans such as *Make Art not War*. As Fairey was signing books, he quoted the Dalai Lama as saying, "What we have in common is 98%; what we don't have in common is 2%." Some of Fairey's faces depict Western and Middle Eastern women with exotic eyes, some with covered heads or faces. In some, women carry guns. I am not sure if this is because more women than ever are now serving in the military; as we know, women were among those torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

Fairey's imagery is complex and, as he says, is intended to start conversations. His layered backgrounds remind me of Jasper Johns flags, of Picasso's and Braque's collages, and of old Charles Birchfield wall paper and visionary landscapes, and poster artists of past decades. Some originals use Rubyliths – a red photographic blockout film used in the early commercial platemaking days. This is one of many examples of the ways Fairey uses hand cut materials to point to processes that are part of early printmaking.



Shepard Fairey installation view 2015, Pace Prints Chelsea, New York, NY

The prints are also layered, starting with the beautiful handmade paper. Some prints are *hpm* – hand-painted multiples – a new designation in print-making. Each edition of each print has a different background. In many cases, prints are made by inking raised metal surfaces and pressing paper against the inked surface. So it's remarkable to me that Fairey has found a way to make *metal prints* – another beautiful and self-conscious nod to printing processes.

*Covert to Overt: The Under / Overground Art of Shepard Fairey*, is Fairey's hefty coffee table book from Rizzoli, beautifully printed and bound. It was selling briskly at the private opening the night before the crowded public opening on September 17<sup>th</sup>. The book opens with a series of images, one a photo of the artist with his wife and two daughters. It proceeds chronologically to chart Fairey's art from 2010 to

2015 with some chapters on his music album covers, large murals, and collaborations. Actor Russell Brand's essay "Art in the Streets" opens, "I believe Shepard Fairey is the most important artist of our time... I come at Shepard's work with the guileless wonder of the average optic nerve user, and what I see in Shepard is a transcendent visionary who never condescends to the viewer."

Missing from *Covert to Overt* is any mention of the Obama *Hope* poster that made national headlines, first as a gripping symbol of change in the run-up to Obama's election as the first African-American President of the United States, and, second, as a plagiarized version of an existing photograph of Obama. Fairey now carefully acknowledges the contemporary photographers with whom he collaborates on his portraits of celebrities, musicians, and faces that interest him. The Associated Press filed criminal and civil lawsuits arguing copyright infringement for Fairey's use of a 2006 photo to create his poster version of *Hope*. At the time of the lawsuit, I examined Fairey's cropping, colorization, addition of the word "Hope," and other touches that seemed, to me, to constitute fair use. However, Fairey did destroy documents related to *Hope*. The artist settled the civil case out of court; in the 2012 criminal case, he was fined \$250,000 and 300 hours of community service. To me, the irony was that the Associated Press seemed to benefit more than the *original photographer*, Mannie Garcia. Fairey later "okayed" a rather dumb National Security Agency 2013 parody of the *Hope* poster as fair use.



Shepard Fairey mural installation, New York, September, 2015

Fairey was surrounded by friends, staff, and colleagues at the opening, and he made a point of speaking with everyone he knew, which seemed to be everyone there, including the children in attendance. One lady with a camera was wearing an OBEY vintage t-shirt and one man had a *Giant* skateboard painted by Fairey, which he had purchased online and brought in for a signature. I enjoyed conversations with Fairey's talented colleagues -- painting assistants Nicholas Bowers and Robert Zagula; Dan Flores, Director of Art and Exhibitions; photographer Jon Furlong; and with Pace's Director of Pace Paper and master printer Ruth Lincoln; printers Akemi Martin and Nina Dine. The artist's schedule is packed; he speaks on Jasper Johns on October 14 at the Philadelphia Museum; he is also working on a prison reform mural project in Philadelphia.

I am intrigued by – and am still thinking about/looking into -- Fairey's signs, symbols, images, and processes along with the associated ironies, psychological, and historical implications. In my view, Fairey is not aligning himself with socialism, communism, capitalism, or any "ism" but instead targeting the power-hungry few who threaten a sustainable future for all. I'm excited by Fairey's wavelength, by his innovative approaches to art-making, and by the ways he engages us to see for ourselves. **WM**



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