Zeros and Ones

Senior Comprehensive Project: Art 620
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Pledge

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Again thank you all.

Bish

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Artist Statement

In this body of work I have pursued two of my highest interests, politics and printmaking. This installation is just scratching the surface of a dystopian world where reason is out and blind faith rules the land. With the intention of enticing the audience to be engaged, not only intellectually but also physically, I have placed viewers in between opposing ideals while using the same imagery and simply changing texts. I am putting them in a place where they are forced to intermingle with what can be perceived as exaggerated situations and interpretations of events in our society. While standing between these ideas, the viewer has become a single number in the mass quantity of people within the world; the space we all try to understand as the gray area between the polar spectrum of ideas while existing in the discomfort of being just zeros and ones.

The history of art in protest of war is a long and dubious. The same is true for printmaking; the print has long been the means of mass propaganda and dissention. This semester my body of work has joined the rank and file of artists who express their distaste, aggression or questions for society through a visual means.

In 1440 with Gutenberg inventing the printing press, the history of printmaking being a means of delivering information had begun. Using the press to illustrate the Bible instigated the idea of using the press to spread information quickly. In a time when kings, bishops and princes started wars for their glory, artists would eventually begin to reflect on the time. (Bruckner 11) Works like the engraving by Pieter Brueghel the Elder *The Battle of the Moneybags and Treasure Chests* (Figure 1) from 1567 or Hans Holbien's *The Battle* (Figure 2) from 1490 both representing prints in the history of social commentary. This is my agenda as well- using visual means to give my commentary on the current social and political climates.

"*For it is an affair of the state… to prevent a people from being driven into the arms of spiritual lunacy, for on the day that this kind of art actually were to correspond to the general conception, one of the most severe changes of mankind would have begun; the backward development of the human brain… -Hitler, Mein Kamp"*

The quote above provides both the greatest fear of mine and sadly a perception of what is happening to our own society; the few selecting what is best for the whole and reduction of the individual freedoms, mainly our first amendment right, the freedom of

speech. To any creative person, whether it is a printmaker, poet, musician or a street performer, freedom of speech is essential for the creative process to be fully recognized.

Since my teens I have been adamant about knowing about current events in the news involving the politics of the world as well as being fascinated by the world's history. Being informed with current events and politics became even more important to me while being enlisted in the United States Army from 2002 to 2005. Seeing daily news of comrades in arms fighting in Afghanistan and on March 19, 2003 being witness to what is my opinion, one of the greatest lies told to the American people; eliminating the totalitarian state of Suddam Husain in Iraq. America's agenda for acquiring cheap oil, big business and low taxes for the rich directly led to my distaste in serving in our nation's military and reaffirming my socialistic roots. My concern developed from wondering how so many people in society cannot know what is happening in the world and are ignorant to matters that have great significance to their lives.

My concern for people's lack of awareness has drawn me to the ideas of dystopias and portraying how bad the world could possibly be. Books like *1984*, *We*, *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451* have long been some of my favorite fiction books. Although at the rate our world is progressing, with larger and larger gaps between the rich and the poor no longer seem like outlandish fiction to me. While each of these books are individualistic in their creation and outcome, they all have creative interpretations of how social and political climates can influence the creation of art even when fictional. So when I found Trent Reznor's *Year Zero* 2009 concept album, I could not resist the urge to dive deeper into the idea.

Since my first drawing class the influence of dystopias and continual political awareness has been present in my art. Needless to say my comp was no exception. I used historical references to artists and eras as well as constantly revisiting dystopian literature. With printmaking, I set my goal of engaging the viewers in a dialogue of political thought.

I began the project using the idea of *Year Zero* to springboard my project development and have a grounds for construction. Having a set of goals for imagery such as, showing the breakdown of separation of church and state, industrial military complex, and the destruction of individual rights and freedoms for protection from ourselves. These being political concerns for me, as well as the basic construct of a dystopia, I found it a good place to start, but as it progressed I found it more and more difficult to illustrate something I am strongly opposed to such as the reduction of pro-choice options.

This steered me to look at more current topics in the news, which on a general basis were things that angered me and that did actually happen- like the reduction of state workers collective bargaining rights being enacted as state law in Wisconsin, and the severe reduction to Pennsylvania's education budget to both primary and post secondary establishments. There is never a shortage of subject matter in the news for someone who is instigated to create by social and political commentary. I made images that in our society may be perceived by some to be exaggerated. While lynching, union riots and book burning are all not too far back in our past, people are not always aware or concerned with having a short-term memory, especially when it does not directly affect them.

As I stated in my proposal, one of the first things that I knew I wanted to explore this semester was using black and white linoleum relief prints. Relief prints in general have always played a good hand of visual commentary on politics. While looking at many of the artists whose work was considered to be degenerate, I found an equal amount of insight from pro-war propaganda as well. One piece of Nazi Propaganda that directly instigated my print *Most Sacred to Whom,* was a poster for the Organization to the Aid of Mothers and Children from 1935c entitled *Germany Grown Through Strong Mothers and Children* (Figure 3). This poster showing a Madonna-like mother and child serenely painted in the countryside, while not showing images of soldiers or anything directly supporting the war machine was still pushing the ideas of the fascist state to the T. The art approved by the totalitarian state was magnificently crafted and in many cases the propaganda is more interesting. Though the definition of propaganda means it is used to send a message, the state sanctioned art is generally nothing more that propaganda made for a gallery instead of a light post. A prime example of this is Richard Schwazkopf ‘s 1937 Linoleum Print *Deutsche Passion VI* (Figure 4). The image as a whole is indisputably well crafted, with clean sharp lines forming a good composition, but needless to say not-so-subtle pro-Nazi message.

Most art in the “Degenerate” category seems to me to be the stronger art from that period, not because it is more technically sound but because of the progression to something new. Artists such as Vincent Van Gogh, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Bechmann, Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimpt and Pablo Picasso were all considered degenerate artists; their works in public or private collections were seized and in some cases held by some high-ranking Nazi officials(Adam 122).

Though some of the state leaders were a bit hypocritical in secretly keeping art, there was still destroyed or lost art in Nazi Germany, some never to be recovered. The aforementioned quote from Hitler's book *Mien Kampf* was the general opinion held by Hitler and Adolf Zeigler the president of the Nazi's Riech Culture Chamber. They decided what was good for the people and of course what was wrong. Nothing was safe from their purge; both American Jazz and literature were under the scrutiny of the Riech Culture Chamber. Though this seems unimaginable to do now, there are still cases of blatant disregard for various opinions in the world. Actions like the so-called Pastor Terry Jones burning the Quran, or the vandalism of Serrano's *Immersion* (*Piss Christ)* in Paris are both events that happened this past year.(CBC)

While researching the Nazis, I also looked at the artists that they condemned. Artists which the Nazi's labeled Degenerate I would label genius. I have found endless information on visual storytelling. Using artists such as Frans Massereel and Käthe Kollwitz provided an endless amount of ideas for how to effectively produce an image, which give emotional expression as well as political commentary. Both Kollwitz and Massereel created works through both world wars and both magnificently represented human emotion through printmaking. One of the most inspiring to me is Kollwitz's *Nie Wieder Krieg* (Figure 5) a 1924 lithograph from post-World War Germany. This single figure print quickly expresses the extreme distaste for war felt by most of the people around the world after one of the most vicious wars ever seen.

Kollwitz being my absolute favorite artist mastered showing compassion in her art. Using images of the downtrodden, young, old and mothers, she would give the art world a view of the unseen of German society. Having a son die in the First World War

and a grandson in the second she understood the need for expressing dissatisfaction with war and conflict in general. (Bittner 11-21)

Like Kollwitz using a similar theme in her prints, Franz Massereel used wood block prints to often create long series of images to tell a story revolving around a social commentary. His series often are the perfect example of visual story telling without the usage of words. Stories like *The City* travel close to the world of graphic novels but never introduce words outside of the images themselves; there is no language barrier to overcome. Because these socio-political stories do not have to rely on language, anyone in war-torn Europe is given the ability to grasp the message quickly

While Kollwitz and Massereel helped me to effectively achieve images with a social message behind them, artists like Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimpt, Oskar Kokoshka, Erich Heckel and many others of the Die Brücke Movement would play a huge role in my developing a manner for creativity. Egon Schiele's grotesque-like drawings and simple, economic watercolors are always awe inspiring to me. His nude images that reach far beyond the traditional use of media are a demonstration of his mastering line and movement within the composition. (*Figure* 6) Schiele was a member of the Secessionist Movement in Austro-Hungarian Vienna, pre-World War I. He progressed in his abilities fast, evidenced by the fact that he was twenty when he made *Nude Woman* and died eight years later at the age of twenty-eight. Looking at his work where he uses single form images, which I have a tendency to do as well, I have tried to understand how he can make a simple image so compositionally sound and interesting to view.

Gustav Klimpt, a fellow member of the Secessionists, used much more complex images. Klimt showcased his traditional mastery, as well as introducing an element of

primitivism, much like many artists in the early 20th century. His paintings are equally inspiring; in New York this past winter I had the privilege to see his work at the Neue Galerie. While Schiele would master the grotesqueness in line Klimpt would do so in content, as in *Judith mit dem Haupt Holofernes (zerstört)* also known as *Judith I* (*Figure 7*).

These two artists being both painters would influence how I could understand line quality and controlling my mark making in my prints over my composition of an image. My stylization and concept of handling figures in relief prints would be more greatly influenced by Die Brücke Movement. Artists like Emil Nolde, Erich Heckel, Ernst Ludwid Kirchner and Otto Meuller were part of this early Expressionist Movement in Dresden, Germany. Die Brücke got its start in 1905 in Dresden, Germany but was solidified with its first show at the Karl-Max Seifert lamp and lighting gallery in 1906(Cantz 20). Here artists revisited art from the past to find a method for their future. They would look at what is called primitive art from Europe, Asia, and Africa as well as something rich in German art history: the wood block print. Developing thick outlined figures and saturated color schemes would end up being the iconic Die Brücke look(Cantz 37). Though I do not claim that I work distinctly from their method of mark making, I can say images like Erich Heckel's *Crouching Figure (Figure 8)* have greatly influenced how I handle the figure in my relief prints. There are more influential artists or movements in the world of printmaking, but the bold lines and rich colors of Die Brücke have attracted me since my first art history class.

While all of these artists have had a significant role in guiding my hand through the art making process, there are contemporary artists that have played a role in

influencing me as well. Artists like El Mac, Shepard Fairey, Kiki Smith, Mike Giant and Aidan Hughes who all span a wide range of art making from pen and ink to graffiti. El Mac who in my opinion is one of the world's best street artist today works with amazing control of a spray can to turn out awe inspiring paintings. El Mac a self taught artist who uses artists from the past to develop his signature photo realist graffiti to represent Chicano culture. (MacGregor) His street painting is immaculate in representing the figure and bringing the non-gangster side of Chicano culture to public light. *Justice (Figure 9)* a street mural in Hollywood, California is a perfect representation of El Mac's style. His massive scale is almost necessary to get the level of detail from a spray can, but the gargantuan size just adds to the impact of his work.

Aidan Hughes a British artist more known for his illustrations and album covers of Industrial band KMFDM, was like me, influenced by war propaganda and the prints of Frans Massereel and Lynd Ward. Usually going by the moniker Brute, he has worked with everything from linoleum prints to digital media to produce images calling on different methods to better the image he wishes to create.(Hughes) Using basic color patterns and ridged line work, Hughes emulates from past movements like the Futurists and Expressionists to bring a different style to the table when illustrating. Images like *Panic (Figure 10)* a digital print uses monochromatic color schemes to intensify the moment we are witnessing. (Hughes Bio) Hughes has been one of the longest running artistic influences in my life, since I first purchased a KMFDM album with his illustration on the front.

Kiki Smith who besides Shepard Fairey is the rock-star of the group, she has experimented with sculpture, collage and printmaking, the entirety of her career

commenting to social aspects of women and feminism. Smith always seems to play with her media to find a way to manipulate it to her whim, which is something that I have tried to understand this entire semester. One of her more recent works *Hall Full of Grace, the Lord is With Thee,(Figure 11)* is a good example of her combining different media affectively to reach her goal for an image. Smith has long used symbolism from folklore, classical mythology and symbols of domesticity to build her concept. (Smith)
This has been a source of reassurance to me using the basis of my senior project on a concept album almost seems silly, but when placed in the correct direction, it can be powerful like much of Smith's work.

Mike Giant, like Hughes, is more known for his work outside of the so-called fine art realm, mainly the world of tattoos as well as illustration. Mike Giant, a Los Angeles based artist, generally uses strictly black and white images in his work and he uses tattoo flash as means of expression like in *Hasta La Muerte*. (Figure12). The art produced by Giant is an incredible use of non-traditional techniques to portray his concepts. (Williams 65). I have been a long time fan of Mike Giant and used him as a model to how I could bring my experience in the world of tattoos to my art making. I was first introduced to his work as a guy hanging around tattoo shops, but have since furthered my respect for Giant because of his ability to transcend the boundary between the art world and tattoo sub-culture. I have yet to translate the two worlds of tattoos and printmaking as well as Giant. For me, the concepts of tattoos and printmaking are similar; when I slip a cut on the linoleum, there is a permanent mark much the same as a line on skin. Bold outlines and saturated colors come from this as well, though I tend to stay black and white.

Shepard Fairey is one of the biggest names in the contemporary art world. His images for the Barack Obama presidential campaign were nothing but iconic and it seems every other day there is a new artist mimicking his style of illustration. Shepard Fairey got to his current level of artist stardom from his Obey Giant sticker campaign. The objective of the Obey campaign is why I have kept an interest in Fairey. Obey was essentially putting up stickers to instigate viewers to think about what information they are taking in daily, trying to engage the viewers to take back their minds from a bombardment of propaganda and advertisements. He produced a simple black and white sticker from a Polaroid snap shot of Andre The Giant, (Figure 13) that has been randomly distributed by the leagues of people who have purchased copies over the world. (Fairey, Obey Giant Manifesto) His recent works have expanded from his roots on the street as a stencil artist to being in museums and galleries across the world. Using mixed media images still based on stencils, he continues to make images derived on social commentary and showcasing people who do the same, such as his representation of Henry Rollins from a 1981 photograph. (Figure 14) While I can say my graffiti days are behind me, much like Shepard Fairey, I still find cutting stencils to be one of my favorite activities. AS with tattoos, I am still searching to find a way to integrate stencils into my art making, though trying not to jump on the Obey bandwagon. The connection to Fairey's work and mine will probably be, for some time, our need to comment on society by means of mocking propaganda and how we deliver our message to what viewers we may be lucky to have.

While these artists are inspiring to create and form a path of observation to emulation, they also serve as a beacon of reassurance. When most of the world is lost in

absurdity, wrapped up in seemingly mundane details, they remind me there is still a need to create. Though I know they are all still just people and I am sure they all have days where they do not want to be working either, they do - and it inspires me to do the same.

As I briefly mentioned before, I have used historical research to gain a perspective on what I should illustrate. The Nazi regime is an easy target for anyone seeking a building guide to one of the most horrific totalitarian states the world has ever seen. Researching Nazis has provided a way to see how people reacted to their situations. Groups like the White Rose Movement reacted in dissention to Nazis and chose death over being a cog in a war machine. But there were also people who, out of fear, did nothing or refused to open their eyes to the horrors that were happening around them. This was instigation for me to look at the people in our society. While I find it frightening that many people choose to remain ignorant to the world around them, I also find it curious that even if they do seek information, there is only the self-righteous corporate media to inform the general masses.

A constant barrage of “believe me, not them” in our media gives us little to no information, leaving us - the people – blind in the middle of all the chaos of the world. How do we choose what is right and wrong? How do we live as if what we do does not affect the world and people around us? We generally, as a society, know right from wrong: don’t kill, steal or cheat- it is not right and if you do, you go to prison. Yet somehow we allow our governments to do this under the guise of national security. This is the reason I looked into the past to gain a perspective on how to represent social absurdity.

While looking at a part of Nazi history, the Degenerates, I discovered how I wanted to present my art as an installation. An image of one of the degenerate art shows in Germany showed many of the high ranking Nazi officials looking at degenerate art, while on the opposing wall there was state-sanctioned art being displayed as well. The sanctioned art getting no attention and everyone was thoroughly engaged in what they considered degenerate art. Having two walls with opposing ideas face to face became my mode for creativity. As someone with strong political beliefs, I found it more and more difficult to create unbiased art and sought other solutions and, for me, this image was key.

This is where my idea for using the same image on both sides of the wall began. I started to develop an idea for an installation, a space where viewers are placed between two opposing concepts. The dialogue of text on each wall is a representation of the actions of the right and wrong of society. Creating a space where the viewer is engaged from almost all directions became just as integral to the installation as the prints.

This being a quandary to my need for control, it was a big step for me not to be cut and dry with my presentation of my work. Using the printing process in ways I would not have been comfortable with such as using stamps and rubbings as final works was something I would have never considered at the beginning of the semester. I have the tendency to hold the traditions of printmaking in high regard; hand-crafted paper, clean lines, perfect borders and perfect editions are traditions I find the most difficult to break. While I understand there is nothing wrong with tradition, the fact that I was looking at artists that were breaking from traditional art making to find a new mode of emotional expression was ironic to me. The presentation of my work even though I was starting to develop an installation was still very bland and not engaging enough to reach the full

capability of my body of work. There are images that are blunt and with text engaging but not enough to showcase the potential of printing.

I considered using multiples of each image on each wall using stencils, adding more text. All of these ideas seemed like a plan, but none were solid enough to fill what was missing from the installation. What was missing in a body of work that revolved around people, was simply people. There are people in every image, but nowhere near enough to represent a society. I came to the idea that if I have three walls and a floor, why would I not use that floor to engage the viewers as well. I began to carve as many blocks of portraits as possible from then to the time I would have to submit to the gallery and install. The idea was to have one long sheet of butcher paper along the entire floor of my installation with the walls no wider than the paper itself - making the space narrow and slightly uncomfortable. I really liked the idea of only having a 36” walkway with images of faces printed on the floor to make the viewer feel the discomfort between the dialogues of the images.

Playing with the installation developed more and more to where it is now. Using the floor to have duplicates of faces, some from the previous prints and some carved separately. Each was rubbed with crayon individually scanned into a computer and printed in mass. The faces are scattered on the floor and jutting up the far wall to bring both opinion together in the final work, which is the two sides coming together in a last embrace and forgiveness. This is the idea of finding a civil solution for our problems and understanding the only way to a better world is by working with each other.

Over this semester I have learned a lot, not just about art or the printmaking process, but about myself as well. I have learned to push myself a little further than what

I would have in the past, which allowed me to understand more of what I am uncomfortable with and forced me to cross those lines in my art making. I learned at best when push comes to shove, I will not move unless I want to and the only person stopping my creative path is myself.

Knowing this, I know now no matter how much I learn, I will never know enough. There is an unending list of artists who have made visual commentary, just as there is almost an endless amount of propaganda in corporate advertisements. I know there will only be a minimal chance I could impact viewers to the same extent as advertising agencies; my only option to get people to think is to be like Massereel or Fairey and continually try to engage people into a thought process.

As predicted at the beginning of the semester, this group of work has turned into a project I wish to continue in the future even though this chapter of my life at Allegheny is coming to an end. It has given me the idea of continuing to work with creating my own fictional dystopian world and wanting to work with other artists to see how they would interpret my ideas as I have interpreted the ideas of artists before me.

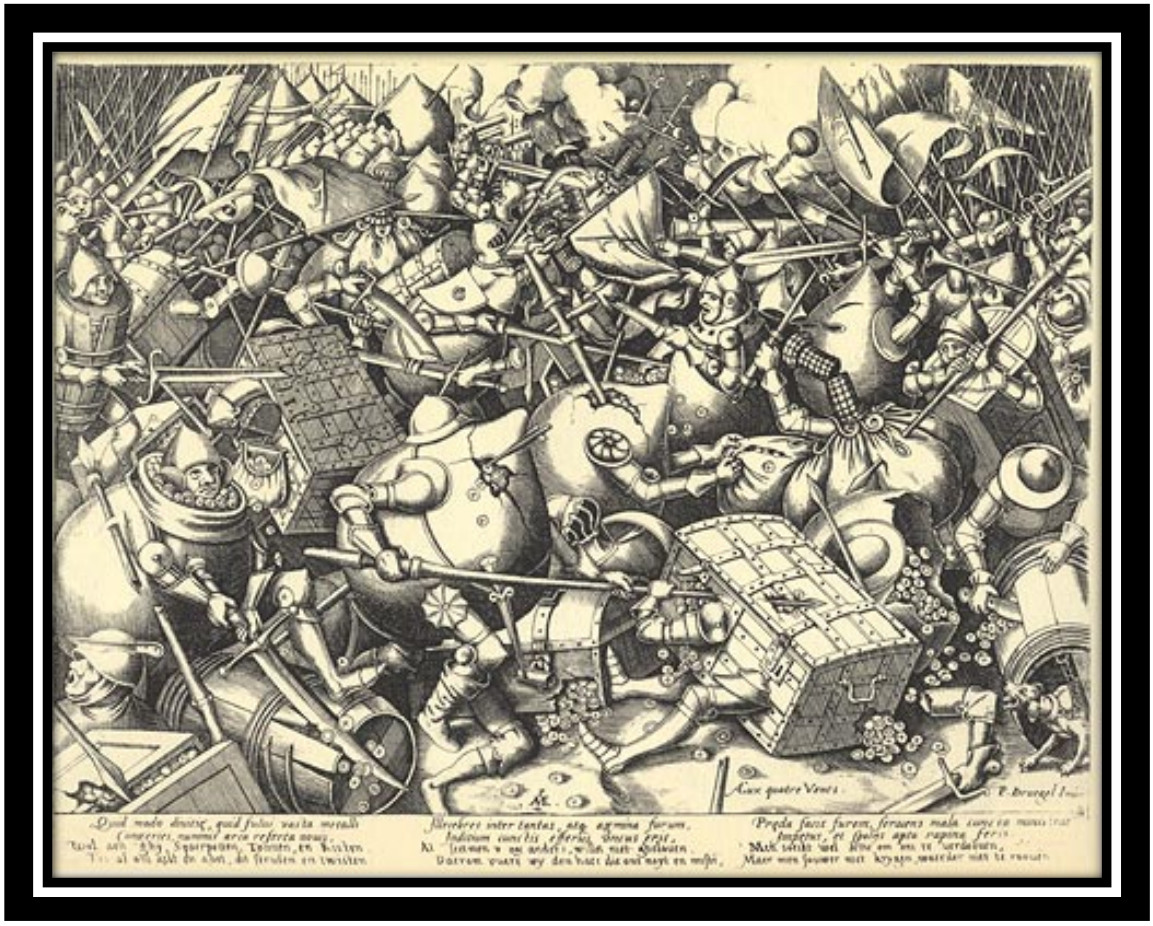


Figure 1
Pieter Brueghel the Elder
The Battle of the Moneybags and Treasure Chests 1567
Engraving
Art Against War: 400 years of Protest



Figure 2
Hans Holbein
The Battle 1490
Woodcut
Art Against War: 400 years of Protest



Figure 3

Poster of the Organization to the Aid of Mothers and Children ca. 1935
"Germany Grows Through Strong Mothers and Healthy Children."
Poster
Art of the Third Reich



Figure 4
Deutsch Passion IV 1937
Richard Scharzkopf
Linoleum Relief Print
http://www.thirdreichruins.com/kunsthaus2.htm



Figure 5
Nie Wieder Krieg (Never Again War) 1924
Lithograph
http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_LNgCz8Cxfps/TQ02U9MVIGI/AAAAAAAAAYE/pcXqVhbpjIY/s1600/nie-wieder-krieg.jpg

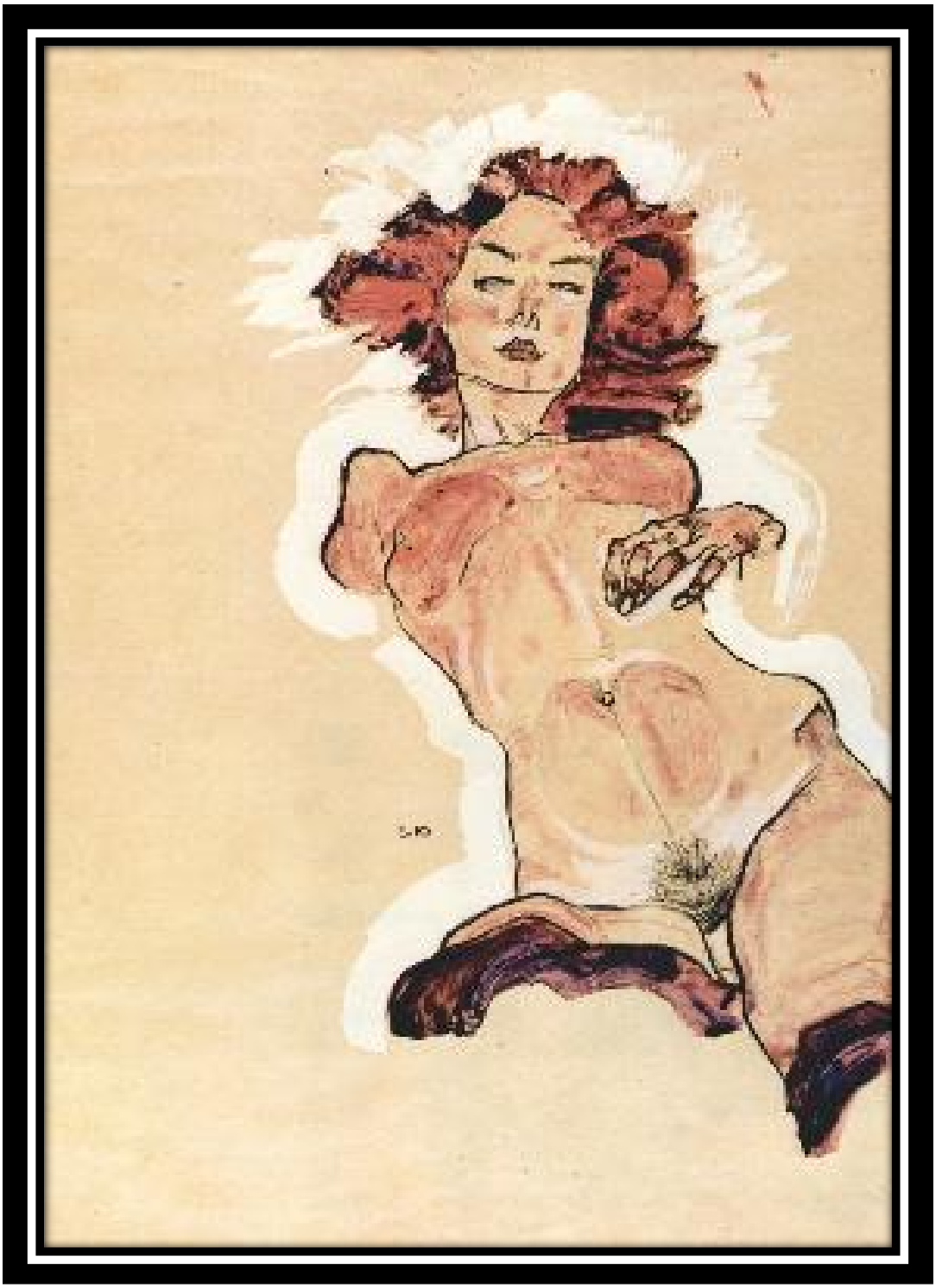


Figure 6
Egon Schiele
Female Nude,
Gouache, watercolor and black crayon with white highlighting
44.3 x 30.6cm
Schiele Pg 21

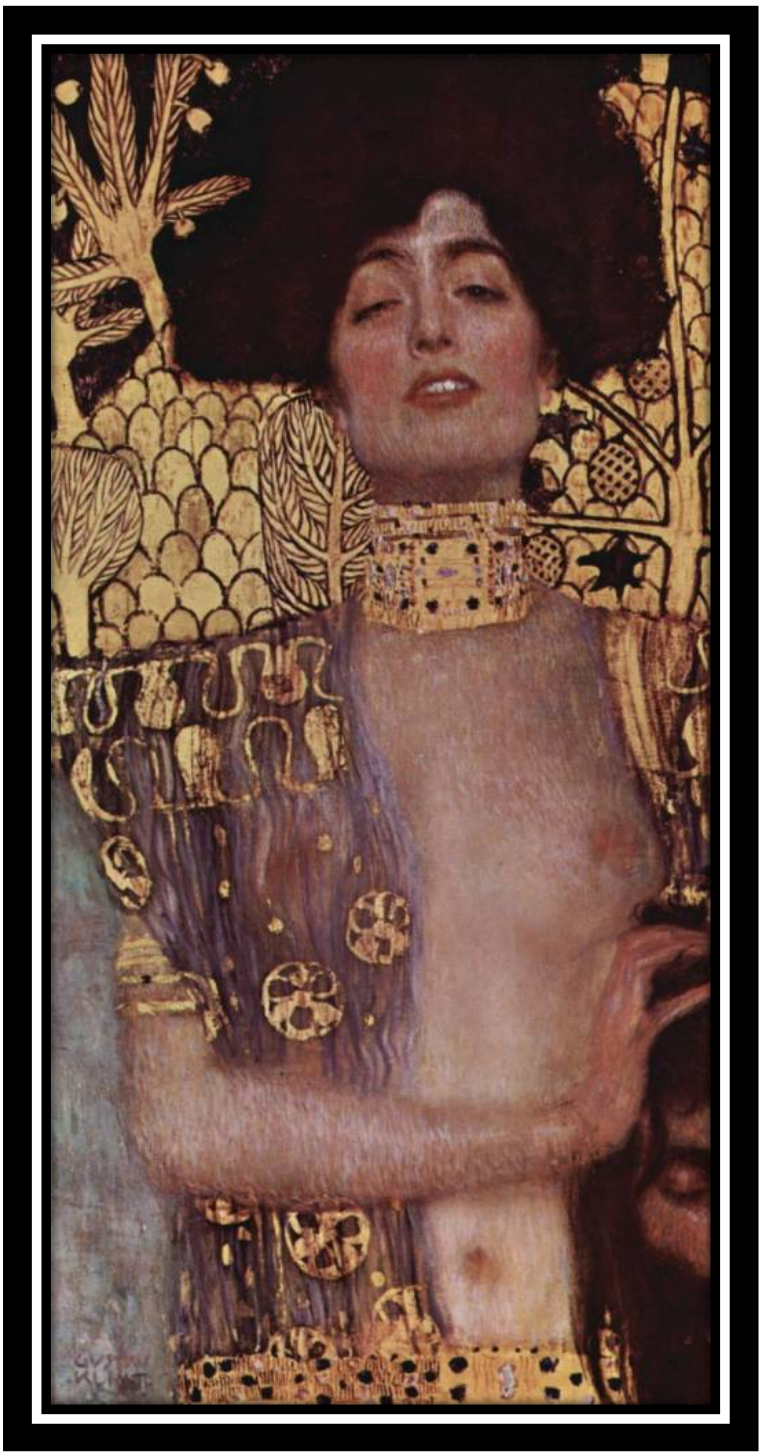


Figure 7
Gustav Klimpt
Judith mit dem Haupt Holofernes (Judith 1) 1901
Oil on Canvas 84 x 42 cm
http://www.wetcanvas.com/Museum/Artists/k/Gustav_Klimt/judith.html



Figure 8
Erich Heckel
Crouching Figure 1914
Woodcut 41.6 x 31cm

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Figure 8
El Mac
Justice
Manifest Equality Hollywood California 2010
21 x 96 feet
http://elmac.net/gallery/spraypaint/page/4/



Figure 9
Aidan Hughes (Brute)
Panic 2008
Digital Print
http://bruteprop.com/



Figure 10
Kiki Smith
Hall Full of Grace, the Lord is With Thee, 2000
Lithograph, collage and wax stamp on paper
50.8 x 75cm
http://www.dailyartfixx.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Kiki-Smith.jpg



Figure 11
Mike Giant
Hasta La Muerte 2009
Digital print
http://www.mikegiant.com/fineart.php?id=1&page=1&pic=25



Figure 12
Shepard Fairey
Obey Giant 1986

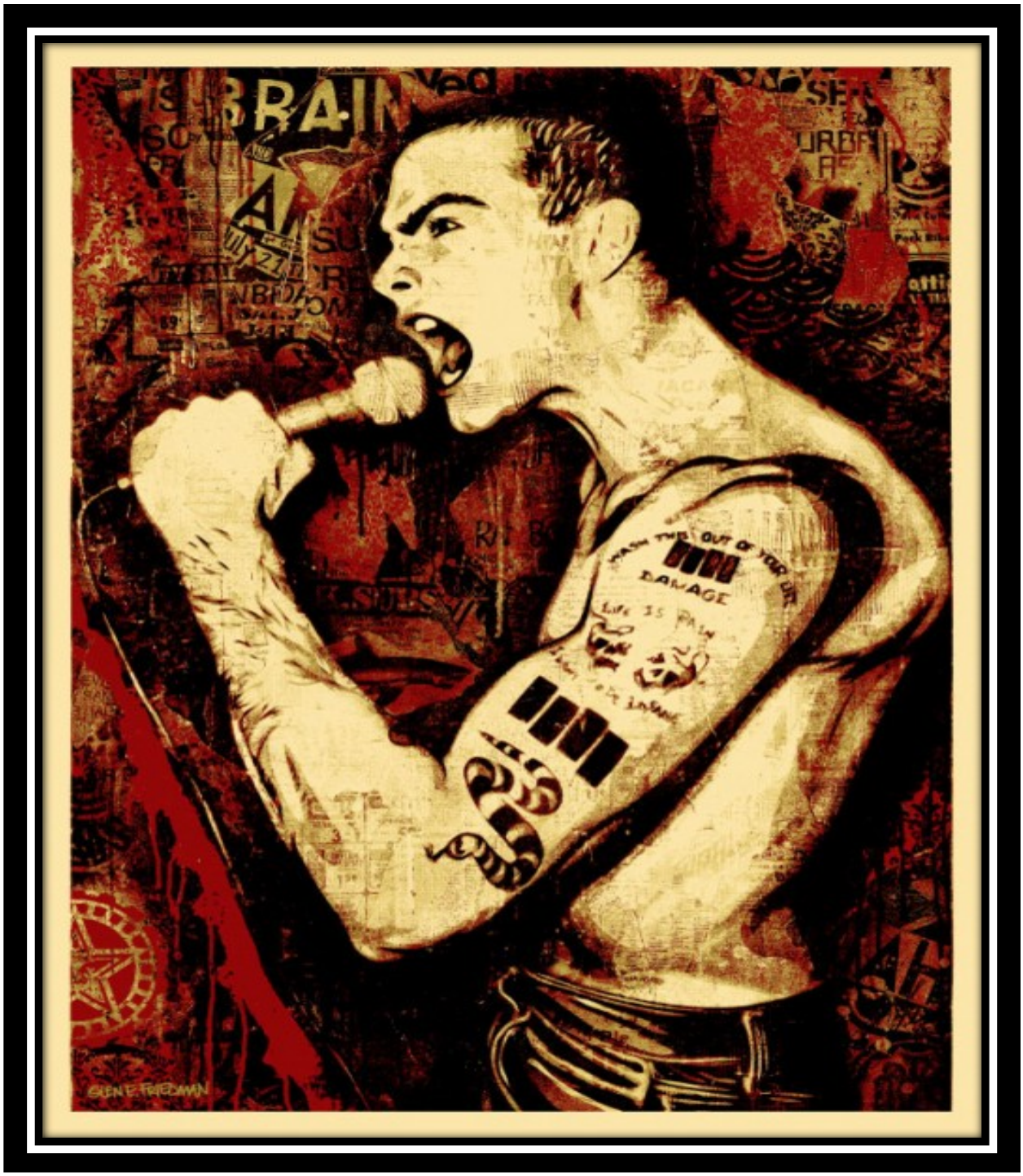


Figure 13
Shepard Fairey
Henry Rollins 1981
2011
Mixed Media
http://obeygiant.com/prints/rollins-81

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