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Delivering Art in the Empire

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A couple of weeks ago, I drove a 15′ truck all day to Maryland. I delivered four of my sculptures and two paintings for an exhibition that opens in September at the University of Maryland gallery.

I graduated from their studio program in 1995. This is probably the first time I went back there since then.

I thought I might recognize the way around as I got closer to the art department building, but I didn't. The school has drastically expanded to bury the familiar buildings and scenery. The curator of the show explained to me that the school had to expand to survive financially. He added that, of course, it can't keep expanding forever.

Everything went smoothly. Unloading was easy. We returned the truck. The curator and I had a nice chat. He dropped me off at a hotel in the middle of Washington DC so that I'd have the next morning to look around, and then take an Amtrak back to New York. I felt welcomed, and I felt happy and excited about the upcoming show.

Next morning, I stepped out of the hotel into the steamy hot summer of Washington DC. I decided to check out the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

The third floor exhibition was titled Masterworks from the Hirshhorn Collection. I was transfixed by two of Francis Bacon's paintings called Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh. The vibrant colors–reminiscent of Van Gogh's work–that I associate with Van Gogh's warm yet desperate attempt to capture the fragile profoundness of natural beauty immediately shifted to convey Van Gogh's tormented soul as I recognized a disfigured facial expression brushed by Bacon.

Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh at the

I feel a special kinship to Van Gogh. His relentless passion for his work, his clumsiness and his earnest yearning for humanity gave him his life as an artist but I feel that it might have also contributed to his early passing. I admire his purity and honesty. I thought that Bacon's interpretation was spot on.

I also enjoyed pieces by Dubuffet, Giacometti, Calder and so on.

However, my psyche, transported to the realm of the mystery of life by those works, was abruptly brought back to a harsh reality of our time.

The third floor had a large painting exhibit that was inspired by President Obama's statement,

> "No matter what happens, the sun will rise in the morning."

Nicolas Party working on the new mural "sunrise, sunset," at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Photo by Cathy Carver)

My heart sunk into bitterness. For those thousands of people who were turned into bits and pieces of flesh and bones by President Obama's predator drones, there were no more mornings. The hardship and death being faced by peoples in seven countries that were bombed under his command would probably elicit devastating rage and sadness on hearing such words.

Moreover, anyone who closely observed President Obama's initiatives to corporatize, colonize and militarize while curtailing legal protections and human rights would recognize the obvious problem of whitewashing the undemocratic trajectory, which continues to expand under the new administration. Danny Haiphong, author, activist, has written an extensive 10 part series on the topic (1).

President Obama fully employed his ability as a constitutional scholar and his flawless Presidential brand (cultivated by the corporate media) in herding his supporters into the framework of what Martin Luther King Jr. described as "the greatest purveyor of violence."

He's done it with slogans that evoke the very legacies of Martin Luther King Jr.–the true revolutionary giant.

There is no way around it. The context of the art work inspired by Obama's words — a major American institution — legitimizes the whitewashing of what he did as President.

On the same floor, there was a piece by a Cuban artist. On one side of the large room, you see a huge window framing a grand view of the governmental buildings of Washington DC sprawling outside representing "democracy", "justice" and "freedom". Across from that, you have a wall with five black rectangles varying in sizes. According to the artist, the sizes of the blackness represent the amount of ink used by representative writings of Vladimir Lenin, Adolf Hitler, Fidel Castro, Mao Zedong and Muammar Gaddafi. His statement explains that their texts were accepted as revolutionary at the time, but they all ended up serving "undemocratic" "regimes".

Again, for those who studied the historical trajectory of our species, the agenda of the work is obvious. The work is intended to glorify the western establishment while demonizing any trajectories that were meant to be alternatives to the western capitalist hegemony.

But let's get back to the piece.

The largest black rectangle looming over the viewers represents Adolf Hitler's writing. No one in their right mind would advocate the National Socialist government of Hitler's Germany. However, it is well known that the Nazi regime was largely supported by US corporate power. For example even during WW2, the Nazi war machine relied on the US industry in manufacturing its weapons (2). In addition, the US establishment collaborated with Nazi war criminals and sympathizers after the war. Renowned investigative journalist Keith Harmon Snow has detailed major points in his work (3).

The support and collaboration with Nazis by the US establishment allow us to observe the hidden dynamics of the capitalist momentum to destroy the true enemy–the revolutionary force of the Soviet Union. In a heated Facebook discussion on the topic recently, Phil Rockstroh, poet, lyricist, philosopher, summarized the lesser known historical narrative as follows:

> "The Red Army won the war against fascism in Europe as the US hung back and allowed the Soviets and Germans to bleed each other dry. Then the OSS, in the form of Alan Dulles, contrived to save as many Nazi officials as possible to serve as operatives in their coming Cold War against the Soviets. Moreover, a large percent of the US corporate/financial, and industrial elite were Nazi sympathisers who hated communism and admired Nazism, from its racist/anti-semite belief system to his hyper-authoritian ideology e.g., from Prescott Bush to Henry Ford." (4)

Human rights activist Winston Weeks went on to say:

> "I've come to the conclusion that that the Dulles brothers originally planned for Hitler to attack the Soviet Union. There was a lot of rather covert funding for Hitler from American industrialists like Henry Ford, the Bush family and other prominent American figures as well. The plan went bad when Hitler attacked England. It's a complex story but the bottom line is that there were droves of powerful capitalists in the USA and England who loved Hitler and saw Germany

> as an attack dog that could be trained and manipulated to destroy the Soviet Union." (5)

The single obvious aim of the western war economy, backed by 900 US military bases, 17 spy agencies, covert and overt military aggression, proxy wars, economic war by the western financial network as well as propaganda projects led by the western funded "NGOs" and media giants and so on, has been the destruction of anything that gets in the way of western financial/military hegemony–most notably, anything socialist or communist. As a result, the colonial wars initiated by the trajectory have killed 20 to 30 million people across the globe (6).

But again, back to the art in question. I would like to very briefly talk about Russia, Cuba, Libya and China, which are reduced into black rectangles on a wall along with Nazi Germany.

First, the piece adds a subtle yet crucial credence to generations of the US covert and overt military as well as economic interventions to subjugate Russia and its former incarnation, Soviet Union, under the US hegemony, accompanied by a ruthless war propaganda campaign against it. This lesser known aspect of an ongoing history is crucial in understanding the current global political climate as well as collective future of our species. Sara Flounders, prominent anti-war activist, author, recently wrote an eye opening, must-read article on the topic (7).

This, of course, echoes relentless US attacks against Cuba as well. One can demonize Cuba however one desires, but many Cubans haven't forgotten the US invasions and over 600 assassination attempts against Fidel Castro, while they have endured the deadly economic sanctions and embargo designed to strangle their lives.

The US support for the ruthlessly oppressive, racist Batista regime clearly contrasts with the US destabilizing policy against the socialist trajectory taken by the revolutionary government.

Cuba's efforts in standing with the oppressed globally, however, have been generously praised by such a humanitarian giant as Nelson Mandela, as well as Malcolm X (8). In an article titled Fidel Castro: Undaunted Revolutionary, Jeff Mackler notes:

> "While Cuba's example permeated the consciousness of the youth and revolutionary fighters around the world, U.S. imperialism employed the most monstrous methods of destruction to defeat it, including using biological warfare to wipe out Cuba's banana crops and to kill an estimated 100,000 pigs, not to mention bombing Cuban hotels and shooting down a commercial aircraft that killed Cuba's Olympic fencing team and many other passengers." (8)

I certainly can't subscribe to a view that systematically demonizes Cuba while glorifying the US government. Here is what legendary activist William Blum has to say about Cuba:

> "No "free press"? Apart from the question of how free Western media is (see the preceding essays), if that's to be the standard, what would happen if Cuba announced that from now on anyone in the country could own any kind of media? How long would it be before CIA money – secret and unlimited CIA money financing all kinds of fronts in Cuba – would own or control almost all

> the media worth owning or controlling?
>
> Is it "free elections" that Cuba lacks? They regularly have elections at municipal, regional and national levels. They do not have direct election of the president, but neither do Germany or the United Kingdom and many other countries. The Cuban president is chosen by the parliament, The National Assembly of People's Power. Money plays virtually no role in these elections; neither does party politics, including the Communist Party, since all candidates run as individuals. Again, what is the standard by which Cuban elections are to be judged? Is it that they don't have private corporations to pour in a billion dollars? Most Americans, if they gave it any thought, might find it difficult to even imagine what a free and democratic election, without great concentrations of corporate money, would look like, or how it would operate. Would Ralph Nader finally be able to get on all 50 state ballots, take part in national television debates, and be able to match the two monopoly parties in media advertising? If that were the case, I think he'd probably win; which is why it's not the case.
>
> Or perhaps what Cuba lacks is our marvelous "electoral college" system, where the presidential candidate with the most votes is not necessarily the winner. Did we need the latest example of this travesty of democracy to convince us to finally get rid of it? If we really think this system is a good example of democracy why don't we use it for local and state elections as well?
>
> Is Cuba a dictatorship because it arrests dissidents? Many thousands of anti-war and other protesters have been arrested in the United States in recent years, as in every period in American history. During the Occupy Movement of five years ago more than 7,000 people were arrested, many beaten by police and mistreated while in custody. And remember: The United States is to the Cuban government like al Qaeda is to Washington, only much more powerful and much closer; virtually without exception, Cuban dissidents have been financed by and aided in other ways by the United States.
>
> Would Washington ignore a group of Americans receiving funds from al Qaeda and engaging in repeated meetings with known members of that organization? In recent years the United States has arrested a great many people in the US and abroad solely on the basis of alleged ties to al Qaeda, with a lot less evidence to go by than Cuba has had with its dissidents' ties to the United States. Virtually all of Cuba's "political prisoners" are such dissidents. While others may call Cuba's security policies dictatorship, I call it self-defense."(9)

Gaddafi's Libya was met with a ruthless bombing campaign by NATO forces under the false pretext of a fictitious impending "humanitarian catastrophe", said to be orchestrated by Gaddafi, while the country was flooded by the western backed Al-Qaeda affiliated forces (10). The subsequent assassination of Gaddafi by the west backed terrorist force was welcomed by then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton with laughter. That was the fate of the most humanely advanced nation on the African continent, with free healthcare and education (11).

Perhaps, the demonization of Mao Zedong and subsequent development of Chinese socialist trajectory can be comparable to the propaganda narratives repeatedly flooding out of the western media against Russia. The confrontational trajectory has been culminating as the US has shifted its military focus to the pacific to encircle the Chinese economic presence, which ironically is emerging out of the socialist trajectory of the Chinese government.

Anyway, here is an impressive compilation of resources titled The 'DEBUNKING ANTI-

COMMUNISM" MASTERPOST. The extensive list of resources can help us understand the scope and depth of the western propaganda efforts against socialist attempts across the globe (12).

So, to me, this piece, which contrasts the monumental buildings of the US capital representing "democracy" with various socialist initiatives termed as "regimes" piled together with Nazi Germany is state propaganda in a classic sense. How can "an art work" that is so blatantly and shamelessly subservient to an authoritative framework of violence even be taken seriously by anyone who respects freedom and humanity?

There was one piece I really wanted to see at the museum, which was Ron Mueck's Big Man.

I loved the piece.

Ron Mueck's Big Man at the Hirshhorn Museum

The Big Man was big but he was not overpowering. Just enough to say that it was big. In fact, the big white man sat at a corner in a fetal position, totally naked and with a defiant expression on his face.

I imagined that this was our species collectively being depicted as a big white naked emperor cornered into a grave predicament by his own existential contradiction–the inherent dichotomy of capitalist paradox that it can only serve humanity by sacrificing humanity itself.

As we face the impending risk of nightmarish nuclear wars and climate change, our predicament is as obvious as the illegitimacy of the system imposing its framework of corporatism, colonialism and militarism on peoples as colonial wars, police violence, mass incarceration, austerity measures, elimination of legal protection and human rights violations. And the ones who are domesticated in the gated communities of privilege and exceptionalism are deprived of their humanity to feel the pain of "others" and their essential capacity to explore what it is to live as humans.

Well, OK, I might be a minority in seeing the piece that way. But to me, a good work is open and it connects us to a bigger framework of humanity and the mystery of life. It does not herd us into a smaller framework of ideologies, religious doctrines, nationalism and so on.

Much of the second floor was dedicated to Ai Weiwei. One of his main pieces consists of portraits of political prisoners from various countries made out of Lego pieces, spreading on

floors in a few large rooms. There were a total of 176 faces on them.

Ai Weiwei's "Trace" features 176 portraits made from a combined 1.2 million Lego bricks. (Photo by Cathy Carver)

We see some famous American prisoners among them, such as Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning or Martin Luther King Jr.

But wait, what about the numerous American Indian activists, black radical activists, anti-war activists and others who have been detained and assassinated by the US government? I mean the list is staggeringly enormous (13).

Besides, the US currently incarcerates more blacks than the apartheid South Africa. It has grown to be a giant mass incarcerations state, which certainly includes many political prisoners.

And what about those countless people who have been kidnapped to numerous black sites and Guantanamo and tortured and killed by the US government? Some of them must have been Americans. Even if not, Guantanamo has detained over 700 prisoners. The majority of them have been released without charges. Over 50 of them are still detained there. Many US backed nations detain political prisoners who defy the US economic/military hegemony. Nelson Mandela, who was captured with the help of the CIA, was one such figure. I mean, what about those Iraqi boys who were sodomized by the US soldiers at Abu Ghraib in front of their mothers(14)?

And we see those randomly selected 176 faces and 38 of them are from China and 6 are from the US? 6?

One of the things which motivated me to write about my visit to the museum was Ai Weiwei's ardent support for Liu Xiaobo. The exhibit included a full length Ai Weiwei documentary. In it, Weiwei expresses his unconditional support for Liu's activism. The documentary, however, presented an oddly one dimensional version of Xiaobo focused on his support for "human rights", "freedom of speech", "democracy" and so on.

Liu Xiaobo featured in TIME

The very next day, I heard the news of Liu Xiaobo's passing. What a coincidence, I thought. And to my surprise, and to my embarrassment for being ignorant, my journalist friends along with my Chinese activists friends revealed the real nature of Liu Xiaobo's "human rights activism". Xiaobo was a US funded right-winger who supported the US in the Korean War, Vietnam War, Iraq War and passionately defended George Bush in invading Iraq.

One of the articles cited by my friend says:

> "Liu's admirers seldom discuss at length their hero's other major views. Among other things, he supported the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. He backed the Vietnam and Korean wars even long after they ended, in a 2001 essay. Despite the immeasurable human-rights abuses of those conflicts, Liu stated in his "Lessons from the Cold War" that "the free world led by the US fought almost all regimes that trampled on human rights." He insisted: "The major wars that the US became involved in are all ethically defensible." Liu Xiaobo also admired Israel's positions in the Middle East's, saying the Palestinians were "often the provocateurs.""(15)

Here is another article on the topic (16), and here (17).

Our cultural environment is shaped by social institutions, media, political institutions, academic institutions, corporate NGOs, entertainment, arts and so on, which force us to embrace narratives of the moneyed interests. John Steppling, a prominent playwright, thinker and philosopher, describes that such a tendency results in a fictitious "backdrop" behind us, which in turn shapes the narratives of our social discourse, while creating willing agents for the establishment. From his recent writing:

"If one *reads* only backdrop, and not a world, how much easier it is to ignore real worlds. Yemen, a massive war crime taking place in real time is ignored. It is not even backdrop, for the backdrop is one manufactured by media — one that also shapes the subject position of those doing the ignoring. And one aspect of this is to shape dissent — a faux dissent in which a *new* left, branded and capitalized, in their guise as reasonable and adult, make sure to police real dissent more ruthlessly than even conservatives or liberals. This is the left that makes sure to denigrate Chavez and Maduro, to label Syria a *regime* and laugh at those crazy North Koreans. For this is proof that they have a seat at the table of reality."(18)

It's been over a couple of decades since I left the DC area. For the bulk of the time, I was like a soldier whose sole mission was the exploration of visual expression. I literary woke up with art and went to bed with art.

But at some point, perhaps, my skill in finding connections among visual elements, in finding a profound perspective, started to show me a wider reality beyond the framework of commodification, consumption, hierarchy of financial power and capitalism.

I am an artist who believes that the power of art can connect us to a larger framework of humanity spreading beyond the corporatism, colonialism and militarism of the empire. I believe art can capture the rare moment of our consciousness, seamlessly merging with the eternity of time and space as a part of the universe itself. For me, museums that house the epiphany of humanistic expressions are sanctuaries of our consciousness; they are that of shrines and churches for the believers; they are that of sacred grounds for those who seek humanity in our connections to nature and earth. Art can give us humility to be human, as well as courage to be human.

The unfortunate attempts to replace our sanctuary of consciousness with a subserviency to the neo-feudal hierarchy of money and violence must be renounced in the strongest terms.

Hiroyuki Hamada is an artist. He has exhibited throughout the United States and in Europe and is represented by Bookstein Projects. He has been awarded various residencies including those at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, the Edward F. Albee Foundation/William Flanagan Memorial Creative Person's Center, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and the MacDowell Colony. In 1998 Hamada was the recipient of a Pollock Krasner Foundation grant, and in 2009 and 2016 he was awarded a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship. He lives and works in New York.

Notes

(1) https://www.blackagendareport.com/obama_legacy_part10_counter-insurgency

(2) http://www.ranknfile-ue.org/uen_nastybiz.html

(3) http://www.consciousbeingalliance.com/2007/09/post-1#_Fogwatch

(4) https://www.facebook.com/hiroyuki.hamada/posts/10155364028489454?comment_id=10155364874389454&reply_comment_id=10155365590439454&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R%22%7D

(5) https://www.facebook.com/hiroyuki.hamada/posts/10155364028489454?comment_id=10155365323599454&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R9%22%7D

(6) https://www.sott.net/article/273517-Study-US-regime-has-killed-20-30-million-people-since-World-War-Two

(7) http://www.workers.org/2017/07/12/russia-a-target-not-a-superpower/#.WW-npIXn0ov

(8) https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/01/03/fidel-castro-undaunted-revolutionary/

(9) https://williamblum.org/aer/read/147

(10)

http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2016-09-22/british-parliament-confirms-libya-war-was-based-lies-%E2%80%A6-turned-nation-%E2%80%9Cshit-show%E2%80%9D-%E2%80%A6-s

(11) http://web.archive.org/web/20141007040654/http://lookingglass.blog.co.uk/2013/02/26/africa-the-story-they-re-not-telling-you-15569066/

(12) https://www.reddit.com/r/communism/wiki/debunk

(13) http://afgj.org/politicalprisonersusa

(14) http://www.mintpressnews.com/classified-evidence-us-soldiers-raped-boys-in-front-of-their-mothers/200160/

(15) http://www.greanvillepost.com/2017/07/17/liu-xiaobo-the-wests-model-chinese/

(16) https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/15/nobel-winner-liu-xiaobo-chinese-dissident

(17) http://www.workers.org/2017/07/17/why-u-s-media-mourn-death-of-liu-xiaobo/

(18) http://john-steppling.com/2017/07/the-past-is-not-safe/

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