

Paul Peter Piech: Political Printmaker

“I have been studying the prints of Paul Peter Piech as part of my art course at Yale College this year. This is an extract from an essay I wrote for the course. I hope it inspires you to visit a Piech exhibition or find out more about his work.” by Libby Bove

In October 2006 I visited an exhibition held at Yale College Memorial Art Gallery on the art of Paul Peter Piech, who was a political printmaker of international note. His work deals with powerful political and human rights issues, and much of it is still relevant today. Piech’s work is designed to grab your attention and make you think. In this essay I will discuss the political content of his works as well as the visual impact and consider what makes his work so powerful.

Before becoming a printmaker, Piech worked in advertising as a graphic designer. I think that this is why his prints communicate his message so effectively. Piech worked mainly in linocut and woodcut prints, a medium which suits his bold and stylised images composed of large blocks of colour and tone. Piech generally worked with a limited colour palette, normally with no more than two or three colours per print.

With Ukrainian parents, Piech himself was born in Brooklyn, New York, in the 1920s; he died in Porthcawl, Wales, in 1996. The Welsh country and culture was very important to Piech, and has been an inspiration for many of his prints. Piech married a Welsh woman and Wales was the place where he spent the final years of his life. Throughout his life Piech was involved in many political cases; he was an egalitarian and a pacifist. Piech’s strong beliefs are what fired his printing career.



The first image I studied is typical of Piech’s work. It has great visual impact and touches on a very strong political issue: torture. The text is an account of racist torture, which I found shocking and unsettling. Something

so disturbing may not usually be considered suitable material for a poster, but that is probably the reason why the work of Piech is so well known and distinctive. His brutal honesty is shocking but also very powerful.



This next print is divided into two sections. One half is an extract from a poem by the American poet Walt Whitman, calling for the abolition of war and warlike culture. Whitman describes the terrible results of war: “blackened mutilated corpses”, pointing to the torture and brutality which take place during wars. The other half of the print is an image of starved and skeletal black bodies crammed into the print area. This arrangement gives the image a chaotic and oppressive feel, while the subject matter shows visually what Whitman has expressed in words.



I found this next print very unsettling. It shows the devastation, fear and destruction caused by the atom bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima in Japan in 1945. I think that the mood and atmosphere of this event is portrayed with the use of line, especially in the background. It looks as if debris is raining down all around. In the foreground, the harsh lines on

the contours of the faces help to convey their horror and despair.



I chose this final print because it makes such an impact on the viewer. It consists of six black handprints stained with red ink to represent blood. The Soweto Riots, or Uprising, amounted to cold-blooded, brutal murder. It was decided that secondary education was only to be conducted in Afrikaans, the language of the oppressors of the native people of South Africa during the apartheid years. The 1976 riots started as a peaceful protest by hundreds of children and teachers. The conflict began as the police arrived; they fired round after round of tear gas and then bullets into the peacefully protesting crowd. The police showed no mercy at all, killing adults and children. The reference to Soweto reminds us of the terrible consequences of racism.

I think that the art of Paul Peter Piech is exactly the sort of work that the art world needs more of. Contemporary artist Emily Johns, who also makes striking prints with a strong pacifist message, says:

“Where my images are put to work, I would say that I tread in the footsteps of artists like Piech.”

The aspect of Piech’s work that I find most interesting is the way he combined visually exciting images with strong political content, much of which is still relevant today. Paul Peter Piech was an exceptional political print artist.

Drawing Paradise on the 'Axis of Evil'

An exhibition of Emily Johns' prints will be on display in the foyer of Wrexham Library and Arts Centre during the month of August. Read about Emily's inspiration for these prints, which were made following a visit to Iran in 2006.

In May 2006 I travelled to Iran on a Fellowship of Reconciliation peace delegation during a period of international tension over Iran's nuclear programme. Since then I have been producing a body of images dealing with the complex relationship between Iran, oil and Britain. The work weaves together the larger international dynamics, the mutual cultural influences, and the more intimate personal connections of Iranian-British relations...

The 'war artist' documents the process of war, and comments on the aftermath of war. This project is 'pre-war art' – an equivalent process for a conflict that I hope may never take place. It deals with the themes that a war artist might deal with, but in a period of tension rather than after the outbreak of hostilities. My approach has been from the perspective of British relations with Persia and the intertwining of histories.

Culturally, 'Persia' has been a potent influence on the British imagination – on poetry, on theatre, on storytelling, and on ceramics. Economically and politically, Iran has played an increasingly important role in British and Western imaginations as an oil producer, a militant Islamic state, and a suspected potential nuclear proliferator.

Drawing Paradise on the 'Axis of Evil' is an attempt to use imaginative engagement to provoke a more rounded debate, by transcending labels such as 'the axis of evil' and to ground public debate in human realities. The Iran that is so widely feared is also a land that has produced, and continues to produce, gardens of paradise and poetry.

Emily Johns



'26 May 1908'

On this date oil was struck at Masjed-I-Sulaiman ('The Mosque of Solomon') in western Iran, by the forerunner to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, later to become 'British Petroleum' or BP. This was the first oil well to be established in Iran. Oil is bursting from the well at the Mosque of Solomon, piercing the flying carpet of King Solomon, puncturing the fabric of Iranian society.

Iran's ambitious nuclear power programme may be deeply worrying for the region, but it is entirely legal within the framework of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The US and UK are pressing Iran to give up its legal rights under the NPT to enrich uranium and to withdraw from the NPT... If they have a right to a legitimate activity, then it is not legally or morally justifiable to threaten them with military attack or massive economic loss to intimidate them into giving up their rights...

Why should the international community be more concerned about Iran (which is a member of the NPT, inspected by the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA), and many years away from being able to build a nuclear weapon) than North Korea (which is no longer a member of the NPT, no longer inspected by the IAEA, and which is thought to actually possess nuclear weapons)?

Milan Rai

**See the exhibition throughout August. Wrexham Arts Centre, Rhosddu Rd, Wrexham.
9am - 7pm Mon-Fri
9am - 4pm Sat
Tel: 01978 292093**



'Shredded Truth - CIA Documents'

After the Iranian Revolution in January 1979, Iranian students seized the US Embassy in Tehran (on 4 November 1979). Although US intelligence officials inside the Embassy rapidly shredded confidential documents as the buildings were being occupied, many of these documents were painstakingly reconstructed by the students, and later published, documenting continuing US interference in the country.