(Excerpt) **Post-truth Printmaking: adapting our visual language to the times**

Our compulsion to respond to the human condition is nothing new. In 1533, Desiderius Erasmus, the Renaissance-era Catholic priest and theologian, wrote about the darkest of conflicts, war, in his essay *Bellum*. In it, Erasmus pits a "portrait of a man" against "a picture of war," and bemoans the existence of conflict between men and, to his even greater horror, between Christians, (19). His words conjure an image of the priest throwing his arms up in disgust at the "blindness of human nature" – a world in which "nobody expresses detestation" (18).

Erasmus' words paint a bleak picture that portends our current national climate, over 500 years later. Trump's divisive response to the racist actions on August 12, 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia triggered debate over public statues that memorialize confederate soldiers. Just days after the event, several protestors heaved a bronze statue of General Robert E. Lee off its base in Durham, North Carolina, while demands for legislation mandating statues' removal nationwide gain momentum. These confederate monuments exist in the public sphere, perched atop pedestals with engraved plaques stamped on their bases that beg to be read as pillars of truth – as idols to revere. Of the statues, artist Adam Pendleton remarks, "These are not works of art, they're propaganda." He continues, "To equate them with how a work of art exists in the world is a false equation. They're instruments of a political agenda and it would be real folly to suggest that there is any kind of ambiguity" (Pogrebin). Pendleton's words do several things. They question visual communication that sanitizes history. And they differentiate between art and propaganda – a distinction that printmaking often prefers to blur. Printmakers, whose editioned work is poised to reach a broad audience, as well, must consider how to harness the medium's power. How does one speak truthfully without resorting to ambiguity. What does one hide or obscure, versus reveal fully? Looking to the past may be a useful starting point.

Conflict has compelled many printmakers to gouge wood or incise metal plates to express anger, grief, or solidarity. Otto Dix, Frans Masereel, and others did so to great effect. Dix created a series of intaglio prints, *Der Krieg (The War),* chronicling his

firsthand experiences in World War I, that was published alongside the text of Erasmus' *Bellum* in 1983. Dix created his prints in 1923, 328 years after Erasmus penned his thoughts. Dix's scratchy images of despondent soldiers trudging through the grim and graphic realities of death simultaneously complement and challenge Erasmus' words. Where Erasmus laments that human apathy prevails in the face of conflict, Otto Dix offers visual engagement.

Dix's war service lends credibility to his images, which mesh realism with abstraction, but that alone does not validate them. Dix depicts a stream of soldiers hauling their fallen man back to camp – recognizable, digestible content – and then treats the open spces of his composition as an aquatinting playground. Contemporary artist Miguel Aragon, whose own visual work explores conflict, notes that Dix uses the "corrosive nature of etching and aquatint to heighten emotional effects" (Aragon). While the confederate statues dotting the American landscape leave little to the imagination, Dix tempts viewers with just enough realism before unleashing intaglio's visual repertoire of marks, smudges, and smears.

In other instances, Dix exaggerates the grotesqueness of a situation – bundles of maggots protruding from a skull's eye sockets, or bodies pouring out of an imploded brick wall. In a print titled *Night Meeting with a Madman,* Dix composes a painterly, almost lush backdrop punctuated by an emaciated figure, his eyes but small, haunting creases of white in a mess of black scribbles*.* Even in the absence of color, Dix's chattering lines forge a stark image with bite – what art collector Charlotte Vershbow calls "magic realism" (Bellum 39).

Other artists turned to print media to express disenfranchisement and anger, too. Frans Masereel's *The City* is a collection of one hundred woodcuts illustrating the nebulous years between World War I and II in Europe. In one print, a man gazes out of a skyscraper window, trapped in the dizzying pattern of white squares and lines; in another, the viewer is complicit in the act of looking beyond silhouetted fedoras and trench coats to witness a murder attempt at a night club. Much like Dix's collection, Masereel's *The City* allows just one print process's expressive potential to flourish.

These prints, which confront weighty topics such as war and isolation, share certain visual conventions and conceptual approaches that have allowed them to endure as eerily prophetic visual commentary: clarity of design, the use of implied narrative, and simplicity of technique. By contrast, I can attest to the contemporary printmaker's compulsion to display technical bravado. Indeed, weaving together several processes into a single image demonstrates a sophisticated grasp of the medium – but one which may limit the audience to fellow printmakers and those with a healthy appreciation for the medium. For an audience living outside of what can feel like a rigidly partitioned "art world," accessibility is key. By limiting their techniques, many historically significant printmakers offer the wisdom of simplification. The twisting forms that populate many of Francisco Goya's prints do not compete with a change in character of lines, textures, or colors that using a medley of different techniques may bring, for example. In Plate 53 from his *Disasters of War* series, a salty aquatint churns around a cluster of mourners, their aching forms built from textured, gestural lines. Goya highlights a single forlorn face, a downcast head, and the slumped shoulders of a figure whose outstretched hand holds the grieving figures together. Simply put, Goya cultivates compassion through line and value.