

RUPERT GARCIA



ROLLING THUNDER

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essay by
LOWERY STOKES SIMS



The War and Children, 1967/1995



Rolling Thunder, 2017



Memorias de Honolulu, las Filipinas y Ubon, 1987

Rolling Thunder: War, Cultural Politics and Art History in the Work of Rupert Garcia

By Lowery Stokes Sims

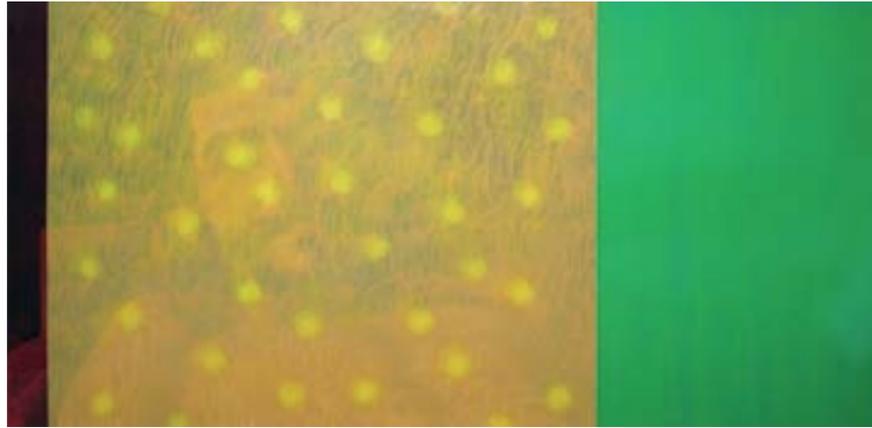
In the fall of 2017 we were enthralled as a nation by the documentary series on the Vietnam War, created and produced by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick and aired on public television. Even for those of us who lived through those turbulent years, the series lay bare the depth of the perfidy and ineptitude that marked the decision making for this war at the highest level of the U.S. government that would have irreparable impact on the lives of thousands of young men. The glaring fact that black men and those of Latino heritage represented a disproportionately high number of draftees in the war is particularly relevant as we view the work by Rupert Garcia in this exhibition.

The title of this exhibition refers to the artist's involvement in Operation Rolling Thunder, a secret American bombing campaign during the Vietnam War. Garcia served in the Air Force from 1962-1966, and from 1965-1966 was stationed at an air force base in Ubon, Thailand where he performed security duties. And as seen in the screen print posters in this exhibition — *iFuera de Indochina!*, 1970, *iFuera de Panama!*, 1989 and *iFuera del Golfo!*, 1991 (cat. p19) — Garcia aggressively juxtaposes and transposes images that crisscross a broad sweep of the history of U.S. military operations. The power of such images is not only in their clarity

and design but also their adroit deconstruction of familiar advertising and poster imagery. Garcia has noted that this is a strategy of "critique and resistance" that goes beyond post-modernism to connect the "social and cultural struggles" of Chicax with those "all across the United States."¹ As Garcia's contemporary Gustavo Segade noted "We discovered universal meaning when we were most ourselves."²

A venerable figure in the art movement generated in the 1970s by Chicax Americans, Garcia's work has consistently participated in their daring and passionate affirmation of that community in the history of the United States. His seminal work can be seen in the context of that of his contemporaries such as the Cuban post-revolutionary artist Raul Martinez, and his Chicax compatriots such as Leonard Castellanos, José Cervantes, Ricardo Favela, Malaquias Montoya, Amado Peña and Ester Hernandez.³ Garcia was not only drawn to graphic conventions that related to Pop Art but, as critic and art historian Lucy Lippard noted, also "Jim Rosenquist's lyrical giantism," and "Robert Indiana's colors-as-form"⁴ — and certainly taking a side-line glance at the Taller de Grafica Popular in Mexico.⁵

The recent painting *Rolling Thunder* and print *Hoodwinked*, both 2017 (cat. p3 and p22), appear to be a reconciliation of sorts of Garcia's experience in the Vietnam War. Garcia's inevitable progression from approaching war as a committed serviceman



[fig. 1]

to one who finally became disillusioned after he returned to the States and began studying at San Francisco State University, is captured in *Hoodwinked*. In this highly personal work he manipulates a photograph of himself as a young airman to show himself literally blinded by his Vietnam service award. *Rolling Thunder* is the type of multi-panel composition in which Garcia presents conflicts from various points of view both perspectively and narratively: phalanx figure planes in flight can be seen in the central panel, flanked on the left by a scene of a landscape lit up orange by a napalm drop and the black smoke of the impact, and on the right we see the same planes flying through the extension of that

black cloud into the air. But the sources of these images are not generic war photographs. As Garcia notes: "The landscape with the orange sky is from a black and white photograph I took of a location right outside my air base; the middle panel with Air Force F-105 Thunderchief jet fighter bombers in the blue sky are [sic] part of the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign. And the last panel is from a photograph of a petroleum, oil, and lubricant facilities [sic] that jets like these bombed in Hanoi."⁶

Rolling Thunder indicates the extent to which Garcia had begun in the 1980s to entertain protocols of abstraction, while introducing more painterly techniques into his work. As seen in paintings such as *Hiroshima* and *C(ia)he*, both 2009 (cat. p11 and fig. 1) this effectively destabilized the formalistic, anti-content bias of modernist abstraction as nuclear clouds, and the image of the dead Che Guevara on display subtly emerges out of fields of color and a "curtain" of circular elements. Figural elements are rendered with touches of texture and gesture that transform the images sourced from existing photographs into activated scenes as seen in *Go-*



[fig. 3]

liath Over David, or the US Invasion of Grenada, 1987 (cat. p18) and *Erupting Iranian Platform, 1988* (cat. 17) in

this exhibition. In *Memorias de Honolulu, las Filipinas y Ubon, 1987* (cat. p4) Garcia plays with simultaneous "multi-screen" scenes where panels of orange and blue are invaded by images of a burning village and soldiers on patrol, while the third features a military plane on a runway at first light in the morning.

An even more geometric sensibility can be seen in *Night Cap, 1993* (cat. p21) where a form that recalls a St Bridget's cross (or a truncated swastika) scarcely conceals a red sombrero (with orange and green embellishments) splayed against a sky blue background. True to the compositions in this selection, helicopters like those seen in *iFuera de Panama!*, are seen in the confines of the cross form. In *N.E.W.S. to All, 1993* (cat. p15) the image of a pistol-brandishing soldier rallying his troops is painted in grisaille against an orange background while a square with diagonal quadrants of red, green, blue and yellow (à la Ellsworth Kelley) disrupts the composition at the upper right corner.

Garcia recycles the cross / swastika shape in *August 6 and 9, 1945, 1995* (fig. 2), a two part composition where two versions in grey form spatial "lanes" for renderings of the B-29 Bombers Enola Gray and Bockstar — seen from overhead — which delivered



[fig. 2]

the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In both panels the grey shapes are flanked by rectangular areas of patterns of leaves and pistils — horizontally and vertically oriented — that

resemble fabric designs. The aftermath of the deployment of the atomic bombs is the subject of *Hiroshima II, 2009* (fig. 3), where Garcia deconstructs the composition of *August 6 and 9, 1945*. Its formal geometry dissolves as if the image of the burning plane literally chars the elements, perhaps Garcia's backhanded critique of trends in contemporary art history. The relationship between subject and stylistic approach indicates how "paradoxical 'aesthetics of war' as represented in the phenomenology of the pictorial and sculptural components of the machines of destruction, the fire of consumption, the evidence of death and devastation" continue to "profoundly fascinate and puzzle" Garcia.⁷

Within this body of work Garcia counters his commentary on the cycle of war and insanity with several images that deal with the victims of those wars and that insanity. In an early etching in this exhibition *The War and Children*, 1967/1995 (cat. p2) two helmeted soldiers in front of a conventional cross look down rather menacingly on a child in the bottom half of the image whose mouth is choked with a stream of blood. Garcia takes on lynching in *El Perro Oyamat y el Cosmos de los dos Hombres Sacrados*, 2006 (fig. 4). Here a howling dog straight out of the 1941 painting *Animals* by the Mexican modernist master Rufino Tamayo (Collection the Museum of Modern Art, New York) is juxtaposed with an image from a photograph of a lynching. Garcia amplifies the horror of the photograph by showing the figures almost in flames (as

was often enacted upon black lynched bodies) and the howl of the dog is a palpable plaint against this outrage. Genocide against Native Americans is the subject of *A Ghost Dance for Big Foot*, 1991 (fig. 5), where Garcia sources the photograph of the Miniconjou Sioux chief Spotted Elk (aka Bigfoot) lying dead in the snow after the massacre of Native Americans at Wounded Knee in 1890 and pairs it with a repetitive pattern that would seem to reference Pat-

tern and Decoration trends in contemporary art, but actually is one from a celebratory shirt that honors a warrior.⁸ This body of work demonstrates how Garcia has boldly seized the reins of appropriation — a theoretical rubric that has been associated with the blatant exploitation of images from multi-cultural global cultures by Euro-centric artists in a long-term habit of imperialistic theft that has been codified since the early years of modernism. As Garcia noted, he likes to think of the work in this exhibition as “History Pictures with a personal infusion. Unlike the canonical History Painting, so elitist and a one-sided take on historical events, I’m interested in the opposite of this. I don’t make pictures for the ‘people,’ I make them for me who is from the people.”⁹ In this re-appropriation of appropriation Garcia has fellow travelers in several contemporaries in the African American and Asian American communities, notably Robert Colescott and Roger Shimomura. Collectively their work can be described as “the seedbed for the... renewed project of a ‘hybrid’ or ‘syncretic’ culture for the twenty-first century, for a post-Columbian world.”¹⁰ As Garcia noted in an interview with Guillermo Gomez-Peña, published in 1993, the vi-

ability of his artistic strategy holds up since “The battle against the conquest, colonization, and enslavement was and continues to be a critique, a ‘deconstruction’ of the dominant social and cultural structures.”¹¹ But Garcia is clear that this battle should not be

literal because he does not “believe that war is the way to solve human problems. The cost of human life is too high. The social and political exchange between adversaries is the only humane way to resolve conflict.”¹²



[fig. 4]



[fig. 5]

NOTES:

I wish to thank Trish and Rena Bransten for convincing me to write this essay and Rupert Garcia for his patient review of the facts.

¹ “Turning It Around: A Conversation between Rupert Garcia and Guillermo Gomez-Peña,” in *Aspects of Resistance: Rupert Garcia*, exh.cat. (New York: Alternative Museum, 1993), p. 16.

² Lucy R. Lippard, “Rupert García: Face to Face,” in *Rupert García: Prints and Posters, 1967-1990/ Grabados y Afiches, 1967-1990*, exh.cat. (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, in association with Centro Cultural/Art Contemporáneo and Fundación Cultural Televisa, A.C., 1990), p. 14.

³ For a quick reference, see the blurb on the 2014 exhibition, *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* on the website of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, <https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/our-america>.

⁴ Lippard, op. cit., 17.

⁵ Noted in *Ibid*, p. 21.

⁶ Rupert Garcia, email to Lowery Stokes Sims, November 29, 2017, 1:39 PM.

⁷ Rupert Garcia, artist’s statement, Nation Veterans Art Museum online, 2017. Sent by the artist to Trish Bransten and China Langford, November 13, 2017, 10:27 PM.

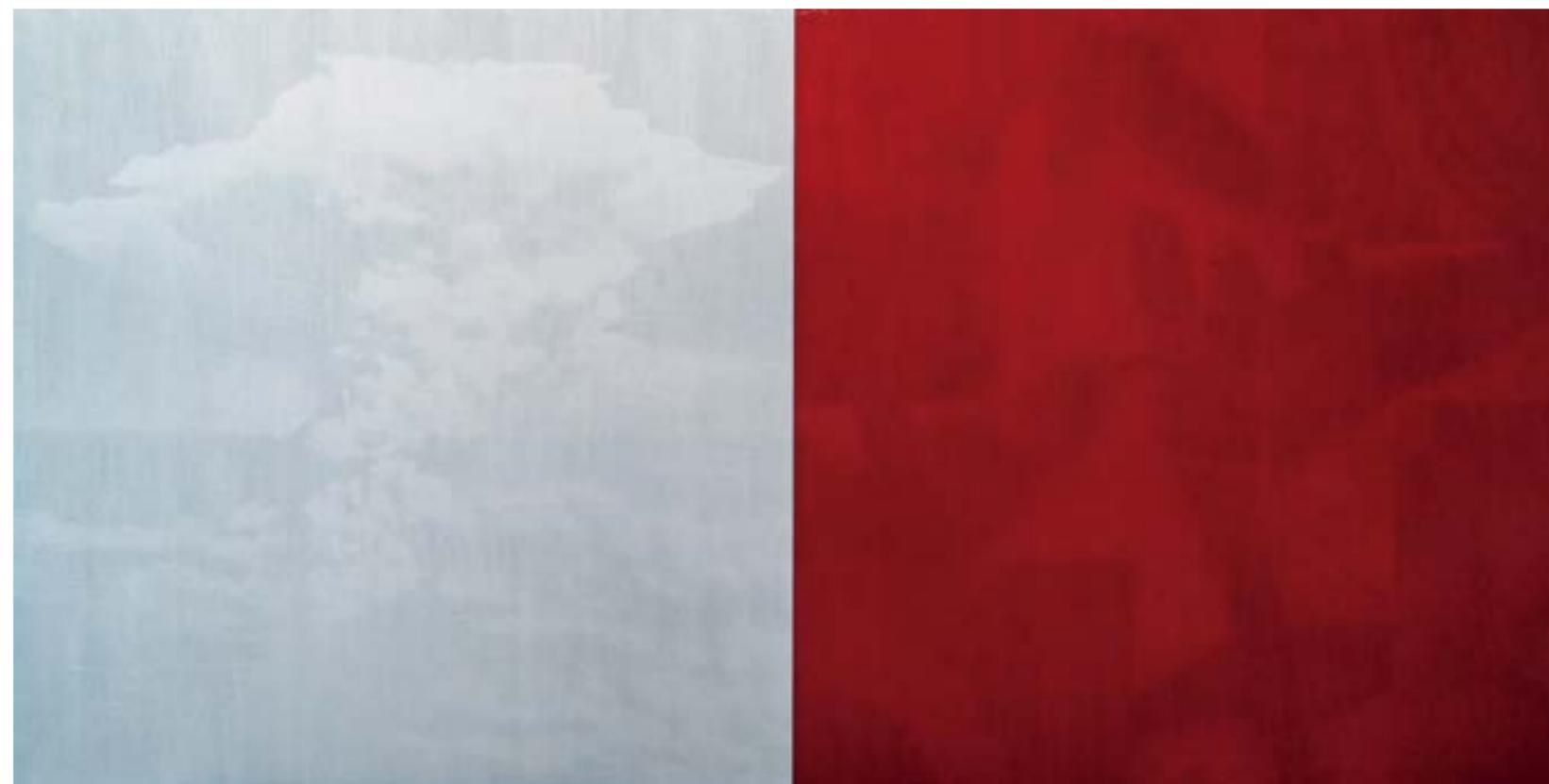
⁸ Rupert Garcia, email to Lowery Stokes Sims, November 30, 2017, 11 PM.

⁹ Rupert Garcia, email to Lowery Stokes Sims, November 25, 2017, 12:44 PM.

¹⁰ Lippard, op. cit., p. 20.

¹¹ “Turning It Around: A Conversation between Rupert Garcia and Guillermo Gomez-Peña,” p. 16.

¹² Rupert Garcia, artist’s statement, Nation Veterans Art Museum online, 2017.



March 20, 2003, 2009





Erupting Iranian Platform, 1988





Goliath Over David, or the US Invasion of Grenada, 1987



¡Fuera de Indochina!, 1970 / ¡Fuera de Panama!, 1989 / ¡Fuera del Golfo!, 1991

Night Cap, 1993



"The paradoxical 'aesthetics of war' as represented in the phenomenology of the pictorial and sculptural components of the machines of destruction, the fire of consumption, the evidence of death and devastation profoundly fascinate and puzzle me.

I do not believe that war is the way to solve human problems. The cost of human life is too high. The social and political exchange between adversaries is the only humane way to resolve conflict."

-Rupert Garcia, 1996



Rupert Garcia has taught at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) in the Art Department and La Raza Studies; the San Francisco Art Institute; UC Berkeley in the Chicano Studies Program and in the School of Environmental Design; and is Professor Emeritus of Art at San Jose State University. He received a B.A. in Painting and Drawing (1968) and an M.A. in Printmaking (1970) from San Francisco State College. In 1981 he was awarded an M.A. in the History of Art at UC Berkeley and the honorary Doctor of Fine Arts from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1993. He was honored with the Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement from the College Art Association in 1992. Garcia's work is held in major collections including the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; The Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American Art and National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA. He lives and works in Oakland, CA.

Hoodwinked, 2017

LIST OF WORKS / CATALOGUE & EXHIBITION

- p2 *The War and Children*, 1967/1995, etching, paper size: 29 3/4 X 22 in., image size: 15 3/4 x 11 1/8 in., edition of 10
- p3 *Rolling Thunder*, 2017, mixed media on paper, paper size: 60 x 100 in., image size: 52 x 96 in.
- p4 *Memorias de Honolulu, las Filipinas y Ubon*, 1987, acrylic on paper, 30 X 120 in.
- p11 *Hiroshima*, 2009, mixed media on panel, 48 x 96 1/2 in.
- p13 *March 20, 2003, 2009*, mixed media on two panels, 47 3/4 x 136 1/2 in.
- p15 *N.E.W.S. to All*, 1993, oil on linen, 72 X 72 in.
- p17 *Erupting Iranian Platform*, 1988, mixed media with oil on linen, 80 X 65 7/8 in.
- p18 *Goliath Over David, or the US Invasion of Grenada*, 1987, mixed media on linen, 50 X 90 in.
- p19 *iFuera de Indochina!*, 1970, screen print, paper size: 26 1/16 x 20 in., edition of approx. 50 – 75
- p19 *iFuera de Panama!*, 1989, screen print, paper size: 30 1/4 x 22 1/4 in., edition of 80
- p19 *iFuera del Golfo!*, 1991, screen print, paper size: 30 1/4 X 23 in., edition of 124
- p21 *Night Cap*, 1993, oil on linen, 72 X 72 in.
- p22 *Hoodwinked*, 2017, pigmented acrylic inkjet on paper, paper size: 36 5/8 x 30 1/4 in., image size: 29 x 25 3/4 in., edition of 10

LIST OF WORKS / FIGURE

- 1 *C(ia)he*, 2009, mixed media on panel, 48 x 96 in.
- 2 *August 6 and 9, 1945*, 1995, oil on linen, acrylic on vinyl, 60 X 144 in.
- 3 *Hiroshima II*, 2009, mixed media on paper, 22 3/8 x 30 1/8 in.
- 4 *El Perro Oyamat y el Cosmos de los dos Hombres Sacrados*, 2006, pigmented inkjet and acrylic on paper, 42 x 84 in.
- 5 *A Ghost Dance for Big Foot*, 1991, oil on canvas, 76 1/4 X 75 in.

