RUPERT GARCIA

ROLLING THUNDER
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essay by
LOWERY STOKES SIMS

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Cover Image: Hoodwinked, 2017


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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 disproportionally 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 — ¡Fuera de Indochina!, 1970, ¡Fuera de Panama!, 1989 and ¡Fuera 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 Chicanx with those “all across the United States.” As Garcia’s contemporary Gustavo Segade noted “We discovered universal meaning when we were most ourselves.”

A venerable figure in the art movement generated in the 1970s by Chicano 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 Chicano compatriots such as Leonard Castellanos, José Cervantes, Ricardo Favela, Malaquias Montoya, Armando Peña and Esther Hernandez. 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” — and certainly taking a side-line glance at the Taller de Grafica Popular in Mexico.
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 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.”

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 Ode, both 2009 (cat. p11 and fig. 1) this effectively destabilized the formalistic, anti-content bias of modern 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-

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 ¡Fuera 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 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.

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 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
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 Pattern 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 multicultural 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 needful for the renewed project of a hybrid or syncretic culture for the twenty-first century, post-Columbian world.”10 As Garcia noted in an interview with Guillermo Gomez-Peña, published in 1993, the viability 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

NOTES:
1 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.
5 Rupert Garcia, email to Lowery Stokes Sims, November 29, 2017, 1:39 PM.
6 Rupert Garcia, email to Lowery Stokes Sims, November 25, 2017, 12.44 PM.
8 Lippard, op. cit., 17.
9 Ibid., p. 21.
10 Ibid., p. 21.
11 Ibid., p. 21.
12 Ibid., p. 21.
13 Ibid., p. 21.
Hiroshima, 2009
Erupting Iranian Platform 1988
Goliath Over David, or the US Invasion of Grenada, 1987

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.
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5. A Ghost Dance for Big Foot, 1991, oil on canvas, 76 1/4 X 75 in.