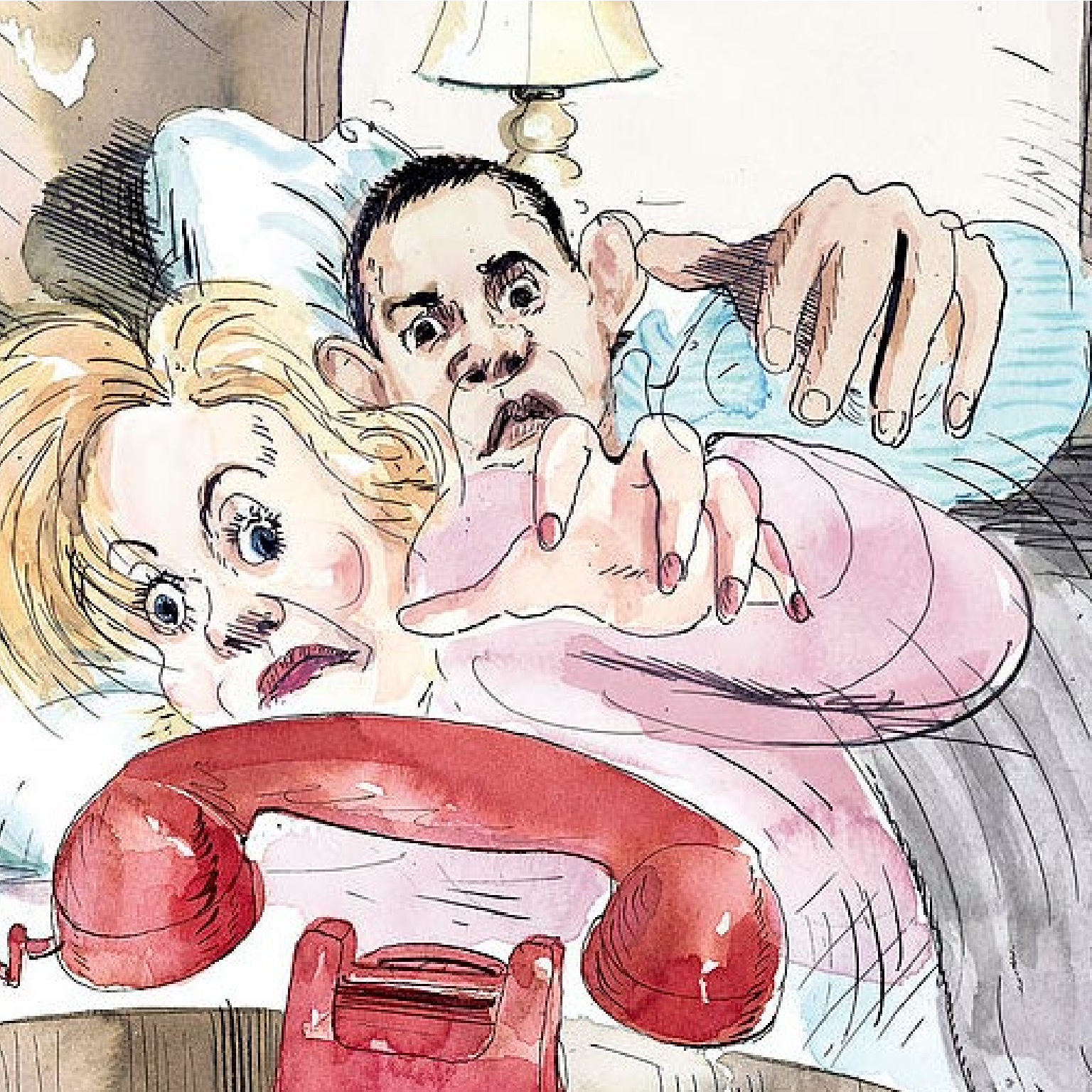


The McIninch Art Gallery Presents

# A Dreadful Attack of Presidential



Southern  
New Hampshire  
University



# A Dreadful Attack of Presidential Fever

Curated by Professor Deborah Varat, Professor, Southern New Hampshire University

The McIninch Gallery's current exhibition showcases presidential cartoons from the late nineteenth-century as well as recent caricatures of American presidents and presidential candidates. Printed imagery from nineteenth-century popular magazines played an outsized role in electoral politics during the Gilded Age. Even now, when we are saturated with media of all forms, the tradition of the political cartoon remains strong in both printed and digital formats. By pairing historical images with contemporary works, this exhibition reveals a remarkable degree of thematic continuity. Specifically, the exhibition argues for a high level of public cynicism about presidential politics over a long span of American history. At the same time, the cartoons displayed demonstrate to the viewer the great freedom we have in this country to express provocative opinions, even to the point of ridiculing the president. On display in the weeks leading up to the 2020 presidential election, the exhibition will offer viewers greater context and historical awareness of American electoral politics in the media.

This catalogue is produced in conjunction with the McIninch Art Gallery virtual exhibition. Please refer to the link below:  
<https://bit.ly/3gdTxNK>

**Cover Image** | Frank Oppen, "A Dreadful Attack of 'Presidential Fever' in the U.S. Senate (detail)," *Puck*, February 21, 1883.

**Image Opposite** | Barry Blitt, "I'll Get It!," *The New Yorker*, March 17, 2008.

PRICE \$8.99

MAR. 2, 2020

# THE NEW YORKER



The most recent piece in the show, Barry Blitt's March 2, 2020 *New Yorker* cover, features a caricature of presidential contender, billionaire Michael Bloomberg. Two days later, Bloomberg dropped out of the race with only forty-three delegates, having spent over 900 million dollars of his own money on a quixotic bid for the democratic nomination. Blitt, a long-time illustrator for the *The New Yorker* and winner of the 2020 Pulitzer Prize in editorial cartooning, portrayed Bloomberg in the guise of early twentieth-century slapstick comedian Stan Laurel (from Laurel and Hardy). Dressed in a tuxedo and top hat, Bloomberg stares witlessly at the viewer, as his cigar, lit by a burning dollar bill, blows up in his face. This cover image, titled "All That Money Can Buy," exposes as a bad joke Bloomberg's attempt to spend his way to the presidency.

Image | Barry Blitt, "Exposed," March 26, 2018, *The New Yorker*.



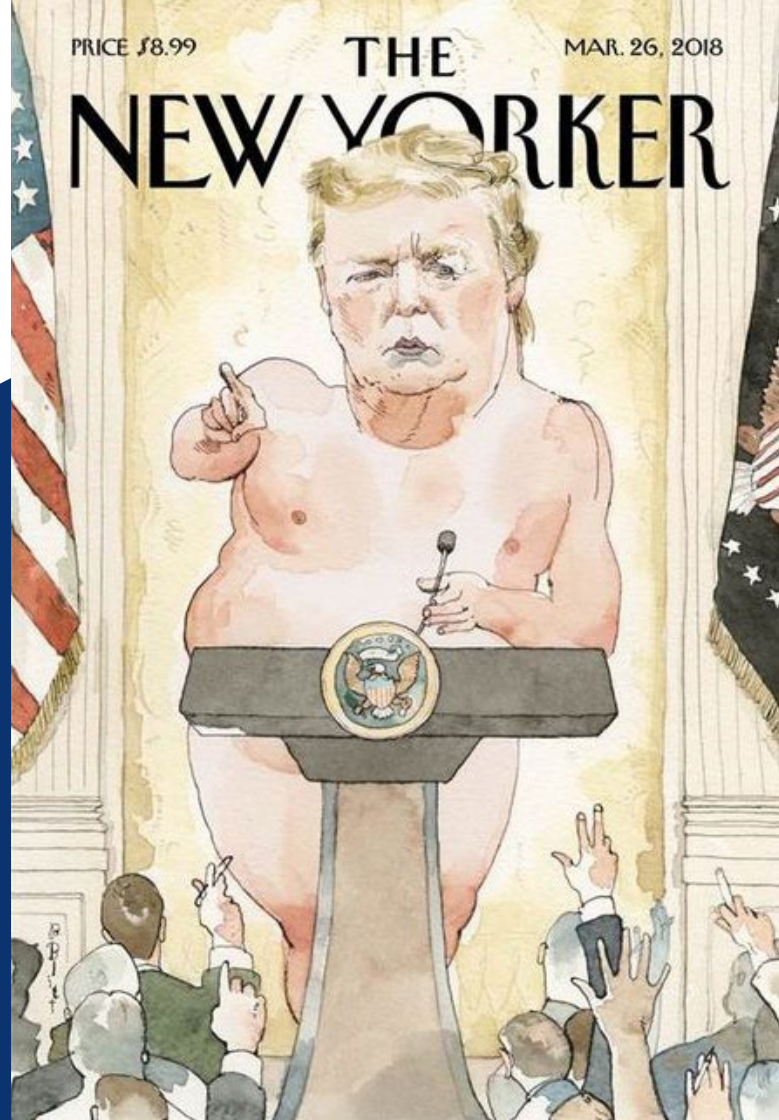
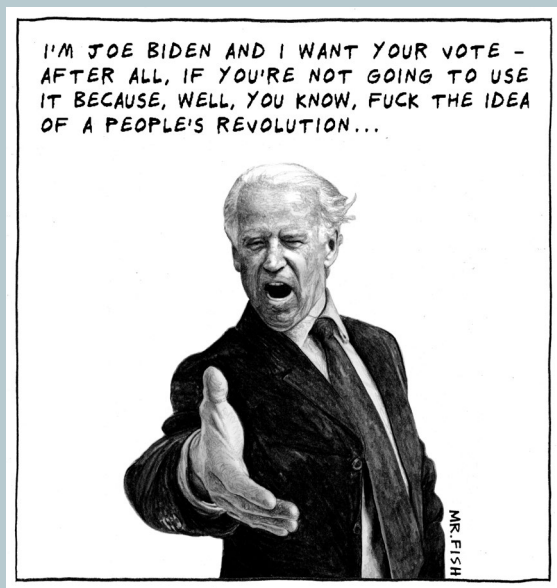
THE  
NEW YORKER

Image | Barry Blitt, "Exposed," March 26, 2018, *The New Yorker*.

Happy to wield his pen against presidents and candidates from across the ideological spectrum, Blitt horrified viewers two years earlier with the naked, blubbery figure of President Trump as the Emperor Who Has No Clothes. Looming behind a lectern that conveniently covers his genitals, Trump gestures toward the crowd of reporters while we, the viewers, chuckle derisively at his delusions. Both of Blitt's caricatures draw attention to unflattering personal characteristics through intentional distortion of physical features. Blitt draws Bloomberg small and old, Trump soft and fat, in order to reveal essential inner characteristics. These "truths" become universally understood and widely accepted, and thus serve as a common visual language within our society.

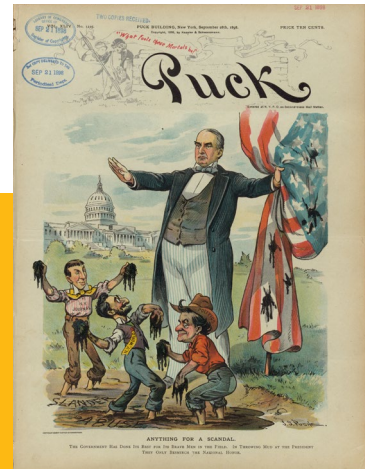
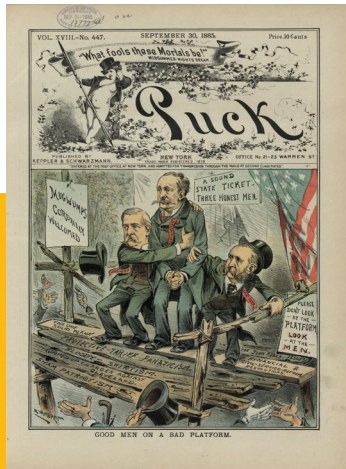


**Image** | Dwayne Booth, a.k.a. Mr. Fish, *Joe Blow*, 2020, graphite drawing, courtesy of the artist.

In today's world, overpopulated as it is with images and information, caricatures like these simplify the news by making certain public figures instantly identifiable. Many artists have lampooned Trump's peculiar hair and Biden's squinty-eyed, toothy smile, providing viewers a visual shorthand of these public figures that works insidiously into the culture. In contrast to the image-rich culture we inhabit today, the late nineteenth-century offered more limited range and quantity of visual material, namely printed newspapers and magazines. Yet that audience also had a need for easily recognizable figure because the adult literacy rate stood at 86.5%, and of those some unknown portion were functionally illiterate. Thus, artists during the late nineteenth-century also sought to communicate through the widely understood visual language of the cartoon.



**Image |** Frank Oppen, “The Only Democratic Presidential Candidate Who Stands a Chance of Election in 1884,” *Puck*, January 24, 1883.



Popular American magazines of that time, such as *Puck* and *Judge*, featured full-color illustrations and cartoons on their weekly covers and interior centerfolds that parodied a variety of themes, including national politics. Presidential election years offered a rich trove of material for illustrators. The cartoons and caricatures that proliferated in these magazines influenced the public's perception of candidates and the political system much in the way that *Saturday Night Live* skits have in recent times. Darrel Hammond's Al Gore (democratic nominee who lost to George W. Bush in 2000), Will Ferrell's George W. Bush (2001-2009), and Alec Baldwin's Trump have become indelibly lodged in our collective brain. Each of those send-ups showed us something that we knew, but

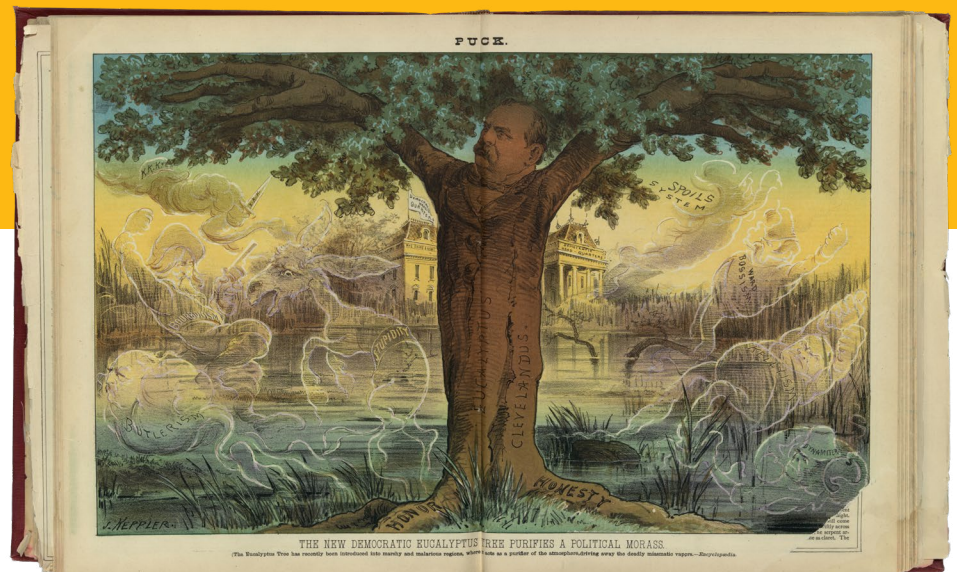
**Image Left** | Eugene Zimmerman, "Good Men on a Bad Platform," *Puck*, September 30, 1885.

**Image Middle** | Frank Oppen, "Old-Man-Read-To-Be-Struck," *Puck*, August 29, 1894.

**Image Right** | J. S. Pughe, "Anything for a Scandal," *Puck*, September 28, 1898.



did so in a hilariously exaggerated form. Thus, Gore's awkwardly stiff manner, perfectly captured in Hammond's "Lockbox" skit (among others) fatally exposed the democratic candidate's lack of charisma, whereas Baldwin's pinch-faced and sputtering Trump makes us laugh while exposing Trump's utterly ignoble personality. We assume that American politics today has sunk to a historical pit of nastiness, distrust, and partisan rancor compared to former times of well-mannered amity, yet a quick glance at late nineteenth-century political caricatures will disabuse us of this notion. Corruption, conflicts of interest, lack of qualifications, poor character, out-sized egos of American leaders – the very issues that preoccupy us today angered and frustrated Americans in the 1880s, 90s, and early 1900s.



**Image |** Joseph Keppler, “The New Democratic Eucalyptus Tree Purifies a Political Morass,” *Puck*, August 27, 1884.



A LENTEN DREAM.



The presidential election of 1884, for example, inspired a burst of satirical cartoons with themes that we can easily relate to, such as Joseph Keppler's "A Lenten Dream" (*Puck*, centerfold, March 12, 1884). Against a night sky spangled with stars, a mermaid swims in shallow, clear waters, a red ribbon marked "presidency" streaming from her hair. A variety of eels, blowfish, and bottom feeders, each derisively nick-named after a contemporary political figure, gape at her with bug eyes and open mouths. She glides by, grinning at their absurdity, as we hope that none will catch her. One of her more hideous suitors is James Blaine, labeled here "Blaineus Mulliganus," a presidential hopeful three times over who narrowly lost that November to Grover Cleveland, or "Clevelandus Blunderius." ("Mulliganus" is a reference to the so-called "Mulligan Letters," a now obscure corruption scandal that, in 1876, cost Blaine his bid for the Republican nomination.) Drawn by Keppler with features distorted by age and disappointment, Blaine was transformed by the pen of another *Puck* cartoonist, Bernhard Gillam, into a hulking savage, indelibly tattooed with scandals, in a series of damning cartoons from 1884.

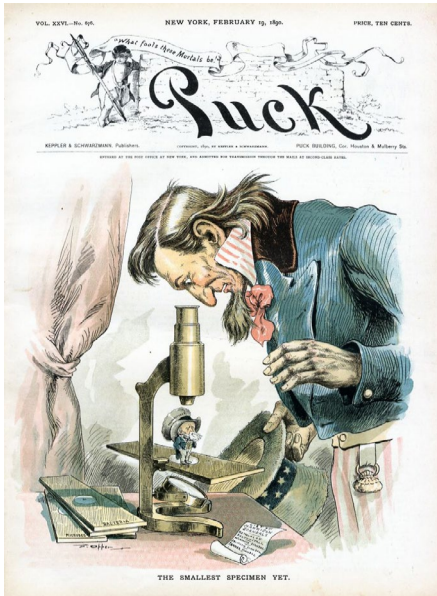
What a contrast to the “BLACKLISTED AND LOVING IT” poster of Republican primary candidate Ted Cruz, created by a right-wing street artist called Sabo in 2016. Sabo photoshopped Cruz’s face (with cigarette edited in) onto the ripped, tattooed body in a friendly spoof enthusiastically embraced by Cruz. That Cruz could find this faux gangster mugshot to be beneficial to his reputation (campaign t-shirts featuring the image were produced) indicates a big shift in the perception of the tattoo in American culture. Once a mark of social deviance or criminality, the tattoo is far more widely accepted now, embraced by athletes, pop stars, and other arbiters of cultural cool. So, while Blaine desperately tries to cleanse himself of his body ink, Cruz proudly shows his off.





Blaine's competitor, Cleveland, a man known for his moral probity, was not as juicy a target as the flamboyant Blaine (nicknames "The Magnetic Man," "The Plumed Knight"), thus Cleveland appears in Keppler's underwater rogue's gallery in a fairly realistic profile on the left. Yet he, too, was pilloried on many a magazine cover, most shockingly, perhaps, on the front of *Judge* on September 27, 1884. Rumors had surfaced that Cleveland, previously



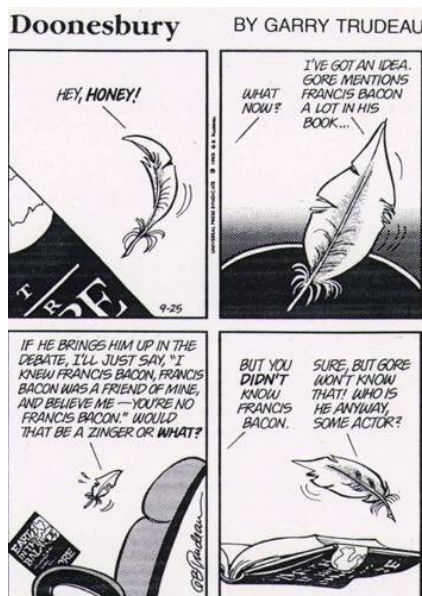


seen as a paragon of integrity, had secretly fathered a child outside his marriage, and in the merciless image the crying child lunges toward his flustered father, “Grover the Good,” calling out “I want my pa!” (A similar scandal of a secret mistress and child brought down John Edwards’s candidacy in the Democratic primaries in 2008). Regarded today as a minor president (1889–93), Benjamin Harrison nevertheless proved a very rich subject for cartoonists in the late nineteenth-century. Whereas Gillam inflated Blaine with allegorical steroids to encapsulate the scale of both his charisma and corruption, artists such as Frank Oppen shrunk Harrison down to expose his inadequacy for the presidency. The accusation that Harrison did not rise to the level of his grandfather, President William Henry Harrison, was brilliantly captured in the giant form of the grandfather’s signature hat, a visual use of synecdoche, that swamps the child-sized grandson (*Puck*, February 19, 1890). Harrison, so small he can only be seen by Uncle Sam with the help of a microscope, occupies a place in the scene usually reserved for

**Image Left** | F. B., “Another Voice for Cleveland,” *The Judge*, September 27, 1884.

**Image Center** | Frank Oppen, “The Smallest Specimen Yet,” *Puck*, February 19, 1890.

**Image Right** | Udo Keppler, “On to Washington!” *Puck*, October 10, 1906.



bacteria and microbes. At this point (two years into his presidency), the hat alone stood for Harrison, and its pejorative implication was well-known. Almost a century later, cartoonist Garry Trudeau, best known for the Doonesbury comic strip, used a similar device to belittle vice president Dan Quayle by portraying him merely as a floating quail feather. First published in 1988 (the year George H.W. Bush got elected with Dan Quayle as his running mate), the feather said everything that we knew and needed to know about the lightweight Quayle. Two-term president Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) inspired numerous cartoonists who could not resist his bravado, machismo, and larger-than-life persona. He, too, became recognizable in cartoons by a few distinctive traits, namely his walrus mustache and little round glasses. During the campaign of 1904, Joseph Keppler sketched TR as a smiling and relaxed boxer in the ring facing a non-existent opponent in the Democratic corner (*Puck*, June 1).

**Image Left** | Joseph Keppler, "The Raven," *Puck*, August 13, 1890.

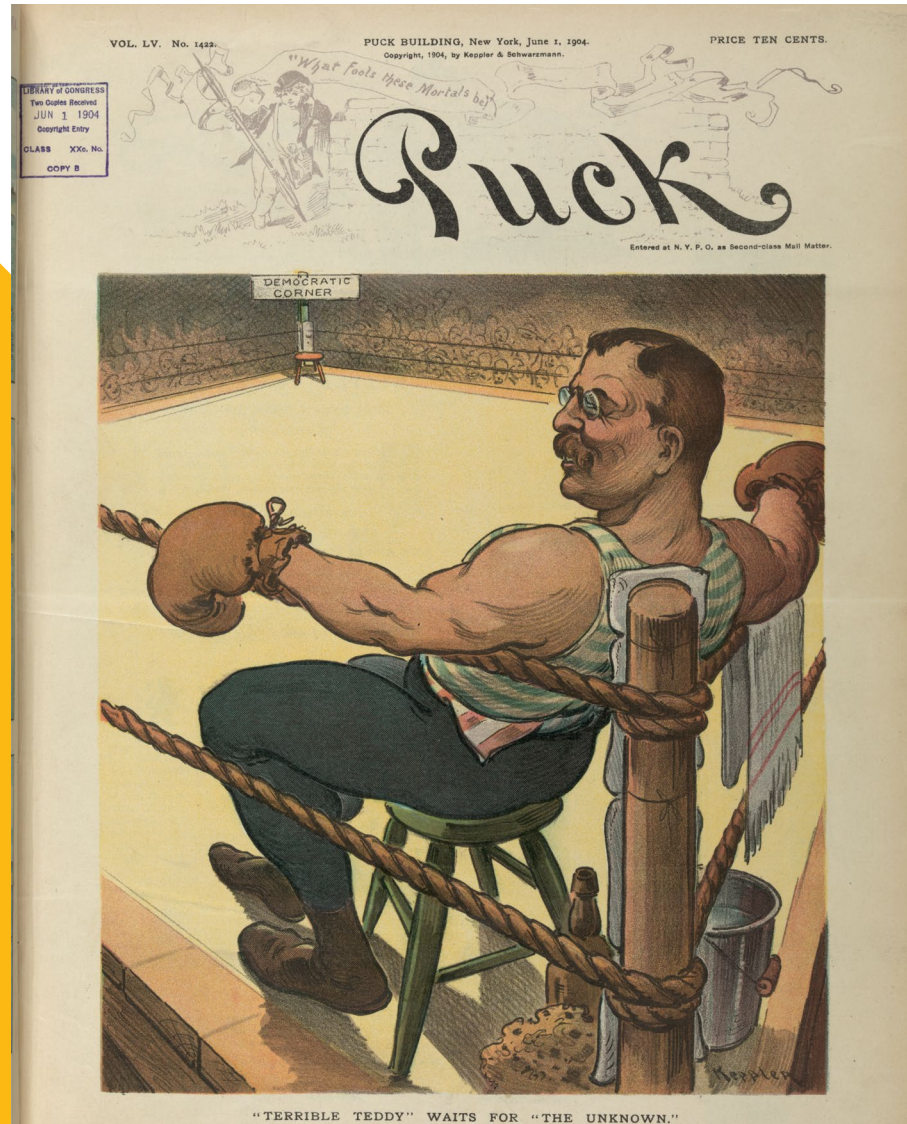
**Image Center** | Garry Trudeau, *Doonesbury* panel, September 25, 1992.

**Image Right** | Joseph Keppler, "The Master of the Situation," *Puck*, May 11, 1892.



**Image** | Udo Keppler, "'Terrible Teddy' Waits for 'The Unknown'," *Puck*, June 1, 1904.

For a caricature, it is rather flattering as what president wouldn't want to be thought of as tough and comfortably in command? Proof of the image's appeal can be found in its adaptation by Barry Blitt in *The New Yorker* cover from June 20, 2016, titled, "Ready for a Fight." Blitt repositioned the viewer here to be looking head on at presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, thus turning allies (we who are in TR's corner), into opponents.



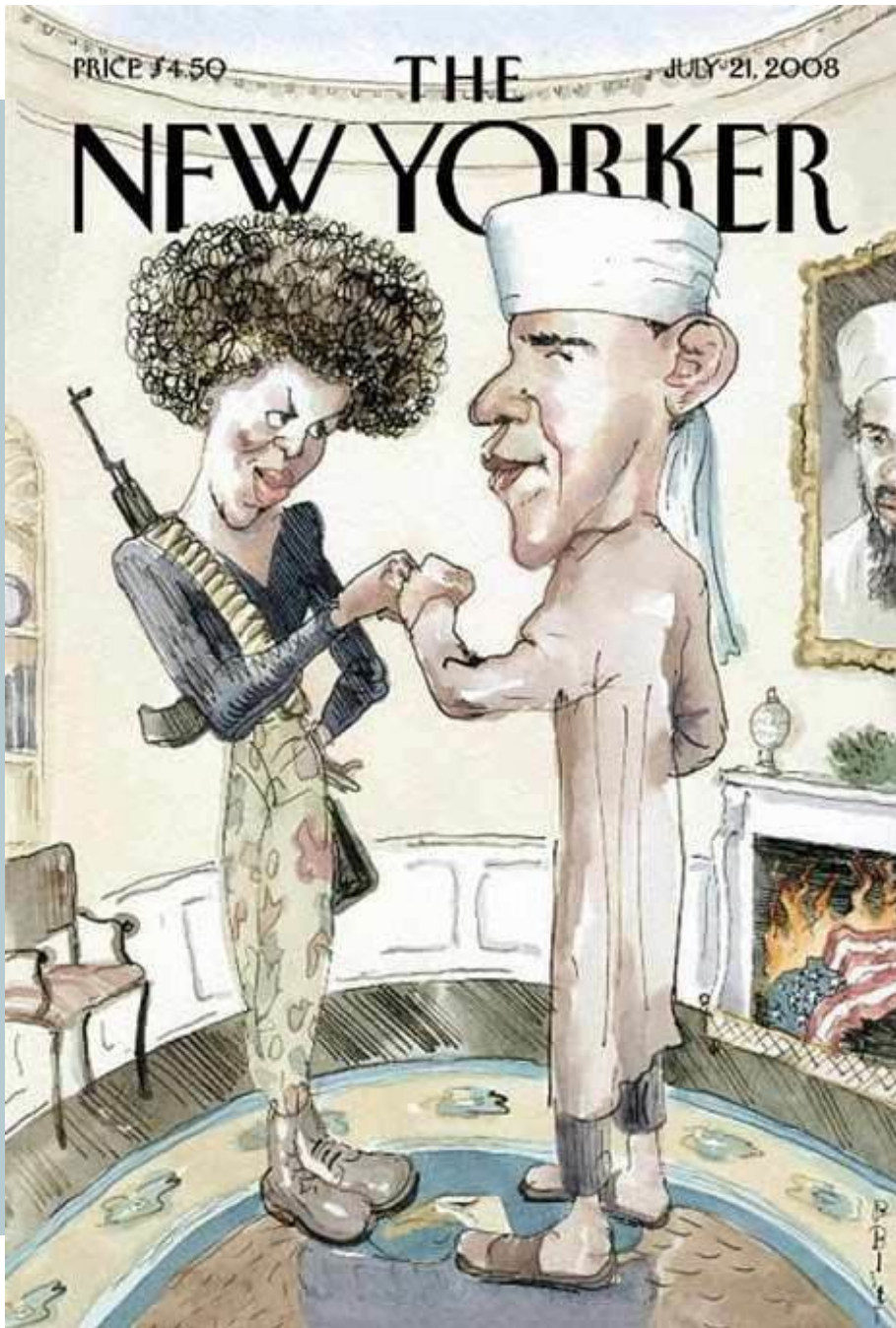
"TERRIBLE TEDDY" WAITS FOR "THE UNKNOWN."



**Image** | Barry Blitt, "Ready for a Fight,"  
June 20, 2016, *The New Yorker*.



Illustrated magazines such as *Puck* and *Judge* went out of production in the first half of the twentieth-century. While newsstands continued to sell an array of similar magazines to the American public, overtly political content took a back seat to style and culture on the covers of publications such as *Century Illustrated Monthly*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* (Norman Rockwell).



**Image |** Barry Blitt, "Fistbump: The Politics of Fear," July 21, 2008, *The New Yorker*.

*The New Yorker*, first published in 1925, was typical in this regard but unusual in its continued dedication to original cover art up to the present day. Bill Clinton's colorful presidency (1993–2001) coincided with this magazine's return to the tradition of presidential caricature on the occasional cover. It is Barry Blitt's work for *The New Yorker*, though, that has been so memorable in this genre. Blitt's cover art from July 21, 2008, titled "Fistbump: The Politics of Fear," stands as one of the most controversial covers *The New Yorker* ever published, drawing howls of protest and widespread condemnation by then candidate Obama and many others. It is a brilliant bit of satire that, in many ways, flips on its head the standard dynamics of caricature, although it touched a raw nerve at the time. Instead of exposing Obama's flaws through exaggeration and distillation, Blitt takes aim at Obama's critics by exposing *their* flawed assumptions about this singular candidate. Thus, Blitt imagines a future when Obama as president dresses in Muslim garb in the oval office, a gold-framed portrait of Osama bin Laden on the wall, and an American flag burning up in the fireplace. He visualizes Michelle Obama, looking like a Black Panther with her afro and machine gun, fist bumping Barack while they share a conspiratorial smirk. By gathering all of the racist and paranoid conspiracy theories about the Obamas into this behind-the-scenes "peek," Blitt exposes the absurdity of it all.



The election of Donald Trump in 2016 has provoked a surge of responses by artists drooling over the rich feast provided by Trump's appearance and behavior. Sue Coe and Sandow Birk, two such artists, have created biting visual commentary using traditional printmaking techniques. Inspired by Modernist printmakers of the twentieth-century, such as German Expressionist Kathe Kollwitz, Coe built a career on provocative political work around the themes of animal cruelty and human rights. "I'm much more focused on what I'm working on now: Dump Trump," Coe explained in an *Artforum* interview from August 21, 2018. "I could just do it in my sleep," she said. Her print titled "It Can Happen Here," from 2016, served as a darkly prescient warning of the violent disruptions to come. Shown as a terrifying black tornado, Trump destroys our society, represented by the scattered people, animals, and houses below, and rips apart the constitution. Although his bizarre hair and silly tie make Trump look absurd, the image is in no way funny, and the intentional crudeness of Coe's linotype technique intensifies the horror of the scene by inspiring elemental fear in the viewer. Embracing the more refined lithographic format, printmaker Sandow Birk created a portfolio in 2017 about President Trump, titled "The Horrible & Terrible Words & Deeds of the Very Renowned Trumpagruel," that riff off the nineteenth-century illustrations by French artist Gustave Dore of the sixteenth-century classic by humorist Francois Rabelais.



**Image** | Sue Coe, *It Can Happen Here*, linocut, 2016, courtesy of the Davis Museum.





**Image Upper** | Honore Daumier, *Gargantua*, 1831, lithograph, courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris  
**Image Lower** | Gustave Dore, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, lithograph, 1854.





**Image** | Sandow Birk, *The Horrible & Terrible Deeds & Words of the Very Renowned Trumpagruel*, 2017, lithographs, Davis Museum, Wellesley.

Titled *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Rabelais' Renaissance parody of human follies suited Birk's purpose for damning commentary on the Trump presidency. The eighth print in the Birk series, for example, shows the massive figure of Trump, his enormous bare behind facing the viewer, squatting in front of the US capitol building, a glowing cell phone gripped in his small hand. The print pays homage to Dore's depiction of the giant Gargantua, published in 1854, but transforms Dore's innocuous group of onlookers into a crowd of devil-horned followers that recall the demons of the Medieval imagination. Another inspiration for this particular image (and perhaps also the Dore) may have been the print *Gargantua* (1831), by French political provocateur Honore Daumier, in which the artist exposed the corruption of King Louis-Phillippe. Inflated to grotesque proportions, the king passively receives bribes delivered straight into his gaping mouth while defecating commendations and honors to eager supplicants standing behind. All three artists revel in the discordance between the elegance of the lithographic technique and the crudity of their subject. The liberty that we have in our democracy to criticize our government freely is the reason why we, along with Great Britain, can lay claim to the richest tradition in the world of this kind of expression. Daumier did not fare so well in the French monarchical system, and was arrested and thrown into prison for six months as punishment for the "Gargantua" cartoon.

The humiliating images made by Blitt, Coe, and Birk of our current president can shock us even as we take the first amendment for granted, which is exactly what they are intended to do. The graphic artist Dwayne Booth, a.k.a. Mr. Fish, attempts to jolt viewers out of their assumptions. That is the goal of this political cartoonist who has published in a range of prestigious newspapers and magazines. Like Blitt, Booth directs his pen equally against politicians across the ideological spectrum. Included in this exhibition are his venomous attacks against Hillary Clinton (unlikability),

THE UNWANTED PREGNANCY



**Image |** Dwayne Booth, a.k.a. Mr. Fish, "The Unwanted Pregnancy," 2017, graphite drawing, courtesy of the artist.



President Obama (Afghan War disaster), Trump (infantilism), and Biden (opportunism). Such attacks are illegal in many foreign countries, including such democracies as Lebanon, Indonesia, Poland, and the Netherlands, that punish such offenses with large fines or prison terms. Booth's cartoons illustrate the amazing degree of freedom we have in this country to express a wide arrange of opinions about our leaders. Given the unbridled ridicule presidents endure because of the constitutional right to free speech, it is surprising that anyone would actually want to run for the office. . . that and, of course, the titanic difficulties and stresses of the job.



**Image** | Dwayne Booth, a.k.a. Mr. Fish, "Suckers," 2011, graphite drawing, courtesy of the artist.



**Image** | Frank Oppen, "A Dreadful Attack of 'Presidential Fever' in the U.S. Senate," *Puck*, February 21, 1883.

The notion that you have to have something wrong with you to run for the presidency dates back at least to 1883, when Frank Oppen lampooned presidential aspirants in his *Puck* centerfold titled "A Dreadful Attack of Presidential Fever." Members of the senate soak their feet and cool their fevered heads as *Puck* administers spoonfuls of healing balm. A few honorable-looking spectators peer down with confusion at the ward of pathetic patients, and the spectator wistfully imagines that one of them, instead, would serve in this critical job. Perhaps we, the voting public, share even this notion with our forebearers.

## CURATOR'S BIO

Deborah Varat is an art historian who teaches at Southern New Hampshire University. Her research interests focus on Jewish themes in art of the Modern period. She is currently working on a book about the representation of Jews in American popular imagery from the 1880s through the 1940s, and has published two recent articles on the Dreyfus Affair and Jewish Immigration as portrayed in newspapers and magazines during the late nineteenth-century. This exhibition is an outgrowth of her work on that body of material.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to recognize the following people and places for their invaluable assistance. I am very appreciative of the contemporary artists represented here and the Davis Museum at Wellesley College for the generous loans of artwork. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the Library of Congress digital database for the excellent quality reproductions of the historical materials. I am very grateful for the expert help in editing this essay provided by Professor Benjamin Varat and Ellie Shafer. Thank you to Professor Ken Nivison for assisting with the exhibition programming. McIninch Art Gallery Coordinator Aish Gejjagaraguppe's work in turning my material into a beautiful virtual exhibit has been invaluable. Finally, Debbie Disston, Director of the McIninch Gallery, was vital in the planning and organization of the exhibition.

– Professor Deborah Varat



## MISSION STATEMENT

The McIninch Art Gallery, administered by the Office of the UC President at Southern New Hampshire University, provides first hand experiences in the arts through collections, exhibitions and diverse programs designed to support the university curriculum and enhance public engagement with fine art.

This digital publication was produced in conjunction with the virtual exhibition organized by the McIninch Art Gallery. The virtual exhibition can be viewed at: <https://bit.ly/3gdTxNK>

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2500 North River Road  
Robert Frost Hall  
Manchester NH 03106  
603-629-4622  
[www.snhu.edu/art](http://www.snhu.edu/art)