



Sadow Birk

By Kim Turner on December 5, 2016

sadow birk and paul mullowney: the depravities of war and the relevance of social critique

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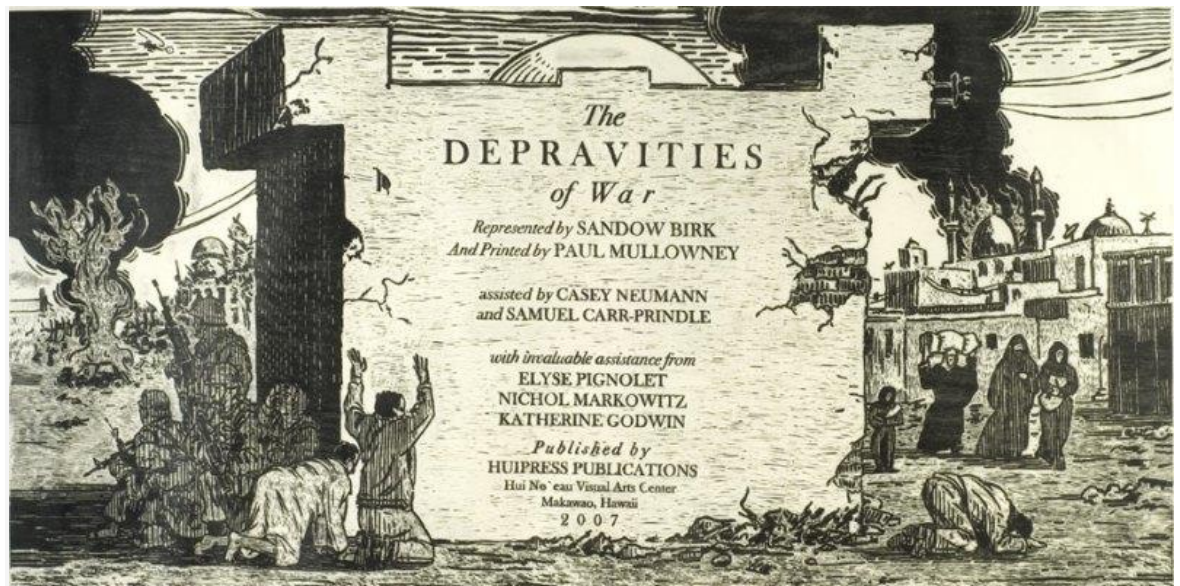
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Sadow Birk, Title Page, from the Depravities of War series, woodcut, 2007. Loan Courtesy of Deborah and Andy Rappaport. Photograph Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

When USF Museum Studies Curatorial Practicum and Thacher Gallery planned their exhibition, *The Depravities of War: Sadow Birk and the Art of Social Critique*, no one anticipated that it would open at a time of national political upheaval. Two days after the destabilizing election on November 8th of Donald Trump, whose divisive rhetoric exposed an undercurrent of racism, sexism, and xenophobia in the national psyche, Los Angeles-based artist Sadow Birk and San Francisco master printer Paul Mullowney joined curatorial student hosts Sarin Cem Cem and Emily Lawhead for a panel discussion of their work and to share their observations on the role of socially engaged art in public discourse. At this well-attended presentation, Birk and Mullowney described their dynamic collaboration to create a series of fifteen monumental woodcut prints on the Iraq War, highlighting the moral implications and horrific human toll of this armed conflict.

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Opening Panel Discussion in Fromm Hall, University of San Francisco, on November 10, 2016. From left to right: Emily Lawhead, Sarin Cem Cem, Paul Mullaney, and Sandow Birk.

Cem Cem began the event by describing the curatorial collaboration that created the exhibition. Curatorial students working closely with Professor Kate Lusheck, Gallery Director Glori Simmons and others “conceptualized and realized the exhibition together, from research and design to writing interpretive text and object labels.” Students assisted with event planning, marketing, lighting and the myriad details that are integral to designing a successful exhibition.

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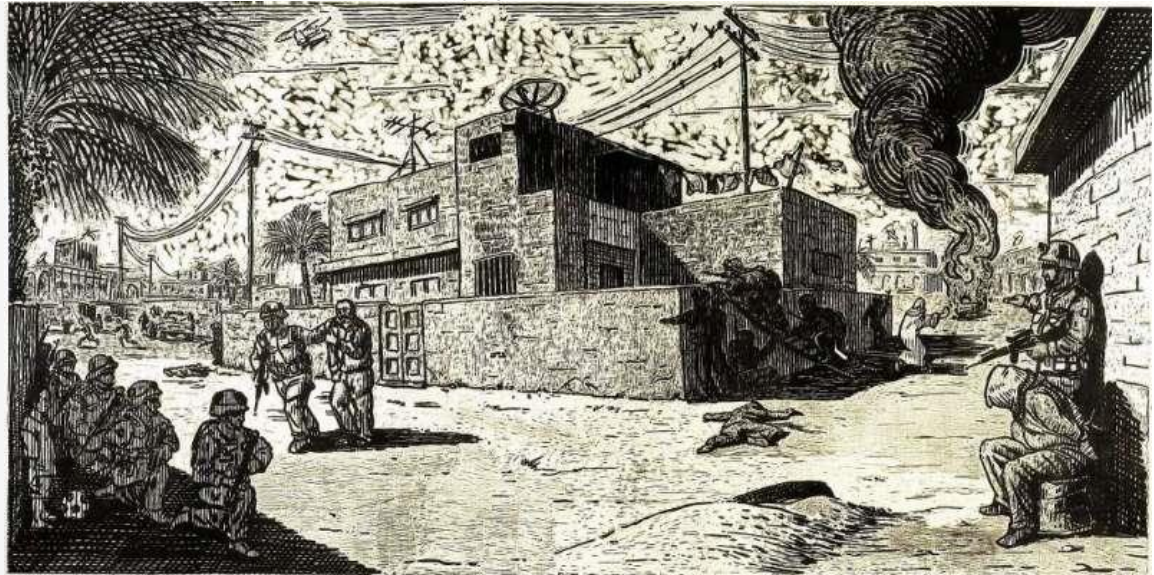
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Sandow Birk came to the podium to talk about his work. A graduate of Otis College of Art and Design, Birk provided insight into how he approaches his art, stating, “ I took my studies in college in art history and I often look at things in art history and reinterpret them to be about events in our life.” In 2006, when there was no end in sight to the Iraq War, he was approached by Mullooney to collaborate on a print series. Birk discovered etchings of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) created by 17<sup>th</sup>-century, French artist Jacques Callot (1592-1635) and was struck by not only the subject matter but also by the artist’s less than heroic perspective on war, unheard of in the western tradition prior to c. 1600. Using this art historical inspiration, Birk recounted, “It was interesting to me that Callot would do war prints in the 1600s and Goya would do them in the 1800s and now in the 2000s we can maybe do a new project. So that was the basis, the germ, of that idea.” Birk was steadfastly opposed to the Iraq War. When Abu Ghraib atrocities became known, Birk reflected on the recurring nature of war, stating, “The sad irony is that all of these things that were happening in Iraq were being depicted 400 or 500 years earlier in Callot’s prints, which made it so much more poignant.”



Sandow Birk, *Incursion*, from the *Depravities of War* series, woodcut, 2007. Loan courtesy of Deborah and Andy Rappaport. Photograph courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

Paul Mullooney, who learned his craft at San Francisco’s Crown Point Press and then spent years studying traditional printing and paper making in Japan, provided his perspective on the collaborative nature of their project. He commented on the longstanding tradition and significance of printmaking through the ages, particularly as it pertains to socially engaged art. Mullooney explained the crucial role that prints have played in culture and history, as images that were disseminated to large audiences, thereby operating at the forefront of social discourse and dissent. His reaction to seeing the full set of 15 framed woodcut prints in the *Depravities* series revealed his intense personal investment in these works. He mused, “After 10 years now it seems more poignant than ever. It’s very emotional to see these on the wall right now, considering the more things change, the more they stay the same.”



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Opening Night of the Exhibition on November 16, 2016 with Sandow Birk, Paul Mullaney, and visitors in Thacher Gallery, University of San Francisco.

The shadow cast by the election and global rise in alt-right politics was clearly on the minds of those in attendance, as the audience asked Birk and Mullaney to reflect on the timelessness of socially engaged art against the backdrop of recent events and global trends. Birk remarked, “Does the artwork become irrelevant once the problem is resolved? Hopefully it is about a broader thing.” This was followed by a final question about the current U.S. political mood. Birk responded, “It’s too soon. Dark days, I think. The clouds are coming more than receding.”

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Once viewers entered the Thacher Gallery, insights from the panel discussion were immediately accessible, as powerful, recognizable images of the Iraq War reinforced the importance of art as social commentary. The original 4 by 8 foot woodcut, *Desecration*, was on display as visitors entered the space. Moving into the main gallery area, the sheer scale of the images evoked strong reactions from many visitors. Alongside each of the Birk prints, a reproduction of a related Callot etching is on display, underscoring the influence Callot's tableaux, compositions and subject matter had on Birk's artistic choices. Birk's monochromatic images, often made with bold, heavy marks, underscore the sense of violence, oppression and despair in Iraq. Several images focus on the shocking revelations about US soldiers' treatment of prisoners in the war zone. Unlike Callot, who depicted several scenes where soldiers were harshly punished for engaging in dishonorable conduct, Birk provided just one image of a Senate hearing, inferring that US war crimes are handled as political theater, likely resulting in few direct consequences to military perpetrators.

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Installation shot with the woodblock of *Desecration*, from Sandow Birk, *the Depravities of War*, 2007. Loan courtesy of Deborah and Andy Rappaport.

In addition to the artworks, the exhibition offers a small library installation to encourage visitors to explore the art historical influences on Birk, from such artists as Callot, Francisco de Goya, Otto Dix, and others that have confronted moral questions about war. Also, visitors are invited to reflect on their feelings about the exhibition by choosing from among four colored pegs representing emotions – indifferent, sad, angry, inspired – and placing their pegs in a glass vessel. From the first week, 132 pegs were tallied, with the emotions ‘sad’ and ‘inspired’ most commonly expressed. ‘Indifferent’ received a mere 16 votes, underscoring the convincing emotional sway these images had on the vast majority of viewers.

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Interactive element of the exhibition focusing on its emotional impact for visitors.

Perhaps the most incisive comment came a few days after the opening, when a USF professor remarked that the exhibition offered his writing class a powerful way “to talk about the election without talking about the election.” The idea that this critical commentary on the Iraq War transcends that conflict and causes visitors to consider their core beliefs about current political events validates Birk’s expressed wish that this art can be about “a broader thing” and that this kind of critique remains particularly relevant in these tumultuous times.

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Paul Mallowney (left) and Sandow Birk (right) in front of Gleeson Library. Photograph courtesy of Nell Herbert, Thacher Gallery.

The full, 55-minute Opening Panel of the exhibition may be viewed [here](#).  
For a brief review of the exhibition by Sam Whiting of the San Francisco Chronicle, see [his article](#), "Mammoth Woodblock War Prints at USF Gallery" (November 16, 2016).