

Alan E. Cober:

The Artist as Illustrator

The Illustrator as Journalist

The Renegade



Katonah Museum of Art

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The artist as journalist is not a new vocation. In the sixteenth century Jacques Callot chronicled the suffering brought on by the Thirty Years War. Two centuries later Francesco Goya made etchings which detailed the most unspeakable horrors of the Napoleonic occupation of Spain. And almost two centuries later Georg Grosz in a series of drawings portrayed the moral bankruptcy of the German oligarchy. If these artists failed to right the world's wrongs, they did bear witness so that others might continue the struggle.

Some of the most scathing indictments of man's folly have been made by those artists committed to art in the service of humankind – an accessible art that does not appeal to the lowest denominator but to the highest ideal. Despite our current reliance on photographic, electronic, and now digital media, for the transmission and reception of objective information, the artist continues to be a valuable interpreter of critical events.

Alan E. Cober is a disciple of the pioneers of modern graphic commentary and visual journalism, artists such as Honoré Daumier, Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, Kathé Kollwitz, and Ben Shahn. He is, therefore, one of a small group of contemporary practitioners who still believes that narrative art can influence and inform public opinion. Yet he's a commentator without a specific beat or agenda, which is not to imply that he doesn't have a distinct viewpoint. One cannot, for example, look at his drawings of Sing Sing prison's moth-balled electric chair without feeling the sensations he must have felt upon first entering the death chamber. Nor is it possible to look at Cober's etchings of mammoth industrial engines without seeing how completely fascinated he was by these monuments of the Machine Age. To say that Cober does not have a specific agenda means that his responses to outside stimuli are conditioned, not by some preconceived conviction, but by the experiences themselves. To say that he does not have a beat means he is not burdened by a constricting formalism, but rather is open to as many approaches and media as the subject demands. To say that he does not have a beat also suggests that Cober does not have a sinecure. Today he

doesn't have access to those outlets which were open to him over three decades ago when he began to practice. Most of them no longer exist.

In the past decades publishing venues for artist-journalists have disappeared because of changes in editorial preference – i.e. illustration is out and photography is in. Moreover, there is a general malaise in magazine publishing which stifles all but the most fashion-conscious instincts. The artist-journalist is neither fashionable nor, in the minds of most editors today, cost efficient. Hence a time-honored form is fast becoming anachronistic and Cober, who is one of its contemporary masters, cannot get enough commissions to satisfy his wanderlust. Yet he remains unconcerned since he's always in demand for the single-image, conceptual illustration. Moreover, Cober is constantly developing his own assignments which he might later sell for publication. During the past decade Cober has drawn countless pictures, etched numerous plates, and created various essays which reflect the insatiable curiosity he has for politics and human nature.

This retrospective exhibition of Cober's work shows how far he has opened the envelope of traditional illustration, and reveals how successfully he has made the conventional assignment into a stepping stone for new discovery. What this exhibit cannot explain is how Cober entered into a netherworld between fine art and illustration. Nor can it show how, as a maverick, he played a crucial role in changing the practice and perception of commercial and editorial illustration. For only within the illustration field itself is the story of a major illustrator's contributions given much credence; art history generally ignores the commercial arts and since Cober is a hybrid – an artist, illustrator, and journalist – he is difficult to categorize.

2 Cober was one of a group of innovators who managed to inject the precepts of modern art into American illustration, which after World War II took a nose dive into a mire of sentimentality. In the publishing industry's haste to return to business-as-usual after suffering the privations of war, many mainstream American magazines began to celebrate normalcy by publishing stories that dramatized common human emotions. The illustrations used to complement these tales frequently presented a clean-cut boy and wholesome girl frozen in a state of joy or sorrow, and often literally depicted a phrase in a story leaving precious little to the reader's imagination. Rendered in an aggressively romantic style, these otherwise innocuous illustrations so ignored contemporary developments in figurative and abstract art that American illustration in the late 40s and 50s was turgid at best.

In the early 1960s when Cober began working, illustration was beginning to veer away from sentimentality towards a new expressionism. A few progressive art directors, notably

Cipe Pinelas at *Seventeen* and Henry Wolf at *Esquire*, had found new illustrators in galleries rather than in the conventional illustration studios. Many were painters previously unwelcome in the illustration marketplace. But with their entry, aspects of contemporary art were slowly infused into more painterly and conceptual illustration.

Cober played a significant role in this developmental period. He revived a journalistic approach (in the manner of the Ashcan School) and invented a loose, expressive style that rejected the typically labored illustration so popular at the time. He credits Ben Shahn as a guiding force in his art. Indeed, Shahn's economical style, which had fallen out of favor in the art world yet had currency among socially conscious artists, captured the essence of his subjects without artifice. This was Cober's goal, too, and through his example (and later teaching) a new group of illustrators came forward in the late 60s and 70s who replaced sentimental with conceptual illustration. This radical change meant that an illustration could impart its own information rather than merely mimic a text. Through the force of Cober's will – and ego – he made art directors and editors aware that illustrators could contribute ideas, not merely handskills. This, more or less, is the norm today.

As a visual commentator Cober responds to three stimuli: to manuscripts; to social or political events; and to his surroundings. The first, manuscripts, is consistent with the traditional role of the illustrator, yet Cober does not merely repeat words in a picture; rather he complements his texts using a distinctly personal symbology. The second, covering events, is an offshoot of the first. He is asked to create visual essays based on his own reportage, such as the Pope's visit to the United States, or Jimmy Carter's unsuccessful 1980 presidential campaign. Usually, he completes many more drawings than a publication can use, and these often become the basis for independent prints or watercolors. The third, sketching his surroundings, is a respite from the rigors of the first two stimuli. Cober is compulsive about drawing from nature and capturing both its grit and beauty in his sketchbooks.

The sketchbook is Cober's repository of visual and verbal ideas. He is a sketchbook fanatic. A few years ago, I paid a visit to him at his studio in Ossining, New York, a large space over a garage cluttered with the books, folk art, and the paper ephemera he uses for inspiration. He showed me some of these legendary sketchbooks, each a collection of pictures from a different adventure or assignment, rendered in ink or watercolor, and composed so effortlessly that every page is like a mini-masterpiece. He also proudly showed me works bearing on his latest obsession: a series of portraits of swimmers drawn from life at a local pool where he practices competitive swimming. Even at poolside Cober finds a culture worth exploring through pictures. The resulting drawings of friends and acquaintances are not caricatures in the satiric tra-

dition, but *portraits chargés* in the classical sense, like Da Vinci's warts-and-all portrayals of Italian nobles. Cober's people are foreshortened and exaggerated, but grotesquery is not merely a conceit but a means of exploring vanity in all its manifestations. All Cober's portraiture, even the numerous self-portraits, are devoted to rooting out the expressive nuance.

This retrospective does not make distinctions between Cober's commercial and non-commercial work. That is what makes it unique (and courageous) in a museum setting. Most of what is shown here has, however, been printed in some form because Cober's art is about communication. His prints, drawings, and watercolors express a message or mood directly rather than inwardly or only to a small group of afficiandos. Like journalism itself, Cober's art is democratic. As an illustrator, his visual language is accessible out of necessity; as an artist it is accessible by choice.

Steven Heller

Exhibition Checklist

Albert Camus: The Exile and the Kingdom

1979, Etchings, 15 x 11"

The Adulterous Woman
The Artist at Work
The Growing Stone
The Renegade

Cape Cod Portraits

Four Portraits of Bobby and Marylee, 1988, 1989
1990, 1991, Ink and prismacolor, 18 x 24"
Al and Joan, 1991, Ink and watercolor, 18 x 24"
Peter and Dolores, 1991, Ink, 18 x 24"

Engines

1982, Hand-colored etchings, 31 x 22"

Caterpillar
Electromotive-Locomotive Engine
Pratt and Whitney Engine, 2037
Shuttle Engine, 2005
Shuttle Engine, 2007

Franz Kafka: The Trial

1974-75, Colored ink, 12 1/2 x 9 3/4"

The Arrest
The Assassins
First Interrogation
The Student
The Whipper

Franz Kafka: Short Stories

The Metamorphosis, 1970, Ink, 17 7/8 x 14 1/8"
The Hunger Artist, 1971, Ink, 17 1/2 x 14 1/8"
In the Penal Colony, 1976, Ink, 18 1/4 x 12 1/8"
Self-Portrait with Kafka, 1977, Etching, 15 x 11"

Lying About Drawing Series: Self-Portraits

1982, 7 x 8"

16 September, Pencil and watercolor
18 September, Pencil and watercolor
19 September, Pencil and watercolor
20 September, Pencil and watercolor
21 September, Sepia and wash
22 September, Pencil and watercolor
23 September, Pencil and watercolor
23 September, Pencil
25 September, Pencil and watercolor
27 September, Pencil and watercolor
29 September, Pencil
30 September, Ink

Portraits

Joe Louis I, 1975, Ink, 24 x 18"
Joe Louis II, 1975, Ink, 24 x 18"
Love Rufus, 1982, Mixed media, 15 x 10 3/4"
Ruby Shoots Oswald, 1984, Mixed media, 12 x 12"
James Cagney, 1985, Mixed media, 11 1/2 x 8"
Jimmy Dean, 1986
Watercolor, ink, and pencil, 8 1/8 x 11"
Astronaut - Alan Shepard I, 1987
Mixed media, 8 1/2 x 11"
Astronaut - Alan Shepard II, 1987
Mixed media, 8 1/2 x 11"
Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, 1987-88
Mixed media, 10 5/8 x 10"
Mandrill, 1988, Watercolor drawing, 22 x 30"
Small Mandrill I, 1988,
Ink and watercolor, 7 1/8 x 22"
Small Mandrill II, 1988
Ink and watercolor, 7 1/8 x 22"
Smooth Talk I, 1988, Mixed media, 18 1/2 x 14"
Smooth Talk II, 1988, Mixed media, 18 1/2 x 14"
Ezra Pound, 1988, Ink and watercolor, 8 x 8"
Gary Hart, 1988, Ink and watercolor, 11 x 14"
Boesky, 1989, Ink and watercolor, 8 x 8"
Mike Milken I, 1989, Mixed media, 12 x 9 1/8"
Mike Milken II, 1989, Mixed media, 12 x 9 1/2"
Mike Milken III, 1989, Mixed media, 13 x 9 1/2"
AIDS, 1990, Watercolor and ink, 11 x 8 1/2"

Winnie Mandela, 1990, Ink, 11 x 11"
Big Game Animals: Heads, 1991
Ink and watercolor, 14 x 10"
Big Game Animals: Bodies, 1991
Ink and watercolor, 14 x 10"
Ellen Cober, 1991, Lithograph, 15 x 11"
Elephant Man, 1991, Etching-aquatint
Conversation for One, 1991
Etching-aquatint, 31 x 22"
Monkey, 1991, Etching, 31 x 22"
Self-Portrait with Horseshoe-Crab
Etching-aquatint, 31 x 22"
Moosataur I, 1991
Hand-colored etching, 41 3/8 x 28 1/2"
Moosataur II, 1991, Monotype, 41 3/8 x 28 1/2"

Series on Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

1977, Ink and watercolor, 12 3/4 x 18 1/2"

From King's Point of View
James Earl Ray in the Bathroom
King in His Coffin
King in a Jail Cell
King and Mule
King and Two Assassins

Sketchbooks

Italian, 1970
Willowbrook, 1972
Parts Catalogue for the Year 2500
Old Folks, 1973-1988
CBS and Westmoreland, 1973-1978
Circus, 1974-1978
Western, 1975
Italian, 1980
Presidential, 1980
Yellowstone, 1985
Cape Cod, 1985-1991
European, 1987
Pope's Tour, 1987
Tennessee, 1988-1992
Southern, 1991
Suite Georgia, 1991

Suite Georgia

Cober by Finster - Finster by Cober
Etching, 15 x 11"
Ellen with Brer Rabbit, 1991, Etching
R. A. Miller by Cober - Cober by Finster
Cut-out tin and relief printed, 11 x 11"

Summer Suite

1978, Etchings, 15 x 11"

Blue Fish-Red Nose
Crabman
Fish Face
Peter
1978, Pencil and watercolor
Sketchbook, 5 1/2 x 4 1/4"
Crabman
Peter

The Willowbrook Ward Series

Small Ward Drawing, 1972, Ink, 11 x 11"
Small Ward Drawing, 1972, Ink, 9 x 9"
Figures from the Ward I, 1974, Ink
Figures from the Ward II, 1974, Ink