TOGETHER WE CAN PREVENT THE FUTURE:
CONSIDER THE SOURCE

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"Let us consider the past and the future with an equal mind and celebrate the two: the past— that museum we carry around with us always, encoded as it is within us, and the future— inspiration’s newly-minted coin before it tarnishes."\(^1\)

This advice from Stephen Neil Greengard is easier said than done. It seems a large part of the population is terrified and spitefully resistant of The Future, romantically obsessing over The Past as a utopian “simpler time” when there was nothing “wrong with kids today” and the world was just better (perhaps better than it ever will be again). Keeping both the past and the future in mind with equal sentiment has become a rare balancing act. There is no shortage of simplified sayings about the past or the future, but the one I subscribe to is “the more things change, the more they stay the same”. I personally feel that each modern age evil has its historical counterpart. Recognizing the perils of new things and accepting the reality of equally immoral eras throughout history is the position I take; doing so means accepting

revisionist sources of information about what has already happened, and continuously examining reports on the woes of today with scrutiny. A large portion of what I would call "becoming an adult" has been trying to make an effort to identify and consider the sources of information in all its forms as I am bombarded daily. This constant questioning of the nature of facts can cause some anxiety, which has crept into the kind of art that I create.

The *Together We Can Prevent The Future* series began as a narrative about a fictional global war where the past literally engages in conflict with the present. Gradually, my premise diffused into the cyclical nature of social change: introduction, resistance, adaptation, assimilation, acceptance, and obseletion. The world is constantly changing, and when a stubborn population must change with it, motivating them has often been the job of propaganda. I consider propaganda to be politically inspired illustration (images with text) or other mass media campaigns that promote a specific behavior for the general population (particularly when the benefit for adopting the desired behavior is the avoidance of an implied threat). To continue to be effective, advertising and propaganda continually updates its message and imagery. Familiar slogans are retired, new ones are introduced, and the persuasion machine keeps turning—powered by the gears of behavioral response.

My overarching intention for *Together We Can Prevent The Future* is to remind the viewer of historical style cues; light-heartedly appropriate propaganda delivery systems of communication; inspire participants in the
exhibit to question the sources of current information; connect events of the past with those of the present (and foreseeable future); create a metaphor for the continual process of obseletion; and to combine contemporary artistic mediums with traditional methods of museum display.

One of the major areas I explored is conditional trust, which must be necessary for interdependent living. Who trusts the government (and when), who trusts their neighbors, who trusts the media, and when-if no one trusted each other we would surely be fragmented into anarchy. In a Post-9/11 world, the culture of fear\(^2\) saturates the news industry, whose ratings skyrocket with coverage of every crisis\(^3\). Conspiracy theorists like the Loose Change\(^4\) group exist as caricatures of "free-thinking" suspicion, posting underground "documentaries" that illustrate their scientific theories about why the United States might have bombed the World Trade Center from the safety of online anonymity\(^5\). At the other end of the 9/11 reactionary spectrum, however, are the cautionary examples of obedient citizens who died as a direct result of the traditional evacuation procedures in an unforeseen application. At the highest level of pseudo-independence and paranoia there is still no assurance of "proof" of any conspiracy- only clues, circumstance, suggestions, and nagging doubts

\(^3\) Ibid., Xxi  
\(^5\) Ibid.
about the track record of full disclosure of national security matters to civilians. If
living dependent on society seems unsafe to the conspiracy theorist, living "off
grid" promises vulnerability outside of the protection of bureaucracy.

Government agencies offer answers about subjects like the events of September
11th, after months of review, and presumably some editing in the interest of
national security. Conspiracy theorists offer questions about the government’s
answers. When we choose whom to believe, the decision is often based on trust.

This ability to trust a foreign entity and engage in its advised procedures
is something I never questioned during the vulnerable first-year period in which
I moved to Indiana. The canopy of rolling mountains removed, I felt exposed to
the sky for the first time. Warning sirens, foreign to my native West Virginia
valleys, seemed to go off constantly. With each alert I scrambled to interpret each
news team’s urgently flashing map full of identical rectangular counties
(counties that taunted me with their uniformity). Many times I dutifully reported
to my bathtub with supplies (flashlight, beer, phone,) to wait out the tornado
alert. Even though I was embarrassed each time nothing happened, I followed
instructions week after week. All the time I spent in the bathtub waiting out
storms was nerve-racking but harmless; still, the local news has lost credibility
with me as a warning delivery device. When the only “alert-worthy” event
occurred, there was no warning, and I can only describe my 5:31-5:34 am
surprise Midwest Earthquake ’07 experience as “pure fun”. If I had been coached
by the media to fear the upcoming earthquake, I would surely have felt crushing
anxiety. The sum of this experience makes me second-guess the prescribed emergency procedures.

By far the greatest inspiration for all the artwork I’ve created recently has been in some way related to an influential stop at the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio. I was enamored with the layout of the museum, the sheer volume of artifacts, and the elaborately positioned and accessorized mannequins perpetually staging various activities. Each expressionless “soldier” gestures to another with strange affinity and purpose, whether the scene is a relaxing break in Vietnam or an intense maintenance check in the hanger. Also in the collection are war posters, mock chimpanzees ready to conquer space travel, and hand-painted leather bomber jackets adorned with pinup girls and good-natured bad words. I happened to catch a temporary Walt Disney WWI “nose art” exhibit, detailing Mr. Disney’s contribution to the war effort: creating pared down shotgun-wielding Donald Duck emblems for different brigades with a sensitivity for economy of line and subtle color. I wished then (and still do) that I could have the opportunity to travel backwards in time to stage my own army of mannequins, paint my own cusswords on a badass jacket, and create my own signature logos for the Fighting Whoever.

I later attempted to paint a portrait series of mannequins from my souvenir postcards, but the result looked as a failed attempt at the likeness of a

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6 Glassner. Xxi.

living person (which a mannequin is, but my concept wasn’t). I abandoned all use of mannequins as a storytelling device from then on and turned to imitating other forms of museum display, specifically, imitating dioramas.

While I find museums and the nature of display fascinating, what I have found through my limited research is that museums often “lie” (hopefully unwittingly) through their constant revisionist updating, bias of staff and individual motives, and private funding (possibly even corporate sponsorship). While some smaller “roadside attraction” museums act as shrines to outlandish fetishes (for example, the museum of Yankee dinosaurs as weapons in the civil war). Two seemingly equal authoritative museums exist that are diametrically opposed to one another, the Creation Science Museum and the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, both of which have strong but opposing views on the theory of evolution. If one’s mind was not already made up, one museum might appear as legitimate as the other. My museum, dedicated to symbolic events that never occurred, seems to fit in to the current state of postmodernism and specificity nicely.

Other inspirations from the series come from contemporary artists in the graffiti/popsurreal realm, most notably Shepherd Farey, who also uses war propaganda symbolism with a heavily graphic style, Zach Johnsen, who also

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9 “Professor Cline’s Dinosaur Kingdom”. Exhibit. Professor Cline’s Monster Museum, Natural Bridge, VA, 2008.
develops popsurreal multi-panel irregular shaped painted wood installation-style paintings, and Cleon Peterson, who has a “superflat” rendering style in a very intense palette and depicts riot scenes crowded with simplified, stylized figures. All of these artists caused me to think about the way I “stack” space in my compositions and the appropriate balance between graphic areas and more subtle areas in both painting and poster design. Historically, I drew inspiration from collections of British, American, French, Japanese, and German WWI-Korea era war posters, the eerie but seemingly innocuous illustrations by Edward Gorey, the neon flattened pop galaxy of Peter Max, the Victorian zeppelin-infused cartoons of Winsor McCay, and the dazzling color modeling and line quality of Alphonse Mucha.

I did not go wanting for pop culture fiction references, like the comic book collections of the steampunk adventures of The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, movies like Brazil and Children of Men, also immersive video games

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such as *Fallout 3* and *Bioshock*, which exploit the dangers of unconditional trust in war with contextual visual and radio propaganda-infused environments.

The content of the *Together We Can Prevent The Future* series is based on complicated relationships between generalizations like "Now and Then" and "Them and Us", but the formal qualities of each medium that express these ideas is relatively straightforward. However, the series is based on bodies of work in different media that may be classified as separately for their own nuances, explorations in digital media "posters", painting/installation "dioramas", and original and historical audio.

Paintings for the *Together We Can Prevent The Future* series are freestanding constructions that I prefer to call "dioramas". The process of painting on movable panels came from an evolution of experimentation with the level of modeling in a variety of subject matter- whether to permit some areas to remain "flat" while intensely rendering others. Letting shallow and deep "space" coexist on canvas proved to be frustrating, and the idea came to render everything as flat as I desired and physically separate subject from background in three dimensions, forcing spatial order. In order for these compositions to be self-supporting, I introduced smooth, easily constructed, relatively inexpensive, panels of manufactured particleboard with concealed rear stabilizers. The resulting environment, something like a life-sized pop-up book, tied in marvelously to my concept of an instructional museum-type installation.
Dioramas typically begin with a small phrase written in cursive, for example the as-yet-unattempted "impromptu dinosaur funeral". I render a small ink sketch inspired by the phrase on paper, showing my desired arrangement of individual panel pieces. I scan and import the sketch into Adobe Photoshop, where I can digitally apply color schemes to eliminate costly large-scale experimentation. After an appropriate color rendering is completed, pieces are selected and isolated digitally so I can apply a grid system for proportionate manufacturing. Each piece's key is printed separately and a corresponding grid is applied to primed panels of MDF. Outlines having been transferred, I cut out each piece with a hand-held jigsaw, paint each according to the predetermined color scheme, and give the pieces supports. The assembled dioramas are about 8’ high x 9’ wide x and 5’ deep. This process generally takes three months, despite my best efforts.

The digital print posters transpired out of a long-standing fascination with poster art; a form of communication that was once immensely popular, but has lost impact in the United States\(^\text{14}\). I thought it would be fun to revive the mysteriously outdated bold compositions, while injecting satirical text elements. I did research to supplement what I thought I knew about the slogans and iconography. The books I have collected as a result are useful and enjoyable.

Having come into the era of Homeland Security, the events of 9/11, and the second Gulf War at the tail end of a youthful infatuation with political activism resulted in sensitivity to the subtleties of policy, modified language, warning systems, fear-mongering, and "spin" in general. Recognizing the absurdity of the phrase "Today's Terror Alert Level is Orange" inspired plenty of creative leeway. Naturally, my interests in historical propaganda and current events collided.

My posters also typically begin with a small phrase written in cursive, with the goal of inspiring action with an implied threat for inaction. I compile a list of corresponding symbols, and begin sketching. A large-scale black and white drawing is sensitively executed, then I photograph and import the image into Adobe Illustrator for text and vector elements and Adobe Photoshop for transparent color rendering. Adding color in this manner permits the original mark making to be seen "beneath" the more graphic elements, and helps maintain my personal touch throughout the series. Selecting color derives inspiration from traditional color lithography palettes and contemporary pseudo-vintage "revival" regarding the 1920's through 1960's, respectively.

Spies are a theme that is illustrated or alluded to in some of my poster designs. I used a pseudo-historical spelling variant (that of the Spye Park House,

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c.1767\(^1\) intentionally to reference the evolution of language and differentiate between my concept actual international espionage. Spyes are personifications of Victorian villains and predatory grifters who assume a hapless citizen’s life and money as imposters, feared as having infiltrated civilian life like secret Communists in the time of the Red Scare; they are also identity thieves who might infect our home computers with spyware, contemporarily speaking. The image of the typical Spye came as a combination of two time-specific facial attributes, the moustache and the monocle, both of which give the wearer something to hide behind and are recognizable for their own time and place in fashion.

The other appropriate method to complete Together We Can Prevent The Future was to challenge myself to create conflicting statements in print and audio media. Radio broadcasting seemed a natural choice to evoke the Fireside Address and wartime news break associations, now obsolete, and use them as audio guides for my museum exhibit. I also incorporated real audio released by the Office of Civil Defense called “In Time of Emergency Radio Kit(s)” (originally released on vinyl for home use in 1968)\(^2\). I edited this audio and combined it with an original script meant to entertain, enhance the similarities between my


exhibit and a museum, further confuse the timeline of the exhibit, and induce slight anxiety in exhibit participants. Included is actual, historic advice to always "follow the signs"19 (which will now refer participants to signs that I have created) and newly recorded warning that there may be Spyes in the area.

In the end, I as the unreliable narrator hope to encourage visitors to accept that we may never know the whole truth of the present or the past. Keeping a reasonable view toward the future means tempering the rosy hindsight of nostalgia. I will not accept doomsday prophecies about the decline of civilization without considering the source. In his 1974 biography, former President Harry Truman observed, "There is nothing new in the world except the history you do not know" 20. This statement remains true today in my opinion. The Future does not bring radically new evils, it merely re-invents familiar ones; moral corruption, war, a misled populace, a culture of fear, and so on. The things we are encouraged to worry about today are in essence the same things my grandmother's worried about. Nothing is new, except the history I do not know, or perhaps, the history that I invent.

19 Ibid.
20 Glassner. 75.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX 1

RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORICAL ART SOURCES: POSTER INFLUENCE

This diagram is intended to show how artifacts of WWI and WWII propaganda influenced my graphic style for the *Together We Can Prevent The Future* series.


APPENDIX 2

RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORICAL ART SOURCES: OTHER INFLUENCES

This diagram is intended to demonstrate how the illustration styles of Winsor McCay, Walt Disney, and Alfonse Mucha influenced my Together We Can Prevent The Future series.

Left to Right: Hank Porter. Insignia for USS Atule SS 403, 1944.
Alfons Mucha. Medee, 1898.
Winsor McCay. The Last Day of Manhattan, c.1903-1912.

Megan Mullenax, What To Do, 2008
Megan Mullenax, The Diorama of Surveillance Whereby the Antique Accidentally Discovers Zebra in a North American Forest, 2007
APPENDIX 3

COMPARISONS TO CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

This “family tree” style diagram is intended to show how my *Together We Can Prevent The Future* series relates to other contemporary artists.

*Shepard Farey, Militerry, 2008*

*Zach Johnsen, Wanderers, 2008*

*Cleon Peterson, Untitled, 2007*

*Megan Mullenax, What To Do, 2008*

*Megan Mullenax, The Diorama of Surveillance Whereby the Antique Accidentally Discovers Zebra in a North American Forest, 2007*
APPENDIX 4

EXAMPLES OF THE FINAL POSTER STYLE

Pictured are selections from my *Together We Can Prevent The Future* series.

APPENDIX 5

EXAMPLES OF THE FINAL DIORAMA STYLE

Pictured are selections from my *Together We Can Prevent The Future* series.