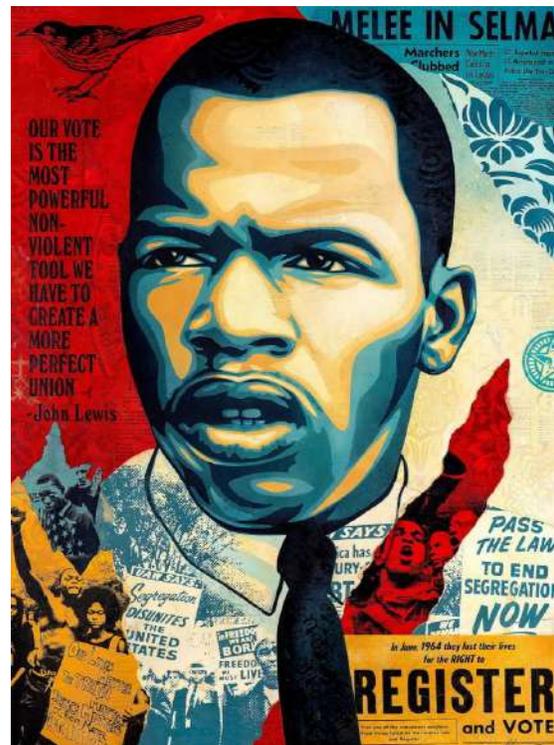
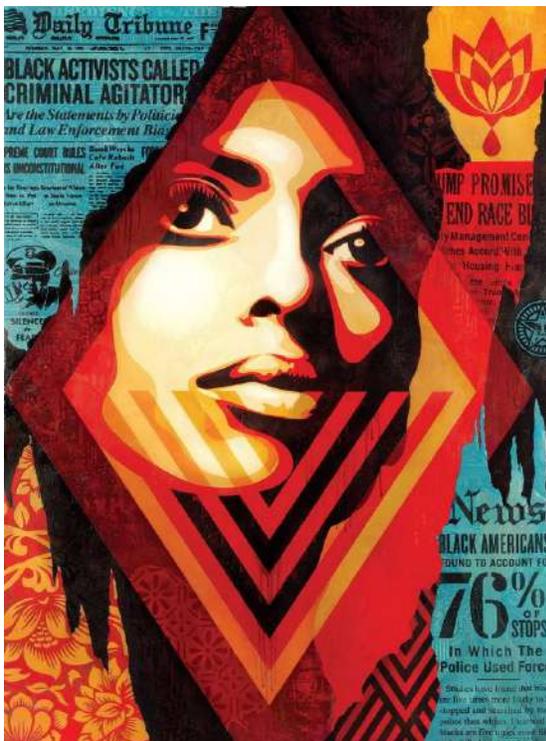


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By Will Higginbotham

Obama 'Hope' artist Shepard Fairey: 'I'm aiming for intrigue and engagement'

The North Carolinian on trying to make art that isn't polarising and why Texas is the perfect place to show political work



Shepard Fairey's 'Bias By Numbers, Version 1' (2017)...and 'John Lewis — Good Trouble, Version 2' (2020)

On a recent afternoon in his Los Angeles studio, Shepard Fairey is in his element. The 52-year-old artist moves energetically around a space that brims with canvases, stencils, paints, spray cans, and even skateboards — supplies as diverse as his artistic output. And everywhere I look, piled on racks and propped on the floor, are his highly stylised images, popping in bright red, blue, black and yellowy-gold.

A practising artist for the past three decades, Fairey has cultivated a unique, instantly recognisable style. It blends elements of graffiti and pop art and draws inspiration from advertising, art nouveau and communist propaganda. His best-known work to date is the iconic 2008 Barack Obama "Hope" poster, which he designed to support the then senator's presidential campaign.

Today his artwork has begun to be shipped from the studio in preparation for a solo exhibition, backward forward, at Dallas Contemporary in Texas. "It's my largest body of brand new work I've ever exhibited," Fairey says as he settles down at a table. Many of the 150 pieces in the show, which opened last week,

are mixed-media and have been produced in the past 18 months. “These are crazy times, there’s been a lot of things to draw on,” he says.



Shepard Fairey, left, at work in his studio © Courtesy of the artist

Fairey, a high-energy character, has always been an activist (although he stresses he is an “artist first”) whose work responds to the social and political. This exhibition is no different. “It’s the themes I’ve been dealing with for a while — the corruption that comes with absolute power, police brutality, the health of our planet, disinformation, gender and racial equality,” he says. As a father of two teenage girls, such problems concern him now more than ever. “The two biggest right now, for me, are the habitability of the planet and the ability for democracy to endure,” he says.

Among the work he shows me is an image of a shrunken Earth underneath the words “No bees, no honey”, and an image of a disengaged human face bathed in blue light and covered by a cyber matrix. Other works include stylised portraits (something of a Fairey signature), including those of the late associate Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and the late congressman John Lewis. “The quiet radicals,” he calls them with a smile.

On the surface, the work appears driven by the horrors and ills of modern society, but on closer inspection, it carries a sense of hope. Comparing these works to Fairey’s earlier pieces, it’s clear that in recent years his work has entered a new phase. The multimedia works are brighter; more blues, yellows, purples, and the central figures seem to have softer edges. There are also more women in his current today.

“The exhibition shows the evolution of Shepard over 30 years,” says Pedro Alonzo, curator of the show, over the phone from Dallas. “You get to Shepard now, and there is tempering in his work, more of an appeal to universal humanity. Once upon a time, these works would have been way more explicit.” Alonzo curated Fairey’s first big show in 2009, and the two have known each other for more than 20 years.



In Chicago, Fairey's image of Barack Obama features in banners celebrating Obama's election to the presidency in 2008 © Mondadori via Getty Images

"I've learnt — and call it ageing if you like — that I need to bring the viewer in with something that's powerful, beautiful, but not instantly political or polarising," Fairey says. "To start the conversations we need to be having right now, you cannot turn people off instantly. I'm aiming for intrigue and engagement. Of course there will always be people who find something confrontational."

Frank Shepard Fairey was born in 1970 in South Carolina. He arrived in the art world with a prestigious degree from the Rhode Island School of Design and a cache of street cred, a duality that has become a defining feature of his career. In 1989 he designed a sticker of André René Roussimoff, a wrestler known as Andre the Giant. It read "André the Giant has a posse" and soon began to appear in cities across the US. A teenager embroiled in the counterculture worlds of hip-hop, punk and skateboarding, he placed his graphics on the sides of city buildings, but also on T-shirts and skateboards. "I just wanted to connect my art to an audience, the broader the better."

This sentiment continues to guide Fairey, although his operation is no longer so grassroots. Today he runs a clothing label, keeps a studio and creative offices in Los Angeles, employs people, and sells art for six-figure sums. He still paints murals and street art — he has racked up 18 arrests for vandalism to date ("I try not to get arrested, the police in this country are not nice"). He supports activist groups by creating campaigns for them or by providing funds through the sales of his art. At the same time, he is wealthy and close to the world's biggest galleries. Being a commercially viable street artist has come at some costs — primarily losing credibility among some within the street art community.

"Some people say I'm a sellout," Fairey says flatly, "but what a lot don't realise is that I've always had this very broad approach. Even in the early days, I was doing T-shirts and I'd have gallery interest, I've just kept expanding. It's never been one or the other for me. I don't see the problem in having [art] on the streets and in the rarefied world of fine art. I'm fascinated by Warhol and artists like him who brought a bigger audience into fine art. He may not have been so political, but that's what I'm going for."



'MOD/Decoding Disinformation' (2022)



Work on a mural by Fairery in Lisbon, 2017 © EPA

In true Fairery form, the exhibition won't just be about what is shown in a white box in Dallas; it will also include a street mural that he is preparing to start work on. He rummages through a desk and grabs a stencilled image of a flower. "The mural is going to be something like this, repeated flowers," Fairery explains, "but in the middle is a figure of a woman — a Mother Nature type with a Mona Lisa smile. She'll hold a flower out with planet Earth as the centre. And there will be a sticker — like in the supermarket — and it'll say 'While supplies last'." I ask Fairery why he chose Texas for this exhibition. His eyes light up at the question. "If I were to exhibit in LA or NY, it would be like preaching to the converted, but Texas is a complicated place," he says. "When the opportunity came up, it was a no-brainer. I couldn't ask for more fertile soil, a better place for some of the conversations I'm trying to provoke."

To July 23 2023, dallascontemporary.org