

A portrait of protest for the young artist

Art arises from life. It may simply reflect on events, experiences, feelings and emotions but it can also challenge and provoke.

There's an insightful cartoon by Australian Michael Leunig which shows a person sitting enthralled watching a beautiful sunset on TV while outside the window the real event is taking place unnoticed. Art sometimes resembles the televised sunset which is a pale substitute for the real experience and which fails to excite in any meaningful way. It is on the other side of art as conscience and critic, prodger and challenger where it reaches its most important role. In a musical context these two sides of art could be the difference between a Hayley Westenra and a Gin Wigmore.

It is this power of art to incite, annoy and confront which is the subject of this contribution.

Every protest group I've ever been associated with has had its artists who, as part of their activism, have designed posters or produced individual pieces of art which have helped carry important messages to a wider public. It's not a case of emphasising artistic style over political substance but the political communication needs a carrier pigeon and while people like me can usually do OK with the words, the visuals are what carry the day. It is the image which links to internal human emotions and subliminal feelings which has greater impact for most rather than the rational argument. More often than not it's the poster or image which is the essential effective vehicle for the message.

Advertisers know this better than anyone. They are paid very well to subvert our best intentions and our noblest ideals with seductive images to manipulate our inner emotions. They also work hard to associate a brand with these emotions such that the brand becomes the medium for their buy, buy, buy messages.

So what role does art play in a protest movement? A much greater part than you might think is the short answer. A few illustrations from my experience.

During the protests against the 1981 Springbok tour a sub-group called Artists Against Apartheid (AAA) formed from mainly Auckland based artists. They spearheaded a large protest march on the eve of the final All Black/Springbok test and the outpouring of artistic talent on the side of the oppressed was incredible. There were puppets, masks, posters, caricatures, fancy dress. The entire march of some 20,000 was itself a piece of colourful, provocative, challenging street

theatre. Among the most memorable images the following day was a black zeppelin-like balloon which floated across Eden Park emblazoned with the single word Biko. (It was 12 September 1981 and the anniversary of the murder of black activist Steve Biko in South African police custody). It could be argued that mini-zeppelin had a greater protest impact than much of the street-level action. It carried a message seen by millions as the game was broadcast around the country and around the world. This was a case of artists as a group joining forces to act together as activists on the streets as well as produce powerful, evocative and influential works of art.

If there were any artists on the other side of the debate it wasn't obvious. Their efforts in any case consisted of just half-witted slogans saying "Fart on HART". (For those of you who under 35 HART (Halt all Racist Tours) was the main anti-apartheid organisation co-ordinating opposition to sports links with apartheid South Africa)

The artworks from that period were stunning, not just for the variety of campaigning images and posters but in the more traditional works as well. For example the late Tony Fomison produced a small but striking image of a rugby ball on an altar for an art auction to raise funds for the anti-tour campaign. The idea here could be read in several ways. Do New Zealanders really see rugby as a national religion? How much was New Zealand sacrificing for rugby?

When Nelson Mandela came to New Zealand in 1996 we presented him with a framed poster produced by Stanley Palmer of a young tagger who had just completed spraying the words Free Nelson Mandela on a wall.

(Which reminds me - where has all the great political tagging gone? Has it really died? Are we just left with territorial tagging and changing Peter McCracken's first name to Phil?)

Auckland artist Peter Lange produced and fired drinking mugs telling the story of the young black man sentenced to several years in a South African prison for scratching the words Free Nelson Mandela on the side of his enamel mug at work. We sold these mugs as fundraisers – again art was a vehicle to carry the issue.

The peace movement produced a similar outpouring of artistic expression later in the 1980s. There were thousands of images and art works of all kinds which couriered this issue through the community. Art made relevant what happened in Washington and Moscow to us in the South Pacific. The images more than the words told the story. Again art was the carrier pigeon for the message.

Artist Ralph Hotere's work reflects two ways of using art to convey political challenges. Sometimes the meaning is in your face (eg his works using Polaris missiles or Moruroa as themes) while at other times it is much more subtle (eg the mournful images reflecting on war which he produced after visits to Sangro in Italy where his brother was killed in the Second World War. For me the pieces are desolate but warm with conflicted emotions).

The artists of each generation find their own voice based around their own experiences and the issues of their day. I'm not an artist but I'd like to think any artist reading this would be encouraged at the power of art as a means of expression to carry critical communications to the wider society. These ideas will never be carried by art which is well paid to produce. It's usually only artists working for advertisers who are well paid. Instead the most important art will be from an artist's own time and talent because the challenges we need are not those telling us what to buy but those evoking inner beliefs which subvert the consumer and empower the citizen within.

To all young artists out there – you have a lot more power than you think. Be courageous and use it.