



Richard Mock: *The Cutting Edge*

Richard Basil Mock (1944-2006) returns to Kentler International Drawing Space where he enjoyed a long friendship with founders Florence Neal and Scott Pfaffman and frequently exhibited in this space. This retrospective exhibition, with over 300 prints on view, is a tribute to him.

Mock's linoleum block (linotype) prints are characterized by bold, vigorously carved lines and irregular angles that quickly assert the essential point of any one subject –themes often bellowing with drama, ethos, and humor. Critics variously described the work as satirical, sardonic, colloquial, ironic, caustic, mysterious, anti-authoritarian and irresistible. What makes the images resonate with audiences are the simple and familiar shapes and by simple, I mean uncomplicated and also unique in ways that others fail to show. By all accounts, Mock's creative energies were immersed in the cultural plurality of the world around him and his art came from a personal credo that art and humanity are inseparable.

After graduating from the University of Michigan in 1965, having studied lithography and block printing, he travelled east to New York, settling there by 1979 and gaining commissions such as the official portrait artist at the 1980 Olympics and print work in *The Wall Street Journal* and United Nations publications. Mock's audience and his reputation widened considerably as his work appeared in the op-ed pages of the *New York Times* from 1980 through 1996. Some prints illustrated a specific event, such as the color linocut titled *Kosovo* (1999) or *Desert Vermin Attack the World Trade Center* (2001), although the majority dealt with foreground issues of social injustices if not social reform. Mock's themes repudiated American corporate greed, political partisanship, and racism in the same years that Reaganomics supply-side formulae governed the nation. Those policies did little for the underclass and Mock identified with their struggle. "I like the warmth of the working class. When I drive in here [Detroit] in my old pickup truck, I feel I've hit paradise."¹ He can be understood as both a political artist– making people think politically– as well as an activist artist. "It's [in] the nature

of my being to attack the enclosing power structures that are out to suck the planet dry."² In the 1990s Mock's prints appeared in leftist and anarchist publications such as, *Anarchy*, *Fifth Estate* and *Alternative Press Review*, where he was regarded "a fellow anarchist" and where he felt at home: "we would discover, in an anarchist society, new dimensions of being human."³ Prints for the *Cartoonists & Writers Syndicate* established additional international audiences for his work in over 55 countries. Mock's paintings and prints could be seen in galleries across continents from Bogotá, Colombia to Geneva, Switzerland, and Ljubljana, Slovenia.



Consider the print *American Voter* (2002) on view in the exhibition. Heavy diagonal linear designs triangulate figures, space, objects as perspectives rearrange themselves across the print. An oversized palm and crossed finger project outward while the three cartoon-like characters differ in size and symbol. Mock's tail-bearing figure screams in the ear of the protagonist while all around them stylized bird and bee-like forms are quaking noisily. The composition recalls the schematized creatures seen in works by Spanish artist Joan Miró. The figure, juxtaposed as simultaneously blindfolded and bug-eyed is wailing in distress, fingers crossed on the one hand, and the other drops his ballot into the box. The composition as a whole with its background of irregular quadrilateral, triangular shapes and patterns vibrates without restlessness; rather, it gives prominence to the oddly shaped objects that illustrate the story. Frequently 20th-century European artists are mentioned as evident sources for his work, however, some of his subjects give an unambiguous nod to American predecessors such as, painter Thomas Anschutz, Jacob Burck, Lin Shi Kahn and Tony Perez.



Another print, *New Republican Agenda*, 1998 shows the pictorial space drawn with broad strokes of angular black lines. Set upright at the center, three monumentalized elephant forms– emblematic of the Republican Party– appear mutilated, their hacked, bloody trunks lay at their feet. One of Mock's preliminary sketches marked as "pachoderm [sic] in retreat," shows how he first worked out the drawing– moving from the figural and only after, creating varied broad linear patterns for graphic interest.⁴



The visual delight of his graphic language is made up of pendant shaped drops of blood to contrast with the short-regular strokes forming the contours of the elephants; these patterns

combine with gently curved bowknots around each elephant's trunk at the point of violent dismemberment. The precision of the message is captured in simple forms that espouse violence and horror as political absurdity. Defining the maxim "See, Hear, Speak No Evil," Mock's image served to editorialize the political moment in a newspaper headline "Running Scared," July 22, 1999.⁵

Mock's career and travels crisscrossed the USA, from his origins in California to his eventual home base in New York, where he quickly became embedded in the art scene of the lower eastside of Manhattan, onto the westside Chelsea Hotel, and his longest stay in Brooklyn's Red Hook section. His creative output included abstract painting– "explosively chromatic"⁶– sculpture in fabric and metals, mural paintings, portraits, but the most noteworthy are the linotype prints. Parallel to this career, Mock was involved with children's art projects and taught art at Public School 6 in Manhattan from 1998 to 2002, leading fourth graders to make their own political cartoons illustrating social values and concern for the environment. Another pedagogical effort originated at the Plains Art Museum in Fargo, North Dakota. As artist in residence, Mock taught linotype classes to youngsters and their efforts resulted in the well-regarded publication *Hardlines* (2000). "Children learn to create symbolic images that narrate...Each child is one unit of the whole of life and art making helps...they are discovering and recognizing their interrelationships to the infinity of complexities in the masses of humanity."⁷

Mock's integrity and a natural generosity of spirit were part of every venture and every friendship. He lived a life that was all about making art, teaching, and sharing with other artists with little interest in possession of things or people. He held humanity in high regard, giving others a wide berth to be as they are. At a gala for 100 visual artists and hosted by African American artist Gerald Jackson, he received the award for the most spiritual artist on the New York art scene. His journeying over land and sea was filled with color and drama; for example, he was the sole artist among scientists on a ship to observe

the comet Kohoutek. The venture resulted in an exhibition of Mock's work, which according to one observer, was filled with "indescribable things of the cruise ship."⁸ Appraisals of Mock's career and his life often use the terms romantic and heroic.

Discerning viewers look forward to a monograph about his works as well as insights into his richly lived artist's life.

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- 1 Mick Vranich, Sherry Hendrick, "Richard Mock's Epic Vision, *Fifth Estate*, #373, Fall 2006.
- 2 Quoted in Allan Antliff, *Anarchists Studies* vol. 14 2006.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Drawing courtesy of Matrix Press.
- 5 Jason Lewis, "News with a View," *Star Tribune*, July 22, 1999, page A 8.
- 6 Grace Glueck, *New York Times*. January 28, 1983, Section C, Page 19.
- 7 Richard Mock, "Artist's Statement," *Hardlines*, Fargo, ND, Plains Art Museum, 2000.
- 8 Brent Berger, reminiscences of Richard Mock. Letter to Florence Neal, 2021.

