

Politically Charged Prints Cause Talking in the Library

Controversy has erupted from the sleepy third-floor hallway galleries at the New York Public Library, where a modest exhibition of contemporary prints called "Multiple Interpretations" is on view.

ART REVIEW

KEN JOHNSON

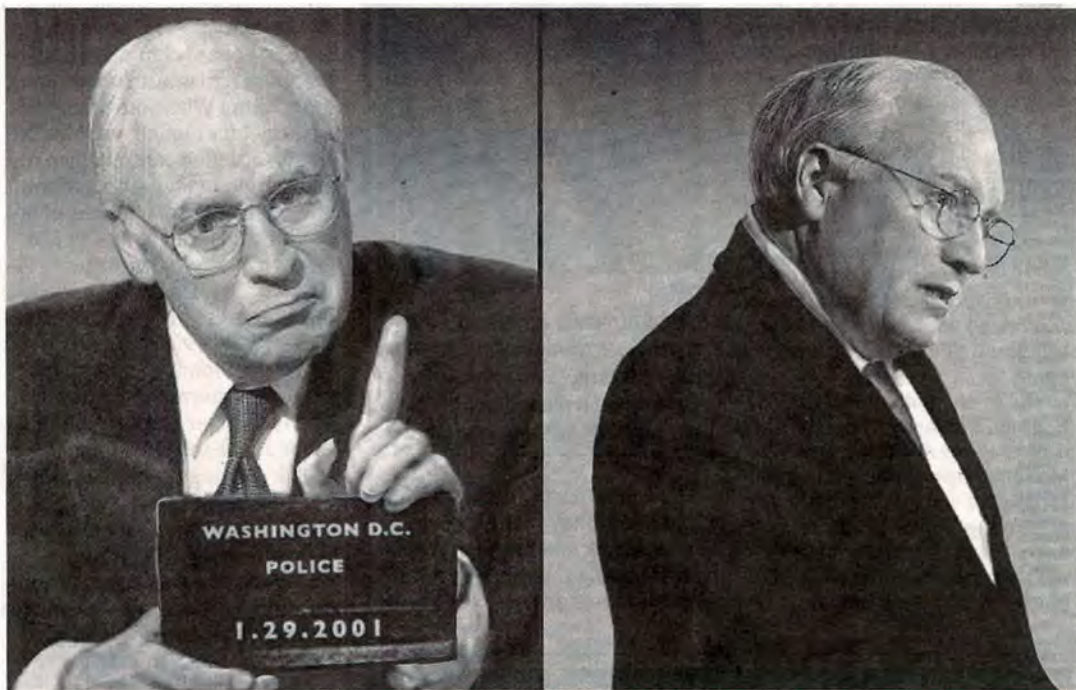
The work that has prompted protests from some library patrons, attracted coverage by The Daily News, Fox News and USA Today and has stirred the blogosphere is called "Line Up," a series of politically inflammatory prints by the team of Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese. Each black-and-white digital print is a mug-shot style diptych in which a member of the Bush administration appears in profile and face forward, holding a police identification sign and the date on which he or she made a statement of questionable veracity relating to Iraq.

A video accompanying the prints allows you to hear an actual recording through headphones as you view each speaker's fake mug shot reproduced on screen. President Bush announces the discovery of Saddam Hussein's effort to purchase uranium in Africa. Dick Cheney says, "Nobody has produced a single shred of evidence that there's anything wrong or inappropriate here," presumably a reference to Halliburton. (The entire video is available on YouTube.)

It is at first mildly shocking to come upon such bluntly partisan artwork on a New York Public Library wall. Biting political satire is deeply a part of printmaking history — see Goya, James Gillray and Daumier — but handmade prints are no longer a significant form of political communication, and we don't expect anything so brazenly tendentious in the public library context.

Seen elsewhere, the prints would not be so provocative. As a commenter on one blog pointed out, Ligorano/Reese's work would hardly raise an eyebrow, much less get a laugh, were it shown on "Real Time With Bill Maher" or on "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart." So the news

"Multiple Interpretations" continues through Jan. 27 at the New York Public Library; (212) 592-7730 or nypl.org.



JIM KEMPNER FINE ART

Vice President Dick Cheney in "Line Up" by Ligorano/Reese, at the New York Public Library.

Multiple Interpretations

New York Public Library

media squall it has precipitated seems overblown.

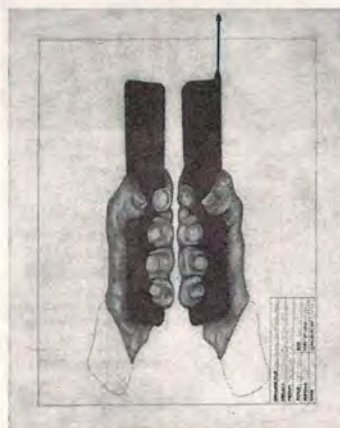
That said, Ligorano/Reese's piece does pose a challenge to the rest of the exhibition, which looks quiescent by comparison, even taking into consideration that the show is not meant to focus on political work. Organized by the library's curator of prints, Roberta Waddell, the display is intended to present the range of contemporary printmaking styles that the library has collected during the last 10 years.

There are some other political-ly animated works, but only Daniel Heyman's drypoint portraits of Iraqi prisoners drawn from life are nearly as provocative. They are not impressive visually, but the subjects' descriptions of abusive treatment by United States guards and interrogators — handwritten by Mr. Heyman into the spaces surrounding the images — are appalling, infuriating and heartbreaking.

A number of the show's artists work abstractly. Thomas Nozkowski's subtly colored etchings representing bulbous forms, geometric shapes and patterned fields are wonderful, and they are as interesting as the paintings for which he is best known.

Which raises another problem. It appears that some of the artists are included not because they are such great printmakers but because they are known for their work in other mediums. If it didn't come with the name of the international installation star Olafur Eliasson attached, a set of small photogravure copies of scientific diagrams and oscilloscope waves would be almost completely without interest.

The same can be said for copies of pages from old Erector Set manuals, done by the noted conceptualist Chris Burden, and for



E. V. DAY AND CAROLINA NITSCH

"Twin Towers — Double Fisted — 2001," part of the "Cellular Communion" series of prints by E. V. Day.

prints by E. V. Day, Kevin Appel and Julião Sarmiento. Too often the work suggests that the prints were made not because the artist was especially interested in the medium, but as tokens for collectors who could not afford the real thing.

There are a few artists in the show who are primarily committed to printmaking. David Avery, for example, created a series of small, Neo-Gothic style illustrations for Grimms' fairy tales that are crammed with magical details rendered in eye-straining miniaturism. And Andrew Raftery uses traditional engraving tools and techniques to create wide-angle views of men trying on suits in a luxurious clothing store. The style calls to mind the early-20th-century advertising illustration of J. C. Leyendecker — creator of the Arrow Collar Man — as well as the homoerotic narrative paintings and prints by Paul Cadmus.

On the other hand, David Shrigley's funny, absurdly rudimentary etchings — one depicts a stick figure crushed under a giant, Minimalist cube, while two companions helplessly look on — prove that technical mastery alone is not enough. Mr. Shrigley shrugs off the weight of high-culture expectations and in so doing achieves something oddly liberating.