Peace Press Exhibit Addresses Still Relevant Social Issues Of The Past

By Tiffany Rider
Staff Writer

Before Facebook and Twitter, e-mail or copy shops, progressive groups in the 1960s needed a way to communicate messages of activism and political change. At a time when commercial printing businesses refused to publish materials for gay rights, anti-war or civil rights, an independent printing collective was

born: the Peace Press.

Peace Press was a Los Angeles-based print workers collective founded by members of Students for a Democratic Society, Vietnam Day Committee and The Resistance, all anti-war groups looking to print materials in opposition to the Vietnam War. The collective's mantra, according to PeacePress.org, was: "Political power comes off the impression cylinder."

An exhibition called "Peace Press Graphics 1967-1987: Art in the Pursuit of Social Change," presented by the University Art Museum (UAM) at California State University, Long Beach, and the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, highlights the 20-year efforts of this group. The display is one of more than 60 art institutions' exhibitions that is part of The Getty Museum's initiative, "Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980," that runs through April 2012.

This initiative also includes exhibits by the Long Beach Musuem of Art and the Musuem of Latin American Art, both of which will be covered in upcoming issues of the Business Journal.

To achieve the goal of Pacific Standard Time – which is to document rarely acknowledged innovations of the post-war Los Angeles art scene – the political posters created by Peace Press show the regional involvement in political action during two decades of love-ins, teach-ins, sit-ins, protests and demonstrations.

There are about 130 posters in gallery, 40 to 50 of which were borrowed from two different private collectors with the rest from the Center for the Study of Political Graphics' collection of about 180 prints. "The posters vary in sophistication and quality, and we wanted to show really the prime ones," said Ilee Kaplan, co-curator of the Peace Press Graphics exhibit and associate director of the University Art Museum.

CSULB provides funding for most of the museum staff salaries and for building and grounds maintenance, but the museum must raise its program funds from outside sources. Most UAM exhibitions cost between $40,000 and $200,000, depending on how elaborate the project is, where the work is shipped from, how large the accompanying catalogue is, and whether the exhibition will go to other venues for display.

To frame, install and print a 200-page catalogue of the 130 posters cost $100,000, according to Kaplan. All of the funds for this exhibition were raised from individuals and private foundations, including about two-thirds of the cost covered by the Getty. Other agencies that donated include the Doris Duke Foundation through the Creative Campus Grant administered by the Carpenter Performing Arts Center, the Getty Multicultural Summer Intern program, the William Gillespie Foundation and the Bess Hodges Foundation for accompanying education programs, in addition to private individual contributions.

Bob Zaugh, one of the founders of Peace Press, provided some original prints and insight to the worker-owned operation. Zaugh was a member of The Resistance, refusing to be drafted into the Vietnam War.

"I turned in my draft card, refused to take a physical, refused induction," he told the Business Journal. "I went to court without an attorney to defend myself and had two felonies. Some of the other people at Peace Press had also done the same thing. So we learned how to print so we could print our statements about the war and the draft because we could not get them printed at a commercial printer."

Zaugh said it is an honor to him that the printing collective is part of the Pacific Standard Time snapshot of Los Angeles arts. "We would like to pass along what we did during those days, all the many movements that were around and the efforts they made ending the war in Vietnam and starting up a bunch of other things such as women's studies, politics, gay rights, civil rights, things like that," he said. "It's pretty exciting."

According to Kaplan, the preparation process revealed that it was necessary to connect the exhibition to various generations. "What we realized was that for people who were born in the '50s or earlier, this was all part of their personal experience," she said. "But for our students here and younger people, it's really history. A history book doesn't have the same personal connection."

To provide context to the exhibition, a team of faculty, undergraduate and graduate students and interns researched the back-story of the posters. Participants in the effort interviewed several members of the Peace Press collective and clients of Peace Press about their posters and their experiences. Using this information, short essays were written as descriptions throughout the exhibition as well as a timeline that highlights events that precipitated what many of the posters were about.

"We felt, as part of the university, from an academic point of view, the posters offer so many different issues to discuss," Kaplan said. Thus, the UAM is offering a series of educational programs in September and October. They include panel discussions about other art collectives, higher education and a symposium on how to affect change through politics. The two-part symposium begins with a panel about using the political system, featuring Assemblymember Tony Mendoza and former City Councilmember Tonia Reyes-Uranga.

"The second part is about civil disobedience and the screening of a new film about the FBI program, the Counter Intelligence Program, that was involved with infiltrating groups during the '60s and '70s," Kaplan said. "We think those will add another dimension to the posters and really make the issues come real."

Famous clients of Peace Press include Brian Wilson, former front man of The Beach Boys; Huey Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party; and Timothy Leary, an American psychologist and writer known for advocating elevating consciousness with lysergic acid (LSD). Progressive groups, including the Alliance for Survival, the American Indian Movement, Angela Davis Defense Committee, the United Farm Workers and many others, used Peace Press posters to help spread their word of protest.

Although Peace Press shuttered in 1987, the materials produced from the collective continue to reflect past issues still faced today. "One of the things we've found is, yes, this was all about the 1960s and '70s and '80s, but some things have not changed," said Kaplan. "Many of the posters are still, unfortunately, very relevant."

In a piece written by Irene Wolt published on the Peace Press Web site, the former Peace Press worker said the history of the collective continues to resonate even in today's political environment.

"In this era of increased corporate media disinformation and news-as-entertainment, there is something vital to be learned from the model of alternative information production created by committed activists more than 30 years ago," Wolt wrote. "Though the tools or technologies may change, injustices continue to

be fought, and dissenting points of view need to be expressed and safeguarded."

The Center for the Study of Political Graphics' collection of Peace Press prints provided many of the posters in the UAM exhibit. In addition, some of the center's other artworks are featured in other Pacific Standard Time exhibitions, including "MEX/LA 'Mexican' Modernism(s) in Los Angeles 1930-1985" at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach. That exhibit opens to the public on September 18 at 2 p.m. with a panel discussion between curators and art historians.

UAM's Peace Press Graphics opens on September 10 with a reception from 5-8 p.m. The exhibition runs through December 11. For more information visit University Art Museum

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