Epicenter

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John Hitchcock's Ground Zero

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Impractically Political: Epicenter, John Hitchcock's multimedia extravaganza, is at once alluring and sobering, playful and deadly serious. Even the colors in this exhibit are held in tension: heavy, dark tones of grey and black predominate, punctuated by explosions of bright, buoyant color. Featuring dynamic prints on the walls, and printed cut-outs arranged in intricate abstract geometric patterns on the floor, the exhibit also includes printed felt pendants hanging from poles like so many flags in a pageant, and three rapid-fire collaborative videos made between 2008 and 2010.[1] No single aesthetic prevails here: rough expressionistic lines serve as the striking backdrop for one image, while clean, pop-inspired polka dots enliven another. Animal heads reminiscent of Saturday-morning cartoon figures intermingle with more spectral portraits of deer and buffalo. A Keith Haring-inspired armored tank sprouting tentacle-like artillery is rendered with comic sophistication, while a sailing ship is depicted with childlike directness.

Over the last dozen years, John has developed a personal iconography and political outlook forged from his experiences growing up next to Fort Sill military base in Oklahoma, and in close proximity to extended family on his mother's Kiowa/Comanche side. Indeed, these formative elements are intimately and complexly interwoven. Today one of the largest Field Artillery training installations in the western United States, Fort Sill was originally established in the mid-nineteenth century as American settlers moved into territory inhabited by American Indian tribes and conflicts escalated. Hitchcock's Kiowa and Comanche ancestors on his mother's side were among those indigenous groups targeted for removal and relocation from the Southern Plains.

[1] Hitchcock's collaborators were Matt Wead, Federico Signaler and Julie Mckendrick.

The Hunt screenprint and ink on paper, 15x22 inches 2010

More immediately, Hitchcock's parents met when John's father (of German and Northern European descent) served in the military at Fort Sill during the Korean War. After a brief time living in Michigan, the family returned to Oklahoma to live on Comanche tribal lands in the Wichita Mountains next to the army base; this was where John was raised. As he once noted, "Oklahoma State Highway 49 is all that separates my family's land from Fort Sill. Helicopters flew overhead, soldiers played war games in the woods, and tanks noisily drove by at 3 a.m. As a child in the early `70s, I thought the television images of war in Vietnam were coming from outside my window. It was kind of confusing."[1]

At once fascinated by military machinery, repulsed by the pervasive culture of violence in which we live and sensitized in a way that most Americans are not to the tactics of "assimilation, relocation and genocide"[2] that shaped our nation, Hitchcock's work as a professional artist has a decidedly political cast. Particularly after 9/11, much of his art addressed the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and the Bush Doctrine, the expansionist agenda driving post-9/11 national foreign policy. His prints and installations suggested that contemporary developments were recapitulations of American imperialism, the foundational bedrock upon which our nation was built. Thus, in works such as *Fear Monger* (Boise State University, 2008), for example, and *Expansion* (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2008), Hitchcock turned pristine gallery spaces into theaters of war with dozens of printed, cut-out military helicopters banking and swarming the walls above hulking military tanks holding positions below. Against these modern-day war machines he projected the silhouette of a lone buffalo and the concentric rings of red targets, the visual filament connecting present-day U.S. actions around the globe with the violent history of our nation. Arrangements of cut-outs of animal heads, encircled and entrapped, evoked the forcible removal and relocation of indigenous life (peoples and animals), while endless rows of hand drawn tickmarks pointed to the ways in which the atrocities of war are tallied and rendered as cold abstractions. Elements from these earlier installations are included in the present show.

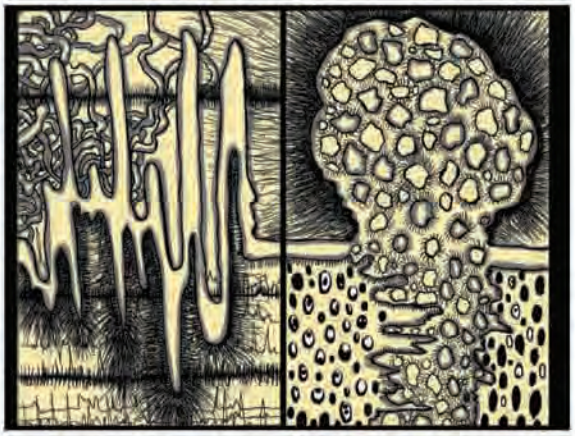
Destroyer ink on paper, 15x22 inches 2010

[1] Hitchcock, as quoted in Carol Pulin, "Interview: John Hitchcock," Contemporary Impressions (Spring 2003): p. 20.

Today, however, Hitchcock's art takes a more personal turn. In 2009, John's eyesight began to fail. Medical exams revealed a large – and growing – brain tumor that required pharmaceutical treatment, then risky surgery. Thankfully, the delicate procedure restored his eyesight, his health and his boundless energy. But, as few events in our quotidian lives and nearly all personal health crises tend to do, John's ordeal heightened his awareness of the fragility of life and compelled him to face his own mortality. These dimensions are palpable in the current exhibit. In sheer physical terms, the prospect of blindness triggered a frenetic period of artmaking, which continues to this day. The artist determined, for example, to make (and post on Facebook) a drawing a day for one full year, beginning on his 42nd birthday on October 31, 2009. The ship in *Epicenter* was selected from this daily output; a new motif in his arsenal of images and open to multiple interpretations in this multivalent show, it is an apt symbol of John's personal odyssey.

More specifically, the tumor that loomed large in the artist's brain and in his imagination also haunts *Epicenter*; at times, the amorphous form is depicted as a void, at others it is merged with mushroom clouds or detonating bombs. There are allusions, too, in the current exhibition to medical charts, and grids and graphs of brain and blood activity that morph, in places, into cityscapes and skylines under siege. Circles and ovoids, cones and squares (cells or bits of data) multiply and ricochet uncontrollably – or expand to form a sea engulfing a whale-shark.

The target motif, long a staple in Hitchcock's iconography of war, takes a new, fractured form in the current show. It also assumes new meaning and ironic personal significance in the context of the artist's battle to recover his eyesight and health. A target is, after all, a sign intended to focus or direct sight. In *Epicenter*, the unmistakeable form is shattered. The precise concentric rings are presented here on the brink of collapse – or re-formation. Like the endlessly changing patterns of a kaleidoscope, Hitchcock's art is in a state of heightened transformation. The current exhibition does indeed delineate an epicenter.



Boom!! screenprint, 11x15 inches 2009

Just as military and medical terms migrate across discursive boundaries ("surgical strikes," "invasive medical procedures"), John Hitchcock activates new meanings in his art through tactical recombination. Exploiting the possibilities of reproduction that the medium of printmaking affords, he recycles and repurposes his images, inserting them in new contexts and setting them in circulation with different images in a kind of endless stream-of-consciousness association.

Blanco screenprint, 30x44 inches 2010

Take, for example, the fantastical animal heads which figure so prominently in *Epicenter*. In several works, they function as they did in earlier installations: as stand-ins for communities dislocated and disrupted by war. Presented in some imagined liminal state between life and death, these hybrid animals are metaphors for life and death. John tells me they also represent departed family members – his maternal grandparents, an aunt, his mother: people close to him whose recent deaths he has not yet fully absorbed. Equally, they are linked to old Kiowa/Comanche stories his grandmother told him as a youth and to the Plains ceremonial dancers he regularly watched at pow-wows – the ones who fully inhabited the regalia they wore. Printed singly, at enlarged scale and affixed to pendants, these fantastical animals become personal talismans endowed with a poignant majesty.

When the same images are reduced in size, multiplied, and arranged in a repeating design, their fearsomeness is subsumed within and overwhelmed by the lacy, crystalline delicacy of the overall pattern. In this way, Hitchcock opens a window onto his working method, which is fundamentally grounded in production and reproduction, modulation and changeability. Come to think of it, these are the central components of our digital-age visual landscape, too, a fact not lost on the artist himself.

But I want return to the brightly-colored prints in Epicenter and those arrangements that are marked by their striking visual patterning. Hitchcock associates his use of the printed image as a repeating unit in larger geometric designs to the Kiowa/Comanche beadwork tradition with which he grew up. His kaku (grandmother), Peggy Pohoxicut Reid, was a masterful beadwork artist; during her lifetime, she was always working on beadwork for family and community members' dance regalia. Peggy Reid enlisted John's artistic talents from an early age – asking him, for example, to design flower patterns for her beadwork designs. "This is how I learned to draw," the artist notes. Their creative collaboration continued until her death in 1999.

In a way, their collaboration extends into the current exhibition. In *Epicenter*, John Hitchcock takes stock of where he has come from and where he is going. The exhibit is about the past, the present and future – his and ours. It is, above all, about change.

Flatlander screenprint on wood, felt, and paper, 2011

John Hitchcock uses the print medium with its long history of social and political commentary to explore relationships of community, land, and culture. Hitchcock's works on paper and multimedia installation consists of prints and moving image that mediate the trauma of war and the fragility of life. Images of U.S. military weaponry are combined with mythological hybrid creatures from the Wichita Mountains of western Oklahoma to explore notions of assimilation and control.

John Hitchcock is an Artist, Graduate Chair, and Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he teaches screenprinting, relief cut, and installation art. He earned his MFA in printmaking and photography at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas and received his BFA from Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma. His work has been exhibited at numerous national and international venues, notably "Epicentro: Re Tracing the Plains" curated by Nancy Marie Mithlo on the occasion of the Venice Biennale 54th International Art Exhibition in collaboration with the Dirty Printmakers of America at the University of Ca' Foscari, Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati, Venice, Italy; the Kumu Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn, Estonia; Dalarnas Museum, Falun, Sweden; London Print Studio, London, England, UK; Waldkunstpfad /Forest-Art- Path, Darmstadt, Germany; South African Museum, Cape Town, South Africa; Museu de Arte de Brasilia, Brasilia, Brazil; Museum of Contemporary Art, Santiago de Chile; International Print Center New York, Chelsea, New York; Museum of Arts & Design, New York; Eiteljorg Museum Indianapolis, Indiana; Naples Museum of Art, Naples, Florida; Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma; Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Exit Art New York; the Print Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and the North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks. He has also served as artist in residence at the Frans Masereel Centrum for Graphix in Kasterlee, Belgium; the Proyecto'ace International Center for Visual Arts in South America in Buenos Aires, Argentina; and the Venice Printmaking Studio, Venice, Italy.

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