

Where are the Social Realists?

by Joan Altabe



If the art commonly seen these days is the sum of what artists are doing, I'm worried and you should be, too. Where are the Social Realists?

Granted, the movement arose in the '30s, during the Great Depression; although it can be said that Social Realism originated long before that. I'm thinking of the cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira. They are demonstration lessons in art that is relevant to its time.

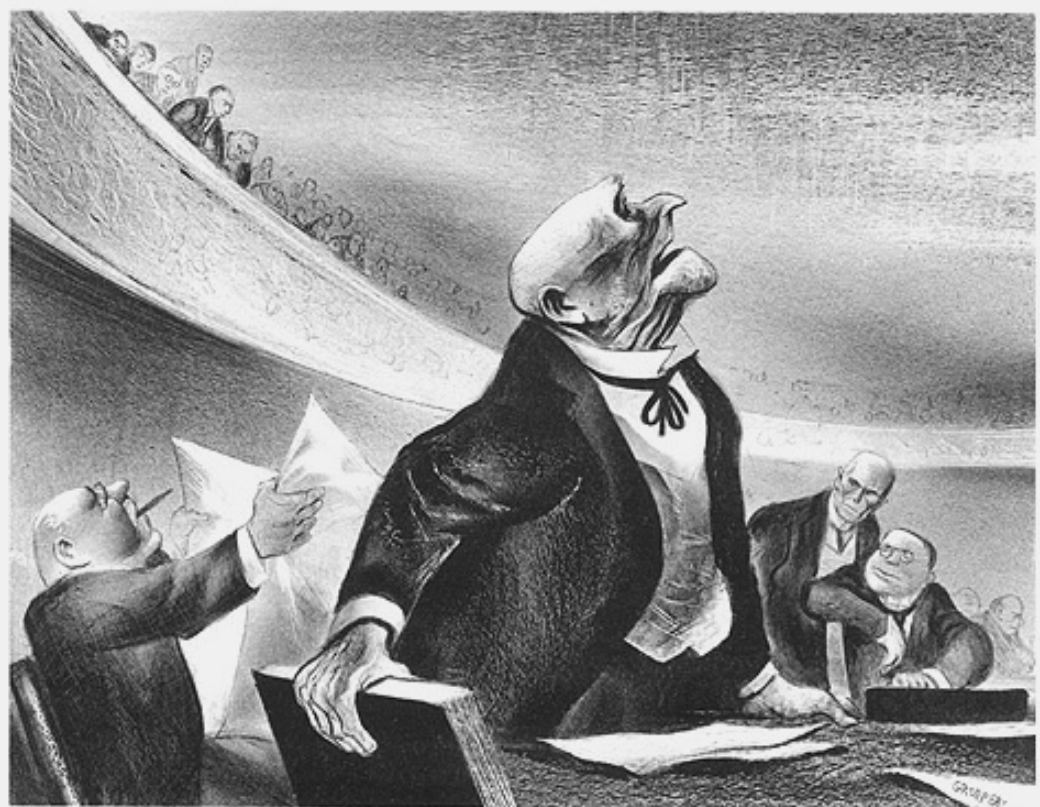
Prehistoric painting was about survival.

In that sense, American Social Realists of the '30s were latter-day cave painters. Concerning himself with the issues of his day, someone like William Gropper believed that Congress ran American life and ultimately its culture. So his painting "Opposition," showed grumpy old legislators railing against something or other. The image could have been made today, as the Congress tries to decide *what* to do about the

Iraq war.

But what do you see around you? Pretty landscapes or abstract drips – often computer generated, no less – that repeat like drum beats on empty tin cans.

"You can't disregard the whole world for some silly paint spots," said Social Realist Jack Levine in 1955.



The Opposition by William Gropper

In the light of all the "silly paint spots" that the art world tosses out at us, I miss Social Realism. How about you? Don't you feel the need for the silent language of such realism? Don't you want to see artists make statement at a time when so much art seems irrelevant?

Gropper's "Opposition" says that when history is made, artists ought to react to it, that indifference to current events disconnects art and renders it beside the point.

But even Gropper disconnected art from life with his landscape watercolors. His "Croton Winter Scene" is bucolic northern scenery. There is no statement, unless you count the limbs of the trees, which are like grey bones. But puffy, clean snow argues against such an interpretation.

Arguing against such painting was Social Realist Ben Shahn, who said that there are just two things to paint – the things you are very strongly for and the things you are very strongly against. Shahn made this remark in 1973. That and Levine's statement in the '50s suggests that you don't have to be an artist during the Great Depression to be a Social Realist. You don't even have to be an artist of the 20th century.

In the last century, Francisco Goya's "The Disasters of War" series was about man's inhumanity to man. Gropper's political

paintings – like those of Goya, Levine, Shahn and the cave painters – concern themselves with the spirit of a time: its conflicts, triumphs and defeats – the stuff of great art.

Damned if I know what Gropper's snow scenes are about other than snow. (Yawn).

Mind you, I've picked on Gropper to avoid faulting contemporary painters. But you have to wonder in these difficult times, with so much of the world warring and so much of our blood and bucks funding such wars, where our cave painters are and whether we'll ever achieve great works as have artists before us.

A great painting marked the bombing in 1937, "Guernica" by Picasso. Felix Deweldon's statue of five marines and a Navy corpsman raising the flag on Iwo Jima, standing near Arlington National Cemetery, memorialized World War II. Visual art is our silent witness. In the '70s, Jack Levine's "Feast of Pure Reason, attacked the lawlessness of power with three overfed authority figures.

At the rate we're going, we'll be painting ourselves into the proverbial corner – the one marked irrelevant. 🖌️