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Anti-Heroic Images in Contemporary American Art

This essay treats anti-heroic images in contemporary American art. These images, which appropriate and even subvert the heroic, are grouped around four political protest movements that emerged during the 1960s: the civil rights movement, feminism, the environmental movement, and opposition to the Vietnam War. With the exception of the last, all of these struggles continue in some form today. Some of the artists discussed here refer in a given image to more than one protest movement, and art works focused on two different movements may share the same heroic referent.

Let us begin with the popular television series, *The Simpsons*. We see the joke of naming a cartoon character, Homer Simpson, after the author of the ancient Greek epic poem, the *Odyssey*. The cartoon shows Homer Simpson, dressed in classical military garb, contemplating a sign that implies the opening theme of the *Odyssey* after its hero destroyed Troy. Here the heroic has been reduced to humor at the level of American pop culture.



Homer Simpson as Homer in the ancient Greek epic poem *Odyssey*.

In the 90s Bart, Nelson, Milhouse and Ralph Wiggum form a band. This inevitable parody of Joe Rosenthal's iconic photo was part of one of their music videos.

Let us turn now to a classic heroic image of American culture: Joe Rosenthal's 1945 photograph of five American marines and one Navy Corpsman raising the flag on the island of Iwo Jima after having fought a fierce battle in which the United States captured the Pacific island from Japan at the cost of many lives on both sides. The concept of the military showing its flag as a heroic symbol goes back at least to the model of the Romans who rallied around their standard, which, as we can see here, often included the eagle as the symbol of Jupiter and the wolf as the symbol of Rome's founding. The creators of *The Simpsons* also parodied Joe Rosenthal's iconic photograph as part of one of their music videos during the 1990s, in which the characters attempt to raise their flag.



Much earlier, in 1968, the California sculptor Edward Kienholz appropriated Rosenthal's photograph in his monumental installation, *Portable War Memorial*, now in the collection of the Ludwig Museum in Koln, Germany. Behind the soldiers raising the flag, Kienholz has ironically placed a World War I era recruiting poster, captioned "Uncle Sam wants you." His inclusion of this famous personification of the United States was intended as an anti-war symbol during the Vietnam War, where the military draft imposed on young men caused many to protest and some to flee to Canada, Sweden, or to other countries.



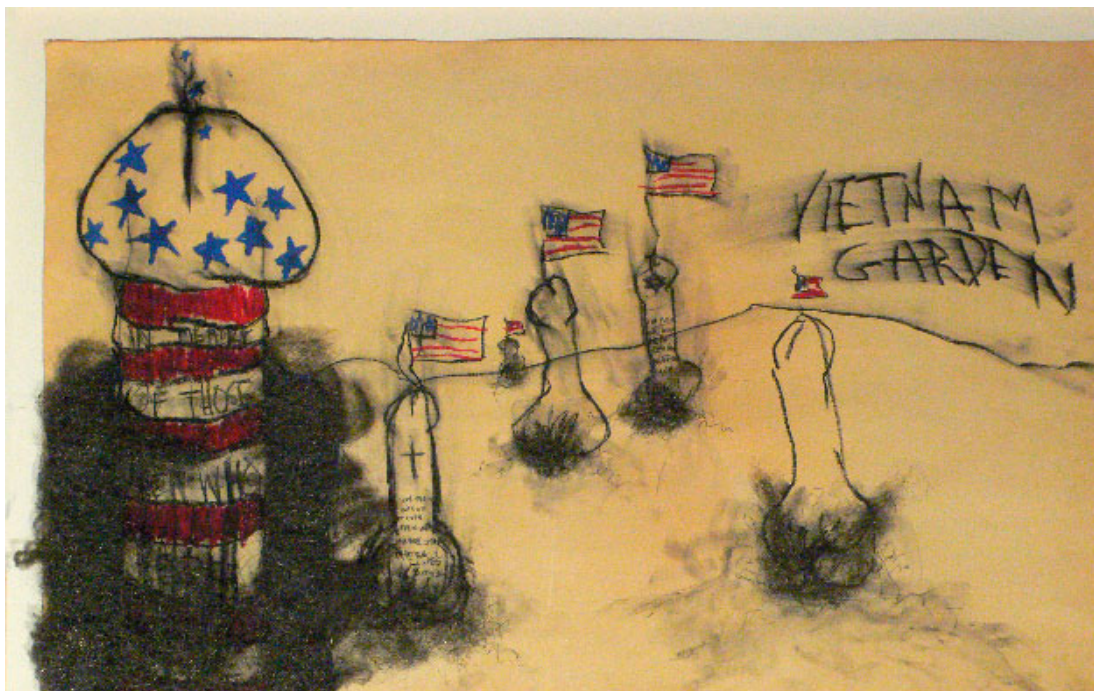
A few years later, Julia Mueli, a feminist organizer in Los Angeles for the National Organization of Women, staged a photograph of a group of young women raising a flag with the 'mirror of Venus,' the symbol of woman. Thus, their feminist triumph is made to echo and to subvert the heroic acts of men at war.



Judith Meuli



Feminist Judith Bernstein's *Vietnam Garden* of 1967, shows that she associated the patriotic symbol of the flag with death. She further turned the flag poles into penises and the penises into grave markers in the form of ancient stele. At least two of these tomb markers bear religious symbols of the Christian cross and the Jewish star. One bears the words, "In memory of those who..."

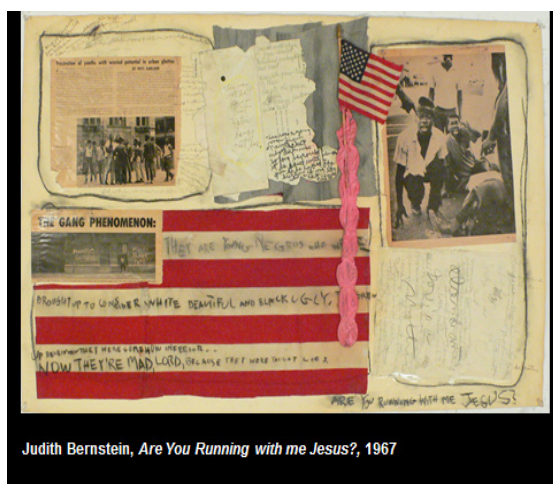


The flag phallus next to it with a cross and the Jewish star phallus in the background say "in memory of those men who gave their lives." *Vietnam Garden*, the title, is floating in the sky. At the time she produced this work, Bernstein was a young graduate student at

Yale University, who associated war with male aggression and excessive testosterone. By transforming this graveyard to a garden, she also evoked the paradise of the environment before it was sullied by violence.

Concern with the environment also led to a parody of Rosenthal's iconic photograph from Iwo Jima on the cover of *Time Magazine* for April 28th, 2008, which turned the flagpole into an evergreen tree. Environmentalists praised the magazine for its bold and brave confrontation with the issue of global warming, however, some veterans and family members of veterans objected. They did not want to share their heroic image with another cause.

Bernstein dealt with the civil rights movement in another work from 1967, called *Are you Running with me Jesus?* In it, she includes two headlines, "Frustration of youth with wrested potential in urban ghettos" and "The Gang Phenomenon." She follows the latter with a handwritten inscription on the white stripes of the American flag: "They are young Negroes who were brought up to consider white beautiful and black ugly. They grew up believing they were somehow inferior. . . Now they're Mad, Lord, Because they were taught lies." A scene of urban ghetto life takes the place of stars on the flag.



Judith Bernstein, *Are You Running with me Jesus?*, 1967



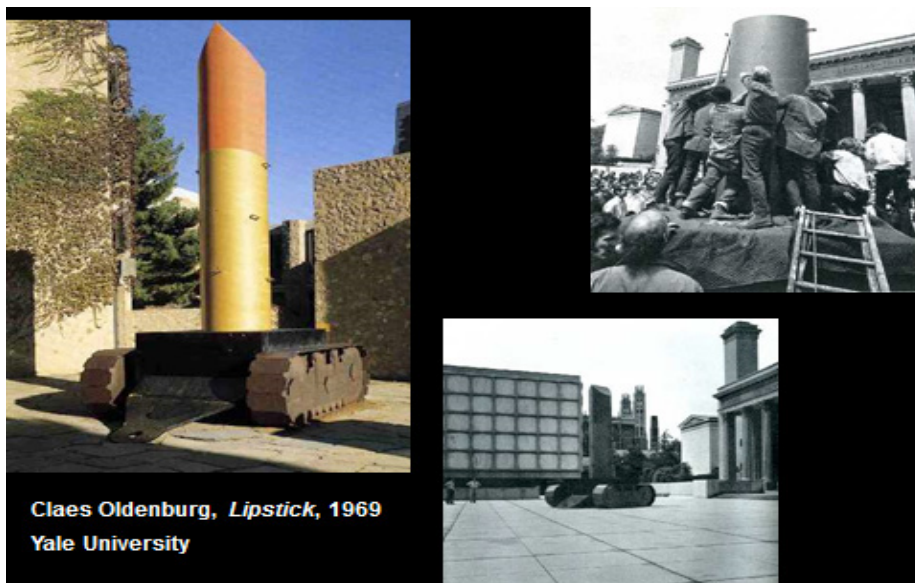
Faith Ringgold, *The Flag is Bleeding*, 1967
Shown at the Judson Church in "The People's Flag Show" in 1970

The heroic image of the American flag also attracted the attention of the African-American artist Faith Ringgold, who painted a 1967 canvas called *The Flag is Bleeding*. Bleeding from its wounds, the flag's stripes may also be read as prison bars. Seen behind the red bars, two men and a woman between them stand together arm in arm. The African-American man holds a knife. Ringgold, a feminist activist, wrote in her memoir that she saw the white woman as a peacemaker between the two men. Painted in the midst of both the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement, this canvas suggests that the artist saw the nation as crippled from both the war in Vietnam and from the inequality of its own citizens at home. Ringgold's *The Flag is Bleeding II* of 1997 is one of her "story quilts" to which she turned in lieu of stretched canvas, evoking the traditional forms of African-American rural women who made patchwork quilts, sometimes with narrative messages. In her image, a large figure of an African-American mother grasps two tiny naked children, recalling the Madonna of the Misericordia, who tries to protect the helpless. Ringgold shows that the heroic symbol of "the land of the free and the home of the brave" does not protect these helpless children from the ravages of war, racism, and inequality in American society.



Faith Ringgold in front of her *The flag is bending II*, 1997 and Piero della Francesca's *Madonna of the Misericordia* 1460-62

From a very different perspective, Claes Oldenburg, who grew up in the United States as the child of a Swedish diplomat, also wanted to protest the war in Vietnam. To do so, he turned to an image of modern-day warfare, a missile. He also produced a work that is ironic and anti-heroic: *Lipstick*, was originally installed May 15, 1969, at the Beinecke Plaza of Yale University. It was intended as a platform for public speaking during the time of the anti-war protests and the free speech movement. A group who called themselves “the Colossal Keepsake Corporation of Connecticut,” commissioned Oldenburg to realize as a large-scale sculpture on campus his idea that previously existed only in his drawings for imagined larger-than-life-size monuments.





Horatio Greenough, George Washington as Zeus (1832-41)

Emperor Claudius as Jupiter, Vatican Museum, c. 41-54 A.D.

The commissioning group thought the work would convey a revolutionary aesthetic and make a political statement. They clearly perceived the monumental lipstick's resemblance to an Apollo Saturn rocket or to a missile and intended that the work's aggressive presence would serve to disturb the public space. Originally, Oldenburg made his work of cheap materials such as plywood tracks and a red vinyl balloon tip that could be inflated to send out an alert. In his flimsy construction, Oldenburg may well have been inspired by model toy rocket kits. The materials he used for his original sculpture did not stand up and so the work was removed, only to be rebuilt out of corten steel, aluminum, and fiberglass. It was then re-installed at Yale's Morse College in 1974, where it remains today as an epitome of the anti-heroic.

As we single out an anti-heroic strain in contemporary American art, we should look also back to American culture's traditional hero. George Washington, the first president of the United States. American artists turned to classical tradition and depicted him as larger than life, strong, brave, and god-like. Many artists modeled Washington on Roman models, particularly Roman statues of Jupiter. As late as early nineteenth-century France, Ingres had continued this tradition, depicting Zeus enthroned. The Emperor Claudius in the Vatican Museum was also depicted as Jupiter c. 54 A.D.

Equestrian paintings and statues of George Washington were also popular in the United States. For a model, the artist looked back to Marcus Aurelius, whose equestrian sculpture was well known from its position on the Capitoline in Rome. Thomas Crawford, an American sculptor living and working in Rome, designed the first equestrian statue of Washington to be erected in the United States. His Classical Revival design was unveiled in Richmond, Virginia on February 22, 1858.

Four years earlier, in 1851, Emmanuel Leutze, a German-immigrant artist depicted

George Washington Crossing the Delaware. This mural-sized picture shows General George Washington leading the American revolutionary troops across the Delaware River to surprise the English and Hessian troops in the Battle of Trenton the day after Christmas in 1776. While Leutze may not have based his Washington directly on an image of Jupiter, his Washington is still larger than life, fearless, and god-like in his stance in a moving boat. The theme of crossing a river standing in a small boat recalls Charron crossing the river Styx, a classical subject related by Virgil in his *Aeneid* (book 6, line 369).

While such images abound, especially in the nineteenth century, Leutze was more probably imitating John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* of 1778. Even Washington's pose with his bent knee and raised foot balanced on the edge of the boat seems to be a mirror image of a figure standing next to the black man in Copley's picture.

Copley's painting tells the story of a shark attack in Havana harbor in 1749. The image is of Brook Watson, the 14-year-old victim, who went swimming to his peril while serving as a crew member on his uncle's trading ship. The crew of a small boat, which had been waiting to escort their captain to shore, rescued Watson, but not before the shark bit off his foot and ankle and a chunk of his lower leg. The appearance of a black sailor in Copley's canvas may have inspired Leutze to include a similar figure in his iconic painting.

Leutze gives prominence not only to the heroic American flag but also to a rower by Washington's knee, who is a person of color, said to be a man named Prince Whipple. No documentary proof survives placing Whipple in Washington's boat, however, there was the integrated Marbleheader unit from Massachusetts, which led in rowing General Washington and his troops across the River.

The known existence of blacks in this historic group of men probably inspired the African-American painter Robert Colescott, who after serving in World War II, studied in Paris with the modernist artist, Fernand Léger. It was in France that Colescott probably attained enough critical distance from American society to enable him to mock some of its most revered icons. He created his painting entitled *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware* in 1974-75. He based his work's theme and composition on Leutze's celebrated *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Colescott's subject is no longer the first president of the United States, however, but the pioneering African-American scientist George Washington Carver, who lived from 1864 to 1943, or from the Civil War to the midst of World War II. Carver developed alternative crops to cotton such as peanuts and sweet potatoes, aiming at improving nutrition.

For Colescott, it mattered that there was no equally celebrated icon for the significant African-American scientist. Thus, he replaced the image of the first President with his namesake, George Washington Carver. Colescott populated his boat with stereotypical images of African-Americans from popular culture, even as he sought to satirize racism in American society. The man playing the banjo in the rear of the boat is straight out of a minstrel show and other figures also appear to be in "blackface."



Colescott referenced African slaves, who first brought the banjo, or at least an early version of it, to America. The banjo was originally played by griots, the traditional bards of West Africa. As the contemporary banjo player Don Vappie explained, “Here’s an instrument that was part of a culture — part of a people — who were taken from where they are and brought somewhere else. And over time, those people had learned to hate something that was part of them, part of their past.”

The other stereotypic figures in Colescott’s boat represent African-American cooks, maids, and fishermen, essentially servants to “white folk.” There is, for example, a ‘Mammy’ figure, as in the Aunt Jemima pancake mix image, the Luzianne coffee can, or in Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel, *Gone with the Wind*. Taking on this complex theme, Colescott explored the issue of race and social position more effectively by employing humor. At the age of 71, he represented the United States with a solo show at the Venice Biennale in 1997, becoming the first African-American artist to earn that honor.

Where Americans have their iconic images such as George Washington, Europeans have theirs-- from Marcus Aurelius to Napoleon. The heroic equestrian image the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who attained the reputation of a ‘philosopher king’ within his lifetime, has come continued to impact culture, well beyond the lands he ruled. The French Neo-classical painter Jacques Louis David continued this heroic tradition with his equestrian portrait of *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* of 1800. Even Napoleon’s dramatic gesture with his outstretched arm echoes the earlier image of Marcus Aurelius. This confident gesture in David’s portrait of Napoleon shows the viewer that the victory is predestined, while he also signals to his soldiers to follow.

Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps was parodied in 2005 by the African-American painter, Kehinde Wiley. He painted himself at the age of twenty-eight as Napoleon. Although Wiley sports a similar shawl, he wears a camouflage-patterned

army surplus uniform and a handkerchief tied as a head-band instead of Napoleon’s characteristic bicorne or two-cornered hat, which was widely adopted in the 1790s for military uniforms. Wiley explained his decision to parody this particular image for his self-portrait as, “Painting is about the world that we live in. Black men live in the world. My choice is to include them. This is my way of saying yes to us.” This painting, now in the permanent collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, makes a powerful statement by subverting this heroic image of a White European male and turning it into an unexpected image of a young African-American man.

Evidently Napoleon refused to sit for David’s portrait, citing the great men of antiquity, whom he insisted, did not sit for their portraits either. Napoleon knew that what he needed in this portrait was not resemblance to precise features, but an image of an idealized, heroic character, which was what David produced and what Wiley wished to call forth for himself and young African-American men.



Marcus Aurelius



Kehinde Wiley, *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, 2005

Jacques Louis David, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, 1800

It is evident that Wiley wanted to correct stereotypes of young black males, who are still disproportionately depicted as criminals and only into crime, sports, and entertainment. Only recently the image of President Barack Obama helped to change such perceptions. “These images are corrosive,” said UCLA political scientist Franklin Gilliam, who was conducting a national focus group study on racial attitudes. “It’s not just about keeping black males infantile; what it does is keep a focus on the ‘misanthropic nature’ of black men. If everyone else depicted is ‘in the system’ and this young black man is perceived as not, the common response of society is that he’s the problem and we need to remove him from the system.” Wiley, through the subversion of centuries-old heroic images, has definitely put himself in the system; he has met with notable success in the art market and

museum world. Audiences of all kind respond to his work.

In 2009, Wiley also painted a portrait of the pop star Michael Jackson to parody the *Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II*. Wiley's most important model for this work was Peter Paul Rubens's *Equestrian portrait of King Philip II of Spain*, painted in 1628, and now in the Prado Museum in Madrid. Wiley even imitated Rubens's background, which features the 1557 battle of San Quintin. But there are also details from Jacques Louis David in his composition.



Peter Paul Rubens
Equestrian portrait of King Philip II
of Spain, 1628. Background
features the battle of San
Quintin, 1557. Museo del Prado,
Madrid.



Kehinde Wiley, *Equestrian Portrait*
of King Philip II (Michael Jackson),
2009

Wiley received voicemail messages in 2007 that alerted him that Michael Jackson was trying to reach him, but he thought that the messages were from a prankster and so he ignored them. When it turned out that Michael Jackson was really trying to contact him to commission a portrait, Wiley was willing. But before the commission could be realized, Jackson died. Wiley, who decided to complete the piece to honor the dead celebrity, described his style and subjects in an interview:

I try to recognize the sacred in the most common places; I just start with an African American community that I belong to. You know, much of what I do is I quote old paintings, and the old paintings are repopulated with young African American men who follow a very straight ahead demographic, between the ages of 18 and 25. It's obviously a comment on youth culture and it's a comment on consumption patterns, but it's also a comment on who gets to be in those sort of important moments in picture making.

When asked why he felt obliged to complete the work, Wiley said: "I think that his idea of collaborating with me was something that he really wanted to see through... I felt a responsibility to him to get it done." What Wiley has done is portray Jackson as a hero, but the irony of showing the controversial pop star in armor suggests his embattled life and his simultaneous image as an anti-hero.

A contemporary visual artist who specifically refers to the anti-hero is the New York feminist sculptor Linda Stein. Her *Anti-hero/Hero 587* is a visual response to her

experience with Borat, the main character of the 2006 film, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, often referred to simply as *Borat*. It starred the English comedian Sacha Baron Cohen in the title role of a fictitious Kazakh journalist who was traveling through the United States and recording real-life interactions with Americans. Cohen and the film producers interviewed Stein in her studio under false pretense.

In this work, which she made in response to the incident, Stein said that she “created [it] to address and ponder questions of manhood/womanhood and cultural symbols of Protection. Here, the hero is my female *Knight* which (unlike Borat) channels Wonder Woman, Princess Mononoke and Kannon.”

Stein further explained: “Borat is the anti-hero to me because he elicits considerable sympathy and admiration as flawed everyman from his mostly young male audience. Unfortunately his sexism and other forms of bigotry are not used as a teaching moment in the movie. This is extremely disturbing to me because as those in the audience are laughing with Borat, and not at him, they are encouraged to condone and even mimic his despicable behavior.” She explained that in her art work, she used “Borat as a foil for my real hero (not ‘heroine’ because I connote that word with one who is being saved rather than one who saves), a ‘Knight,’ who represents for me all of the traditional values we associate with being a hero.”

In the wake of the revolutionary movements of the 1960s, many people rejected traditional values along with heroic archetypes like the white-hatted cowboy and other larger than life male stereotypes. The continuing popularity of the antihero in contemporary visual art parallels similar images in modern literature and in popular culture. Old definitions of the heroic were called into question along with all authority figures. It may be that what we are witnessing is a shift in the popular mind from old notions of the heroic to a new popular imagination that now validates characteristics that were once thought to be un-heroic.



© Linda Stein—Anti-hero/Hero 587, 2007, 3-D Limited Edition Fine Art Print (Borat), 12' x 9' x 1'