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Battle Emblems (installation detail), featuring posters from AOUON Archive. Pictured: Gay & Lesbian Liberation (on right); Favianna Rodriguez, Reproduce and Revolt!, 2006, acrylic paint on panel, xeroxes, silkscreen on paper (in center). Photo credit: S



Battle Emblems (installation detail), featuring posters from AOUON Archive. Pictured: Nuclear Disarmament/Peace Symbol. Photo credit: Scott Chernis



Battle Emblems (installation detail), featuring posters from AOUON Archive. Pictured: Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (on right); Mark Pearsall, All Power to All People, 2006, mixed media (on left). Photo credit: Scott Chernis

Battle Emblems at Intersection

The Logo is Mightier than the Sword
By Clifton Lemon
(02/17/2006)

This compact exhibit of graphic arts explores the political agendas of American social activist movements and the potent symbols used to convey their underlying messages. The historical range of these movements spans abolitionism through gay rights, and includes the United Farm Workers, Black Panthers, AFL-CIO, anarchism, IWW, ecology, nuclear disarmament, feminism, and the Resistance.

Most, if not all, of the movements had significant connections to the Bay Area, with its rich history of political activism. How many of us today know about the 1934 General Strike in San Francisco, or that the first feminist march was held here in 1978? I was around during the eras of the Vietnam War and

feminism and the Black Panthers, but for twentysomethings, this is all history. Even for those of us who lived through most of the movements, historical lessons are easy to forget -- the show achieves an important goal by helping us to remember what it was

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like back then, and to draw crucial parallels to what's happening today. And the parallels are there -- the Iraq war demonstrations vividly recall the chaos of Vietnam for those of us old enough to remember.

The earliest movement, abolitionism, effected lasting and profound changes in the U.S., and was a major factor in everything from the Constitution to the Electoral College to the Civil War. Its inclusion in the show provided an essential historical reference point, as you can trace important similarities between it and subsequent American social activist movements. Its logo -- a ragged, shirtless kneeling slave whose upraised fettered hands trail the chains of oppression -- was memorialized in a design by Samuel Wedgwood (of fancy English porcelain renown).

The topic of the evolutionary relationship between graphic symbols and political movements is particularly fascinating and warrants a scholarly treatment that this show can only touch upon. No doubt because of the limited resources of the gallery, its scope is modest, although there is evidently a book planned in the future. The didactic material explaining the images is concise and well-written, and the display is nicely organized.

However, the organization of the show is a bit inconsistent -- most categories relate to political movements and their attendant symbols, but one category covers "clenched/raised fist" and its attendant movements. But one wishes for about four times the material, for much bigger, more dramatic images, and more of the gritty graphic punch that the media is designed to deliver. Of the current artists featured in the show, only Favianna Rodriguez's mural has significant impact. I found the historical material to be much more engaging.

I left the show wondering what the next big social activist movement might be. With terrorism paranoia threatening to erode much of our civil rights and serving as a lever for the Bush Administration's relentless, tragically misguided, ruinous agendas, no serious movement appears to be on the horizon. But it will emerge, no doubt, and most likely it will bear a mighty logo.

Battle Emblems

at Intersection for the Arts

Runs through March 25, 2006

BUSINESS LISTINGS

Intersection for the Arts

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