

Hope and Glory

*Shepard Fairey's
grassroots success
empowers other artists
to make a statement*

By Matt Morris
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When it was announced last year that Shepard Fairey's traveling solo show *Supply and Demand* would stop at Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center, it immediately seemed a masterstroke for the museum. Once it opens Friday (continuing through Aug. 22), we'll see if the attendance and community interest live up to expectations.

As intelligent and beautiful as recent CAC exhibitions by Anri Sala and C. Spencer Yeh have been, they have also been challenging — asking us to stretch how we engage with and consider art. Sala works predominately with videos, Yeh with sound.

In contrast, Fairey is an increasingly recognizable name working in popular, accessible imagery. The 40-year-old Los Angeles-based artist, trained at prestigious Rhode Island School of Design and has become one of the most well-known "street artists" for appropriating images from mass media — from wrestler/actor Andre the Giant to our President — for use on stickers and posters that carry strong, sometimes-political, graffiti-style messages.

"Street art is my way of participating in democracy," Fairey says during a phone interview with *CityBeat*. "I express my political viewpoint with pictures, art and taglines. A lot of people feel powerless. They think that they can't do anything to meaningfully participate in the cultural dialogue. Street art shows that on a very limited budget, you actually can."

Fairey already has a following here, strengthening the potential popularity of his exhibition. His work was very well received in the CAC's 2004 group exhibition *Beautiful Losers*, which gathered recent contemporary work that drew inspiration from street art and skateboarding culture.

Since then, the artist and illustrator has become even more ubiquitous as the creator of the wildly popular "Obama HOPE" poster. But he currently finds himself in the middle of a legal dispute, because he used without permission an Associated Press photograph of Obama as a reference for the red, white and blue posters that were widely distributed during Obama's successful presidential campaign. As a result, he's in the middle of a lawsuit.

He believes what he did constitutes fair use.

“I think it’s very important for me to fight for the rights of artists and exercise my political speech with images,” he says. “All artists’ political speech (will be) far more limited . . . if we lose this case. I’m worried for the generation of artists coming up that don’t have the resources to license photographs or arrange photo shoots. They are going to be very limited in the kind of art they can make from references. Warhol, Rauschenberg, Barbara Kruger — all favorites of mine — are (artists) who I emulated. If the people who look up to me are told, ‘He did it this way, but you can’t,’ I don’t think that’s a good thing for art or political dialogue on so many different levels.”

By bringing *Supply and Demand*, this expansive exhibition of Fairey’s work, to Cincinnati, the CAC is making a move to relate the critical art dialogue that takes place within the institution to popular culture at large in our city. To artists, young people and those who view anyone who helped Obama get elected as a hero, Fairey is a big draw.

One component of this exhibition will involve Fairey working in public spaces and on mural projects, but not unauthorized graffiti. The CAC has been working for several months to secure a range of proposed sites around the city for sanctioned, permitted paper murals that will be glued to the walls and bring the art from the enormous exhibition out into our urban landscape. That should be public art to get excited about.

In his interview with *CityBeat*, Fairey stressed that he definitely doesn’t oppose graffiti as a creative tool. “I think that public spaces should have options other than just advertising in them,” he says.

Fairey, it develops, might be more adman than graffiti renegade: “People have been conditioned to respond to the language of brands and logos because of corporate identities and advertising.”

The CAC exhibition will include more than 250 art pieces that trace Fairey’s career from his start to a brand-new mural created in the museum’s lobby. Several vitrines will present his tools of simple, lo-fi image propagation and distribution. Sticker sheets, stencils and spray cans are all used in an approach to including pictures in political discussions that Fairey calls “viral.”

As his images have become so recognizable and his traditional artwork now accompanied by a clothing brand and work as a graphic designer, he’s received complaints about “selling out.” To that, he replies: “Even that someone would make that analysis is an amazing triumph. So it’s worked!” He hopes his work can teach viewers to approach advertising with skepticism.

One of Fairey’s earliest breakthroughs was his “Obey” stickers, featuring a black-and-white graphic of Andre the Giant, accompanied by the word “obey.” That command can now be found throughout many of his images, like a logo or even a hidden message, appearing at the center of flowers or inserted into intricate patterns.

“People subconsciously obey quite a bit, but when they are asked to confront that obedience, it makes them uncomfortable and makes them think about what they prefer to resist,” he explains. “The word ‘obey’ originated from a place of reverse psychology — telling people to obey would hopefully get them to question their obedience. If it doesn’t resonate within you, don’t listen.”

Watch WCPO’s coverage of the exhibit

Rather than rate himself to other street artists from the famed *Beautiful Losers* show, Fairey draws comparisons to political satirists like Comedy Central’s *Colbert Report* and to contemporary Protest Art like the activist projects of The Yes Men. Many of his posters look like Soviet Era propaganda and may even at times be confused with their forceful messages about control. But really, they are exploiting the conventions of a government’s aesthetics in order to incite dissent.

“Everything’s political,” he chides. “I think that art is a really valuable, powerful tool of communication, because it works differently than the way words or talking heads on television operate. A lot of times, people form ideas intellectually and define themselves. Even if the reality of things that are happening around them doesn’t quite synch up with that, their previous position will dictate how they behave.

“But pictures break through that, because they affect people emotionally, and then that emotion drives an intellectual process that’s different from watching a news broadcast. The power of art is stimulating people’s imaginations and having them reassess positions they haven’t questioned in awhile.”

A whole area of the artist’s website (www.obeygiant.com) offers material and directions to get aspiring artists started with spreading art. He has found many have started by imitating his own work and then moving on.

“People inevitably get bored of making stickers of my things and so they make something more personal to them,” he says. “Pandora’s box has been opened! They have the tools to spread whatever they want around. All of a sudden they’re empowered.”

Fairey sees himself as a role model not just for artists but for all people who want more input in our society.

“The biggest problem in democracy is that a lot of people feel powerless and they don’t participate. If it’s just the act of making stickers that are fun and putting it out there, it can inspire the next person to take it further. A culture that has more participants than just recipients of information (is) a richer, better culture.”

SUPPLY AND DEMAND opens Friday at the Contemporary Arts Center (www.contemporaryartscenter.org) with a free public reception at 8 p.m. As part of the Fine Arts Fund Sampler Weekend, the exhibition will be free the entire initial weekend.