



linoleum block print by Sam Kerson, 2010

Sam Kerson  
painter, engraver, muralist

## “Betrayed, Double Crossed, Lied To and Deceived”

– a linoleum block print series by Sam Kerson

*review by Marc Awodey*

Art has always been a means of educating the masses, and that tradition continues in the linocuts of internationally known artists and activists Sam Kerson and Katah. They’ve collaborated to produce a series of twenty-one prints, entitled “Betrayed, Double Crossed, Lied To and Deceived” concerning topical issues gleaned from the news of 2010. Those pieces are now on display at the Musro Historico de la Sierra Gorda in Jalpan de Serra, Queretaro, Mexico. It’s an important show that unmaskes the party line of what mainstream media wants us to believe. Yet it’s also an exhibition of complex compositions, stark contrasts, and innovative designs. The show opened on December 16, and will be on view till January 8.

As international artists based in both Quebec and Vermont, Kerson and Katah take on international issues in the new series. Issues originating in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, and in the E.U. countries as well as Israel and Colombia, and Afghanistan are commented on. The medium of linocut renders forms in harsh contrasts, and in Kerson and Katah’s prints that sharp focus becomes a metaphor for the dualities of rich and poor, peace and war, justice and injustice portrayed in the series. Borders and the troubles they spawn become a recurring theme in the show. So do militarism, corruption, and economic terrorism.

“Harper and the Tamils” is a dynamic, vertical composition with a large portrait of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper at left. At right is a sailing ship of refugees, and Quebec fleur de lis are emblazoned on each sail. Strong diagonal lines in the black background emphasize the tallness of the ship, and short choppy marks appear in the sea. The lines are varied in thickness, with a group of broader background lines to the left of the ship acting like a barrier between Harper and the émigrés. We note the ship is the Hermine, not the ship of the Tamils but the ship of the French explorer Jaques Cartier.

“Plan Merida” is based on an initiative in the so called “War on Drugs” that involves the U.S. paying Mexico and Central American governments to suppress the drug trade. Hundreds of millions of dollars have gone into the militaries of the countries participating, and human rights abuses have become commonplace. The phrase “Exporting Chaos” appears at the top of the composition and Kerson drew a chaotic scene of weapons, trucks, and a bestial Uncle Sam at upper left, to echo that phrase. The underlying theme of the event was thus replayed in the image. In “La Macarena” a jumble of skeletons scattered over the print mirrors a jumble of unknown skeletons found in a mass grave.

The phrase “We Are Not Afraid” presented in Spanish, English, and Finnish are among the shreds of text in “Betty and Juri”. Their faces are starkly lit, and subtly abstracted. It’s a simple composition, portraying the two faces. Betty Cariño was murdered by paramilitaries while bringing supplies to San Juan Copala in Oaxaca on April 27, 2010. Juri Jaakkola was a Finnish national killed while serving as an observer who accompanied Cariño in an effort to break the right wing siege of San Juan Copal.

Mexican artist Leopoldo Méndez (1902-1969) has been cited as an influence in these works, and there is a particularly strong tradition of artist activism in Mexico. While his contemporary compatriots Orozco, Siqueiros, and Rivera are better known, Méndez the printmaker may have reached a wider audience in his lifetime. Woodblock printing has a long tradition in Mexico, dating to the sixteenth century - but it’s earliest works were created at the behest of the Catholic church. In the Twentieth century printmaking in Mexico was often seen as a tool for the liberation of the working class. Méndez, who also worked in linoleum, was one of the founders of the League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers in the 1930s.

Satire also appears in subtle doses in many of the show’s works. In “Dairy workers in Vermont” one of the migrants holds his nose, as the workers are lined up behind a wall of cows. On the looping composition of “Euro Train” the text reads: “those Greeks are so far behind our only hope is to throw more euros on the fire” stoking the firebox of a locomotive labeled Germany.

Most of the prints in “Betrayed, Double Crossed, Lied To and Deceived” are limited to editions of thirty. Katah does the printing at Atelier Presse Papier in Trois-Rivieres, Quebec and in a true partnership, the drawings were produced by Kerson. The artists work together on research and concept in their projects.

Words are commonplace in the prints of Kerson and Katah, however, even if their language were unfamiliar to an audience, the prints would still have universal meanings. Sadly, violence and oppression are all too familiar in the modern world.