

Drawing Back: Cartoon Critiques of America, Washington, DC: Provisions Library, June 9-September 23, 2006, <http://www.provisionslibrary.org/>

This exhibit consisted of two smaller shows. *Why Do They Hate US?*, a traveling exhibit, was curated by executive director Rod Gilchrist of the Cartoon Art Museum (of San Francisco) with images from CartoonArts International (aka Cartoonists and Writers Syndicate) / New York Times Syndicate. *Political Posters by Mike Fluggenock* was the second, much smaller show. Provisions Library defines itself as a "cultural institution for exploring and inspiring new avenues of creative social change" and as such, definitely is a leftist organization, especially by Washington standards. The library is located on Dupont Circle, about as bohemian an area as DC offers, on an upper floor of an old brick building. Both exhibits were strongly critical of the current US government and its policies; unsurprisingly since most editorial cartoonists work from opposition to authority.

Why Do They Hate US? was a strongly international show with thirty-one cartoonists¹ from over twenty countries. The artwork, as would be expected due to logistic and monetary concerns, consisted of reproductions. About eighty cartoons were displayed, down from a slightly larger ninety in the original show, due to space considerations. The reproductions were done well, printed from computer files without distortion, and mounted on foam core board. They were displayed in a large unadorned room in the back of the library. Most of the cartoons, as can be gathered from the pun in the exhibit title, were on international topics where the United States has had a checkered record such as Saddam and the Iraq war, torture and the Abu Graib scandal, oil, and foreign relations. Perhaps because all of these were syndicated, they were easily comprehensible to the American viewer. However, there was often a surprising correlation between these pieces and work by American cartoonists. Bush was often drawn the same way, with protruding ears and a overly-prominent upper lip. Kichla of Israel in particular draws as typical a Bush as one would see in any American paper. Not being a caricaturist, I am unsure if these are two obvious features, or if the cartoonists borrow from each other. Oddly enough, there were cartoons on Arnold Schwarzenegger from Singapore and Austria, perhaps because the show originated in California. More likely, his Hollywood stardom is what the cartoonists see that makes the governor of one American state of interest half-way around the world. A few pieces in particular stood out. Two particularly excellent cartoons were Brian Gable's "Mind If We Borrow the Torch?" of torturer thugs asking the Statue of Liberty to borrow her torch and Ares' drawing of a mullah eating American fast food. Ten drawings by Gado of Kenya could easily have been done by an American. He uses a Puck-like character like Oliphant does, and actually used both *Time* magazine and American lawyer Johnnie Cochran in cartoons. This was a bit jarring when one reads the labels and sees the cartoons are by a Kenyan, but his "How Did This Happen to You?" of a starving sub-Saharan and an obese American was particularly good. Riber Hansson of Sweden has a line much like David Levine's and his "Dreams of Arabian Knights" cartoon of harem girl Condoleezza Rice dancing for Sultan Bush and advisors Powell and Rumsfeld was very well done. Peter Lewis of Australia also drew a striking caricature of Rice as a black hawk with a caption "Blackhawk Up".

Local Washington anarchist cartoonist Mike Fluggenock selected nine of his cartoons to fill another small room. Fluggenock's posters are usually seen as broadsides papering DC and he also provides them all free of charge on his website <http://www.sinkers.org/posters>. In the exhibit text, Fluggenock says, "In the winter of 1990-91, I did my first hardcore political cartoons since dropping out of the Yipster Times and, inspired by the 'delivery system' used by Robbie Conal to expose Los Angeles to his work², chose to mass-copy and plaster them to as many flat

public surfaces as possible with wheat paste and paint rollers instead of waiting for any newspaper or magazine editors to expose their readers to flagrantly anti-war and anti-imperialist opinions." His "The Madness of George II" (October 2001), a play on the movie, is unfortunately starting to become dated, but his "What Has Ariel Sharon Learned from the Holocaust?" (February 2002) received new attention when he submitted it to the Israeli anti-Semitic cartoon contest held in the wake of the Danish Mohammad cartoon controversy. "Afghan Women's Liberation" remains unfortunately timely as Fluggenock shows a burqua-clad woman cowering in front of a bullet-scarred wall in 'Before' and the same women in the same pose in 'After,' but now with a TV showing *Sex in the City*. Fluggenock's idiosyncratic labels add to the enjoyment of this part of the exhibit; for "Stay the Course" (December 2005), Fluggenock wrote, "I actually find myself looking forward to watching Imperial America's future unfold in Iraq and Iran with the same relish that I have for watching old films of Project Mercury booster test-launch failures -- 'oooohhhh! aahhhhhh!'" One has to appreciate such an uncompromising political cartoonist.

The two exhibits were complemented by a good display of books in the library, a sunny and pleasant yet modernist open space. Director of Education Sita Reddy brought in some of her own collection for use as well, including material that was new to me such as an exhibition booklet *Pork Roast: 250 Feminist Cartoons* by Avis Lang Rosenberg (Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1981) and a collection of Indian comic strips *This is Suki!* By Manjula Padmanabhan (New Dehli: Duckfoot Press, 2000). Two good bibliographies of political cartoons and graphic novels can be found on their website as can a page of links to K-12 educational resources.

Another valuable adjunct to the exhibit was a Friday-night screening of comics-related films throughout the summer. Films shown, but not necessarily attended by this reviewer, were *Tintin and I* (2003), *Comic Book Confidential* (1988), *The Political Dr. Seuss* (1999), *Hooked on Comix* (1989), *Ducktators*, (1997), *Will Eisner, Profession, Cartoonist - Part I: The Spirit, and Part II: The Dream* (2001), *Funny Ladies: A Portrait of Women Cartoonists* (1988), and *Naji-Al-Ali: An Artist with Vision* (1999).

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¹ For the record: Brian Adcock (Canada), Ares (Cuba), Angel Banegas (Honduras), Ross Bateup (Australia), Joep Bertrams (Netherlands), Patrick Corrigan (Canada), Tayo Fatunla (Nigeria / UK), Brian Gable (Canada), Gado (Kenya), Rainer Hachfeld (Germany), Emad Hajjaj (Jordan), Riber Hansson (Sweden), Heng Kim Song (Singapore), Tom Janssen (Netherlands), Peter Lewis (Australia), Keshav (India), Michel Kichka (Israel), Christo Komarnitski (Bulgaria), Ala Moir (Australia), Pedro Molna (Nicaragua), Paresh Nath (India), Stephane Peray (Thailand), Petar Pismetrovic (Austria), Plantu (France), Heiko Sakurai (Germany), Peter Schrank (Ireland), Osmani Simanca (Brazil), TAB (Canada), Martyn Turner (England), Bas van der Schot (Netherlands) and Zapiro (South Africa).

² Conal's caricatures of Reagan-era politicians were also pasted up around Washington, DC, and he was profiled in the *Washington Post*. See Marc Fisher, "A Fast-paste night of protest: Activist-artist Robbie Conal and his latest crew poster the town," *Washington Post* (May 22, 1995).