



## Studio Sessions

# Rupert García

By John Zarobell *January 30, 2018*

*Studio Sessions offers behind-the-scenes access to artists, writers, curators, and creative individuals through a variety of tête-à-tête conversations that consider the how, and what, and where of making art. Studio Sessions are presented as interviews, profiles, and studio visits through text, photo essays, and videos.*

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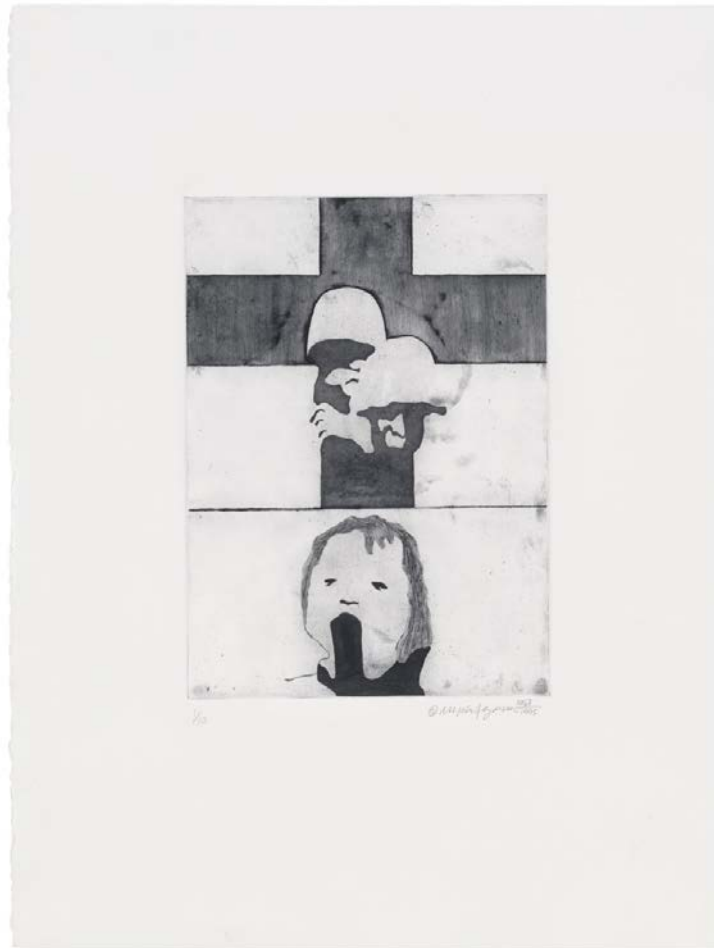
Amid participation in two museum exhibitions as part of *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*,<sup>1</sup> noted artist Rupert García is enjoying a selective retrospective, *Rolling Thunder*, at Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco, that focuses on his images of war made over a fifty-year career. García served in the U.S. Air Force during the Vietnam War and was stationed at a base in Ubon, Thailand, where the United States claimed it had no military presence.<sup>2</sup> His one year at Ubon was to support the secret bombing mission “Operation Rolling Thunder,” the first nonstop

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American assault on North Vietnam, which extended from 1965 to 1968. While the Pentagon Papers exposed these government lies long ago, the relationship between war, politics, and truth is a persistent dynamic in García's work—perhaps because the U.S. has almost always been at war since then. In any case, the current exhibition and the recent focus on Latino art in California presents an excellent opportunity to sit down with one of the elder statesmen of political art in the U.S.

The earliest piece in the exhibition at Rena Bransten, *War and Children* (1967/1995), is a print made while García was studying art at San Francisco State University (SFSU) in the 1960s. The work presents images on two registers: a pair of soldiers against a cross above, and a child below emitting liquid (presumably blood) from her mouth. In many ways, this picture sets the stage for García's lifetime of reconciling different perspectives through his art. The images are discrete; the soldiers are not shown to cause the problems affecting this child. Rather, they hover above, in a world of their own. Yet the child bleeds.



Rupert García. *The War and Children*, 1967/1995; etching; 15 3/4 x 11 1/8 in. © the Artist.  
Courtesy of Rena Bransten Gallery. Photo: John Janca.

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In my recent visit to García's Oakland studio, he explained that at the time, none of the artists at SFSU knew that he had served in the war. In the context of the university and its art program, this work appeared as anti-war art that was akin to the political protests of the era. Yet there is a personal connection here that is not visible at first sight. For the artist, the work was a means of coming to terms with his duties as an airman; the complexity of the work resulted not just from the juxtaposition of these elements, but from his efforts to reconcile his past with his present, his identity as a veteran, and his compassion for the children affected by the war he supported through his security detail.

During our conversation, García shared the impact that his involvement in the civil rights movement and the burgeoning Chicano art movement of the '60s had on him. He participated in several artist collectives, beginning at SFSU and continuing in the Mission; he showed at Artes 6 in 1969, and was a founding member of Galería de la Raza in 1970. Third World Communications (TWC), a gathering of artists in San Francisco who shared common cause and solidarity for the oppressed peoples of the Third World, expanded García's political and artistic activities beyond his engagement with fellow Chicano and Latino artists. Regarding his time with TWC, García remembers: "We were involved in discussions and debating liberation aesthetics, colonialism, anti-colonialism, reading Frantz Fanon, reading all the important thinkers of the Third World."<sup>3</sup> He wrote articles on art for the community newspaper *El Tecolote*, as well as a historical review of Chicano and Latino murals in the Mission for Galería de la Raza, and also served as an art editor for literary publications developed by TWC. During these years, he worked primarily on posters as a model for artistic integration into social action. His MA thesis show, consisting of political posters he made beginning with the Third World Movement protests at SFSU in 1968, was held at Artes 6 in 1970. This was a period of activism, spurred by global and local protests, but the posters García made during this period were exceptionally artistic, and were eventually given exhibitions at both the Oakland Museum of California and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art during the '70s.

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Rupert García. *Rolling Thunder*, 2017; mixed media on paper; 52 x 96 in. © the Artist. Courtesy of Rena Bransten Gallery. Photo: John Janca.

Though García first sold political posters to raise bail money for students arrested during protests, he claims no overt political ambition for these images. He notes: “All the posters made during that period are about me.” Wrestling with his own experience in the war and as a descendent of Mexican immigrants, he endeavored to make a space for himself outside of the Eurocentric context for art. The core issue was not the struggle against injustice, but the effort to achieve a means of seeing and describing his own activities as an artist, and indeed, expanding his own self-understanding. Looking back on these years, he asserts that he was “trying to figure something out to his satisfaction,” namely, “what I am involved with as a human being.” He was not setting out to propagandize, but to explore the broader context of the politics of art.

Yet that was only the first chapter in García’s exploration of art and politics. He later set out to study arts education and was enrolled in a PhD program in the subject. When he felt that this field was unable to accept the social and political changes he was hoping to address, he sought a PhD in art history at University of California, Berkeley. He studied with Herschel Chipp, Peter Selz, and T.J. Clark in order to come to understand the formation of the canon of Western art with its numerous exclusions and blind spots. Though he eventually left the program due to a dispute over whether Spanish was a language adequate for art-historical study, he apprehended “a certain criticality” in this program that helped him to understand how to approach the history of art, and how to digest it as an artist.

Having returned to painting by this time, García worked consistently with multi-panel images in order to tease out the political meanings and philosophical subtleties that art had to offer. Garcia’s work is fundamentally concerned with raising consciousness, but he rarely approaches

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this in an overt way. Even political posters such as *No More O' This Shit* (1969), a rejoinder to the advertising image once featured on Cream of Wheat boxes that perpetuated a stereotype of Black servitude, is a complex play of language and image that undermines expectations and forces viewers and readers to figure out what exactly the problem is.



Rupert García. *No More O' This Shit*, 1969; silkscreen print; 24 5/8 × 19 1/8 in. © the Artist. Courtesy of Rena Bransten Gallery.

The confrontation between image, source, style, and form are, in the hands of García, a means of exploring significant aesthetic questions that negotiate the relationship between beauty, truth, and power. His goal with these works was to create a “dynamic visual experience,” and to present another approach to making a picture. Despite many years of postgraduate education, García discovered much philosophy on his own. After reading Hegel and Marx on dialectics, he became interested in exploring thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in his art, symbolically represented by three panels. He developed “conversations between the panels formally and intellectually. “[It was] very exciting, pushing me along to think about it, to feel it.” He particularly enjoyed the freedom of moving the panels around to see how they related to one another in multiple ways.

During our conversation on this topic, he got out of his chair to show me *Obama From Douglass*, (2010), a triptych featuring images of Barack Obama and Frederick Douglass, and between them what appears to be an abstract linear drawing. This image is actually a photograph

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of a print-trimming mat at Magnolia Editions, where García has long made prints and developed digital-imaging techniques. He explained that he wanted to make a portrait of Obama but that a single image was not satisfactory. He paired the Obama image with a historical portrait of Douglass, but found this combination not interesting enough visually. He needed “nuance and complexity,” so he added the abstract element in the middle, which effectively creates a bridge between them. He also played with the execution of each of the images. The Obama image—like many of García’s posters—is a stylized three-tone representational image in warm tones, while the photo of Douglass is a historical photograph that García painted over in blue, revealing the brushstrokes. Finally, the abstract photograph is left in black-and-white. It acts as a kind of space between, but an art-historical space that carries references to Sol LeWitt and minimal art. He summed it up by sharing that multi-panel paintings “gave me the sense that a picture is an idol; it’s in process.”



Rupert García in his studio with *Obama From Douglass*. Photo: John Zarobell.

*Rolling Thunder* (2017) is a multi-panel painting that takes its name from the bombing campaign discussed above, and that gave its name to García’s current show. This work is an excellent example of the political and artistic fusion so fundamental to the artist’s work. It is also

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constructed from three different photographs: the first, an image from the Air Force base in Ubon; the second, an altered image of jets releasing their bombs; and the third, an image of an oil and lubrication production facility in Hanoi that was bombed by the U.S. As he described the process of this piece's construction, he pulled out various drafts of all three images, spread them out across his studio floor, and explained the trial-and-error process that led to this particular composition.



Studies for *Rolling Thunder* in the studio. Photo: John Zarobell.

The final iteration, hanging on its own wall in the Bransten Gallery, is an impressive sight. The colors, forms, and styles are all carefully balanced. The meanings carried over from the photographic source material are personal and political. Yet the political narrative, fifty years old, has taken on a new form. There is no single position represented here. Perpetrator and victim are present, as well as the logics that ushered in the war, such as the threat of the spread of communism and the fight for freedom. In García's work, one sees the military-industrial complex, feels the patriotism, and hears the lies the government told. These pieces of the historical narrative are all transformed into art here, where they will persist for time immemorial.

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*Rupert García: Rolling Thunder is on view at Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco through February 24, 2018. A conversation between García and the author will be held at the gallery on February 3, 2018 from 4–5 p.m.*