



Toby Millman

Public Works

Interview with the Artist

Please discuss your ideas behind the specific work(s) of art submitted for this exhibition?

The piece that takes up the most physical space is a collaborative project I did with Andrew Thompson, who is primarily an installation artist. It's titled, Porous Borders Poster Project and was commissioned for the Porous Borders Festival, which was a weekend event consisting of site-specific projects along the Detroit/Hamtramck border in 2015. We started the project by discussing our what our own objectives were: I wanted to make something in multiple that viewers could take away with them, and Andrew wanted to make something that would invite the viewers to also be participants. We agreed that we wanted the project to draw from imagery on both sides of the Detroit/Hamtramck border and came to use distinctive billboard and storefront signage that most residents passing through the area would identify. By asking participants to draw what they want to see in their neighborhood, taking over structures that are typically used for advertising, we see this project also as somewhat anti-capitalist, yet democratic.

What were your inspirations for creating the art submitted for this exhibition?

I am attracted to people, social structures, and the visual evidence of these relationships on our environment. These prints are a direct response to my observations and experiences as someone who has lived and travelled in Palestine, later settling in Detroit. While most of the images in this exhibition come from the Detroit area, I found that these artifacts that dot our landscape such highway overpasses, signage, or streetlamps – civic infrastructure intended for public benefit –transcend place. By redacting them from their environment, they serve as metaphors for people living under occupation or similar circumstances related to racism, public corruption or mismanagement. These elements of the landscape, often taken for granted, are most apparent when they are in disrepair or simply nonexistent.

Which media, techniques, and work processes did you use, and why did you make those choices?

I used many forms of printmaking and included a glossary of terms with the exhibition. They include etching with aquatint and drypoint, woodcut, lithography and screen printing. Sometimes the imagery dictated the choice to work with a particular technique and sometimes it depended on what facility access I had at the time.

What do you intend for audiences to see, experience, and think about when viewing your work?

I hope these pieces encourage people to pay more attention to their surroundings.

Did you encounter any difficulties when creating your artwork? How did you work through them?

One difficulty was moving from Hamtramck to rural Massachusetts in the summer of 2015. I had been influenced by the Detroit landscape for so long, that I was afraid I would be uninspired by my new environment. All this meant, however, is that I paid a different kind of attention to my surroundings. Instead of being bombarded by these structures in my daily life, I started seeking them out. For example, the series of manholes are drawn from photographs I took on the college campus where I taught, next to a building that was undergoing renovation. I revisited and photographed those manholes several times over the course of the year to document how the tarp changed form with the changing of the seasons.

What kind of research did this work involve? What kinds of investigations and discoveries resulted?

In 2012, I began a series that prominently featured lampposts, partially in response to the lighting crisis in Detroit, whereby 40 percent of the city's 88,000 streetlight were broken or non-functioning. The dark streets were a hazard to public safety and the broken lampposts-personified seemed like sad reminders of a city neglecting its residents. As I continued to work on the project, I learned how contentious the issue of lighting was to area. Then-mayor Dave Bing was talking about forcibly relocating people from more sparsely populated areas of the city to denser neighborhoods in order to avoid paying for infrastructure upkeep and repair. I learned that the state appointed emergency manager to Hamtramck had plans to remove functioning street lights to save on costs, and the city of Highland Park had all of its lighting shut off due to nonpayment of the municipal electricity bill. Also alarming, the mayor was asking residents to add to their household expenses, and turn on their porch lights at night, despite the city's high rate of poverty, which exceeds Detroit's.

How do your works of art relate to each other in terms of visual and conceptual content?

While most of these images draw from municipal structures, there are a couple outliers (I'll let the viewers identify which). They all relate, however, to ways in which people are "protected" from their environment. Streetlights, traffic cones, fencing and sewer grating all serve a purpose to either alert someone to danger or protect us from it. The few exceptions are meant to raise questions as to what constitutes danger and what merely serves to control our movement or behaviors.

What are some of the most important skills and influences you draw upon to create your work?

While it's taken me years to build my printmaking skills, I think the skills of observation are most important. I'm influenced by street photographers of the 1940s, 50s and 60s like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Helen Levitt, and Robert Frank who were known for showing the complex relationships between people and their surroundings through candid photographs. My decision to make giveaway posters was also influenced by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who would often make pieces that were shown in gallery settings, but intended for mass distribution, subtly bringing issues related to gun violence or AIDS into people's homes (and bodies) while subverting the idea that art is a precious commodity with a high price tag.

