

ARTS AND CULTURE

Print and power



The print titled "This Machine Kills Fascists."

PHOTO BY KATHRYN SHAW

By Kathryn Shaw

On January 22, a new print show entitled "Protest in Print" by the Ottawa-Gatineau Printmakers Connective (OGPC) went up at the Nepean Creative Arts Centre (NCAC) main lobby, the Connective's usual exhibition space. Thirteen artists participated, however by January 23, only eleven remained. The Arts Programmer of Ottawa, through the NCAC, requested the removal of three works by two artists, myself being one of them, for "frightening" a child according to a public complaint. The offending pieces were not nightmarish scenes of violence, nor were they rude or discriminatory. As a parent myself, I am curious to understand under what circumstances a child attending an art or dance class saw our show and registered fear to their accompanying adult in such a way as to warrant a complaint. Perhaps having a look at the offending art in question is in order.

BLOOMFIELDS

Breathtaking flowers, plants and striking contemporary decor.

Beautiful living, naturally.

783 Bank St | 1280 Wellington St West
www.bloomfields.ca | 613.230.6434

The *OSCAR* editor saw the image fit to print. What do you think?

Let's first consider the title of the show. Participating artists answered the call in whatever ways moved us, honouring the powerful role that art, printmaking and the written word has in voicing dissent, raising alarm, and speaking for the silenced. The exhibition description is as follows: "Printmaking has long been associated with protest and advocacy, both overt and implicit. Since the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, ordinary citizens have voiced and disseminated their political and ideological views in mass-produced pamphlets, flyers, posters, editorial cartoons and other printed materials. From Martin Luther's 95 Protestant theses, to El Lissitzky's Soviet-era posters, Käthe Kollwitz's wartime woodcuts, and Diego Rivera's revolutionary lithographs, printmaking has been an important tool for protest. Whether with images, text, or both, printmakers have the means to spread their opinions on climate change, human rights, war, government, and many other political and social issues."

My print, a 7 cm x 7 cm linocut showing a black square with white text reads: "This Machine Kills Fascists." It is also the title of the work. The words are full-justified, an aesthetic choice that ends up splitting the words "machine" and "fascists" over two lines. The label beside my print refers to folk singer Woody Guthrie, who in 1943 began painting the phrase on his guitars. It has been emulated throughout the decades by other musicians and activists; singer Donovan (remember "Mellow Yellow"?) put it on his guitar in the 60s, but left off the words "fascists" because, in his words, he thought by

then fascism was dead. Rob Baker of the Tragically Hip had it on his guitar in the music video for "Bobcaygeon," in my opinion the most romantic song about antifascism ever written. Why is this relevant now? I'm sure we all thought fascism was dead too, but a glance at the headlines over the last few years shows us that, to our horror, we have to conclude that it is not. The other prints that were taken down presented pairs of images: the US president with the Russian president, and an ICE officer with an SS officer.

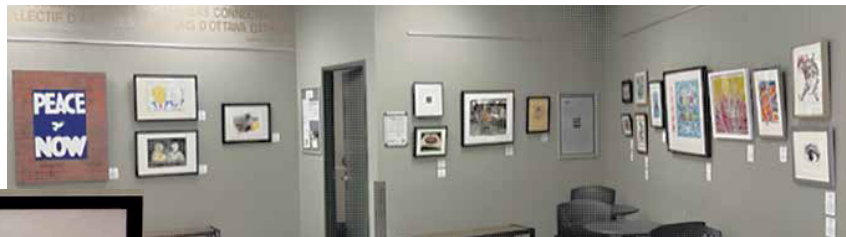
Perhaps the print group waded in a little too deep with the theme of this show. In the context of 2026, they might have anticipated that asking for prints about advocacy, human rights and war might conjure images relating to those topics. The City of Ottawa has guidelines about what is appropriate for their exhibition spaces, and specifically for public spaces such as the NCAC corridor that serves as an access route to city facilities. In other words, people are exposed to art who haven't specifically intended to see it, as they go about their business. It is therefore imperative to "balance artistic expression with public sensitivities" (quoted from the OGPC's contract with the City). I imagine the same show hanging in the vitrines in the Firehall – would I find it inappropriate for my child to see on their way to dance or pottery class? Having a conversation about meaning, context, and what's going on in the world might be too much for some people; I know how difficult it can be with a middle-schooler. It is challenging to find a balance between openness and truth, and protection from worry. The alternative to talking about it is silence, and the world doesn't get less scary if we ignore it. Some might ask that we "think of the children" when deciding what is appropriate to display in public, missing the point entirely. The reason we care, the reason we speak up and call out hatred and hypocrisy is that we are thinking of the children – we want to make the world better for them.

The OGPC engaged the City arts staff in a discussion about the incident. The fact that a single complaint led to this action was chilling. City staff were sympathetic, and stressed that they were not trying to censor anyone, but balance

expression and the needs of the general public. They offered that the offending works were "literal" depictions, very "immediate," and "on the nose." They incited an emotional, political response. Others that were not removed were more symbolic in nature, and open to interpretation. The line between literal and interpretive, between acceptable and in violation of family-friendliness seems to be hard to pin down. The phrase "I know it when I see it" was coined in the 1960s in a US Supreme Court case about obscenity. Does this print look obscene to you? One wonders where it ends; the OGPC has previously presented print shows in this city space about climate change. If someone who denies that climate change is real feels threatened by it, does it have to come down as well? Conversely, the Ottawa Public Library has refused to remove books that were subject to public complaint. They also refused to cancel a film event that was subject to protest for being transphobic. Across the city, it seems that a consistent policy regarding public complaints is lacking.

Currently, ten copies of my print are on their way to Germany as part of the Open Print Exchange. I've participated for the last three years, and this year, my submission feels right, it feels current and it feels correct. Copies will be distributed to other participants around the world, and I'll receive nine prints from strangers in return. One copy will tour with the entire year's collection to galleries worldwide. Last year's show is currently at the Jackal Independent Art Space (www.jackalonthide.co.uk) in Berwick, UK, whose mission is to present "exhibitions, workshops, talks and events that get people thinking and connecting". I can't think of a better medium than print to get people doing just that, unless it's deemed too dangerous to be given the chance. Perhaps the City of Ottawa should consider whether they want to participate in the "thinking and connecting" part of the art world, or simply want to present pretty pictures, full of colour and line, signifying nothing.

Kathryn Shaw is an artist and resident of Old Ottawa South.



The show entitled "Protest in Print" by the Ottawa-Gatineau Printmakers Connective (OGPC) at the Nepean Creative Arts Centre (NCAC) main lobby.
PHOTO BY KATHERINE STAUBLE