

The Art of Democracy ★★ 1/2

Show goes beyond politics

Exhibit works find universal in current

By Alan G. Artner

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Presidential election years always generate exhibitions in which the theme is politics, and most are shows to benefit specific candidates. But this year has brought more general exhibitions as well, some glancing back at the Democratic National Convention of 1968, others looking at the present state of the Union with an eye to Tuesday.

"The Art of Democracy," at the Loyola University Museum of Art, is one of those broader shows in which 60 contemporary American printmakers reflect on such issues as war, national security, poverty, crime and the court system. Several pieces of course treat the war in Iraq, but as none is for it, the message comes across as being against every war, and such broadening is characteristic with nearly all of the issues.

This is not, then, an exhibition that overwhelmingly bashes the current administration. Viewers understand we are where we are on each of the issues because of the current administration, but the prints have unfailingly humane viewpoints that go beyond political parties. So the only people who should avoid seeing it are those who would resent the absence of fair-and-balanced treatment because the artists have not argued in favor of war, fear, hatred, poverty, crime and corruption.

That said, viewers will seldom come away with memories of artistically significant pieces. First-rate works of warning and protest have a strong initial impact that hardly ever is lasting. Content is so much more important than formal matters or style that bluntness trumps everything even if we have seen the means before. Here, for example, so many earlier styles are turned to that the last half-century of art might never have happened.

An engaging exception is Drew Luan Mattot's "Combat Paper Portfolio," a group of works that has screen print and stenciling on paper made from uniforms worn during combat tours. The selections shown from Volume IV have made something physically strong from a poignant idea, and their effect transcends the easy effect of broadsides and posters.

One poster that could not look more traditional yet stuns with its contemporary attitude is Stephen Fredericks' etching and silk screen, "Vote." A cropped shot of the Statue of Liberty accompanies text that reads, "Vote like your life depends on it (because it does)."

Then, more ominously: "When they come for you—you'll wish you had." The bright symbolism of the image is darkened by text that envisions an American police state.

Interestingly, the long-standing division between New York and Chicago artists is here dissolved by politics, and viewers will be hard-pressed to tell one from the other. May future politics bring even more people together.