Hobos to Street People

Artists’ Responses to Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present

by Carol Harvey

The “Trend” Chandler stood in the courtyard at a gallery. Her hair was 4 feet 11 inches long. She was dampened by the colorful painting of a woman walking in the street past a motion-sensored splashed against graffiti on a wall, reading “Hobos Go Home.”

The text is interrupted by four adults as they walk to a school for homeless children. Artist Nii Oyeku crafted the work after Norman Rockwell’s illustration of a young girl entering a large brick school into a newly integrated Little Rock school in the early 1950s.

Chandler told her head, praying at me with a shy, anemic smile. “When people say this,” she observed, “they are doing it in bad faith. It’s a good thing that homeless people get to see this show too. Then we can kid you if it’s not or not. The best thing about this show is it makes people think.”

Chandler’s voice echoed softly. “It’s not a show. It’s so real. All this is true.”

I looked at four formerly pronounced San Francisco artist in The California Historical Society at 520 Mission Street in San Francisco. They viewed a collection of paintings, prints, photographs, and mixed media works by more than 60 artists in an exhibition entitled “Hobos to Street People: Artists’ Responses to Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present.”

The show began on February 19 and continues in August 15, 2009. It was organized by curator Art Hazelwood, a San Francisco artist whose artworks on homelessness and social justice are often published by Street Spirit, and the Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP).

Charming, smiling on Chandler, one, once slept in nearby Annie Alley next to a dumpster pictured in an exhibit photo. After one night on the street, resisting avoiding dangerous bushes. Eric Redwine, 54, stays in shelters or with friends. David Stuiver, 56, camped in the woods after being evicted by a corrupt landlord management. Travis, 28, read John Steinbeck’s “Of Mice and Men” just before he was forced to leave home.

Curator Art Hazelwood reported many positive reactions to the show, and favorably noted coverage. “It seems occasional negative responses reflect a ‘denialism’ of homeless people by the press and social stereotypes,” according to Hazelwood. “People want to turn homeless peoples into a kind of Other that they can distance,” he said. “It’s easier to dismiss people if you categorize them and distance them from being merely ‘us.’”

Chandler agreed. Her brown bags swung attractively. “The newspaper tells people things that aren’t true, and people believe it.”

This false stereotype is “out something new,” Hazelwood said. “One answer to almost anything is to point to identifiably patterns of discrimination throughout our history.” The cheap fix of Mayor Gavin Newsom’s Care Not Cash program that slashed lifetime benefits to homeless people and Rudy Giuliani’s attempt to sweep away New York’s homeless will not go away. Red wine glasses are piled by 19th-century sailors who couldn’t partake in the experience and Rudy Giuliani’s attempt to sweep away New York’s homeless will not go away.

Doug Minkler, an artist who tells his art on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, has close connection with street life. Eric Redwine was drawn by his color and dynamism to Minkler’s painting “Who Drives The Cycle of Poverty.”

Bill Clinton dismantled welfare in 1996, calling it “reform,” but “doing a lot more damage than any Republican,” said Minkler. “The National Lawyer’s Guild,

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“Sacred Heart”
Jos Sances, ceramic tile

Painting by Eric Drooker

“Under Bridges”

“Eviction Notice”

“Sweat Home”

“Under Bridges”

“Eviction Notice”

“Sacred Heart”

Jos Sances, ceramic tile
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seeing this as a real attack on women, lcdand the poor, he had me to do a piece on the concept.

Hazelwood chose Minkler's pasting for the show because it satirizes the Perpetual Poverty Cycle,” the studded lines of a motorcycle garnered toward us by a vicious bear. For its very existence, our capitalist republic seems to require, at varying levels of intensity, poverty’s perennial presence, cycling endlessly round.

Out of the motorcycle's exhaust pours poisonous gas — welfare cuts, layoffs, unemployment, homelessness. “Who dri

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Most people think of homelessness as urban. Ed Gould’s artwork, “America’s Forgotten Homeless,” dramatizes the disappearance of rural affordable housing. Chandler said she was writing about people in the country. “They couldn’t survive like we can here in the cities because there is nothing for them to do.”

Hazardland, Portland’s poverty imagery with Depression-era art which refused to divest the people of nobility or hope. He believes hope was stronger in Depression-era America than today.

Rockwell Kent’s skillful lithograph, “And Now Where?” echos an agitated couple as in stone or steel, staring lovingly into the future. Richard Courctel’s “Doughnut” displays a proud farm woman, strong, independent and able to deal with life’s difficulties.

Both the attitudes expressed and contemporary imagery mirror the often hopeless struggle of today’s homeless. After Gould’s father lost his carpentry business his mother took a job as a farm hand. Gould said he would never forget his.”

In his Smith’s drawing, “Homeless,” the sleeping hobos sit in a cardboard box. This image reminded Chandler of Travis’s murder in a young man protecting himself in a cardboard box during sub-zero winter nights in Manhattan.

Norman Rockwell’s bygone illustrations are sometimes sartorial by his name. “Freedom From Want” is a classic Thanksgiving dinner. His “Freedom From Fear” depicts a couple putting their heads in bed as the husband holds a paper with a World War II headline. The image suggests they are dreaming of America.

By contrast, in Hazardland, America’s “ Poor Peoples’ Coalition” marched down the same Washington Mall. “It happens,” said David Smith, as he added his voice to the protest in the wake of the events.

The words, “Everyone has a right to a decent shelter” were added to the list of the people’s rights. The event was a serious re-evaluation of federal responsibility to homelessness. San Francisco officials created the “Contest for Housing” program, a

The New Deal era, the government promised, supported, and funded images of the poor. New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and the city public housing director paid an artist to create the 1936 poster about Manhattan’s rundown tenements entitled, “Why Must We Always Have This? Why Not Housing?”

Bodi, supported art projects, and “Backwood System” which must be made new. Conversely, modern government and media promote images of poor and homeless people as “broken people” to be “fixed.”

Bodi said that the exhibit encourages the viewer to consider the ways we see and talk about homelessness and poverty. “If we can both and rebuild Iraq,” he said, “we can rebuild this country.” Massive war funding and bank bailouts tell us how quickly the economy’s supposedly well-ordered comes together.

Curator Hazlewood said, “We’ve been through this before. We can rise to the occasion again. The government did something about the Depression. The government could do something about our current economic crisis, poverty, and homelessness. We don’t have to live with this situation. We can get through it.”

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Hobos to Street People Exhibit
California Historical Society
678 Mission Street, San Francisco
Art exhibit continues to August 15, 2009
Thursday, August 6, 6:00 - 8:00 p.m.
California Historical Society. Free.
Panel discussion with Curator Art Hazelwood and artists Christine Hanlon, Jos Sances, Doug Minkler and Jesus Barraza.

"The Hand That Takes"
Artwork by Eric Drooker

"Must we always have this? Why not housing?" Silkscreen, Federal Art Project, 1936, New York City Housing Authority. Poster promotes housing as the solution to inner-city problems, showing an animal on which are drawn elements of inner-city life.

Who drives the Cycle of Poverty?
A. Welfare Queens
B. Illegal Aliens
C. Bleeding Heart Liberals
D. Capitalist Pigs