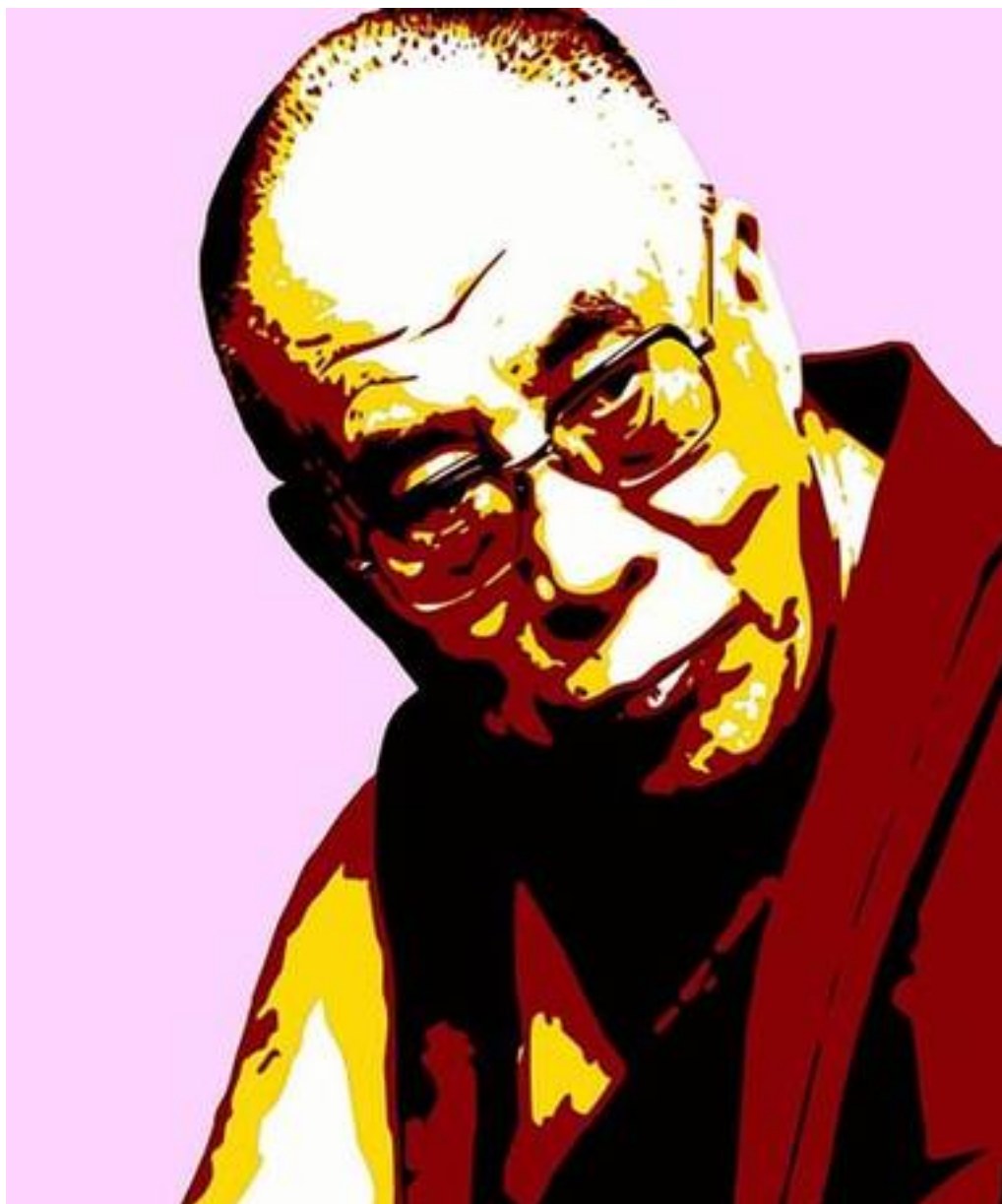


Interview with Artist Pat Edwards, on his Heroes Cycle

Jonathan Harris (September 17, 2009)



Italian artist Pat Edwards' work has been exhibited worldwide in galleries and public spaces. His portraits of Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama are currently displayed in the show, "The Myth – from Andy Warhol to Mario Schifano to Digital Art". His portrait of the Dalai Lama will be displayed at the Tibet House Cultural Center in New York in November, and then sold at Christie's for charity



purposes

Italian artist Pat Edwards' work has been exhibited worldwide in galleries and public spaces. His portraits of [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) [2] and the [Dalai Lama](#) [3] are currently displayed in the show, "The Myth - from Andy Warhol to Mario Schifano to Digital Art". The complete "Heroes" cycle, comprising 63 large scale portraits, will be exhibited in a major event in 2010. He is currently represented by [AnfiteatroArte Gallery](#) [4] in Milan and Padua. The portrait of the Dalai Lama will be displayed in New York in November at the [Tibet House](#) [5]. The occasion is a fund-raising event organized by actress [Uma Thurman](#) [6]'s family in favor of Tibetan children in exile.

On November 18, the artwork will be auctioned off at [Christie's](#) [7] for charity purposes. Pat Edwards is the only Italian artist participating to this exclusive event.

What inspired you in creating Aung San Suu Kyi's portrait?

In summer 2008, I started working on a group of 63 portraits under the title of "Heroes." The concept behind this project was to make a visual inventory of the 20th century through some of its most influential figures. The "Heroes" series features, at the same time, positive heroes as well as tragic/negative heroes. The invitation is for the audience to reflect on each Hero and to express an individual point of view. Therefore, this cycle relates to perception, which is influenced by aspects like culture and personal history. In fact, a positive hero for a person can well be a negative hero or even a threat for someone else.

I think that Aung San Suu Kyi is surely to be considered as one of those emblematic personalities that will be remembered as a hero of our time for future generations. She belongs to those very rare figures who really commit to their beliefs before their own lives.

Why this image of Suu Kyi and not another? Her expression in this portrait seems neither hopeful or withdrawn. What does her face look like to you?

It is very important for a visual artist to decide how to approach an image in order to represent someone's identity. I think this task bears a responsibility, as images can be very powerful and they are a primary and very direct way of communicating and expressing. I wanted Suu Kyi's portrait to be meaningful and sensitive. I worked a lot on her eyes. She addresses the viewer directly and her glance is very strong and very gentle at the same time. Just below her eyes and over the nose I drew in yellow and white a sort of abstract butterfly, as a symbol of freedom.

In this portrait I really wanted to depict Aung San Suu Kyi as not only a leader and an icon, but also a human being and a woman.

What do you think of Shepard Fairey's image of Aung San Suu Kyi?

I like Shepard Fairey's portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi. I find it very interesting that artists may represent the same subject in completely different ways through individual interpretation. Shepard Fairey conceived his piece as a half figure portrait while I focused on the image of her face. I also notice that his work emphasizes a rich image with many elements and details, whereas mine is more minimal. I would say that we have different styles (he is more graphic and I am more pictorial) and conceptual approaches, but we both work on images for a powerful, significant and effective communication and I think Aung San Suu Kyi has been so inspiring for both of us.

Do you think this form of art can help make this human rights struggle an internationally prominent issue? Sometimes it seems like these issues stay in the margins of mainstream media. What's your hope? Will this artwork influence change and action?

I think any form of art is important and can be useful. It is true that media like newspapers and television often leave these issues behind, so it's appropriate to find other ways to reach the widest audience. Literature, poetry, music and art can be further means of communication: lyrics and images can be so strong and direct, so effective and dramatic and can penetrate social consciousness. Under these aspects the role of the artist can be very influential for present and future generations.

With my works from the "Heroes" series I want to represent our time and society through some of its most prominent figures: characters who changed our history for the good or for the bad. As an individual I have my personal opinion on each of them, but as an artist I prefer not to affect people's



views. It is appropriate for me as artist to be a witness and in this sense to stimulate observation, consideration and reflection.

My invitation would be for people to stare in front of each single portrait, to get as much information as possible, and then to meditate on their own point of view in a critical but not dogmatic sense.

I think art should bring up issues and arguments and open discussions to stimulate points of view. I believe that an image must retain a lingering conceptual aspect.

Let's move on to your portrait of the Dalai Lama. Why the Dalai Lama and why this image?

The Dalai Lama is another of those emblematic icons of our present time and his image embodies so many moral, spiritual, traditional and historical issues. He is one of those characters who have been leaving strong and deep traces to our society. Again he is one of those personalities that meet opposite points of view: a positive Hero for most western societies and an Enemy for some eastern societies. At the same time Nobel Prize for Peace and feared Threat.

I decided to portray him in a very intense pose. He is in the middle of a conversation with somebody and he is listening very carefully. I wanted to focus on the aspect of his attention, and the way he listens, understands and meditates. Silence and perception are also a way of communication. Alighiero Boetti, an important Italian conceptual artist, said "the body always speaks silently," and this is really true.

In this portrait I wanted to depict both the Dalai Lama as the charismatic Tibetan leader and Tenzin Gyatso as the Buddhist monk.

Tell us about where you started with these images. Was it a specific color? A look?

I have been working on the Heroes series for over one year and I think I will finally complete the whole cycle comprising 63 portraits by the beginning of 2010.

Each portrait requires a long and stratified work that implies different layers and steps.

For each character I carry out an historic and iconographic research until I meet my requirements. I look at it like a social and cultural exploration. My portraits are not meant to be just images that stand on their own, they must capture the physical and spiritual essence.

Each image must be a medium to communicate and to engage with the audience as well as to stimulate intellectual discussion.

The decision to approach a specific image is a crucial aspect to me. At that point I start working on black and white images until I find the right one and then I proceed by defining lights and shadows and simplifying the shapes. The most important step is then to create a 1 to 1 scale painting on which I work in colors with bright glossy enamel paints.

The choice of colors comes quite naturally and the last thing I paint is the background, that I generally leave monochromatic as I do not like it to interfere with the subject, unless there is a specific reason. Then I reacquire the image digitally and start working on it until I am completely satisfied. The final result of this work is a large scale photograph.

Even though I am not a painter in the strict sense, I find it necessary to work with paint at certain steps because I feel it gives the final image a peculiar pictorial taste and a subtle intimacy. Notwithstanding this may not be immediately perceivable for the viewers, the overall quality stands out.

For me working on a portrait is very fascinating as I treat it like something private and public: an image represents not just a face, but a story. Personal and collective, symbolic and emotional.

I deeply feel the importance of whom I choose to represent, but even more I consider what significance, perception and reaction the represented images imply.



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