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Mock of the Times

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MOCK OF THE TIMES



Alligators—From Swamp to Home Plate, illustration for New York Times article by Ron Guidry on alligators and alligator hunters in Louisiana, printed September 19, 1981.

There comes a time in every artist's life, when he finds his true medium. Richard Mock found his when he began to make linoleum block prints. Though Mock was introduced to the linocut in high school, it was on July 23, 1980, that he embarked on a six year project in collaboration with the New York Times, and his metier was evident.

During this productive period, Mock revived the role of artisan, adapting his talents as a painter, to the needs of the newspaper, illustrating specific stories on the Opinion and Editorial page of the Times. His emphatic visual statements served to bring the contemporary art world out of the Arts and Leisure section and into the secular arena of the Op/Ed pages. Mock began this long-term project with the intention of compiling a portfolio of sixty linoleum block prints. He methodically accumulated prints created spontaneously upon the request of Jerelle Kraus, Art Director of the Op/Ed page. Kraus chose an article she considered appropriate for Mock's illustrative interpretation. Generally, these articles refer to human interest issues, such as ecology, social injustice, ethical values, or the economy. Typically, Kraus read the given article to Mock over the telephone, and then related the specific dimensions of the space available for an illustration. During this initial conversation, Mock harnessed his immediate response to the article, often visualizing the image before Kraus had finished reading. Within twelve to eighteen hours, Mock had completed the linocut image and delivered it to the Times, where it was reduced, printed, and distributed to the Time's vast readership.

Mock's interest in block prints corresponded with the resurgence of wood and linoleum block printing and narrative expressionism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The potent issues of hypocrisy and social struggle are natural vehicles for Mock's assertive imagery. His powerful, tightly woven compositions and imposing lines could be considered refined graffiti. The caricatured renderings and child-like simplification, possess a primitive quality similar to the impassioned markings on a subway wall. But while the linocuts retain the veracity and immediacy of a spray-painted graffiti drawing, they also aspire to the permanence and resolution of a traditional print. Spontaneity and technical ease are wed in Mock's incised depictions of colloquial reality.

With the Times prints, Mock contributes to the figurative issues of the 1980s, while reviving the nineteenth century tradition of fine artist functioning as illustrator. But unlike the master journalistic illustrator, Honoré Daumier, who generally adhered to naturalistic forms, Mock abandons traditional proportion and perspective in favor of dramatic hyperbole and clarity of form.

A print such as “Alligators—From Swamp to the Home Plate” in many ways typifies the Times portfolio. Mock’s confident hand commands a curvilinear motif, promoting the pictorial dominance of the alligator as it encircles the scene, while the tethered pole mirrors the arc of the alligator’s tail. Mock’s skillful balancing of incision and relief enables the ferocious black reptile to dominate the composition, while the white background illuminates the captive bird and the two determined hunters. The broad arc of the alligator’s body ends in the prominent pointed tail, a motif which is repeated in the spikey vegetation on either side of the print. Mock’s sardonic humor places the unlucky fowl in a Darwinian chain of victims as the hunters set their sights on the alligator, and the alligator is about to devour the bird. A fish and a frog frolic obliviously as the natural hierarchy is enacted. Meanwhile, the viewer observes the scene, perhaps looking over her own shoulder as the predatory chain threatens to extend beyond the print surface and into the spectator’s space. In “Alligators,” Mock takes a rather banal essay and renders it full of bravado, and theatrical suspense.

When illustrating “Sound Common Sense,” Mock assumes a more literal stance, maintaining the irony and black humor of the 1919 article by a Russian humorist, which was reprinted in the Times in 1983. The caustic wit and eery premonitory content of this article presaging nuclear weaponry, are transferred directly from the printed word to the printed image. The general festooned with medals, the smiling inventor, cartoon-like airplane and missiles and the insidious ball of money directly relate to the story and complement the writer’s relentless satire.

Whether literal or liberal, narrative or critical, each of Mock’s linocuts achieve an autonomy which survives the transitory nature of newspaper print. The original prints, preserved as unique works of art, command an irresistible presence and authority. As a group, the prints are unified by their strong composition, decisive linearity, and graphic activity. The immediacy of Mock’s hand is transmitted directly to our eyes, as crisp blacks leap away from the white incisions, creating an energetic dialogue between the artist and the viewer.

Daphne Anderson Deeds
Curator



Sound Common Sense, illustration for New York Times article, abridged from 1919 essay by Arkady Averchenko, on the foibles of military escalation, printed August 13, 1983.

RICHARD BASIL MOCK

- 1944 Born in Long Beach, California.
- 1958-61 Studied at the Art Center in Los Angeles for three years while still in high school. Awarded scholarship to study illustration.
- 1961-65 Transferred to the University of Michigan where he studied lithography and block printing with Emile Weddige. Involved with the Once Group in Ann Arbor. Graduated with B.S. in Design.
- 1965 Studied painting and drawing with Richard Diebenkorn at the San Francisco Art Institute, then moved to New York. Studied with Alex Katz and Philip Guston, among others.
- 1969 Spent one year teaching at the University of Oklahoma and began showing his paintings in Austin, Texas.
- 1970 Received painting fellowship from the Roswell Museum in New Mexico for a year, then returned to New York.
- 1972 Exhibition at Chicago Art Institute; first Dance Environment at the Detroit Institute of Art. Created a dance performance for his one-man show at 112 Greene Street Gallery.
- 1973 Included in the Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial.
- 1977 Began series of 17 linocuts based on Southwestern images and themes entitled "Desert Visions." One of the series was later included in the Whitney's "Block Prints" show of 1982.
- 1984 Included in the "American Neo-Expressionism" show at the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut.
- 1986 Three one-man shows held in New York; two painting retrospectives and one exhibition exclusively of prints. For a second time, included in the Brooklyn Museum's National Printmaker Biennial.

MOCK OF THE TIMES, an exhibition of thirty-one linoleum block prints selected by Daphne Anderson Deeds, from a portfolio of sixty linocuts by Richard Basil Mock, and exhibited at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, May 19 to July 5, 1987. The portfolio was generously loaned by Dr. Donald Arkfeld, of Omaha, Nebraska. Resource/Response is part of Sheldon's ongoing resource exhibition series which explores current issues and ideas addressed by contemporary artists. The Resource series is made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal funding agency which supports the Arts.



COVER: Northeast of Eden, 11 Tales of Serpents, illustration for New York Times article by Rick Rofihe, on the human aversion to snakes, printed October 17, 1981.