

Art in the Time of Trump

By Wendy Reiswig Bailey

I was never a political artist, and in fact was not that interested in politics in general, until Donald Trump hit the scene. I had known of Trump since the late seventies, when he was a hot item on the New York social wannabe scene. When *The Apprentice* came out I watched part of one episode before turning it off, because I found his blustering egotistical narcissism to be annoying and not worth watching.

But let's start at the beginning. What does it mean to be an artist? At what point do you become an artist? Or rather, at what point can you legitimately start calling yourself an artist? It's not like you go to school, get a BFA, and then hang out a shingle: ARTIST.

I have always drawn, ever since my earliest childhood memories. But I also had many other interests: music, writing, the natural world, etc. I had considered marine biology, but started college as a music major, then switched to creative writing, and finally ended up as an art major. This was different than my friends in the art department, who were all Artists with a Capital A.

After college, I worked for a number of years as what was called in those days a Commercial Artist. I was an in-house fashion illustrator and graphic artist for the most high-end shoe store in San Francisco (Kushin's Shoes). At that point, I could legitimately call myself an artist. I had pay stubs to prove it.

When my first daughter was born, I left that job and started working as a Fine Artist (definition: someone who does art but doesn't make any money). It was at that point that I started working

almost exclusively in wood block prints, because having two children, the time I could dedicate to doing art was very limited. With printmaking, you can stop and start and be interrupted and still eventually come out with a piece of art.

My husband was a scuba diver and underwater photographer, and my artwork at that time reflected my lifelong interest in the ocean. One of my pieces, a series of rock fish prints, was part of the Native Species exhibit at the Oakland Museum (The Museum of California). I started having pieces included in group shows around San Francisco, the Bay Area, Sacramento, and beyond—including one exhibit for Galleria Mesa in Mesa, Arizona, that traveled to various museums and galleries across the country for two years.

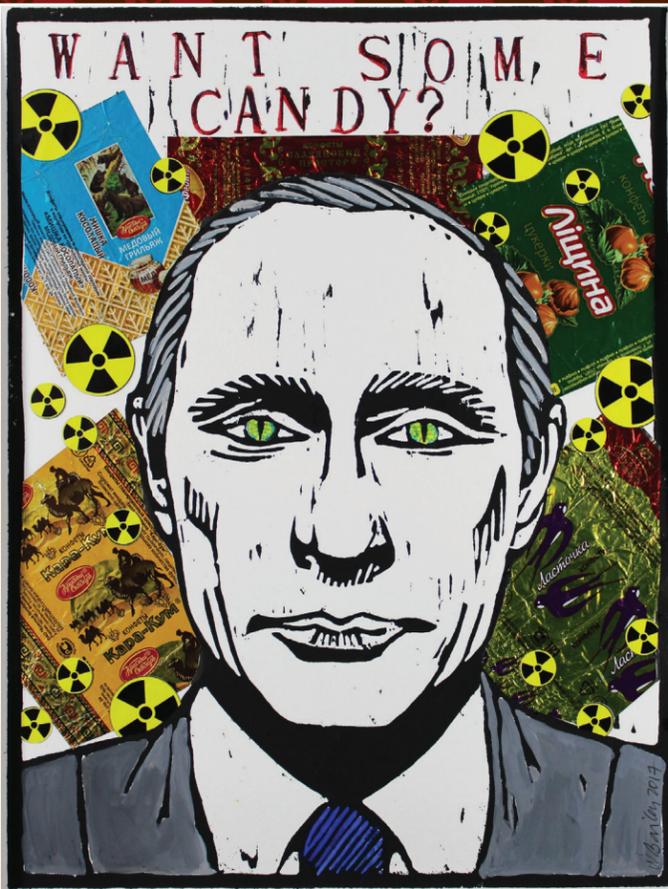
After moving to the Mendocino Coast in 1989, I began a collaboration with a couple of writers who wrote about gardening and farmer's markets. At that point I began putting together the prints I had done of flowers, plants, trees, and fruits and vegetables into larger prints, and embellishing them with writing, collage elements, and gouache paint.

These large prints were highly personal, with enigmatic imagery which meant something at the time they were composed, but, quite frankly, even I have forgotten what each element meant. Then in 2016 Donald Trump hit the scene. There was a Salon de Refuses show at Gualala Arts Center, and Donald Trump, being such a ridiculous candidate, seemed like the perfect subject for a satirical print. I thought it would be funny. As it turns out, by the time the exhibit went up, he had been elected. The joke was on me, I guess.

Cockroach DNA
Hand-colored
woodblock print
11.75 x 8.75



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Putin: Want Some Candy?
McConnell as Dr. Frankenstein
Melania: I Really Don't Care At All
Liz Cheney: The Biggest Balls
Lindsey Graham: Chameleon

Hand-colored woodblock prints, 12 x 9

I began having nightmares about men in black suits chasing me down.

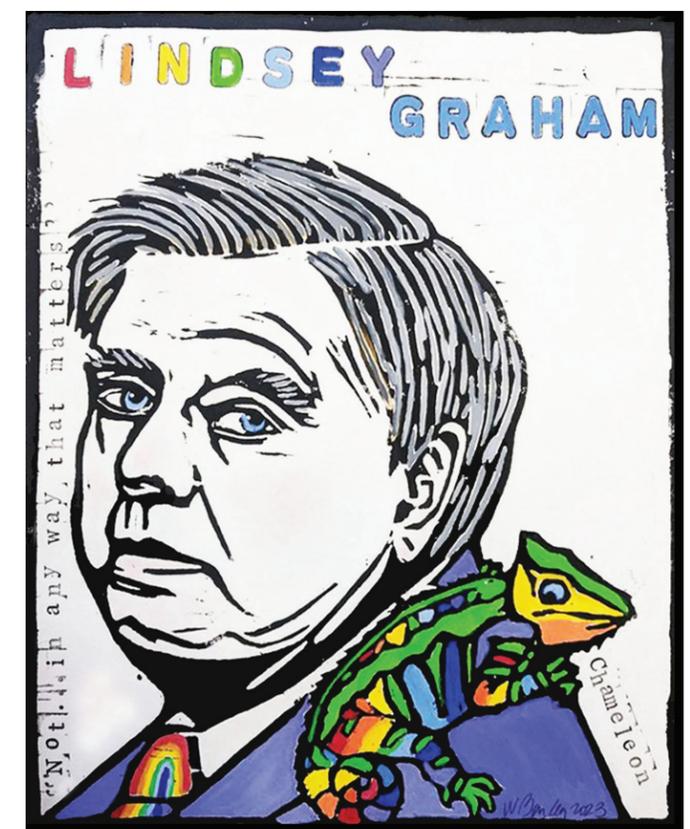
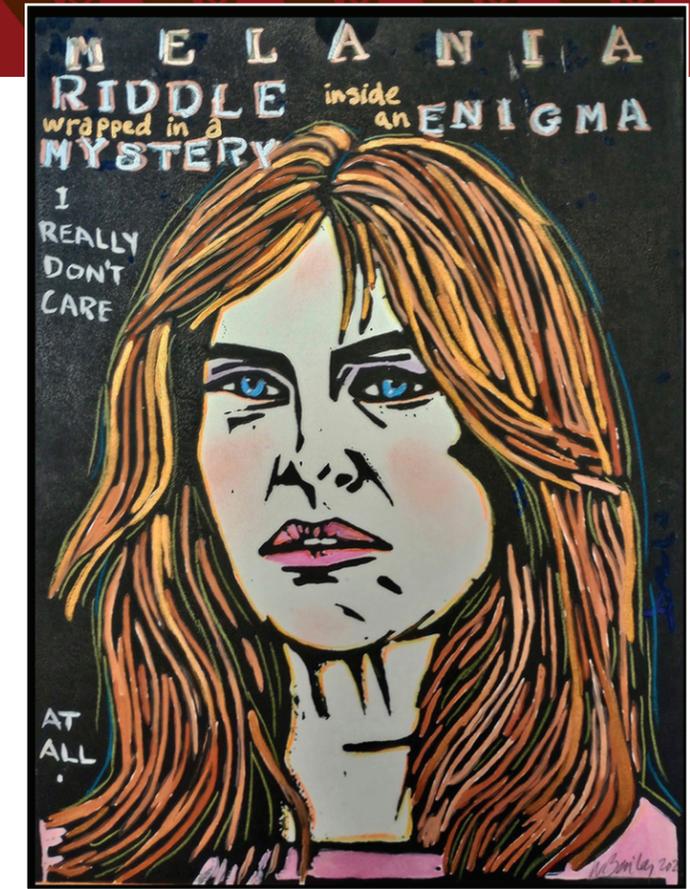
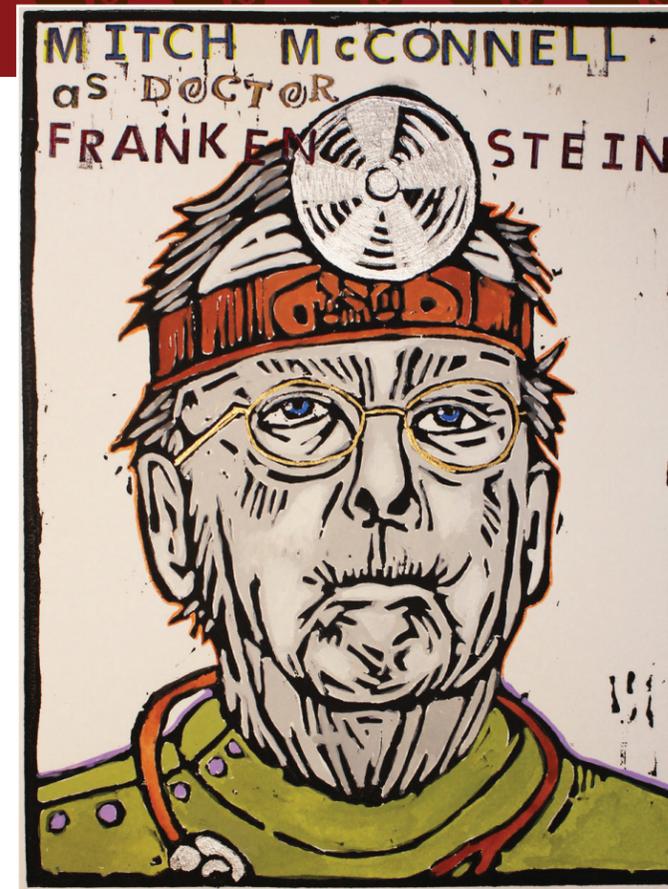
The rest of the portraits in this series grew organically. When Trump got into bed with Putin, I did a portrait of the Russian president, inspired by what my Russian language professor, who was born and raised in Moscow, said about him (“He’s a snake”). People are always suggesting new subjects for me to do, but I thank them for their input and then ignore it. The people I choose to portray have to grab me at an emotional level. I don’t really choose them; they choose me.

When I decide to do a portrait of someone, I have to do a very deep dive into their personalities and their past history. It can be very unpleasant because I really dislike many of those I portray. But I feel compelled to do it. My friends take part in demonstrations and are involved in mailing campaigns and so forth. I don’t generally do any of that. For me, my protest is my artwork.

And now, given the hostile atmosphere of the revenge-driven second Trump administration, it can be a little scary to put myself out there like that. I would love to show my artwork at more galleries or museums, but I doubt if many would be brave enough to show them, given the likelihood of retribution from powerful people on the Right, including investors, board members, and conservative collectors.

Doing this series has made me realize that, for myself, it has always been the portrait that really interests and compels me. I always drew faces. It was never landscapes, or still lifes. It was always The Face. And in the current political climate, there are a lot of faces just waiting to be carved and printed.

Wendy’s art can be found at the SK Gallery & Studio in Gualala, CA. ■



On a lark, Wendy affixed this tiny portrait to a bathroom wall at SF MOMA, so she could finally say that she had a piece there. Two weeks later, COVID shut down the museum, and she never found out what happened to the print.