

Or, the Whale

Jos Sances



AUGUST 14 - SEPTEMBER 26, 2020
LAWRENCE ARTS CENTER





Catalogue Key to “Or, The Whale”

By Tim Drescher

This catalogue identifies the major images in the 14' x 51' scratchboard drawing mural *Or, The Whale*. They are treated in a roughly chronological order from left to right, with occasional deviations for thematic consistency.

The mural's title, which is the subtitle of Herman Melville's epic 1851 novel, *Moby Dick*, immediately draws attention to the relationship between the mural and the novel that inspired it, but it is important to distinguish between the two. The novel is about whales, whaling, adventure, myth, labor.... The mural is about the consequences of capitalism, of our actions or inactions seen against visions of the future we are leaving our children and grandchildren. It is also about whales. For example, the scratches visible on the whale's snout typically come from sperm whales' ingesting giant squids, whose tentacle hooks scratch the animals as they are eaten. This art work is a metaphorical scratch on capitalism's snout.

Melville's novel is an adventure story set into a context of whales and whaling. As an adventure story it fits the pattern of the monomythical hero's quest. Ishmael takes his journey against a background of social forces, en-acted in the novel by the multinational crew led by psychotic captain Ahab. The novel offers a model of capitalism and the role of the international working class, the Pequod's crew. It has in addition psychological and mythical levels of meaning. *Or, the Whale*, while depicting a history of US capitalism, foregrounds its well-documented but too often ignored ravages. The mural is content to focus on the structure of capitalism as a socio-economic system that carries with it the horrors depicted by the mural. Whether inescapable by-products of that organization of society or not, bias, bigotry, and racism, along with other anti-social characteristics constantly underlie US society, as C.L.R. James argues. The mural explores adverse effects of capitalist history in the United States. *Or, The Whale* is a political art work. Under neoliberalism, any description or criticism of capitalism is considered radically political.

Whales, too, exist within multiple frames spatially and temporally. The giant, graceful beasts appear sub-lime because they are so much larger than humans, but they are endangered. Step back and appreciate the beauty of the entire mural, then examine details. On its flank can be read a history of capitalism, the system that is endangering the animal. The same beauty and vulnerability is also true of us, individually and collectively.

The work is properly described as a mural for two reasons, size and intention. The size allows for a double impact, one at a distance, where it looks like a whale, and one closer, where a viewer sees that the broad outline of the whale contain dozens of specific vignettes of US capitalist history. Viewed from a distance, the life-sized image looks like a barnacle-encrusted whale, huge, with much surface texture. Viewed up close, the texture is seen to consist of socio-historical vignettes presenting a history of US capitalism which, replete with impressive achievements, is simultaneously suffused with racism, sexism, greed and ecological destruction.

The section headings in this key correspond to a chart that Jos Sances made during the creation of the artwork. Sometimes, categories overlap. Sometimes themes appear in more than one part of the epic image. History and epics, not to mention whales, are hard to keep in line.

Mining

Reading from left to right, the whale's snout encompasses mining, mostly coal mining, a foundational industry for the industrialization of the United States that in various forms stretched across the entire country as well as iron and gold extraction from hard-rock shafts to massive open pits. The boys depicted (from a nineteenth-century photograph) were Pennsylvania coal miners. Most of what is in the mural is from 1850 to the present, a starting point chosen because *Moby Dick* was published in 1851. The single exception is the massacre of the Pequot Indians in 1637, when the pilgrims' brutality shocked the Narragansett Indians. Melville's invocation of the tribe's name as the name of the ship his protagonist Ishmael sails on is a clear reference to the historical fact that United States history sails on a genocidal sea.

Miners are multicultural, here shown by the presence of 19th century Blacks and Chinese working together. But mines of any type are not ecologically neutral, indicated here by a collapsed mine below the whale's nostril. To the right, an early coal-burning power plant is cited as another source of pollution directly stemming from production of the power necessary for industrial capitalism.

Mining and power generation segue into timber harvesting. Next to forestry, different kinds of social destruction are shown: racism with police dogs and lynching, then slave ships, then bottling, into plastic bottles and the resulting pervasive plastic waste. On the far left of the whale, the bottom of the whale's mouth shows discarded cell phones, which, along with plastic bottles, constitute the mural's emblematic examples of toxic waste. It is countered by a group cleaning up toxic waste from a beach.

Above and to the right of the slave ship is a scene from the Vietnam War and the killing of peaceful anti-war demonstrators at Kent State University. The two are spatially linked, both being the products of aggressive militarism running through the country's history. Then the mural shows feed lot beef and chickens, along with shipping (oil tankers) and, contrapuntally, kids playing in the surf. They frolic innocently, but terrors lurk in the background.

Timber

We see a power plant, and lumberjacks felling massive redwood trees. Placing the viewer in a forest here, even one seen as a commodifiable resource, merges naturally enough into forest fires, catastrophes of particular note in the 21st century as the effects of global warming become increasingly evident, especially throughout the western part of the country.

At this point, the mural requires being read vertically as well as horizontally because the complexity of the multiple subjects utilizes a vertical as well as a horizontal "canvas". The image of the open pit mine in the mural's design sits atop an electric power generation plant. Below them rages a forest fire which in the mural connects imaginatively with the Pequot fire, then the Pilgrims and others set fire to the Native Americans' village and massacred them when they tried to escape the flames. In the natural world, including the exploited one, everything is connected, as it also is in *Or, The Whale*. The puritans stand next to buffaloes and face a pile of animal skulls. This is what the animal and human worlds become in an exploitative commercial process, targets with little concern for the consequences.

Power

Power has been produced historically in the United States by burning coal, hydro-electrically, and from nuclear reactors. Some of these sources are less ecologically impactful than others, but all of them have environmental and social costs which are not always recognized. The mural mixes animals and animal skeletons as reminders of these costs. In particular, dogs roam throughout, humanizing the story for contemporary 21st-century viewers, because dogs are often support animals, but they were also attack dogs set against Black people in civil rights demonstrations.

John D. Rockefeller and Oil

looking out from the top of this grouping is the mural's first major portrait. John D. Rockefeller is placed next to the Drake well in Titusville, Pennsylvania, the first commercial oil well. This is the commodity on which Rockefeller built his stupendous fortune, indeed, a monopoly that was broken up through anti-trust legislation only in 1911. As an indication of the extent of Rockefeller's Standard Oil of New Jersey monopoly, today companies derived from his original holdings include Amoco, Chevron, Marathon, Exxon, Texaco, Sohio, BP, Mobil, and several others.

The Drake well was drilled in 1859, and is important also because fossil oil replaced sperm oil and thus destroyed the whaling industry, i.e., fossil fuels replaced whale oil. By 1900, Nantucket had gone from being the prosperous center of the whaling industry to being a site for hobos (who in the 21st century would be called "homeless"). Along the upper portions of the whale, Ahab-like, these five portraits of important capitalists embody the psychological characteristics driving Ahab in Melville's novel. In important ways, each is also of Captain Ahab. Ahab is consumed by his need to find the great white whale and then take revenge for its having bitten off his leg. That Ahab's obsession leads to the death of the entire crew of the Pequod, suggests that capitalists' obsession with accumulating more and more money and power will lead to the destruction of the entire planet and its inhabitants (us).

Native Americans

More careful examination of the drawing shows that what at first appears as a pile of animal skulls in fact comprises Rockefeller's coat, placed above a bison slaughter. Everywhere industrial capitalism consorts with death.

The image of the slaughter of the Pequod Indians is taken from an 18th-century wood cut. Below, a Catholic nun teaches Indians in the 1950s. This, of course, inscribes the history of mis-education of Native American children in government schools whose first order of business was to separate the children from their families, deny them use of their own language, and remove them from their own culture and inculcate the worst of Anglo (capitalist, racist, etc.) values.

The adjacent out-of-control forest fire, catastrophically destructive of natural and human habitats, is immediately contrasted with a single Indian starting a small cooking fire in the lower right corner of the scene. This is a "then and now" vignette, but it also presents two contrasting styles of ways of relating to the natural world, immediate use and commercial exploitation.

Below the fire is a huge oil drilling rig (think Deepwater Horizon, the British Petroleum oil platform in the Caribbean that exploded in 2010); again, the scale is industrial, not human, and the scale alone reduces the humans to seeming insignificance. Next to that is a visual detail quoted from the famous, Westward Ho the Course of Empire Takes its Way, a mural painted for the US capitol building in 1861 by Emmanuel Leutze celebrating Manifest Destiny. Invoking the universal power of "destiny" claims that conquering the continent and expunging its indigenous population are part of the natural order of the universe, thus making opposition futile. Claims for "human nature" act similarly. This, after all, was the excuse for slaughtering Native Americans, i.e., to allow the continent to be developed for commercial purposes, and Indians, who had neither interest in nor need for such things, were "in the way". Manifest Destiny was the official philosophical excuse allowing United States forces to remove/slaughter the indigenous Native American Indians. To the right, oil and timber extraction are mixed together, not because they were practiced together, but because of their combined impact on the national economy and culture. They represent similar attitudes toward nature.

Sometimes, attacks on Indians were direct and physical. Sometimes they were more subtle, as in the denial of their culture by means of, for example, the establishment of the Native girls' school depicted. Elsewhere, indigenous culture is represented by Natives performing a ghost dance, a sophisticated presentation of a world without white men widely performed by many tribes across the country. Below them is a Native American drawing of smallpox-infected blankets, the first recorded instance of biological warfare--invented by the United States.

The whale is an appropriate vehicle for the unfurling of US history because as it stands, the whale and its kind are doomed, threatened with extinction as they swim so elegantly across the planet. In this the mural shows us that US history impinges on world history.

Henry Ford and the Automobile

Even when noting horrendous examples, the drawing here is superlative; beautiful portrayals of horrible things, Yeats' "terrible beauty." For instance, pollution-spewing automobiles are drawn with care. Sances, like the rest of the male population of a certain age, grew up admiring the sleek, finned 1950s models (is there a pun lurking here about "fins"?), such as the '58 Chevy Bel Air shown here. But they do not exist in isolation and their greatest presence is the daily traffic jams clogging our nation's highways and the air we breathe. *Or, The Whale* contains hundreds of cars. They tend toward sleek, classic forms, but they are not without danger and the effects of their pollution are well known. What is more, they can be used as weapons, like the vehicle (shown) driven by a white supremacist used to kill a peaceful demonstrator and injure many others in Charlottesville, South Carolina in 2018.

Henry Ford, another major portrait in the whale, is shown riding in a car his company manufactured. His greatest genius was not the invention of the assembly line (for which he had to double workers' pay because they knew it was dehumanizing), but having the confidence to know that if he built cars, the government would build streets, roads, and highways for them to drive on. As shown, in several southern locations, chain-gang prisoners worked to build and repair public highways. Then, a contemporary auto plant is presented, with no workers, just robots. The alternative capitalism presents is being exploited or being excluded.

Polar Ice Cap Melt, Worldwide Sea Rise, Storms and Fires

Following automobile manufacturing is a depiction of the melting polar ice cap, one of the consequences of global warming. The decimation of the polar bear population, symbolized here by two images, one a polar bear crossing ice floes (there is no longer sufficient ice, so much swimming is required), and a polar bear skull. Below the polar bear skull is shown more melting and empty polar ice, the only empty, quiet space in the entire mural.

Global warming has many impacts on our lives, including the polar melting pictured at the top of the whale. Another consequence of this climatalogical phenomenon is a general rise in sea level, in the US first experienced in the inundation of low-lying New York areas and subways in storms around the turn of the century.

Less obvious, but nevertheless a result of the same global warming, are the massive, historically unprecedented forest fires in the west in the twenty-teens, especially in California. These catastrophes are particularly vivid because they occurred in populated areas where the events were quickly transmitted to the rest of the world via already-in-place television and video apparatuses. People across the world saw the devastation of the forest fires immediately, as if the damage was inflicted in their own home town.

The mural images for these events include a tornado, hurricanes, and burning houses. New Orleans was flooded by hurricane Katrina in 2005, causing many deaths and destroying entire portions of the city. The mural shows some of the aftermath rubble of this disaster. These catastrophes could have been avoided or much reduced in their destruction if human needs and not profit had been the priority of officials. Indeed, to take only one example, some informed witnesses argue that rebuilding in New Orleans has been deliberately delayed because of a desire to evict portions of the black population and replace them with "higher value," newer properties and housing.

As a contrast to these destructive natural disasters abetted by humans, the mural offers arctic birds. This is another example of a mini-theme in the mural, i.e., animals, including house pets and pets cared for by homeless people. They, too, are victims of the catastrophes illustrated by *Or, The Whale*.

Slavery, Genocide and New Immigrant Labor

Adjacent to an Indian motorcycle is chief Wahoo, mascot of the Cleveland Indians baseball team, which retained its disrespectful mascot years after most athletic teams recognized the inherent racism of such logos and discontinued them. The team announced discontinuance of the figure in 2018.

This section, near the whale's eye, is an extension of Chief Wahoo. The mural shows various racist stereotypes including an ethnic notion cartoon image of a black man eating watermelon and a nineteenth-century Thomas Nast drawing of a stereotyped Chinese person from California, when laws were passed making it illegal for people of Chinese ancestry to testify in court against Anglos. This made it possible for whites to steal Chinese gold claims.

At the top of the whale's eye are the "Scottsboro Boys" dressed in prison garb. They were five young men in Alabama falsely accused and convicted of raping a white woman. The case became a cause celebre and eventually asserted the legal precedent of the right of everyone to a fair trial, including people of color. In the eyes of history, the case put the legal system on trial along with the role of racism underlying much of it.

Most of the immigrant labor shown replacing earlier slave labor is Mexican, which is appropriate for a mural drawn in California, but the general point remains valid. Historically, it is easy to see that new immigrant labor in the 21st century replaced workers who in the period before the Civil War were supplied by slavery. This is not to say that later immigrants were slaves, only to note that capitalism needs cheap labor and traditionally the United States has found that labor among people of color. Nor is this a claim that Anglo settlers did no labor. They certainly did, and continue to do so heading toward the mid twenty-first century. For example, white women sewing in sweatshops are also pictured. But slavery and immigrant labor were especially valuable sources for early nineteenth-century industries, as immigrants continue to be for twenty-first century high tech, restaurant, and service sectors.

Plastics

These categories, plastics and war, could be contained within a single heading, constituting as they do perhaps the most egregious examples of waste. The mural has previously noted the accumulation of plastics, most notably confronting the children playing in the surf. The sea and the shore are both littered with the ubiquitous discarded plastic, detritus of a careless throw-away society.

The greatest source of waste across the planet and the centuries is war, here exemplified by several scenes, including the role played in the Civil War by J.P. Morgan.

Cotton and a modern cotton harvester are depicted as examples of industrial agribusiness, adjacent to the kinds of labor that the harvester replaced, slave labor and prison labor. The new source of field workers is immigrant labor. The inherent racism of these examples is then continued by depicting Al Jolson in his famous role wearing blackface. Jolson was one of the most popular singers of the 1920s and is known as a great entertainer.

Below are a tornado, hurricanes, houses on fire, flooded New Orleans, rubble from burned housing. In short, the chaos and waste of catastrophic disasters.

J.P. Morgan and War

J.P. Morgan was one of the first war profiteers. He paid \$300 to avoid serving in the union Army, while serving instead as a banker and war profiteer. For example, he was responsible for the sale of five thousand defective rifles for a large profit. This was investigated by the government, but, unsurprisingly, no charges were brought against him.

The Civil War is represented by a Black unit, a group of Union generals, and Confederate soldiers. The point here is not about any particular people or battle, but the constant war that permeates US history. The step into WWI is then seen as relatively small. The industrial-level killing of WWI brought much death, mainly by means of the machine gun, the new weapon that changed war. The British upper class officers, refusing to dismount their horses, rode into machine gun nests, displaying courage combined with fatal arrogance. WWI soldiers are wearing gas masks.

Then down into WWII. Mussolini & Hitler, the D-Day invasion, and a kamikaze pilot are all images of those who pursue brute force to gain their ends. Hitler and Mussolini in particular are given lavish visual treatment, and the car they ride in refers to earlier automobile images and to Henry Ford, a Nazi sympathizer. In capitalism, the automobile is a ubiquitous symbol of waste and political corruption as well as industrial development.

The image of a prisoner standing helplessly with a hood covering his head and electric wires connected to his fingers in Abu Ghraib, Iraq, 2003-2005, has come to symbolize the United States' endorsement and practice of torture. The image of helicopters in Vietnam reiterates fruitless wars the United States has provoked since World War II... and lost. A group of Vietnamese watches the destruction of their country. Near the whale's ear are hundreds of plastic bottles.

Note, illustrated in the whale are frequent instances of dehumanization throughout US history, where capitalist priorities take precedence over humans.

At a border, Trump's wall is being climbed by refugees, and holocaust survivors are shown at the gate at Auschwitz with the infamous sign reading "arbeit macht frei," ("work sets you free.") The terrible irony here is that the work referred to is the forced labor of enslaved concentration camp inmates, and the "freedom" occurs only in death. More than six million people were slaughtered in this holocaust, at least five million Jews, symbolizing religious intolerance, but the Nazis also murdered labor organizers, Roma (gypsies), gays and lesbians, all people who led non-Nazi lives. Nearby is the emblematic mushroom cloud of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945, killing over two hundred thousand people and forcing Japan to surrender at the end of the Pacific conflict in World War II. These scenes are perhaps the sharpest reminders in the art work that fascism is again growing, feeding on ignorance, hate, social instability, and fear, especially as it gains strength in European and United States elections.

Women's Suffrage

More than halfway through the lengthy leviathan, the critical content begins to introduce positive images after the series of horrors depicted. After the unremitting images of exploitation, signs of resistance to the dehumanization depicted thus far begin to appear, images of people who resisted exploitation and struck back against the system and its perpetrators. Among these, suffragist women are exemplary.

Not all battles are military. At the turn of the twentieth century, women suffragists lead by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth (born a slave) and others, fought for women's right to vote, along with the abolition of slavery. Stanton, born in 1815, was an abolitionist and a leader of the suffrage movement. She fought for women's rights, for women to be treated equally with men. Anthony, born in 1820, was a Quaker and fought against war as well as for women's rights. Many in these movements, it must be acknowledged, tended to embrace their society's racism uncritically.

A strong anti WW II movement is shown, including a Red Cross worker and women working in factories doing jobs that were previously restricted to men, but were well filled by women when men were fighting in the military. During WW II, collectively these women were known as "Rosie the Riveter" and are instantly identified by the famous Norman Rockwell Saturday Evening Post cover image of a woman wearing overalls with a red bandana tied in her hair (J. Howard Miller's image of a similar working woman flexing a bicep and captioned "We can do it!" is often confused with Rockwell's Rosie).

In the mural, these earlier militant women become mixed with women activists in the later twentieth century, including 1960s women demonstrating against the Vietnam War, and pink hat women and pro choice activists, noting 70 years of women's activism.

Refugees

Refugees are included beneath the activist women. A detail is included from the Nakba, when the Israelis drove the Palestinians out of their homeland in 1948. Syrian refugees represent the fact that struggles to retain homelands are still being fought today. For instance, the pictured boat carries refugees from Myanmar in the 21st century.

Corporate Farming

The right side of the mural, below War and Refugees, depicts the industrialization of agriculture: corporate farming and agribusiness bring earlier images of sharecropping, slave labor, and nineteenth-century growing methods up to date.

Railroads/Gold Rush

A group of black gold miners, taken from a nineteenth-century photo, is included. Nineteenth-century California gold mines offered a rare opportunity for racial integration that countered the pervasive racism in the country, although racist laws were passed specifically against the Chinese. For the most part, what mattered in the gold fields was the work, and those who worked honestly could be found in integrated mining teams.

Leland Stanford

Another major portrait is of Leland Stanford, who is recognized widely as a major California figure in the nineteenth century, primarily because of his role as one of the Big Four railroad men. Stanford, Mark Hopkins, Collis Huntington and Charles Crocker are credited with building the Central Pacific Railroad, the western portion of the trans-continental railroad completed in 1869. They are also known as philanthropists, and Stanford became governor of California. But they were also known as Robber Barons because of their dishonest, corrupt and deplorable methods of getting what they wanted, including extortion, bribery, and perjury. Beneath Stanford is a bear pelt, a double reference. The first is the extinction of grizzly bears, the state animal. The last grizzly in California was killed in 1923, but the California grizzly remains on the state flag. The second reference is a sly championing of Stanford vs. Cal, one of the oldest rivalries in college football. The portrait of Leland Stanford is placed atop the vanquished Cal bear.

Associated with the growth of California into a major world economic power (the state's economy is, depending on sources, ranked from fourth largest to ninth largest in the world.) Its growth began in earnest with the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in 1848 (It took a year for word to get out, which is why gold seekers were known as 49ers).

Railroads were one of Stanford's important businesses. They raise the question of who built them, to which *Or, The Whale* answers that in this case the immigrant Chinese workers who were popular because racism dictated that they could be paid half of what was paid to white workers.

Muybridge

The sequential photos of a running pig reproduce images taken by Edweard Muybridge, an innovative photographer famous for his motion studies. He was hired by Stanford to help settle a bet as to whether or not all four hooves of the galloping horse Sallie Gardner left the ground at once (they did). Perhaps most famous for his sequences of motion studies, Muybridge made thousands of stop-action sequences which were so well executed they are still useful in the 21st century. They are also the precursors to the influential California film industry.

Pipeline

Pipelines cause the majority of oil-related spills. Also depicted is the off-loading of oil tankers, which also pose a significant environmental danger. Adjacent to the pipeline is a historical reference to the slaughter of California natives the 1850s. A bounty on native scalps was offered by the state, large enough to encourage failed miners to leave the gold fields and practice murdering Indians instead.

Steve Jobs and Computers

This section shows a 1960s word processor and the astronaut Dave and the computer HAL from 2001: A Space Odyssey, Stanley Kubrick's famous 1968 science fiction movie. In additional references to high technology innovations, *Or, The Whale* displays many cell phones and much selfie taking. Cartoon cop Dick Tracy's wrist-phone was science fiction speculation when Chester Gould first drew it, but has come to pass in the latest generation of i phones, fit-bits, and the like. There is a kind of a joke here based on the image of Dick Tracy with his watch, based on the considerable resemblance between Tracy and Robert Mueller, the special council who investigated Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign. Behind Tracy a robotic arm assembles a cell phone. An additional step into robotics displays Pixar's Wally, thus blurring distinction between computer and film industries. Muybridge was high tech for his time. Steve Jobs is for ours. He and Steve Wozniak invented the desk top computer, but it was Jobs' ruthless business acumen that parlayed that into Apple, Inc., one of the largest companies in the world. The mega-yacht Octopus displays the titanic wealth of the super rich in the early twenty-first century. It is owned by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen.

Grandchildren

Nearby, a child boogie boards above a young girl looking at the viewer and representing the future for which technology ostensibly is created.

Figuratively, the future is for the grandchildren, and the mural is a gift from Sances to them, but it is a mixed gift. Some people and events are exemplary, but many, however well-intentioned, positive and beneficial, also have "an unnoticed downside," and unintended consequences, which our grandchildren will be left to resolve, as we have tried to solve socio-political-ecological problems left to us by our forbears. A group is shown removing bags of toxic waste from a beach.

Fundamentalism and Civil Rights

Also shown here is a religious fundamentalist next to Martin Luther King, Jr., marching, a sharp juxtaposition of opposites. King marches for racial integration and peace while the fundamentalists assemble in a mega-church and celebrate a narrower, male-dominated view of mankind. This reiterates the complexity of the world we live in. No matter how much we may want a particular perspective to dominate, contradictory extremes are always present.

The next section is packed with intense contradictions, beginning with the juxtaposition of fundamentalist Christian mega-church revivalism and a Muslim fanatic in front of a jihad slogan. Juxtaposed to the religious fundamentalists are the Three Stooges, more famous for mocking than for religious beliefs. Fundamentalism breeds fanaticism wherever it exists, as much among Christians as any other group. In this case, Oral Roberts is seen performing a "healing" in front of a massive crowd. This contrasts with one of the high school girls who helped desegregate Little Rock High School as a test legal case that ultimately forced President Kennedy to send federal troops to enforce the Constitution. Integration/civil rights leaders include Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and, historically a bit later, the great gay leader Harvey Milk, of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, shown here with Mayor George Moscone. Both were murdered by a fellow member of the S.F. Board of Supervisors and former policeman in San Francisco city hall on November 27, 1978. Anti-gay slogans are reproduced in this section.

Civil Rights' struggles with religious fundamentalism raise the question of whether the country is ruled by religious dicta or by civil laws.

Excessive Wealth

Civil Rights images then merge into a treatment of the extremely wealthy, which was glimpsed before in the mega-yacht Octopus.

A woman's march in the 1950s contrasts with a Trump rally where all participants hold cell phones. This reminds that back at the far left side of the image the whale's mouth is filled with landfill made up of discarded flip phones. This waste is recent, but, then many new gadgets are designed to be obsolete soon after being manufactured. These women march beneath a sign, and next to Stormy Daniels, the pornography star who accused Donald Trump of paying her off to keep quiet about their relationship. Next to her is a pedophile priest being cast into hell. More cell phones are shown, 36 in this panel alone, indicating loss of mental focus and replacement of human interaction by technology-infused, electronically mediated relationships. More women's teeth are included, suggesting a large dose of hypocrisy among President Trump's supporters. It is worth noting that in the various groupings depicted, right-wingers repeat certain visual characteristics such as large teeth and fluffy hairdos. *Or, The Whale* exaggerates selected characteristics to indicate the homogeneity of right-wingers. With their teeth and hairdos they all look the same. To emphasize the point, an alligator is included with obvious teeth, suggesting that at one level, wealthy Trump supporters feed on the rest of the population, and that he inhabits the political swamp he promised to drain.

Wealth naturally merges with Wall Street financiers, symbols of wealth. Juxtaposed are the homeless. There is a grouping of corporate "types," next to the Trump's Florida estate, Mar-a-Lago which is placed behind the Wall Street bull sculpture, symbolizing their faith that the investment economy will continue to grow forever. Depiction of a Wall Street board of directors meeting and the Wall Street bull encapsulate this idea. These images underlie the mega-yacht, visually suggesting the wealth on which arrogant conspicuous consumption is built. Kissing lesbians are placed next to the fundamentalists, next to The Three Stooges, further emphasizing the contrast between normal human relationships and religious fundamentalism. Personalizing these symbols, Rupert Murdoch, the owner of The Wall Street Journal, innumerable British tabloids, and Fox News shows the power of great wealth. He is married to Gerry Hall, former wife of Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones, also shown.

Poverty

Wealth is next to homelessness because the two emphasize current concerns about both wealth and poverty. Placing them next to each other emphasizes the fact that neither exists without the other. To the lower right, businessmen sunbathe next to homeless people in the same poses. Rich men from the board of directors are served by a black waiter, underscoring the pervasive institutional racism that offers only limited opportunities for people of color in the country. It is perhaps ironic that these images display particularly strong scratchboard drawing, again, Yeats' "terrible beauty."

Feet become a light motif here, where a homeless foot touches a rich man sitting in the same space, literalizing the idea of ongoing struggle for space in the urban world. "Barefootedness" shows vulnerability. The depiction of poverty includes refugees' families separated at the US-Mexico border by the ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). It is bracketed by Migrant Mother, Dorothea Lange's famous photograph of a homeless migrant worker in the 1930s, next to a 21st century homeless encampment. Homeless pets are not forgotten. An emaciated cat lurks beneath Migrant Mother.

It is easy to get lost in the details looking at *Or, The Whale* because the drawing is so strong, the overall composition so rich, and the scenes depicted are so deeply relevant to our contemporary society. Among its other themes, *Or, The Whale* is thus about us, the viewers.

Water Pollution, Factory and Sewer Waste

A water tower in Flint, Michigan symbolizes water pollution—many things are shown being dumped into water, including waste from nuclear power plants. The scene reminds of earlier Whale details such as the massive conglomeration of polluting automobiles on freeways (inaccurately so-called, because their pollution costs are enormous, individually and socially.) Waste and water are inextricably associated because waste is so often dumped into waterways or oceans, and wells are polluted by industrial by-products. When contaminated, water thus becomes not a source of life, but a source of potential illness and death.

The scenes distributed along the bottom of the whale tend to show various forms of waste which are discarded in US society. Factory and sewer waste are far too often just dumped, as opposed to properly discarded in a manner that protects society and preserves the environment. This is especially clear in the final tail section, the far right-hand portion of the mural showing dead coral reefs, and in the mural's corner the last whaling station in the US, closed in 1971, at Point Molate, in Richmond, California, displaying a harpoon canon. Images of destructive waste pile up, just as the waste and its corporate/industrial sources do. A fracking platform is shown next to a WWII crashed airplane. "Fracking" is short for hydraulic fracturing, an extractive process where large amounts of water are pumped into underground oil-bearing shale, enabling the oil to be recovered. Fracking, however, contaminates ground water, including drinking water.

Of many candidates, *Or, The Whale* highlights water pollution in particular because water is so fundamental to our existence. A San Diego pier damaged by high tides is shown. A sign reading, "Keep out, Sewage, Contaminated" is also from San Diego. It and a woman fighting her way through piles of plastic trash to gain access to the water relate to the previous scene showing the water tower from Flint, Michigan, which has become a symbol of what can happen to a community (or an entire city) when its water is contaminated.

At the far right side of *Or, The Whale*, are two circular images, micro and macrocosm. Both are fragile. And endangered by pollution. The expression on the fish's face, somewhat bewildered, definitely not happy, tells the story. The fish is round, at normal scale, next to a same-shaped Petri dish containing contaminated biological specimens. Extensive pollution eventually results in biological damage, and the earth functions less well, which affects everyone.

Other whales swim in the seas, some literal, some figurative. They all have their stories. They are all worth studying, as Jos Sances has studied this one.



About the Artist

Jos Sances was born John Joseph Sances in Boston, attended Montserrat School of Visual Art in Beverly, Massachusetts. For over the past 40 years he has made his living as a Printmaker and Muralist in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Jos is founder of Alliance Graphics, begun in 1989, a successful, union screenprint shop. Previously he co-founded Mission Grafica at the Mission Cultural Center in 1980 and worked there until 1988. All the while maintaining a steady output of art which address issues and ideas which concern him. In 2010 and 2016 the Library of Congress aquired 490 prints from Sances which represented a broad overveiw of his printmaking.

As an artist and community collaborator for the past 25 years, murals and public art have been Jos's passion. He has painted murals at the Oakland Coliseum and tile mural commissions at the new Juvenile Justice Center in San Leandro, CA; AMTRAK/BART Station, Richmond, CA, the Sixteenth Street BART station in San Francisco. Two tile murals were completed in 2009, at the Castro Valley Library and Arnett Watson Apartments in San Francisco with Art Hazelwood. In 2010 with Daniel Galvez, Jos completed a huge 7000 sq.ft Mural for a new Recreation Center at Ira Jenkins Park in Oakland. In 2011 Sances and Galvez completed a tile and etched metal artwork for Skyline College in San Bruno, CA. In 2015 and 2016 three screenprinted tile murals and workshops were done in Todos Santos, Baja, Mexico. Shorouq Cultural Center in Dheisheh Refugee Camp, Palestine and with students at Berkeley High School in California.

The most recent projects completed grew out of workshops given with invested community participants. This aspect of the projects—working with community to help guide and create the artwork—is of particular interest to Jos. "Building community through artistic practice has been some of the most satisfying work I've done. Interacting with people who will use the facilities and helping them to express their values and experience, has enriched the process. The artwork begins by meeting with community stakeholders, asking them to contribute images and ideas for the piece. We then use my skills and knowledge of ceramic and screen printing to make these ideas concrete. I am eager to share what I know with the community through hands-on workshops. Thus the broader community is engaged and connected to the artwork we create together."

Jos is proudly a founding and lifelong member of the Great Tortilla Conspiracy. A political performance group that produces satirical edible art screenprinted with chocolate on tortillas.

The Scratchboard Process

Scratchboard panels consist of a mixture of white kaolin clay (used in ceramics and cosmetics), bright white titanium dioxide, and mechanical glue painted onto a eucalyptus panel measuring 2' x 3'. A black layer of sumi ink (densely black and matte, commonly used in Japanese calligraphy) is laid on top of the white base. To create an image, the black top layer is removed, exposing the white under layer. The process is like carving. The image emerges when the layer of dark pigment is removed, a subtractive process. For the artist, the process is a reverse process, and works from brightest light to darkest dark.

Wall Plaque

To create his epic, life size drawing of a sperm whale, *Or, the Whale* (2018-2019), Jos Sances was deeply inspired by Moby Dick and the history of whaling in America; an industry that didn't end until the last whaling station at Pont Molate in Richmond, California, was closed down in 1971. In starting from C. L. R. James' idea that Moby Dick is a metaphor for capitalism, Sances embeds within the body of his scratchboard whale a history of capitalism in America, including portraits of some of the most notorious tycoons. The history is revisionist, but carefully researched.

Sances' whale is also a metaphor for survival (battered, harassed, targeted, attacked, it nevertheless endures); immortality (whales predate us, outlive us, and will be here when we're long gone), and overwhelming power. The whale is bigger than individuals grubbing for money, and encompasses a critical message about the natural world and humans' small place within it. Sances wonders, "Do whales even believe in us?"

Recommended Reading

Philip Hoare. *The Whale: In Search of the Giants of the Sea*. Ecco, 2011.
A compendium of information about whales and compulsively readable, to boot.

C. L. R. James. *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*. Hanover, New Hampshire. Dartmouth College Press. 1978.
A brilliant exercise in critical reading of Melville's life and his epic novel, well set into their political contexts.

Herman Melville. *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 3rd Norton Critical Edition, 2018. 1851.
Contains excellent, helpful notes, along with a selection of critical reviews and responses. The Modern Library edition has superb illustrations by Norman Rockwell.

Elizabeth Schultz. "The New Art of Moby-Dick". *Leviathan*, Volume 21, Number 1, March 2019,
Published by Johns Hopkins University Press . <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/719913/pdf>
A sequel to the 1995 book, Unpainted to the Last: Moby-Dick and Twentieth-Century Art.

By Amy Spencer, Curator of the Richmond Art Center

Sances is represented by Vessel Gallery, Oakland CA
www.vessel-gallery.com



Lawrence Arts Center

Located in historic downtown Lawrence, Kansas, the mission of the Lawrence Arts Center's exhibitions program is to enrich the community by presenting the best in contemporary art and to actively engage audiences through multi-disciplinary exhibitions that question and inspire. To that end, the Arts Center features 20-25 exhibitions each year from diverse artists in all media, ranging from local preschool children to internationally known artists. Such richness reflects the community that the Arts Center serves. Many of the original artworks on display are available for purchase. Learn more about the artists and their art by visiting our galleries and website.



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