



SUBVERSION DISAPPEARANCE + LOS CAPRICHOS

Story Steve Lopes



IT'S COMMON NOWADAYS to see art that on the surface touches on controversial subjects surrounding contemporary life in an ironic and slick way. Humour can be a potent artistic tool and has long been used to highlight social and moral issues. It can be confrontational, glib, self referential— in a word 'subversive'.

One great artist who effectively used humour to give exposure to issues surrounding the human condition—and in the process put himself on the line 'politically'—was Goya. It's worthwhile examining his example at a time when the aims and ideas behind so much contemporary art is simply career enhancement or a way of positioning ones art as 'clever'. Much of Goya's work was a brave and risky reaction to the political and social climate of his time. There are great examples of contemporary artists who have followed suit, like the Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, whose subversive art and motives are not geared towards careerism or publicity seeking opportunism.

For some artists there is an event or crisis that marks a turning point in their career or output—it can send them to prominence or lead them to eventual oblivion. Why is it that some emerge brightly, while others are slow burners or slowly fade away? The importance of what one has to say and the way you say it can't be underestimated. It is the connecting point between the artist and their work that sustains their vocation.

That turning point for Goya came on February 6, 1799, when an advertisement in the *Diario de Madrid* newspaper announced the publication of his print series *Los Caprichos*. He was 53 years old and these were the largest graphic works he'd produced to date. They showed an enormous leap in quality and power, more than anything he had done before. Goya himself described the series on the *Diario* front page:



03



04

110

"A collection of prints of imaginary subjects, invented and etched by Don Francisco Goya. The author is convinced that it is as proper for painting to criticise human error and vice as for poetry and prose to do so, although criticism is usually taken to be exclusively the province of literature. He has selected from amongst the innumerable foibles and follies to be found in any civilised society, and from the common prejudices and deceitful practices which custom, ignorance or self-interest have hallowed, those subjects which he feels to be the most suitable material for satire and which at the same time stimulate the artists' imagination."

Seven years before, Goya had been struck down with a mystery illness, suffering a combination of nervous and physical troubles. Some say it was Meniere's disease, but it has never been completely explained. He lost his hearing, went 'underground' and became a changed man—bitter, secretive and less exuberant than the successful court painter of previous years.

During his illness Goya wrote numerous letters to his childhood friend Martin Zapater detailing his depression. One of them read: "My very dearest friend, I am standing up, but feel so ill that I do not know if my head is on my shoulders, and I have no wish for food or anything else. It is only your letters and you alone that give me pleasure. I don't know what is happening to me, wretched as I am. I haven't started to work at all and my illness has dulled my inclination to work, but God willing, I shall start next week... I haven't got over my troubles and only wish I could be free, and am striving to be so."

Beset by self doubts he goes on to write: "I am sorry about the confusion and pray God that I do not have those turns that come over me on these occasions, and that I may not be accused of hubris, and remain calm for the rest of my life, doing the best I

can, and that my work becomes less bad."

It was during this 'disappearance' that he planned the Los Caprichos series. He became keenly aware of the 'terror' of neighbouring France and the subsequent 'reaction' in Spain. Through his recovery he educated himself about the French Revolution and the philosophy that created it. In reinventing himself after his illness, he worked to expose and change what was happening around him. He emerged with fantastic visions that defined his work.

It's easy in the modern world to take for granted the sacrifices artists of the past made for their art. We should take our role as exhibiting artists mindfully. Can you imagine Goya during the time of the Spanish Inquisition putting works like the Los Caprichos up for public scrutiny without some sort of trepidation?

Ai Weiwei has had many run-ins with Chinese authorities, including a severe beating from police for testifying in a trial for a fellow activist, yet he remains an artist of great convictions. He continually risks his wellbeing for the sake of his art. He was recently released from house arrest as Ai's newly constructed million-dollar studio in Shanghai was ordered to be demolished after allegedly violating land use and construction laws. A protest party in his honour was still held while he was under arrest and Ai said at the time the fact that the party was still held is a sign of how China is changing. Ai says he thinks the days of people censoring themselves and being afraid have passed. He says many people, especially young people, "can freely show their smiles and have the courage to voice their own opinions."

It was clear that Goya had his own trepidation and fears, changing etching methods, and hiding meanings and identities in his Los Caprichos prints. He feared the sources of his inspiration might



05

be discovered and lead him into trouble with the political and clerical powers. The series is laden with meaning, imbued with a profound understanding of the lives of people from all walks of society, it pokes fun at the judges and politicians of his time, as well as Spanish intellectuals and the general populace. From this period the artist continued to develop both intellectually and technically, learning long past the age when lesser artists have grown tired. He was a late starter and had another 30 years of great achievement ahead of him when he started to hit his stride in the fantastical and allegorical Los Caprichos series.

“Goya’s imagination and belief of the series led him onto a higher artistic plane than he could ever have imagined”

One direct literary source for his series was a passage written in the Spectator newspaper by Joseph Addison in 1712, which was translated by his friend Jose Luis Munarriz: “When the brain is hurt by an accident, or the mind disordered by dreams or sickness, the fancy is overrun with wild dismal ideas, and terrified with a thousand hideous monsters of its own framing.” Goya’s imagination and belief in the series led him onto a higher artistic plane than he could ever have imagined, though his initial fears were right. It wasn’t the success at the time he had hoped for. After the sale of 27 copies Goya was forced to suspend sales.

In 1803, the whole matter of this controversial series was covered up by the boorish King of Spain who personally ordered the artist to give the crown all the unsold sets as well as copper etching plates which he said he had “expressly ordered Goya to make.”



06

This order in the end saved Goya from the political right and the Inquisition. The War of Independence reduced him to poverty and in 1814-15 as an elderly, stone deaf widower, he was investigated and questioned about his conduct during the war as part of a political purification procedure. He lived the last years of his life in Bordeaux, France, exiled from his beloved homeland.

There has been a long line of artists like Goya, who’ve had no concern for the art world. These passionate creators were willing to take risks for their cause or point of view.

For modern day artists, remaining in the fringes for a while or taking a good look at the artists that have come before allows for a refreshing take on a practise, focusing intensity back into the work. So what does one gain from this approach? Is it clarity of vision? Time with your own thoughts and getting comfortable in your own skin and work? Maybe the complete opposite, where anger has a chance to brew, adding fuel to ideas. What are those forgotten artists in the system up to right now—will they ever come back, and who is waiting in the wings to make an impact or to be rediscovered? ■

Steve Lopes is a painter and printmaker represented in the National Gallery of Australia.

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- 01 **Might not the pupil know more**, 1799, 24 x 15cm
- 02 **They spruce themselves up**, 1799, 24 x 15cm
- 03 **Those specs of dust**, 1799, 24 x 15cm
- 04 **There is plenty to suck**, 1799, 24 x 15cm
- 05 **Wait till you’ve been anointed**, 1799, 24 x 15cm
- 06 **When day breaks we will be off**, 1799, 24 x 15cm