

ARTFORUM



Ben Shahn, *We Fight for a Free World!*, ca. 1942, gouache and tempera on board, 13 × 30". From "We Fight to Build a Free World: An Exhibition by Jonathan Horowitz."

Jonathan Horowitz

THE JEWISH MUSEUM

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In 1942 Ben Shahn, employed by the United States Office of War Information to create propaganda in support of the Allied cause, borrowed imagery from his fellow artists for a series of five posters depicting the "methods of the enemy." "Suppression" was represented by Edward Millman's *We Must Win!*, 1942–45, a rendering of a gaunt visage gagged by a swastika-emblazoned cloth; Yasuo Kuniyoshi's *Torture*, 1943, featured a scarred muscular figure whose hands are bound behind his back. Käthe Kollwitz's 1923 lithograph of begging children allegorized "starvation," while Bernard Perlin's exquisite lifeless female head provided an unsettling emblem for "murder." For his contribution, titled *Slavery*, Shahn adapted his own 1935 Resettlement Administration photograph of Sam Nichols, a white tenant farmer in Boone County, Arkansas. In the illustration, the artist deepens his subject's skin tone and fences him in with barbed wire. Conveying the war effort as part of a universal struggle for human dignity and liberation, the posters—deemed too challenging for their conceived purpose—were never reproduced. All five, however, are depicted side by side in Shahn's gouache-and-tempera painting *We Fight for a Free World!*, ca. 1942, and appear as though they've been tacked onto a brick wall graffitied with the canvas's title.

This work inspired "We Fight to Build a Free World: An Exhibition by Jonathan Horowitz." Invited by the Jewish Museum in 2017 to respond to the resurgence of anti-Semitic violence in the US, Horowitz, following Shahn's example, expanded the curatorial scope to embrace

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broader movements against racism, oppression, and ethnonationalism, presenting his own art in heteroglossic congress with work by more than seventy contemporary and historical artists.

From Elizabeth Catlett's street-fighting print *Homage to the Panthers*, 1971/1993, to Malaquías Montoya's necrotic 1992 lithograph of Christopher Columbus, and from the irony-soaked glamour of Asco's "No Movie" photo series, 1973–78, to the detonation of cowboy mythopoeia in Luis Jiménez's fiberglass sculpture *Progress II*, 1974, "We Fight to Build a Free World" was as invested in representing politics as it was in probing the politics of representation. For the most part, the show eschewed the liberal sentimentalism that coated much Trump-era cultural production, instead offering perspicacious juxtapositions that articulated hard-won solidarities while reflexively examining how images produce social meaning. In a narrow gallery, Horowitz installed his *Untitled (Arbeit Macht Frei)*, 2010—a steel replica of the infamous Auschwitz sign that was stolen from the camp's gate and dismantled (ostensibly to be sold) by a Swedish neo-Nazi in 2009. The piece faced Abraham Manievich's oil painting *Destruction of the Ghetto, Kiev*, 1919, commemorating—via broken Cubo-Expressionist planes and sooty twilight colors—the pogrom that took the life of Manievich's son the same year the work was made.

While Shahn's *We Fight for a Free World!*, like most of his OWI projects, was judged a propagandistic failure, Thomas Hart Benton's canvas *Invasion*, 1942, part of his series "Year of Peril," 1941–42, was known to millions of Americans through print media, newsreels, and a traveling exhibition. Benton's Sardanapalian rendition of the attack on Pearl Harbor deployed sexualized violence and racist caricature in the service of wartime jingoism. Here, Horowitz digitally enlarged Benton's picture and rendered it in sepia tones, repurposing the work as a vinyl backdrop for Henry Sugimoto's 1943 oil painting of interned Japanese-American children; Gordon Parks's famous 1942 photo portrait of custodial worker Ella Watson; Philip Evergood's anti-lynching painting *The Hundredth Psalm*, ca. 1938; and Robert Gwathmey's oil-on-canvas *From Out of the South*, ca. 1941, a spectral collocation of Black labor, Ku Klux Klan terror, carceral exploitation, and sclerotic white gentility. The smallest work of the group, and for me the most revelatory, was Charles White's cubist collage *Headlines*, 1944. Dispersed across a wood grain-patterned ground, news clippings about anti-Black bigotry, anti-Semitism, and working-class division mark a fractured space of representation while conveying the inextricable entanglement of racism, capitalism, and the struggles against both. The work is a document of its time and a lesson for ours.

— Chloe Wyma