

Neoteric Art
APRIL 11, 2017

“Vonnegut’s Odyssey” at the National Veterans Art Museum,
Chicago, November 11, 2016 – May 6, 2017

Bruce Thorn
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Kurt Vonnegut Jr. has long been one of my favorite American authors. His classics include: *Player Piano*, *The Sirens of Titan*, *Cat’s Cradle*, *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Jailbird* and *Galapagos*. Even Vonnegut’s curmudgeonly approach to abstract expressionist art espoused in *Bluebeard* is a good read that poses relevant questions about art and culture. (This was the book that detractors of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning loved to reference.)

With a fatalistic mindset, grim satire, imagination and wit reminiscent of Mark Twain, Vonnegut is an American precursor to contemporary author Frenchman Michel Houellebecq. Because of my fondness for Vonnegut’s fiction, I almost passed on a wonderful exhibition of his screen prints at the National Veterans Museum of Art. I just couldn’t begin to believe that such a great writer could also be worthwhile as a visual artist. *His graphic art couldn’t possibly match up to his written word*. That may be true, but Kurt Vonnegut’s visual images are still quite compelling and worthwhile.



Big Bird Cage, 1996

Vonnegut's Odyssey at NVAM consists of a large collection of screen prints from the collection of the Nielsen Family, who sponsored this exhibition and subsequently donated all of the works to the permanent collection of the museum in memory of their mother Faith Ellyn Nielsen.

Ash Kyrie, curator of this exhibition and a 2004 veteran of the U.S. war in Iraq, eloquently noted: "The experience of returning home and processing the effects of war is something that is shared by all veterans, from the time of Homer's *The Odyssey*, through Vonnegut's experiences in Dresden, and continuing on today. Exhibiting the artwork of Vonnegut as an illustration of the post-war experience and as a creative processing tool for the artist highlights the process of the return and the complexity of the veteran experience."



Black Heart, 2004

Vonnegut's experience as a prisoner of war during the carpet-bombing of Dresden, Germany by Allied forces at the end of World War II certainly tainted his outlook and thinking. These events were emphatically described in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I've always found Vonnegut's futuristic, sci-fi satire to be dark, but coming from the viewpoint of an undefeated humanist.

As a writer, Vonnegut was a master of his craft, so it should be no surprise that he demanded standards of excellence concerning graphic arts. For the transformation of his drawings into screen print editions, the author enlisted his friend Joe Petro III, an accomplished sculptor and screen printer, who kept the productions simple, high contrast, clean and well registered.



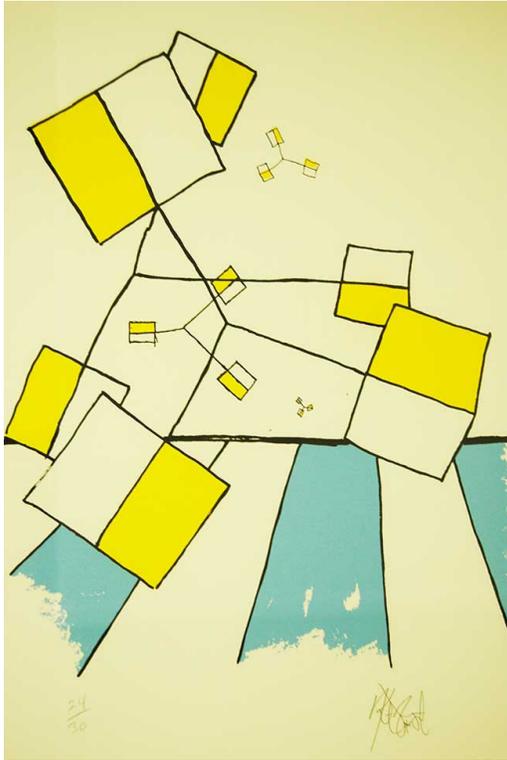
November 11

November 11, the title of an image celebrating Armistice Day, is also Kurt Vonnegut's birthday. A closing hand is imagined as a human head and the globe serves second duty as an eye, all within a standard portrait composition. The drawing is simplified almost as much as possible, leaving out most unnecessary details and embellishments. Vonnegut's draftsmanship brings to mind the paired-down drawing style of John Lennon. Each image stays focused on a single idea.

Veterans have long suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder, even long before a diagnosis existed for it. To handle PTSD, many turn to drugs and alcohol. I can surmise that Vonnegut had fought these demons himself and at some point experienced the era of Prozac's widespread abuse. *Prozac* is buzzed-out and over the line just enough to remain sociably acceptable.

As mentioned earlier, Vonnegut's novel *Bluebeard* served as a reference for haters of abstract expressionism. Vonnegut clearly did not have a taste for that style of self-expression, so it is interesting

that he was quite comfortable with Modernism. This is apparent in works like: *Prozac*, *Tralfamadore*, and *Welcome Home*. I think he was more comfortable with the rules and order of modernism than with the seeming chaos of Abstract Expressionism.



Prozac, 1996

Vonnegut's *Self Portrait* offers a softened, kinder self-image of an author known more for a dark and fatalistic outlook. He portrays himself in profile as a grandfatherly, doe-eyed dandy with plump lips, hot red and blue collar and olive-green, Mark Twain hair. Still, in the arch of the brow, the prominent lashes and pointed, vortex nose, there is perhaps more than a hint of anxiety and vulnerability.

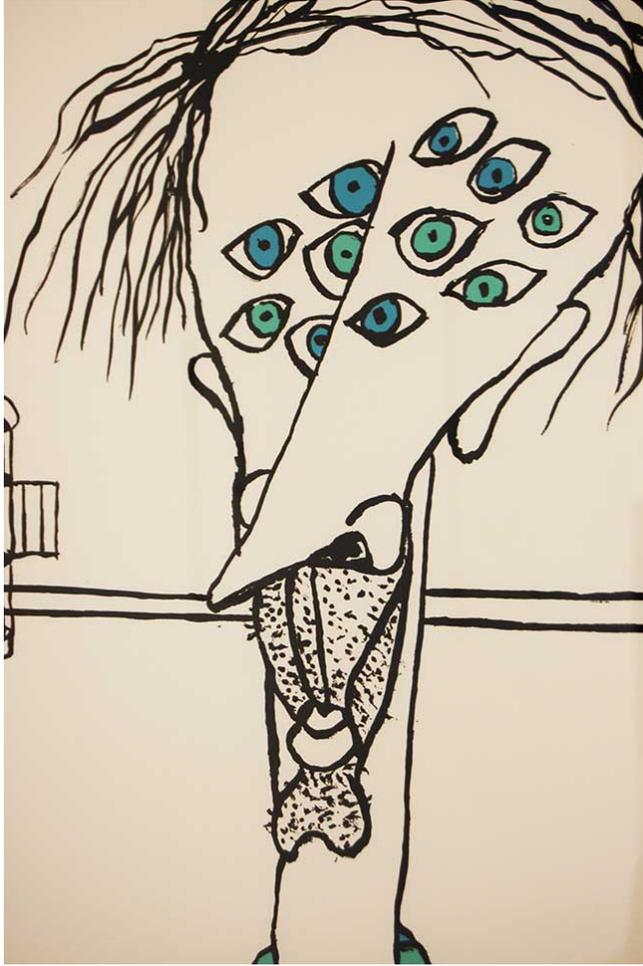


Self Portrait



Tralfamadore, 1996

That Vonnegut was more interested in Picasso than Pollock is evidenced in *Tralfamadore*. Tralfamadorians are a fictional alien race mentioned in several of his novels. Details about them vary from novel to novel. Tralfamadore might be a magical literary device, a cheap shot, but from Vonnegut's pen it becomes a wildly imaginative, fantasy daydream escape to which the Modernist style is well suited.

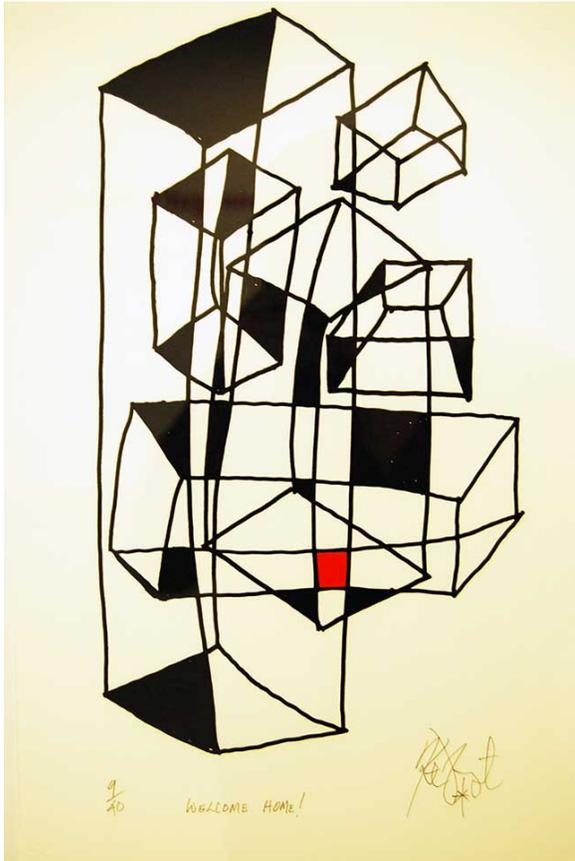


Trout in Cohoes, 1997

Trout In Cohoes portrays a frazzled, been-through-the-mill, eleven-eyed schizoid. Kilgore Trout is another literary device used in several Vonnegut novels, a reflection and parody of himself, an alter-ego, a fictional character portrayed as an unsuccessful author of science fiction. Cohoes, New York happens to be where Trout went to commit suicide by drinking Drano, due to depression set off by a female psychic's tarot prediction that George W. Bush would be re-elected by a decision of the Supreme Court.

Vonnegut enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1943 and was deployed to fight overseas in Europe during WWII. He was later captured at the Battle of the Bulge and served as a Prisoner of War until 1945 when he returned to the U.S. and was awarded the Purple Heart...From WWII through Vietnam and beyond, Vonnegut remained an active voice in American culture and society—openly discussing war and its effects publicly.

The exhibition is that of a well-known author making illustrations for his own books. My guess is that Vonnegut often lived completely within his own imagined world and was quite comfortable being the illustrator of his own visions.



Welcome Home, 1997

A war veteran might encounter various personal dilemmas upon coming home. This struggle to fit in socially becomes a Modernist puzzle in the image *Welcome Home*. There's no ground breaking art experience here, but it does take a poignant theme and successfully render that theme as a hand drawn, squiggly and personal, geometric, black and white design with a splash of red; a smart design that makes narrative sense.

Considering Vonnegut's experiences in Dresden and his post-war civilian life, one could only speculate if the author ever felt as he fit in or had "come home again." Only one thing is certain. There is only one thing we can trust. And so it goes.

All photos of artwork by Bruce Thorn.