

Tom and Connie Merriman



We have been creating socio-political art for 20 years. Over that time, our perspectives and methodologies have evolved with the art, however, our core concerns have remained intact. We have maintained a concern for disenfranchised people who are adversely affected by economic, environmental, and political issues beyond their control. We have been concerned with the consequences of globalization and large-scale extraction of power. We recognize that social and environmental issues cannot be separated. We have always believed we could make change through art.

Like Raymond Burr in the movie *Godzilla*, standing on a hillside out of harm's way, reporting on *Godzilla's* destruction of the earth, our early works were journalistic narrative art, which stood to witness global events. The art, in the form of paintings and installations was generated to be accessible to the audience. It was more an observation of a phenomena than an overt critical statement. Our venue was the art gallery, and the audience we targeted was the general population – gallery visitors who might not have been schooled in contemporary theories of art. The art was presented in the hope that it would inspire viewers to act for positive change. Some of the subjects of this work included Apartheid, and conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and Central America. The content was derived second-hand from images and information in the media. In retrospect, this tactic was sincere but naive and not productive for making real change.

This work was created within formal aesthetic constraints, and seemed to be well received by our intended audience, but because it was infused with an agenda, it was less than successful as contemporary art. We chose to stay isolated from current ideas and thinking in art. This stance provided an opportunity for uninfluenced personal insight into content and expressive methods, but disregarded emerging theories. It had many disadvantages. We were not participants in the dialog surrounding the emergence of reconstructive art, and we could not build on the ideas of others. Our work was for the most part supported by our personal resources, and limited by the lack of outside funding and support.

In the 90's our methodology shifted. We stepped down from the journalist's hillside vantage point to become more directly involved with the community experiencing *Godzilla's* wrath. We came to realize that we could not make meaningful statements about issues without direct firsthand involvement. We became involved in community residencies, working with special populations such as youth and families in shelters, stroke survivors, and mentally handicapped individuals. We also were involved in interdisciplinary projects in school settings. Although the goals of these projects were framed to the needs of the participants, all incorporated the theme of fundamental respect for individuals and life.

We also continued to make art that witnessed conflict and addressed regional and global concerns. The work was based on firsthand involvement and research. We made personal contact with the stakeholders in the conflicts, and when possible, we visited the affected environment. The works included statements about Haitian refugees, homeless populations, domestic violence, the construction of hydroelectric systems in northern Quebec, and Mountain Top Removal coal mining in Appalachia.

Our current methodologies have evolved from our earlier experiences, and we have developed a common process that can be applied, with variations, to most of our projects. The genesis for a project is quite often derived from identifying some issue that has an element of environmental or social conflict and has some component that we find intriguing, or that meets our criteria for subject matter. We carry out preliminary research from media sources and begin documentation in a journal. We try to identify the different stakeholders in the conflict and research their positions. We visit the area of the conflict to gather personal first-hand impressions, take photos, and possibly collect materials or specimens. We try to establish an understanding of what the issues are surrounding the conflict and what the agendas of the various stakeholders might be. The stakeholders are contacted directly by phone and if the parties are receptive, appointments for interviews are scheduled. We identify ourselves as artists and educators. We state that we are preparing an art project and a series of talks on the subject and that we would like to clearly represent the views of all of the participants. We state that an exhibition site and date has been arranged, and we define the audience of the exhibition. We request support information so that we might be better prepared to discuss the issues. At the interviews, the parties are asked to share with us their personal understanding of the subject. Many of the interviews are audio and video taped and photographed for documentation. As the information unfolds, additional parties emerge to be engaged. In recent projects, environmental impact studies have been conducted.

In all of the projects we have been involved in, all stakeholders believe that their positions are valid and their actions are justified. When they have the opportunity to openly state their position, it is apparent that it is a conflict of values and beliefs that fuels the conflict. How do you reconcile conflicting belief systems?

As we gather information, small works of art are created that focus our understanding of different components of the issue. A culminating work is created that attempts to stand as an overview of the project. Recent media has included video, fiber, found objects, book art, and graphics as well as painting, drawing, and sculpture.

In spite of the fact that we try to be impartial and objective in presenting the subject, we find that we cannot help but inject our personal belief system into the work. We could not help but conclude that Hydro Quebec is wrong to flood Cree and Inuit land in northern Quebec, and that Massey Coal is wrong to obliterate West Virginia's mountains. We believe that they do not demonstrate a fundamental respect for life.

The art we have presented to date may have created personal change in the viewers, however, it has not remedied any conflict. The conflicts we have witnessed have developed from divergent belief systems, which are not easily or quickly changed. They are situations in crisis, requiring immediate action. The only way to make fast change is to enforce existing laws. In the past, our art was created for the gallery, which is an ineffective venue for influencing public and political opinion. If our work is to create tangible change, it must leave the gallery and go to places where it can more effectively influence change. The audience must change. Also, in our work, we present the views of the stakeholders, but it is our translation of their views. To have the stakeholders communicate directly with lawmakers might have effect. This would require technology and media exploration. Changing venue, audience, and media are methods we are eager to explore.