



# HYPERALLERGIC

MUSEUMS

## How Does One Make an Image of Revolution?

Dahlia Schweitzer | June 25, 2013



Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes. “Grande hazaña con muertos (Wonderful heroism against dead men), Plate 39” (1863) (All images courtesy of the Hammer Museum)

LOS ANGELES — What does it mean to be a revolutionary? How does one portray a revolution? What are the parallels between religion and revolution? And does religion have a place in our current world?

These questions currently fill an exhibit in Los Angeles's Hammer Museum with the very loaded title: *Imitation of Christ*. Los Angeles-based artist and curator William E. Jones selected images from the Hammer Museum's and UCLA's private collections to create a unique installation that engages head-on with the questions above.



Pedro Meyer, "El Guerrillero herido (Wounded guerilla fighter)" (c. 1982-1985) (© Pedro Meyer, photo by Brian Forrest)

While Jones's own work has explored gay subcultures and the materiality of film and photography as mediums, the idea of revolution inspired this particular installation, sparked by Pedro Meyer's "Wounded Guerrilla Fighter" (c. 1982-1985). On Jones's first day looking through the Hammer's collection, he discovered Meyer's image and could not get it out of his head.

It's not surprising that this powerful and intimate photograph of an amputated guerrilla would have such an impact on Jones. Despite the lack of personal or political information, the man's direct gaze is as haunting as the absence of his legs, a washcloth over his genital area serving to remind us of how naked he really is. His shirt appears to have been quickly tugged on, the skin of his chest exposed, one shoulder bare. Gaunt and intense, he stares at us from a primitive hospital bed.

Personal sacrifice, much like religious imagery, is not only a complicated concept, but a timeless one as well; this exhibit makes that clear by featuring works spanning seven centuries. Some of the oldest images hung on the walls of this small room include an Italian 15th-century engraving of Christ's "Descent into Limbo" and Francisco de Goya's harrowing depictions of tortured and dismembered bodies in the series *The Disasters of War*. The chronology is clearly less important than the conceptual message though, with Giuseppe Scolori's "Christ Crowned with Thorns" from 1580 beside a Larry Clark photograph from 1963, Pedro Meyer's "The Statue of Somoza" from 1979 adjacent to an untitled Abraham Cruzvillegas silkscreen from 2009.



Käthe Kollwitz, "Outbreak (Losbruch)" (1902), etching and aquatint.

So if chronology doesn't matter, then what is this exhibition trying to tell us? The almost heavy-handed pairing of Jesus images with those of guerrilla fighters and junkies makes the point painfully clear. Those committed to a greater cause, those made to suffer (often in misunderstood or underappreciated isolation) for their choices and ideals, are worth acknowledging, however disparate the causes themselves. Perhaps, in our current quick-fix, non-committal culture, with our rejection of religion, morals, and integrity in favor of our easily-digested idols of cash, technology, and capitalistic salvation, a devotion to any cause other than the bottom line is worth noting.



Installation view of "Imitation of Christ," at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

Jones's selected works verge from predictable Jesus iconography to Che Guevara, from a 1954 Edmund Teske portrait of Kenneth Anger to Marion Palfi's photograph of the wife of a lynching victim from 1949. Larry Clark's image of a man in shadows shooting up drugs is juxtaposed with an image of a foot driven through with a stake. Jones also tackles the concept of artistic revolutionaries, casting those whose work defies censorship and morality restrictions as another type of sacrifice and courage. One piece, by Wallace Berman, explains in neat Courier typeface that during an exhibit of his paintings and sculpture in 1957, members of the vice squad entered the gallery and confiscated some of his work. When brought before a

judge, the works were deemed lewd and pornographic. In the eyes of Jones, Berman is a revolutionary, much like Clark's junkie and Palfi's widow. They are all, like Jesus, anointed as martyrs for the sins of others, saint-like in their convictions.

One of the first works of art in the show, a lithograph by Raymond Pettibon, features a rectangular box so completely crossed out that it is impossible to see what is underneath, if anything, in fact, ever was. Below the box, the caption states: "The most austere moralists go farther and would not permit the reproduction of pagan images and illustrations." This quote is taken from Anthony Blunt's book *Artistic Theory in Italy: 1450-1600* and references the actions of the Counter-Reformers, whose mission was not only to remove theological inaccuracies from art but also to eliminate everything secular or pagan. They decreed that all words and music, much like all paintings, must be free of secular elements and paganism. Censorship, in this case, was undertaken in the name of God, and therefore standing up against religion and its related decrees was the revolutionary act.

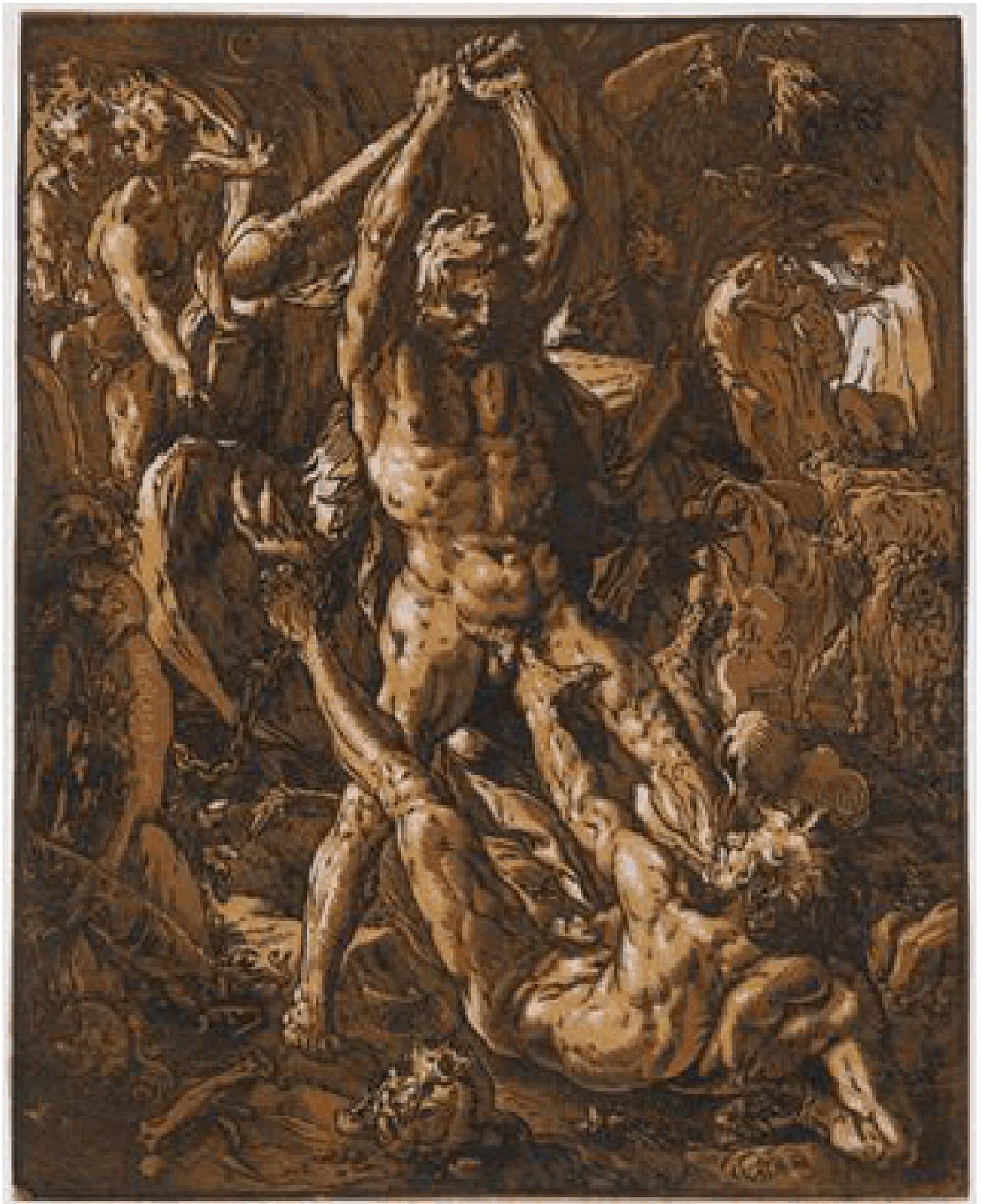
Pettibon's print is presented alongside another work by Wallace Berman, which features the text, "A face raped by innumerable messiahs places into sodden cotton an anxious needle. A face hisses rules to cathedrals and prepares for the narco myth." Addiction, in this case, is a response to God. Sacrifice is to be found along with the needle. A paperback book entitled *Jesus the Revolutionary* is adjacent. The image of Che Guevara is directly above.

Drugs. Censorship. Religion. Addiction. Politics. War.

Through this diverse group of artists and art works, Jones questions the very definitions of revolution, religion, and sacrifice — seemingly dated concepts in the 21st century. Our increasingly secular society, with its flattening of culture and cavalier rejection of religion on one hand, and its embrace of religious fundamentalism on the other, encourages an ephemeral state without any sense of past history or future consequence. Along the way, we have also lost touch with the core purpose of religion, with the true meaning of sacrifice. Religion is not just a superstitious form of social control. Religion is not just a tool of censorship and dictators. Religion, like revolution, provides a moral compass, a sense of order and right versus wrong. Religion, like revolution, gives us purpose and a way to understand our place in the universe.

So then how did we arrive at this place where religion has become a four-letter word? Where sacrifice has been replaced by quick-fixes and a determination to avoid the harsh realities of our frail human existence? And what have we lost along the way?

This exhibit made me think of Antonio Gramsci, an early 20th century Italian Marxist and a founding member of Italy's Communist Party, who spoke of the value of religion in the middle of a movement that hated it. In his observation, religion wielded enormous power, not only because of the obvious reasons but also subtle ones involving narratives (who defines the stories inside of which we live?) and structures (how are these messages transmitted?). He argued that government — or better yet the movement — could never displace religion unless it found a way to be equally (or even more) majestic, spiritual, and all-encompassing.



Hendrick Goltzius, "Hercules Killing Cacus" (1588), chiaroscuro woodcut.



George Platt Lynes, "Walter Roemer" (1940)

Maybe this sense of the majestic and the spiritual is what we have lost. Maybe what Jones is saying in this exhibit is that we need more art, more history, more philosophy, more conscious choices in everything we do, say, think, and feel. Maybe we need more sacrifice and less convenience. More integrity and perseverance. Maybe we have to figure out what matters — and then commit to it. These days, standing up to religion can be a revolutionary act, but sometimes, embracing religion and imitating it, finding the spiritual in the everyday and the mundane, is the most revolutionary act of them all.

[Imitation of Christ](#) is on view at the Hammer Museum (10899 Wilshire Blvd, Los Angeles) through August 18.

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