

Worldwide protesting culture in the art of Lisa Chandler

An extensive and concentrated series of paintings around the subject of civil protest is the outcome of two year's work by painter Lisa Chandler. Monumental paintings and miniatures on canvas, employing various materials, collages and her newly adopted technique of trace monoprint determine this both visually attractive, outstanding and socio-critical oeuvre. In the monumental painting *Language of the unheard*, painted in 2017 in Leipzig, we see an enormous battle – the battle between light and darkness, between hope and despair, between peaceful protesters and armed policemen in full protective gear. In its intensity, in its accumulation of bodies and through strong formal structures as clear diagonals, the battle painting reminds one of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937).

In contrast to the Spanish painter, Chandler separates the two sides clearly from each other through the use of colour and the dynamics between light and dark. While we see in Picasso's masterpiece only the victims and their suffering, Chandler shows both sides. The position of Picasso's light bringing woman formally corresponds with Chandler's policeman in the foreground.

In the structure of her picture and its genesis, Chandler worked with a detailed intellectual plan in mind in order to enforce the contrasts. Hate and despair are linked to chaos. While hate is defined by the feeling of intense dislike, extreme aversion and hostility, despair stands for the loss of hope. These two aspects may be united in Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil on canvas, 776.6 x 349.3 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional, Centro de Arte Reina Sophia the culminating words "welcome to hell". In opposition, Chandler formulates the ingredients of hope, which are to believe, to look forward with desire, to hope for something and to hold to the conviction that events will turn out for the best. There is so much division in the world, rich and poor, blacks and whites, men and women, left and right, destruction/exploitation and protection, and, as mentioned, hope and despair/hate. To pictorially describe these "dividing lines", Chandler created a repeating visual element of strong diagonals and emphasised the contrasts between light and dark, black and white and the ambivalence between figuration and abstraction. The diagonals emerge in the form of riot sticks and shields, but also through abstract, not realistically definable elements, which reminds one of medieval lances in the paintings of battles by Paolo Uccello, for example.

Technically, *Language of the unheard* distinguishes itself by a totally abstract foundation, where the figures have been overpainted. Chandler works with different approaches in every painting. Sometimes she starts with the figures and creates the space around them, sometimes she paints the space first and then over paints the figures, as described above. Generally, in her process she paints in a lot of details and then overpaints over and over again until she is happy with the result. Therefore, every work contains many hidden, visible and shimmering layers. This gives her paintings special meaningful depth and eye-catching, divergent surfaces.

The bystander shows us a quite abstract painting, where we can decipher a few figures – decipher, because they in part seem to be more hidden than visible. A standing man, possibly holding a smartphone and around him at least eight people lying on the ground. Motionless. Maybe severely wounded or even dead. We as viewers do not know, but *The bystander*, obviously, is not interested in helping the victims directly. Maybe he calls for help, dialling the emergency number, or perhaps he just documents and photographs the injured persons, as it often happens nowadays. It seems as if people struggle with the differentiation of reality and filmed reality on screen. The bystander as a gawper, who satisfies his curiosity?

In *The bystander* as well as in *Five minutes of fame* Chandler strongly refers to the French art of the 19th century in a double way: formally and technically. In both paintings we see people lying dead or severely injured on the ground. This motif finds itself in a long art historical tradition of murdered victims, regardless of chronology and completeness, from Jean-Léon Gérôme's *The Death of Marshall Ney* (1868), Edouard Manet's *Civil War* (1871), *Guernica*, to Jeff Wall's *Citizen* (1996), which does not necessarily show a dead person, but uses the same extreme perspective or worm-eye's perspective, respectively. Manet depicted a victim of the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune in a lithograph, while revisiting an earlier painting, his *Dead Torero* (1864/65). This again refers to Diego Velázquez's *The*

Dead Soldier (1635–1640) and/or to a 17th century Italian painting. The latter looks very similar and is named *The Dead Soldier (Orlando Muerto)*.¹ Both paintings are in the National Gallery, London.

Why stress the link to French art of the 19th century? This small, not very well known lithograph by Manet shows a scene from the Paris Commune in its last, lethal phase of the barricades. In its historical situation it may be compared to the contemporary protesting culture. In 1871 people in Paris took to the streets in order to found a radical socialist and revolutionary society. But the Paris Commune did not last long. It was suppressed by the government after only two months. During the “Bloody Week” in May 1871, barricades were built but too late. In the following days communards were cruelly massacred by the army. Hopefully and certainly, the outcome of protests nowadays will result in a peaceful modification of the global order towards more justice, equality and environmental protection, and towards open democracies.

Today, we have, again in France, the protest movement of the “Yellow Vests” (Gilets Jaunes) and so many other protests movements around the globe – against capitalism, neoliberalism and for more democracy, against sexism, racism, speciesism, for freedom, justice and (gender, financial) equality, and not to forget for the environment and especially the climate. Protests have arisen in recent years all over the world.² Think of people like the then fifteen-year-old Swedish student and climate activist Greta Thunberg, who went for weeks on strike in front of parliament. At the UN Climate Change Conference she said in December 2018: “We have not come here to beg world leaders to care. You have ignored us in the past, and you will ignore us again. We have run out of excuses, and we are running out of time. We have come here to let you know that change is coming, whether you like it or not. The real power belongs to the people.”³ Thunberg raised awareness and generated other school strikes for the climate worldwide.

For her artworks, Chandler works with images from the media and the internet. However, she deliberately leaves the source and background of the depicted protest open. In her constantly developing art practice, Chandler recently became aware of trace monoprinting, a hybrid technique between printing (monotype) and drawing developed by Paul Gauguin. The process creates a positive as well as a negative image and Chandler profits from both. The process was described by Gauguin in March 1902 in a letter to his patron Gustave Fayet: “First you roll out printer’s ink on a sheet of paper of any sort; then lay a second sheet on top of it and draw whatever pleases you. The harder and thinner your pencil (as well as your paper), the finer will be the resulting line.”⁴ Lisa Chandler creates collages with the “leftovers”, with the recto of her prints. The negative on brown baking paper will be pasted later as collage on paper. She employs a wide range of techniques, such as monoprint (on glass), the ghost print (second print), she scratches and cuts with a knife, uses a paint roller, pours and drips fluid acrylic on canvas or paper, and even uses sprays in a graffiti manner, as is recognisable in the painting *Five minutes of fame*. But that is still not everything. It is not long ago that Chandler started creating her artworks with templates from a protest stencil toolkit bought online and this she exploits to complete her visual language for depicting the global protest movement.

Primarily, Chandler became aware of arising protest movements and therefore her new subject through the history of Leipzig, a small city in Eastern Germany and her second city of residence. In 1989 Leipzig was the centre of the peaceful revolution, which culminated in the reunification of Germany. In the last five years, protests have increased again. Worldwide. Recently “*The Guardian*” published an article, titled: “We are living through a golden age of protest” and it described the enormous increase of protests since Donald Trump took office.⁵ Never before in American history have so many and such large demonstrations taken place. Never. Never before. It’s good! It’s great! As Trump himself would put it into words, if it happened to concern another subject, of course!

But what really matters: It can be proved in numbers; for women’s rights - Women’s March 2017 and 2018 with up to 4.6 million participants the largest protest in US history; against gun violence - March for Our Lives with up to two million participants; climate change and science - March for Science estimated participants around one million.

The increase in protests in recent times becomes obvious through a quick Google search, where you find headlines such as “What are the meanings behind the worldwide rise in protests? What trends can we decipher when it comes to modern protests? Is there a pattern to the grievances that helps to explain the current spike in protest? (...)”⁶.

Australia, France, Belgium . . . In January 2019 up to 200 million people took part in a two-day general strike in India to protest against their government and poor working conditions . . . In Germany, too, there were huge protests in recent times for the climate, against factory farming, against coal and for the protection of landscapes such as the Hambach Forrest. The worldwide school strikes “Friday for Future” took over and now mobilise thousands of students. Young people all over the world need to be really worried about what their future will look like.

From the beginning, Chandler has been interested in people in urban spaces and how they change the space, making this the subject of her paintings for a number of years. In Leipzig in 2016 she accidentally got involved in a huge protest. When she entered “Kunsthalle G2” one night for a relaxed art opening, everything was quiet on the street, but when she stepped back onto the street afterwards there was an enormous mass protest, armed policemen wore machine-guns and used pepper spray. This was a turning point in Chandler’s perception of the world, of how an urban space can change so quickly from an everyday mundane experience to something almost otherworldly. Since then she has focused more and more on depicting the “Language of the Unheard”, those who move onto the streets and cry towards the people in power “Stop, Stop, Stop”! But Chandler constantly resists the temptation to paint pictures of a political direction. She brings an artistically convincing distance and a certain abstraction to her work by showing the protesting culture liberated from its concrete background. She stays true to her own recognisable visual artistic style, and does not allow her art to be used politically by any party.

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1. *I described the art historical tradition of the dead person, lying on the ground and presented in a worm’s-eye view in my monograph Tim Eitel. Das investigative Bild, Berlin 2015, pp. 160–166, p. 277.*

2. *Maria Popova, Rebecca Solnit on Hope in Dark Times, Resisting the Defeatism of Easy Despair, and What Victory Really Means for Movements of Social Change, online: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2016/03/16/rebecca-solnit-hope-in-the-dark-2/>, checked on 21 November 2018; Rebecca Solnit, Hope in the Dark. Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities, Chicago, Haymarket Books: 2016.*

3. *Greta Thunberg, You Are Stealing Our Future: Greta Thunberg, 15, Condemns the World’s Inaction on Climate Change, on 13 December 2018 in Katowice, Poland, online: https://www.democracynow.org/2018/12/13/you_are_stealing_our_future_greta, checked on 26 January 2019.*

4. *Lotte Johnson, Metamorphoses: Paul Gauguin’s Oil Transfer Drawings, https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2014/04/16/metamorphoses-paul-gauguins-oil-transfer-drawings/, published 16 April 2014, checked on 26 January 2019.*

5. *LA Kauffman, We are living through a golden age of protest. We are seeing a level of organising with little precedent – but it’s time for stronger forms of demonstration, such as sit-ins and street blockades, in: The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/06/protest-trump-direct-action-activism>, published 6 May 2018, checked on 13 January 2019.*