

NEWPORT
ART
MUSEUM



ARTIVISM:
Art + Activism

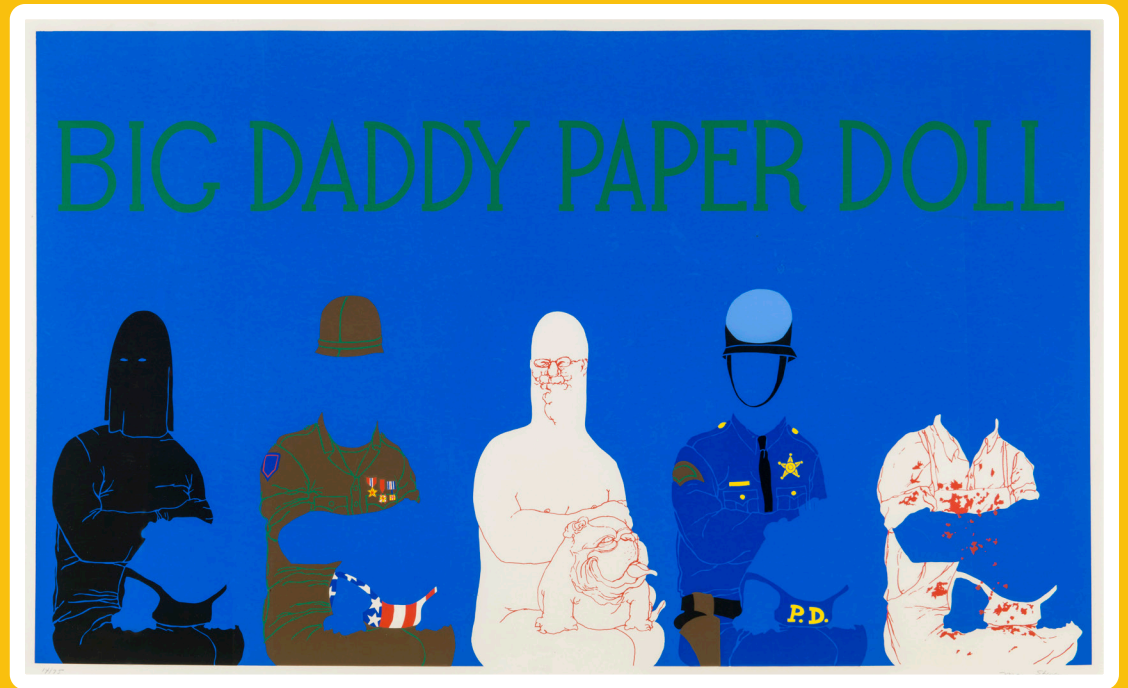
Featuring

May Stevens:
Big Daddy
Paper Doll, 1971

May Stevens, *Big Daddy Paper Doll*, 1971

Serigraph
Opaque Watercolor, pen, ink,
and graphite pencil on paper
27 × 41 1/8in. (68.6 × 104.5 cm)
Permanent Collection of the
Newport Art Museum

About the Artist



“Why is it so hard for art-minded people to understand art as a natural vehicle for political passion, not an adulterant but an irritant, a stimulant, a rich and common source of energy?”
—1975 *Artforum*

Born to a working class family in Quincy, MA in 1924, May Stevens was an artist, **activist**, teacher, and writer who actively used her voice to raise public consciousness about the **feminist, Civil Rights**, and anti-Vietnam war movements. In 1963, in support of **desegregation**, Stevens produced a series of paintings titled “**Freedom Riders**”, named for the groups of white and African American activists who boarded interstate buses in segregated southern cities to protest **Jim Crow Laws**. She was a founding member of *Artists and Writers Protest Against the War in Vietnam* and cofounder of the influential journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*.

As if to prove the need for the Women’s Liberation movement and its goal to create equity for women, her solo exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, “*Images of Women: Near and Far*,” was the institution’s first major **retrospective** dedicated to a living female artist...in 1999.

From 1961-1996 Stevens taught at the School of Visual Arts in NYC, where she maintained an art studio and exhibited in numerous museums and galleries. May Stevens died in 2019 in Santa Fe New Mexico after a long struggle with Alzheimer’s Disease.

Description of Artwork

Big Daddy Paper Doll is a **serigraph** print on paper. In the center is a white figure drawn with red ink of a bald man with a wrinkled face, moustache and glasses, but no clothes. He is sitting with one arm crossing his chest, and a bull dog on his lap. On either side of the figure are two shapes that mimic his pose with clothing but the bodies are absent. The background color is a vibrant royal blue, and along the top are written the words BIG DADDY PAPER DOLL in large green capital letters. The “paper doll” outfits from left to right are that of an executioner’s black robe and hood, a military soldier’s brown fatigues and hard hat, a blue officer’s uniform with helmet, gun and sheriff’s star, and a meat butcher’s white shirt and apron, splattered with blood. The bull dog wears a sweater that coordinates with each uniform.

About the Artwork

Political themes are evident throughout Stevens’ career, but the *Big Daddy* series, (1967-76) was a celebrated example and universal symbol of the abuses of **patriarchal** power. The series features **caricatures** of a bloated white male figure, based on an image of President Roosevelt, in a variety of official uniforms. Stevens’ figure was also a depiction inspired by her own father’s racist, reactionary masculine attitudes.

In *Big Daddy, Paper Doll*, the male figure and line up of authoritarian uniforms are illustrated in a **pop art** style. The use of intensely saturated primary colors, crisp outlines and flat, one-dimensional depiction of the characters results in a lack of visual complexity. This lack of shading or nuance hints at the possible intellectual or moral simplicity of the characters. The color palate seems to be a symbolic nod to American patriotism, and makes the work physically taxing to the eyes. The butcher and executioner personas suggest the threat of physical violence, while the soldier and police officer represent authority and political oppression.

For Stevens, the recurring character of Big Daddy represents the backward, bigoted, and militaristic patriarchy of America. Pudgy and short-sighted, Big Daddy could be your racist father, a coercive police officer, or the man who voted to deploy your son to Vietnam. Big Daddy’s bulldog, whose tongue protrudes lasciviously from his jaw, serves to visually accentuate the character’s belligerent qualities.

BIG DADDY PAPER DOLL



14/75

May Skidmore

Questions for Viewing

Take a close look at this serigraph. Describe in detail what you see happening in this work.

How do you think the artist feels about the figure in her piece? What inferences can you make to substantiate your impression?

Consider Stevens' title: *Big Daddy, Paper Doll*. Why is he called "Big Daddy"? What is the **symbolism** of the concept of him being a paper doll?

What is the role of the bull dog in this piece?

Is it important for society that artists use their work to draw attention to or challenge social, political or cultural issues, even if you disagree with their opinions?

This work was completed in 1971, 49 years ago. Reflect on what has changed, and what has stayed the same.

If you could ask the artist one question about this work, what would it be?

Activities

Protest poster

Choose a real or imaginary social, political or cultural issue or cause that you wish to support or reject. Create an image-based protest poster (not only words) using visuals as metaphors for your position. This can be done digitally, collaged with cut and pasted pictures, or drawn by hand. Share with the class and discuss as a group.

Collagraph Prints

<https://theartofeducation.edu/2015/06/08/teach-your-students-to-make-collagraph-prints/>

Responsive Writing

What do you think May Stevens means when she says, "why is it so hard for art-minded people to understand art as a natural vehicle for political passion, not an adulterant but an irritant, a stimulant, a rich and common source of energy?"

Persuasive Essay

Argue for or against this statement in writing or live debate: It is important for the greater good of society that artists use their work to draw attention to or challenge social, political or cultural issues, even if you disagree with their opinions.

Art in Context

The Civil Rights Movement 1948-1968

The Civil Rights Movement was an organized effort by black Americans to end racial discrimination and gain equal rights under the law. It began in the late 1940s with President Truman's Executive Order ending segregation in the Armed Forces, and ended in the late 1960s with the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 by President Johnson, which provided equal housing opportunity regardless of race, religion or national origin. The Civil Rights Movement was primarily a non-violent effort led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. involving peaceful marches and sit-ins, but interactions with opponents of the movement and law enforcement resulted in violent clashes and tragic events that today would likely be considered acts of domestic terrorism.

Women's Rights Movement, or Women's Liberation Movement 1960s-'70s

The Women's Rights Movement sought equal rights and opportunities for women and is recognized as part of the "second wave" of feminism. The "first wave" was the Women's Suffrage Movement in the late 19th and early 20th century, which established women's legal rights and the right to vote. The "second wave" focused on creating equal opportunity for women in the home, workplace, and in politics. They fought for equal pay, access to childcare, protection against workplace discrimination, maternity leave rights, equal job training opportunities, tax deductions for child care expenses, and more.

Vietnam War 1954-1975

The Vietnam War was a long, costly and divisive conflict that pitted the communist government of North Vietnam against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. The conflict was intensified by the ongoing **Cold War** between the United States and the Soviet Union. More than 3 million people (including over 58,000 Americans) were killed in the Vietnam War, and more than half of the dead were Vietnamese civilians. Opposition to the war in the United States bitterly divided Americans, even after President Richard Nixon ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1973. **Communist** forces ended the war by seizing control of South Vietnam in 1975, and the country was unified as the **Socialist** Republic of Vietnam the following year.

Art and ELA Vocabulary

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL: marked by or dealing with one's own experiences or life history; of or in the manner of an autobiography

ACTIVISM: the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change

SERIGRAPH: a printed design produced by means of a silkscreen

RETROSPECTIVE: an art exhibit that displays an artists' early works progressing to the artist's most recent works

SYMBOLISM: the practice of using an object to represent or suggest an abstract idea, mood, or emotion. An action, person, place, word, or object can all have a symbolic meaning

POP ART: art based on modern popular culture and the mass media, especially as a critical or ironic comment on traditional fine art values. Pop art is also defined as an art movement that emerged in the 1950s and flourished in the 1960s in America and Britain, drawing inspiration from sources in popular and commercial culture

CARICATURE: a picture, description, or imitation of a person in which certain striking characteristics are exaggerated in order to create a comic or grotesque effect

Social Studies Vocabulary

RACIAL SEGREGATION: the practice of restricting people to certain circumscribed areas of residence or to separate institutions (e.g., schools, churches) and facilities (parks, playgrounds, restaurants, restrooms) on the basis of race

JIM CROW LAWS: Jim Crow laws were a collection of state and local statutes that legalized racial segregation. Named after a Black minstrel show character, the laws—which existed for about 100 years, from the post-Civil War era until 1968—were meant to marginalize African Americans by denying them the right to vote, hold jobs, get an education or other opportunities

FEMINISM: Refers to social movements, political movements, and ideologies that aim to define, establish, and achieve the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes

SOCIALISM: a political and economic theory of social organization which advocates that the means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community as a whole

COMMUNISM: a political theory derived from Karl Marx, advocating a classless society in which in which the means of production are owned communally and each person works and is paid according to their abilities and needs

COLD WAR: A period of geopolitical tension between the Soviet Union and the United States and their respective allies, the Eastern Bloc and the Western Bloc, after World War II. The period is generally considered to span the 1947 Truman Doctrine to the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union

PATRIARCHY: a system of society or government in which the father or eldest male is head of the family and descent is traced through the male line. A system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it.

Additional Resources

Website: May Stevens

<https://maryryangallery.com/artists/may-stevens/>

Website: Freedom Rides

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/freedom-rides>

Book: “*Images of Women: Near and Far*” Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Exhibition Catalogue.
Available on Amazon

Obituaries: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-may-stevens-obituary-1729692>

<https://www.artforum.com/news/may-stevens-1924-2019-81580>

Article: Huffington Post Meet May Stevens, A Feminist Civil Rights Activist Artist You Should Know, by Priscilla Frank

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/may-stevens_n_5649294?guccounter=1

Exhibition: Smithsonian American Art Museum Exhibition, *Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War 1965-1975*. Exhibition images, short video and other resources.

<https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/vietnam>

Publication: *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*.

<http://heresiesfilmproject.org/archive/>

Full archive of high resolution downloadable pdf editions of the magazine from 1971 on.

Stevens full 1975 Artforum response: “Why is it so hard for art-minded people to understand art as a natural vehicle for political passion, not an adulterant but an irritant, a stimulant, a rich and common source of energy? The obvious answer is that art which the establishment is least able to accept is not the avant-garde (which fights prior art concepts) but the politically effective (which fights establishment myths of patriotism and nationalism, the superiority of one class, sex or race to another).”

Photo (right): 26th US President Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919, in office 1901-1909). This image served as inspiration for Steven’s depiction of Big Daddy.

