

Grace Dixon

9/25/21

Writing About Art

Bernatz

Exhibition Review

### John Buck: Looking a Little Closer

At first glance, when entering the “John Buck: Prints and Sculpture from the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation” exhibit, the feeling was underwhelming. The artworks looked a little *too* alike when displayed next to the other, and the compositions deemed as repetitive when looking at a distance. But, like all pieces of modern and contemporary art, one should look a little *closer*; metaphorically and quite *literally*, because one might miss out on something incredible. Each work contains a foreground, the main message or “mascot” but behind each mascot lies multiple works of detailed lineart, each composition telling a smaller story to the bigger story. Not only do they visually stand out, they are also so groundbreaking; the exhibit can potentially be identified as its own artistic movement. In his work, Buck explores a parameter of political storytelling through the lens of printmaking and sculpture. The exhibit is open to the general public, allowing all visitors to capture Buck’s vision free of charge from August 31st through November 19th, 2021 at the Marion Art Gallery located at the State University of New York at Fredonia. The gallery hours are as follows: Tuesday through Thursday from 12-4 p.m., then on Friday and Saturday from 12-6 p.m. and Sunday from 12-4 p.m. The gallery can be accessed from the Symphony Circle side of the Rockefeller Arts Center.

John Buck, who currently resides in both Montana and Hawaii, mainly takes inspiration from pop culture, humankind, and generic irony from our global history, Buck uses cultural imagery to tell his stories, one of his most famous being *Phoenix Rising* (2006), which renders the ill-fated consequences of politics and religion conflicts by symbolizing the extinct dodo bird. Most of his art are visual combinations from the cultures of his two backyards, as if he is drawing what is laid out in front of him. While looking closer, recurring images seem to appear in multiple works: the Statue of Liberty, a simple caged-like shape of the globe, members of hate groups, the human figure, a naked woman, etc. These reappearing images could potentially be a motif for something bigger, more compelling which leaves the viewer to wonder *why*. Buck is most well known as the “wizard” of wood. Linda Tesner, who wrote and published a book called “Who Is John Buck?” claims that he can carve virtually any object from his imagination. She also makes the comment that Buck’s work is severely overlooked and should be more popular; each work can be carefully examined multiple times, and each time someone will spot something new. The amount of detail and consideration that are thoroughly distributed in each piece results in astounding narrations and visual appeals.

For his sculpture work, Buck uses an impressive balance of form and shape when presenting his ideas, yet these ideas are nothing political or environmental. His sculptures portray more so of the visual concept, and the importance of composition. An example of this can be his piece *Nine Quarter Circle* (1996). This work is an experimental sculpture working with line, volume, and perspective. The piece centers around a formal approach but also denies three-dimensionality; the female figure is placed three inches in front of the background (which both are the same

color), one box is framed traditionally while some other boxes are upside down and some even circular, and a drawing of a nine quarter circle is floating on the top. Having a piece of work that lacks historical content can allow the work to simply tell its story solely based on visual appeal (and what visual appeal it is!) Buck's sculpture work is abnormally large, His prints, however, lie on the other side of the spectrum. Buck has large prints as well, usually around 50-90 inches, which actually rejects the traditional process of printmaking. His largest printed woodcut, *Sky Line*, sits at 97 x 37 inches. As stated earlier, each work consists of a foreground image telling a narrative, while the smaller, more complex line art works in the backgrounds construct similar statements. Most of the time, actually, Buck has no idea what the foreground piece will be until after the background compositions are completed, according to my tour guide when I visited the exhibit in early September.

One of his most compelling works, *The Coal Mine*, (1996), is a prime example of exquisite storytelling. In several of his pieces, Buck portrays a caged black raven, only this cage is constructed as a female torso. This torso, according to Buck, represents the impulsiveness of the human brain and body; it could also mean the fragileness or vulnerability of womanhood, since in the background lies illustrations of "girls gone wild". These "girls gone wild" each are performing a "traditional" goal or "expectation" of women: cooking, childbirth, wearing makeup, the "perfect body", pleasing others, staying silent. The choice of colors with the black raven (which can signify the coal), the red caged female torso (the fireplace), and the vibrant warm colors and line art in the background (the fire), plays a great role in correlating mine work to the hardships experienced by women and how these expectations can persuade any woman into flames or "madness".

Student Kristina Ebert visited the museum in early September, and made the statement that the exhibit was easily accessible-- she acknowledged how the prints were similar in size, making it easier for viewers to walk up, sit, and meditate on what the piece was about. Ebert also admired how the art established an accepting and nice community, both artists and non-artists: "I saw lots of people who normally aren't interested in artistic critique or art history," Ebert explains, "but they were still drawn to it." Most of the people Ebert witnessed at the exhibit exchanged engaging conversation about the works, seeing all these people from different backgrounds having a similar approach towards the art's educational purposes, and wanting to know more felt rewarding. Ebert stated, "Even 30 years later, John Buck's exhibit is still an accurate mirror of contemporary society today."

What Buck is doing is not only revolutionary, it is also portrayed in a reminiscent, familiar way. While a first glance seems unconvincing, what lies underneath Buck's imagery and depiction of real-world issues is beyond what we can imagine, all we need to do is look a little *closer*.

Overall, "John Buck: Prints and Sculpture from the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation" brings insight to audiences from ranging backgrounds. The exhibit once again is available at the State University of New York at Fredonia's Marion Art Gallery, from August 31st through November 19th, 2021. The gallery hours are Tuesday through Thursday from 12-4 p.m., then Friday and Saturday from 12-6 p.m. and Sunday from 12-4 p.m.

