

Interview with Chamomile Tea Party Founder – Jeff Gates
by JOSH O'CONNOR on 19th Mar 12 No Comments



Like 0 Tweet 28 Submit Submit
78 points on reddit 78 points on reddit Share

1 2 3 next page »

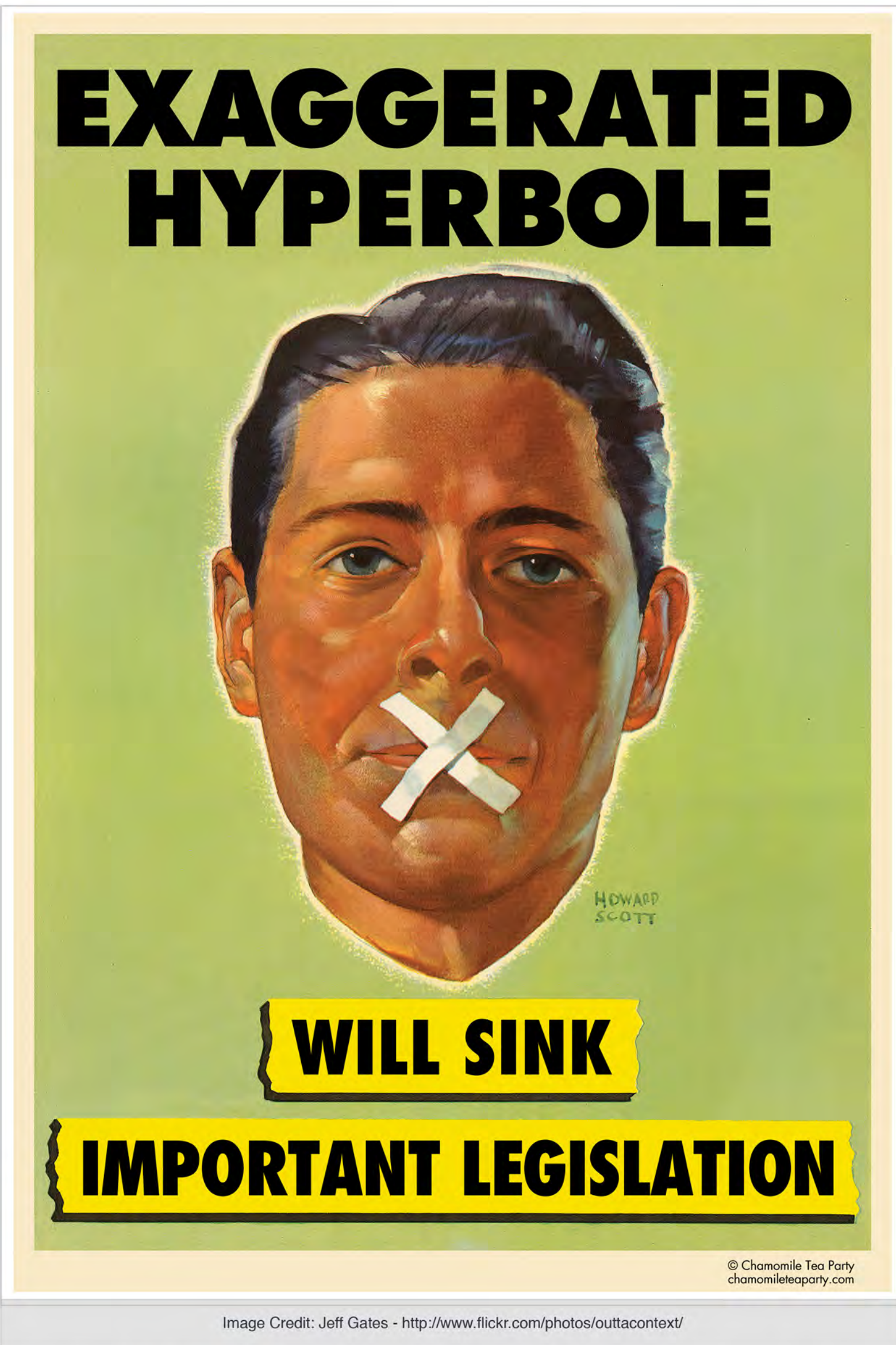


Image Credit: Jeff Gates - http://www.flickr.com/photos/outtacontext/

As with most of my recent artistic exposure, I first encountered the work of Jeff Gates, founder of the Chamomile Tea Party through Fab.com. Jeff offers some pretty compelling politically oriented art that escalates the absurdity of the modern political system to a level which can generate some meaningful and non-divisive discourse. Jeff was kind enough to do an interview regarding his art (which you will see sprinkled throughout this post). Jeff's offering to the modern political climate highlights the sort of optimistic, forward thinking worldview which Urban Times strives for in that it shows that we are not locked into our current trajectory, but that an introspective (the sort that can only be brought about by well-done satire) can open up new possibilities for a more civil political future.

Josh: So to start off with tell us a little bit about yourself, your art, and some of your past projects.

JG: I have a B.A. in political science and an M.F.A in graphic design and photography. And, while at the time, I saw these two areas as discrete, I can now see how they've intertwined over the years. Starting in the early 1980s I began to photograph an area in Los Angeles that was to become a freeway. However, the transformation from middle class housing tracts to highway had been abruptly halted when homeowners, the NAACP, and the Sierra Club filed an injunction to stop construction. That's when I discovered the area and began to photograph. I was attracted to what seemed to be an abandoned suburbia. As I photographed I began to connect with many homeowners and government workers who were involved in the project. A decade later the public interest law firm that handled the litigation commissioned me to rephotograph the area. The injunction had been lifted and many social programs were instituted because of that court case. In Our Path is the result of these two photo essays.

In the late 1980s I founded an organization called ArtFBI (Artists for a Better Image). I studied stereotypes of artists: their origins and how they continued to form people's opinions in contemporary culture. Through ArtFBI I collected depictions of artists from T.V. and film and I went around the country using these very stereotypical and overly simplistic notions about artists to talk about these issues. I was interested in promoting the discussion, not just within art circles but also between artists and the public. I started to make bumper stickers that promoted these discussions in a very public space. As I look back now, these stickers were the precursor to my latest poster work and a thread that is very important to me: creating art that engages the public. In the mid 1990s, as the Internet started to develop, I saw a way for artists to, once again, become important to society as information providers. I outlined this process in an article I wrote for the New York Foundation for the Arts called Artists Roles in the Information Age. Because of the latest battles in the ongoing culture wars I've had a chance to revisit this article and find that what I wrote still rings true to me. I feel strongly that artists, as information providers and storytellers, can fill an important need in our society.



Image Credit: Jeff Gates - Artist for a Better Image - http://outtacontext.com/artfbi.html

I found the potential access to a much larger audience via the Net than the traditional gallery scene to be very attractive. It was a way I could get my art "out there" and, most importantly, find venues where the work could be discussed. My earliest net project was an auction I held on eBay in 1999 to sell my personal demographics. (I think I might have been the first artist to use eBay as an art form!) If the Internet was going to provide companies a way to cash in on my buying habits, I wanted to see if I could preempt that by selling that data to the highest bidder. Interestingly, the issue of privacy and personal information has only become more important over the years.

In 2001, after 9/11, I created my second online project: Dichotomy: It Was a Matter of Time and Place. Living in Washington, DC on the day of the attacks, it became apparent that those of us who experienced them directly had a very different viewpoint than those who experienced them via the media. And I wanted to highlight those differences. So, I constructed one of those "where were you" websites but with an important twist. I asked people to submit stories of where they were and what they experienced from two different viewpoints: as participants (those who were in DC and New York City) and as witnesses (those who lived elsewhere and experienced the attacks via the television, newspapers, and the radio). And then I paired these two different viewpoints on the site to emphasize that difference. Read one pair of stories and then hit the refresh button and two more stories appear, one from each group. There are some amazing and powerful recollections on the site, including one from a person who was in one of the Twin Towers. Most importantly, the stories are so human. And that is the foundation of art: a human experience.

Not to give you the impression that I always deal with very somber and serious issues, a few years later I did a very funny online piece. I tweeted my root canal procedure live to a group of dentists throughout North America. The result is My Tweet Tooth. In a way, the genesis of this project was serendipitous. I had just been introduced to Twitter by a colleague. Initially, I thought, "What do I need with another online distraction?" But, I thought I'd try it out. I was sitting in the waiting room of the endodontist (a root canal doctor) when I tweeted my location. Suddenly, a dentist in Toronto started to follow me. I came up with the idea of tweeting the procedure live (if I could get my doc onboard) and my Twitter dentist follower said that he could get many dentists across the continent to participate. My doctor had no idea what I was doing but wonderfully embraced it. As she went through the procedure she would stop here and there so I could tweet what was going on and answer the dentists' questions. It was lots of fun but I had to remember that my number one goal was to get my tooth fixed, not create art. It was a humorous intersection of art and life. Even my most ardent art supporters squirm at this project. Apparently, many people are squeamish about any dental procedure.

In the late 1990s I made a big career shift. I had been teaching college-level photography and computer graphics for years. But I also started my own web development company and, eventually, left teaching to take a job as a new media producer at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Over the years, as the Net and new media developed, I discovered that I was very process-oriented and began to write about the huge shifts taking place in organizations as we moved from a "broadcast" mode of information dissemination to more of a "conversational" one. I proposed and helped launch the very first blog at the Smithsonian, Eye Level, and I now serve as its national editor.

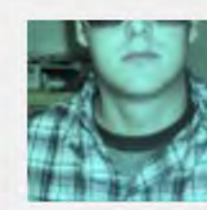
All of this, in one way or another, leads to my latest project: the Chamomile Tea Party.

Josh: I've enjoyed flipping through the Chamomile Tea Party posters that you have up on Flickr, can you tell me a little bit about what the Chamomile Tea Party stands for and how it originated?

JG: I remember the moment I had this idea. It was July 2, 2010. I was listening to National Public Radio as I walked home from work just before the July 4th weekend. They were reporting that all Republicans were going to vote the party line against Elena Kagan for Supreme Court Justice and that was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. It became clear to me that party politics was trumping common sense and progress in this country (after all, Kagan wasn't a raving socialist). I had always been interested in the intersection of politics and design. And I had always been attracted to World War II-era propaganda posters. At that moment I decided to see if I could use the strong visual messages conveyed by these posters and add new texts about the current state of affairs. And I came up with the Chamomile Tea Party as an antidote to the extremism of the Tea Party. I was interested in a "calming effect" on the often-hotheaded rhetoric that is so prevalent in American political discourse. Politics today makes everything seem so black and white, like there are always either right or wrong answers. Rather, the issues today are full of shades of gray. What's important is to find ways to solve very serious problems our country faces. Again, I am interested in the process of problem solving. Instead, what I have found is that our two political parties are more interested in retaining power. That being said, there are major differences in the ways the Democrats and the Republicans approach this. And there are some very real differences with how each is dealing with its base.

I have no qualms about saying I'm a liberal. But the issue is not one of party affiliation; rather, it's a problem of finding ways to work together to solve these economic issues. Right now the G.O.P. is digging itself into a big hole. But there have been times that the Democrats have faced similar issues. However, as a citizen, I want my government to work towards the betterment of the country, not the betterment of either party. I am more interested in how we work out the issues. Americans lives are depending on it. And I think that's where the government is letting us down.

1 2 3 next page »



ABOUT JOSH O'CONNOR

I am a planner by trade and an advocate for community-oriented urbanism. My interests include urban planning, ecology, sustainability, geographic information systems, and Asheville. I live in Asheville, NC with my wife and daughters...

See full bio »

Download Now

Easily extract and create ZIP, Unzip, RAR, 7-ZIP and more

advertisement

SUBSCRIBE USING FEEDBURNER

Enter your email address:

Subscribe

RELATED POSTS



Captivating the Capital City: Refurbishing Raleigh [Again]



Spin Doctor: A Time Of Choices, Part 1

FACEBOOK

The Urban Times on Facebook

2,836 people like The Urban Times.

Kevin Claire M. Dwi Juliant Andrew Robin
Rosie Mahdi Lindsey Keeley Marc

Facebook social plugin

RECENT POSTS INCULTURE



The Health Pantry: Magic Seeds

RECENT DEBATE

on Iran With The Bomb

RUIN: 8 Minutes of Awesome – Urban Times on The Two Futures Of Modern Thought

RUIN: 8 Minutes of Awesome – Urban Times on Sci-Fi Speed Dating

A WISE Eye Wonders – Urban Times on The Most Poetic Idea in the Universe

A WISE Eye Wonders – Urban Times on The City Limits (Timelapse)

Interview with Chamomile Tea Party Founder – Jeff Gates by JOSH O'CONNOR on 19th Mar 12 No Comments

URBANTIMES EXCLUSIVES | Interviews Like 0 Tweet 28 Submit Share 78 points on reddit

« previous page 1 2 3 next page »



Image Credit: Jeff Gates - http://www.flickr.com/photos/outtacontext/



Original poster which served as the basis for 'Politicians! Your Manly Insecurities Show'

When The Huffington Post ran a piece on these posters over 700 people commented. I asked the author of the article if that was a lot and he replied that that was a huge amount for the Politics section of site...

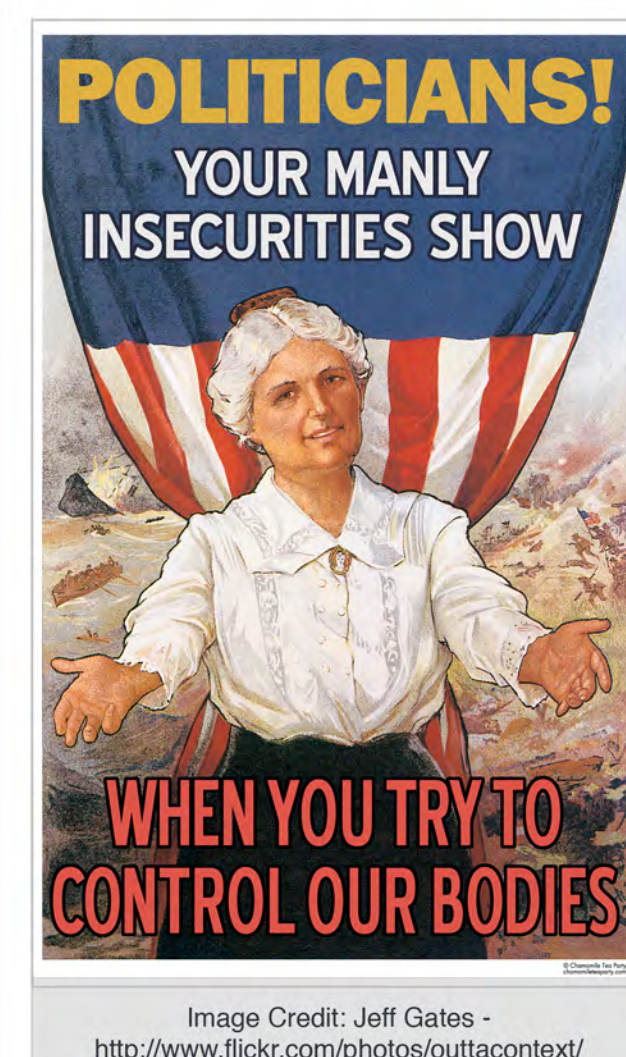


Image Credit: Jeff Gates - http://www.flickr.com/photos/outtacontext/

the middle is often not well represented in our political parties. I'd support a party in the middle. Let the Dems and the Republicans have their extremes.

« previous page 1 2 3 next page »

ABOUT JOSH O'CONNOR I am a planner by trade and an advocate for community-oriented urbanism. My interests include urban planning, ecology, sustainability, geographic information systems, and sociology.

Download Now ZEPDEVIL PRO Easily extract and create ZIP, Unzip, RAR, 7-ZIP and more

advertisement

SUBSCRIBE USING FEEDBURNER Enter your email address: [input] Subscribe

RELATED POSTS Captivating the Capital City: Refurbishing Raleigh [Again] Spin Doctor: A Time Of Choices, Part 1

FACEBOOK The Urban Times on Facebook Like 2,836 people like The Urban Times. Kevin Claire M. Dwi Juliant Andrew Robin Rosie Mahdi Lindsey Keeley Marc

RECENT POSTS INCULTURE The Health Pantry: Magic Seeds

RECENT DEBATE on Iran With The Bomb RUIN: 8 Minutes of Awesome – Urban Times on The Two Futures Of Modern Thought

Interview with Chamomile Tea Party Founder – Jeff Gates

by JOSH O'CONNOR on 19th Mar 12

No Comments

URBANTIMES EXCLUSIVES

Interviews

Like 0 Tweet 28 Submit Submit Share

78 points on reddit 78 points on reddit

Download Now



Easily extract and create ZIP, Unzip, RAR, 7-ZIP and more

advertisement

SUBSCRIBE USING FEEDBURNER

Enter your email address:

Input field for email address

Subscribe

RELATED POSTS



Captivating the Capital City: Refurbishing Raleigh [Again]



Spin Doctor: A Time Of Choices, Part 1

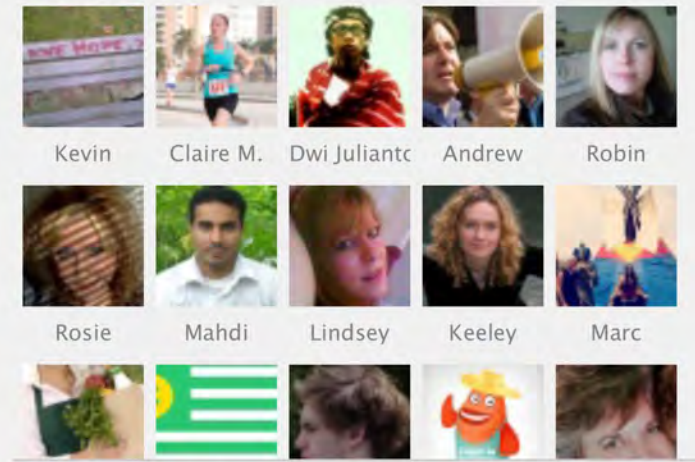
FACEBOOK



The Urban Times on Facebook

Like

2,836 people like The Urban Times.



Facebook social plugin

RECENT POSTS INCULTURE



The Health Pantry: Magic Seeds

RECENT DEBATE

on Iran With The Bomb

RUIN: 8 Minutes of Awesome – Urban Times on The Two Futures Of Modern Thought

RUIN: 8 Minutes of Awesome – Urban Times on Sci-Fi Speed Dating

A WISE Eye Wonders – Urban Times on The Most Poetic Idea in the Universe

A WISE Eye Wonders – Urban Times on The City Limits (Timelapse)



Image Credit: Jeff Gates - http://www.flickr.com/photos/outtacontext/

Josh: What's your favorite poster?

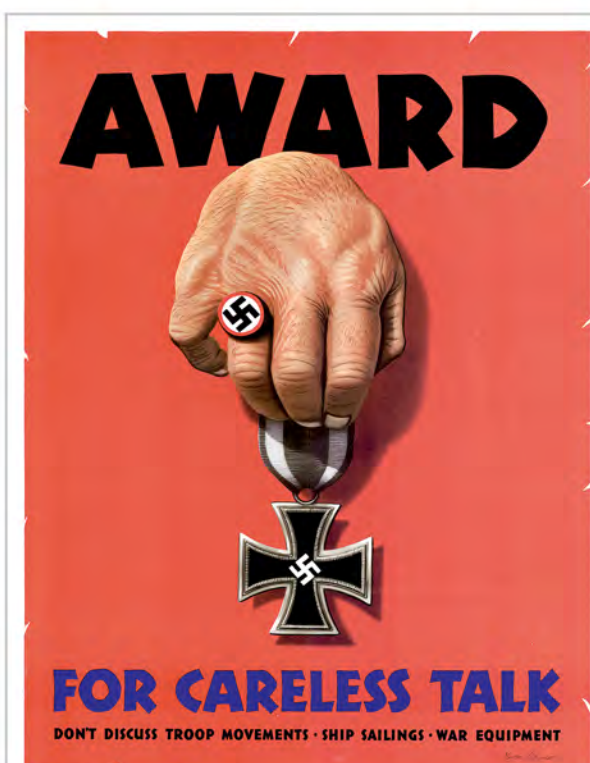
JG: That's a hard question to answer. I think some posters are more successful than others but, often for different reasons. And I have favorites for different reasons. For example, one of my favorites is the "Award for Careless Talk" poster. It was one of the most complicated to make. And I had to use all my Photoshop powers to do so. For example, I changed the swastika on the hand's ring to an American flag. But I had to make it look rounded and three-dimensional with a highlight. And then there was the dripping tea bag. I had to learn how to make believable drips. In the same vein, I'm happy I was able to remove the shadow of the swastika from the grass in "Predatory Capitalism" (featured at the beginning of the article) and place a believable shadow of a dollar sign. So, sometimes posters are my favorites because of the technical aspects involved in making them.

Some of them are my favorites for the simplicity of the poster and message remix. Two examples are "Exaggerated Hyperbole" and "Look to Your Right". In both, I think the messages are very successful.

Both "America's 4th Front" and "I Lost My Job While You Played Party Politics" have been popular with the public.

Josh: What type of reactions have you gotten to the posters so far? Has it been largely negative or positive? Do you ever get any hate mail regarding your work?

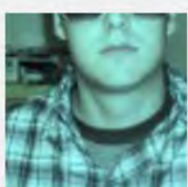
JG: I have never received "hate" mail. Sometimes people agree and sometimes they don't. But the response has never been vitriolic. However, I've gotten some negative reactions to these posters from people who think I've simply used other people's art, simply putting different text on it to call it mine. Rather than ignore them, I engage them in a short dialogue. We have a huge remix culture now in music and in art. There's a history to remixing. And it fits my basic philosophy of art making: take Encounter A, mix its meaning with Encounter B to create something new and insightful. Artists have been doing that for centuries.



Original poster which served as the basis for "Sopping Wet Tea Bag Award for Careless Talk"

« previous page

1 2 3



ABOUT JOSH O'CONNOR

I am a planner by trade and an advocate for community-oriented urbanism. My interests include urban planning, ecology, sustainability, geographic information systems, and sociology. I live in Asheville, NC with my wife and daughters....

See full bio »