Obama's On-the-Wall Endorsement

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LOS ANGELES -- When the street artist and guerrilla marketer Shepard Fairey got word from the Obama people that they would welcome his contribution to the campaign, he knew what he wanted to create: a phenomenon.

All political art is propaganda (that is the point), but most political posters are bland, forgettable, wallpaper, like Fred Thompson on an off day. Fairey wanted something more iconic -- aspirational, inspirational -- and cool. In other words, he wanted to make posters that the cool cats would want. The 2008 Democratic primary season equivalent of the Che poster (with all that implies). More Mao, more right now. The kind of poster that might make its way onto dorm room walls of fanboys. The kind of poster that might sell on eBay, as a signed Fairey Obama recently did, for $5,900. He wanted his posters to go viral.

"I wanted strong. I wanted wise, but not intimidating," Fairey says of the look for his Obamas. The agitprop pop art has become a must-have accessory among a certain subset of the candidate's supporters, who have gobbled up more than 80,000 of Fairey's posters and 150,000 postcard-size stickers since Super Tuesday.

Who is this Shepard Fairey? He is a skate punk -- with a secretary. A CEO in Puma sneakers. The rebel who did Pepsi ads. If you live in a big city, including Washington, you have probably seen his handiwork. Since 1989, during his student days at the Rhode Island School of Design, Fairey has been slapping stickers and pasting posters depicting the face of the Andre the Giant, the deceased French actor and professional wrestler, on every available surface, legal and not. Fairey has spent two decades shimmying up lampposts and over chain-link fences in a tenacious public art enterprise, irony performed on a landscape scale. Thousands of his Andre stickers include the word "OBEY" in bold
lettering. What are we dealing with here? Obey what? Obey whom? A giant from France? Aha. You have cracked the code. It is reverse psychology. (Pssst! Don't obey.)

You see, in his 1990 manifesto, Fairey wrote that "the Giant sticker campaign can be explained as an experiment in Phenomenology. Heidegger describes Phenomenology as 'the process of letting things manifest themselves.' Phenomenology attempts to enable people to see clearly something that is right before their eyes but obscured; things that are so taken for granted that they become muted by abstract observation."

We're talking German philosopher and author of "Being and Time" Martin Heidegger? The very same. "The sticker has no meaning but exists only to cause people to react, to contemplate and search for meaning in the sticker," wrote Fairey. Unless that person is what Fairey describes as "the paranoid or conservative viewer," who becomes confused and annoyed, "considering them eyesores and acts of petty vandalism, which is ironic considering the number of commercial graphic images everyone in American society is assaulted with daily."

His pro bono Obey Giant campaign created a niche market for Fairey's graphic designs -- for movie ads ("Walk the Line"), album covers (Led Zeppelin's "Mothership" compilation) and the brown spirits (Dewars Scotch). At his new, plywood-floored offices at Studio One last week, in the shabby chic corner of L.A.'s Echo Park neighborhood, Fairey appears in jeans, T-shirt, sneakers. He's 38, boyishly handsome. He confesses he suffers from a Peter Pan complex. He has just flown in from New York, where he Dj'd at the Guggenheim Museum, which is a kind of art school/street cred double axel that is almost impossible to pull off without appearing like a character from "Zoolander." While in Gotham, he erected two large Obama posters, one at the downtown intersection of Houston and Bowery, which is a super hive of Obama support rivaled only by, say, the Trader Joe's parking lot in Silver Lake in Los Angeles or the Busboys and Poets cafe/bookstore/performance space in Washington.

Fairey has done his share of political art in the past. He did posters for Ralph Nader in 2000. In 2004, he did George W. Bush, depicting the president as a grinning vampire. In the weeks before Super Tuesday 2008, "I put out the word I wanted to do something for Obama," explains Fairey, through Yosi Sergant, a plugged-in "early adopter" publicist in Los Angeles who knew prominent Democrats in the Obama circle. "I didn't want to be an unwelcome distraction," Fairey explains. "I've been arrested," he says, referring to his graffiti work in public places. "I really want him to win, so I didn't want to do anything that would cause him problems." The Obama people, somewhat to his surprise, said go ahead. Who said, exactly? "You can assume this came from the highest levels," Fairey says. Indeed, the Obama campaign liked the posters so much it now sells them via the official campaign Web site store (for $70, and the supply is currently all sold out -- again).

To create his Obama poster (which he did in less than a week), Fairey grabbed a news photograph of the candidate off the Internet. He sought an Obama that looked presidential. "He is gazing off into the future, saying, 'I can guide you,' " is how Fairey reads the image. The artist then simplified the lines and geometry, employing a red, white and blue patriotic palette (which he plays with by making the white a beige and the blue a pastel shade). He uses a lot of red along with boldface words: PROGRESS or HOPE or CHANGE.

"I wanted the poster to be recognizable as my work, and to be appealing to a younger, apathetic audience, yet tame enough not to be seen as radical or offensive to the more
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"You want to create the most flattering shapes. Strong in the face of adversity. How the light falls beautifully. It's idealized."

Fairey's artwork follows the style of his predecessors. His Obama posters (and lots of his commercial and fine art work) are reworkings of the techniques of revolutionary propagandists -- the bright colors, bold lettering, geometric simplicity, heroic poses -- the "art with a purpose" created by constructivists in the early Soviet Union, like Alexander Rodchenko and the Stenberg brothers, and by America's own Depression-era Works Projects Administration.

Not only has Fairey done Obama, but works on the walls of his studio and on his Web site include depictions of Sid Vicious, Bobby Seale, Chairman Mao, Noam Chomsky, Emiliano Zapata, Patty Hearst, Vladimir Lenin and Richard Nixon. Though Fairey is quoting revolutionary forms (meaning he is playing with Mao, not endorsing Mao), some observers see his Obama poster and think: reds.

"There's an unequivocal sense of idol worship about the image," wrote op-ed columnist Meghan Daum in the Los Angeles Times, "a half-artsy, half-creepy genuflection that suggests the subject is (a) a Third World dictator whose rule is enmeshed in a seductive cult of personality; (b) a controversial American figure who's been assassinated; or (c) one of those people from a Warhol silkscreen that you don't recognize but assume to be important in an abstruse way."

Fairey rummages around on his desk and produces a letter from Obama himself. "Dear Shepard," the candidate writes. "I would like to thank you for using your talent in support of my campaign. The political messages involved in your work have encouraged Americans to believe they can help change the status quo. Your images have a profound effect on people, whether seen in a gallery or on a stop sign."

Messages. Images. Effect. Someone understands phenomenology. And the thing about stop signs? "He's kind of endorsing graffiti," Fairey says, "isn't he?"

Who knows how many do-it-yourself reproductions of Fairey's Obama have been scanned off the Internet. "I have no idea. I think a lot," says the artist, who put the image on the Web in a downloadable file. "I've seen it on stencils, fliers, shirts, Web sites, places we had nothing to do with." Copyright infringement? No, no, no. "This is exactly what I wanted to happen." This isn't a limited-edition print. It's unlimited. He charged $25 to $45 for the first runs of 950 posters, to pay for the printing of the all the rest, which were free. Fairey says he hasn't made a dime off Obama nor does he think he has unfairly glommed onto the candidate.

He has more Obama art in the works. Coming up next? Ten thousand bicycle spoke cards.
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