VIEWPOINT: Text Artists Are the Francisco Goyas of Our Time

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by Joan Altabe

He was a court painter and a painter of history, but Francisco Goya was hell-bent on a bigger picture through drawing. He wanted to track the human experience—the whole story, not tucking away the unsavory parts.

He fixed on what he called "the innumerable foibles and follies to be found in any civilized society." Not one for ambiguity, Goya defined human weaknesses as "common prejudices and deceitful practices which custom, ignorance, or self-interest have made usual."

Not a pretty picture. But Goya piled on, adding telling words to his drawings, such phrases as "Nobody knows himself" and "Everyone will fall." Like a jeering editorial cartoonist, he spelled out human frailties in pointed satirical etchings he called—what else?—*Los Caprichos* (*The Caprices*).

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"Nobody Knows" by Francisco Goya, 1799. From the series "Los Caprichos." Image from the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando website.

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On view through January 19, 2015, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts is showing them as part of "Goya: Order and Disorder", along with his paintings, some of which tell the same story as *Los Caprichos*, but without the weight of his words.

Exemplifying the parallel between Goya's drawing and painting are the echoes in *Capricho No. 55: Hasta la muerte (Until death)*, which shows a gnarled old woman sitting before a mirror vainly trying to look young in a kind of sweet 16 party dress, and the large-scale painting *Las Viejas* (often called in translation *Time*), which portrays the same aged figure, also gussied up in girlish clothes.

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"Capricho No. 55: Hasta la muerte (Until death)" by

Francisco Goya, 1799. Image from the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando website.

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There is also reciprocity, in the *Capricho № 56: Subir y bajar* (*To rise and to fall*) depiction of one figure menacing another and the image of a figure fleeing an attack in the painting *Attack on a Military Camp*.

But here's the thing. While Goya's themes in both painting and drawing are often comparable, the added words on the drawings leave the viewer nowhere to go but where he wants. In that sense, the *Caprichos*, though cartoonish, hit harder.

Apparently self-conscious about the blatant messaging in the *Caprichos*, Goya sought to justify them. Writing in the Diarrio de Madrid (Feb. 6, 1799), he acknowledged that "censure of human vices properly belongs more to oratory and poetry." But he argued that such censure could also be an appropriate subject for visual art. By using forms and attitudes that exist in the mind, he said, "Art, like poetry, selects in the universe whatever she deems most appropriate to her ends to earn the title of inventor and not of servile copyist."

Goya was big on invention and imagination. While he saw skewing "vulgar prejudices and frauds" as worthwhile, he took extra pride in the fact that all the imagery in the *Caprichos* came out of his head.

An object lesson of his imagination at work is *Capricho No. 43* "*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*," in which he put himself in slumber as owl-like winged monsters mob his unconscious.

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Capricho No. 43 "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" by Francisco Goya, 1797. Image from The Museum of Fine Arts Boston website.

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And, as if to win approval from all naysayers, he also wrote in Diarrio de Madrid, "The artist who has not followed the example of others deserves some esteem."

Goya's need to rationalize his *Caprichos* might have been a reaction to their sorry reception. They were offered for sale for only a few days and withdrawn—likely due to protests. He was denounced to the Inquisition, but thanks to his powerful friends he escaped punishment.

Not as lucky was Honoré Daumier, a painter some 60 years younger than Goya, who also lampooned the foibles of his time in cartoons. His caricature of French king Philippe as Gargantuan led to his imprisonment for six months.

Clearly Goya started a revolution of sorts that's still raging. How else to explain all the text-image art that showed at Art Basel Miami Beach last year, or the continuing popularity of Raymond Pettibon's text-images being collected by museums worldwide. His ink drawing of a scowling, bearded man saying "why should I shave when the world is likely to get blown up any moment" makes him a latter-day Goya.

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Artwork by Ray Pettibon. Image from raypettibon.com.

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Another 21st century Goya is Barbara Kruger, whose famed text-art includes the words "Look for the moment when pride becomes contempt" set in the stars section of an American flag.

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"Untitled" (Questions) by Barbara Kruger, 1991. photographic silkscreen/vinyl, 66 x 93 in. (167.6 x 236.2 cm.), Marieluise Hessel Collection, Center For Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-On-Hudson, New York, courtesy: Mary Boone Gallery, New York. Image from warhol.org.

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Someone else who can also be called a Goya beneficiary is Roz Chast, whose cartoon book "Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?: A Memoir" made the National Book Award list this year—the only narrative nonfiction selected.

Perhaps even caustic TV cartoons like "Family Guy" can be called heir to Goya's mockeries. Highlighting the disrespect that young people exhibit toward their parents, for example, Baby Stevie tells his mother, who asked him to play in another room, 'Why don't you burn in hell?"

Thanks to Goya, cartoons have become a potent art form to confront human frailties. Putting them through our motions as caricatures, they can act out our bad behavior at a safe remove. Blowing out of proportion the way we look and talk, cartoons also make the humorous look-see at our weaknesses easier to take.

If art's purpose is to reveal truth, long may the Goyas among us reign.

Joan Altabe is an award-winning art and architecture critic, commentator, author and artist. Her books include “Sculpture Off the Pedestal: Monuments and their Makers” and “Art: Behind the Scenes: One Hundred Masters in and out of Their Studios”.
