

ARLIS/NA – VRA 2016 Session: Artists Books as Agents of Social Change

Presentation Text

Jessica Spring & Chandler O’Leary, Dead Feminists

Chandler and I met in 2008. She had just moved to Tacoma, the presidential election was in full swing, and one candidate’s infamous eyeglasses took over the news. I asked her to provide an illustration to accompany a quote by Elizabeth Cady Stanton: “Come, come my conservative friend, wipe the dew off your spectacles and see the world is moving.” Chandler drew the glasses along with every word of the quote and more, which launched a series of broadsides—or posters—we call the Dead Feminists.

A large sheet of paper typically printed on one side only, the broadside was used to promote political causes, spreading the word on the street. Our method in creating the Dead Feminists series is a mix of traditional and contemporary letterpress processes. Historical broadsides were printed with metal and wood type composed to create a form for printing, as I do in my shop.

The broadside series has continued for eight years—we are nearly ready to print our 24th dead feminist. We’ve developed some rules of engagement over the years: the women we quote must be dead, and we aim to focus on a critical political or social issue. Quotes aren’t about men being bad, or “women are awesome” either. Our most important effort has been to reclaim the word “feminist.”

In the spirit of the democratic multiple, we have kept the prints affordable and when they sell out we reprint small postcards. We also engage in the community through public talks, and our annual Wayzgoose where we make nearly life-size dead feminist prints with a steamroller.

Chandler designs the layout in pencil, and then redraws it in black ink, separating the colors by hand. Then we scan the final version into a digital file to create photopolymer plates, easily placed on a base to create a raised surface for printing.

Every color in the print is represented by a different plate and pass through the press which must be carefully registered. When plates are overlapped, the two colors combine to create another color. Each design has a minimum of two colors, some with as many as five.

To keep the series fresh we experiment with color layering, rainbow rolls, hand coloring, metallic and fluorescent inks, and even one print on black paper.

In trying to write a book, we needed a way to tie all the women we've featured together. We chose a framework of action words to highlight their lives and work.

Build

These women all spent their lives building to benefit their communities with a profound respect for education and the opportunities it provides.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: the right and responsibility to vote

Fatima al-Fihri: education, especially for women

Gwendolyn Brooks: racism and violence

Grow

These women planted seeds and cultivated growth.

Eleanor Roosevelt: Victory Garden

Alice Paul: marriage equality (after Prop 8)

Thea Foss: women's entrepreneurship

Protect

While women have traditionally been seen as protectors, especially in their parenting roles, these Dead Feminists took on some big issues outside the family.

Annie Oakley: gun control

Adina De Zavala: Arizona immigration reform bill (after SB 1070)

Rachel Carson: environment (after Deepwater Horizon spill)

Make

Throughout human history, women have assumed the role of makers.

As artists, craftswomen, hobbyists, and homemakers, women have used their hands to shape and influence the world around them.

Imogen Cunningham: artist's vision / staying focused in a distracting world

Sadako Sasaki: nuclear power (after earthquake and Fukushima)

Elizabeth Zimmerman: homesteading and handcraft

Tell

These women were all extraordinary storytellers.

Virginia Woolf: value of self-publishing, books and reading
Rywka Lipszyc: religious violence in the wake of the Paris attacks
Sarojini Naidu: violence against women after the attacks in Delhi

Lead

All our Dead Feminists are leaders, but these women especially forged the way for the rest of us to follow.

Harriet Tubman: bi-partisanship and political cooperation
Washington State Suffragists: working together
Shirley Chisholm: 2012 election, voting power

Play

The word “play” meant something different to each of these women, from games to experimentation to wordplay.

Babe Didrikson Zaharias: women’s equality in athletics
Marie Curie: healthcare reform
Sappho: body image and aging

Share

These women didn’t share much in common, but each staked her claim on history.

Emma Goldman: freedom, equality in love, marriage
Jane Mecom, education equality (after Occupy movement)
????: new print to be revealed

Our newest print will be on exhibit at the University of Washington Library, in an exhibit focusing on feminism and the ancient world. The show inspired our oldest Dead Feminist, Sappho.

Very little is known about Sappho's life except what fragments of poetry have survived. Yet we know that 2000 years ago, Sappho was scrutinizing her own appearance—and nothing has changed.

Our new piece is called "Age Before Beauty," and references ancient Greek vases.

We thought we'd show you a bit of the process behind the broadside, because we have the originals here to share with you.

We've flown through 8 years of our process, but our book, coming out this October from Sasquatch Books, goes into great detail. Here's a sneak peek of the cover.

In the meantime, you can learn more at our website, [deadfeminists dot com](http://deadfeminists.com).