There is a Remedy for all This

DEVELOPMENT MEANS A COMMERCIAL or INDUSTRIAL UNDERTAKING

Ericka Walker
THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

"DISPUTE" MEANS A CONTROVERSY, QUESTION, DISAGREEMENT, OR CLAIM

ALSO ON THE SOIL

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ERICKA WALKER:
THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

May 25–September 3, 2017

The Reach Gallery Museum Abbotsford
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Ericka Walker
THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

OLD GHOSTS AND NEW NIGHTMARES:
ERICKA WALKER'S *THE GREAT EXPERIMENT*

ALEKSANDRA IDZIOR

"Even propaganda, an allegedly self-evident, transparent language, needs to be deciphered."[1]

Outsized, meticulously executed fine art prints by Ericka Walker were on display at The Reach Gallery Museum in Abbotsford, British Columbia from May 25 to September 3, 2017 in an exhibition entitled *The Great Experiment*. Characterized by densely interlocking layers of text and image, and rife with political and social commentary, these prints have an undeniable relationship to war-era propaganda posters; in fact, many visual and textual elements of Walker's works are immediately recognizable from historical sources. However, the careful orchestration of space, economical use of colour, and often jarring juxtaposition of text and image destabilize any straightforward reading that her source material might have originally encouraged. Drawing on a wide-ranging repository of historical documents and slogans, political cartoons, press illustrations, and other iconic images, the works in the exhibition instead use the language of propaganda to critically examine notions of nation-building, patriotism, militarization, and subjugation in the name of civilizational "progress." Following Carlo Ginzburg's entreaty in the epigraph above, care must be taken to decipher meaning, even—and perhaps especially—with those things that at first appear transparent and self-evident. Walker's images force us to slow our perception and interpretation, to look closer and reconsider our relationship to the familiar.

Born and educated in America but now living and teaching in Canada, Ericka Walker is keenly aware of the turbulent histories of both countries. The force of Walker's work comes largely from her willingness to critically situate herself as a benefactor of these histories, someone who is implicated in—rather than simply an observer of—her own relationship to this complicated past. Walker's work interrogates the cultural legacies of both the United States and Canada with regard to shared notions of colonialism and imperialism, the economic exploitation of Indigenous peoples and their lands, and social and political power structures that have sustained imperial regimes. Throughout this body of work, texts

[1] Carlo Ginzburg, "'*Your Country Needs You*,' a Case Study in Political Iconography," *History Workshop Journal*, No. 52 (Autumn, 2001), 7.


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and images from highly specific historical sources are combined in unexpected ways, moving meaning from explicit to general statements about the use and abuse of power.

The title of the exhibition at The Reach references the concept of "the Great American Experiment." Originally used to describe the goals of the American Revolution, the phrase was also rallied to the cause of "Manifest Destiny" in the nineteenth century in order to validate and promote American expansion westward across the continent while engaging in the annexation and occupation of Indigenous lands. Though historical, this choice of title for Walker's exhibition resonates in our own time, when a similar slogan—"Make America Great Again"—has re-emerged to both shape and represent a particular brand of current American ideology, identity, and cultural self-representation.[2]

Many of the works in *The Great Experiment* deal specifically with American history and its iconic imagery. Recognizable figures and symbols such as the Lincoln Memorial, Winchester rifles (the "gun that won the West"), the Statue of Liberty, George Washington, and myriad others are layered, combined, and superimposed in an explosion of muscular imagery. Although the density of detail in these tightly woven composite images may frustrate the viewer with their sheer volume of visual information, the invitation to dig in and decode the artist's visual associations yields rich avenues of interpretive possibility. Consider the work titled *Soil*, for example. Against a dark blue background a ghostly, transparent outline of two figures locked in a violent embrace anchors the composition at the bottom of the frame. A complicated mass of industrial and militaristic forms rises above this group, towering over them and seemingly weighing them down. Bold serif text proclaiming "Also on the Soil" is partially obscured by a central, rust-coloured column, but emerges into legibility against a dark blue void on the right side of the image. The relationship between the figures, the text, and the composite mass of forms is not immediately apparent, but there is an overall sense of violence and industrial heft, as well as a tension between the forthright proclamation of the text and the possibility of subtler messaging conveyed through image choice.

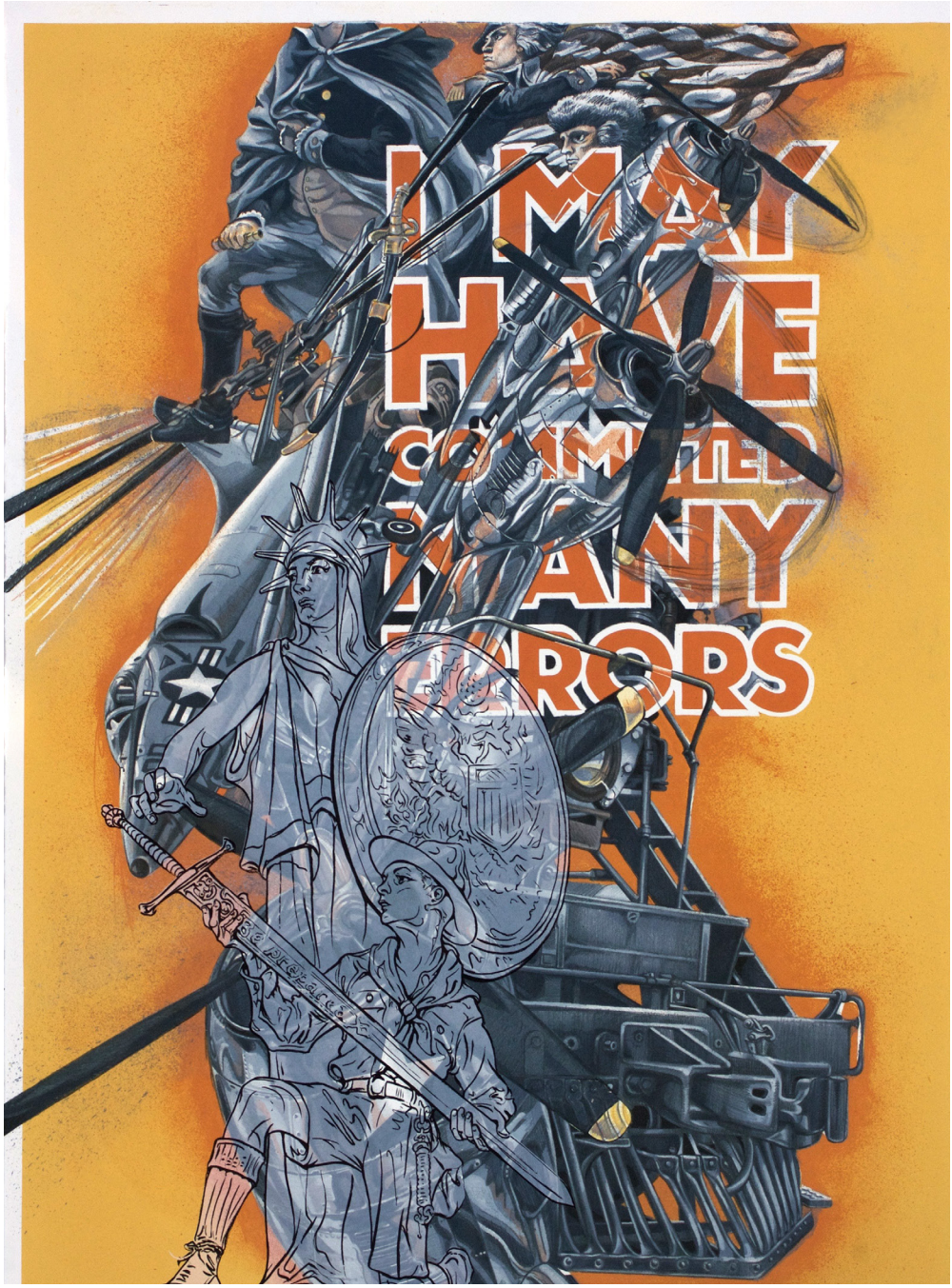
The two figures in *Soil* are a visual quotation from a political cartoon by René Georges Hermann-Paul that was originally published in *La Cri de Paris* on July 10, 1899, depicting a French soldier pinning a Chinese man to the ground while raising a sword above him. The original illustration was accompanied by the caption "Civilisation," and was juxtaposed with an alternate

[2] "Let's Make America Great Again" was first used by Ronald Regan and George H.W. Bush in their 1980 presidential campaign. Although never a part of his official campaign rhetoric, Bill Clinton used a similar phrase in speeches in 1992. In 2016 Donald Trump launched the shortened "Make America Great Again!" slogan with an added exclamation mark.

Previous page: *Remedy*, site-specific mural painted for *The Great Experiment* at The Reach Gallery Museum, 2017.

Soil, 2016, lithograph with screen print, edition of 8, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)

scene captioned "Barbarie" ("barbarity"), in which the Chinese combatant had the upper hand over the Frenchman. The French connection is carried further by Walker's inclusion of a fragment of the Statue of Liberty—specifically, the right hand of the statue that holds the torch of liberty aloft—in the central mass of forms. Formally titled *Liberty Enlightening the World* and originally intended to serve a practical function as a lighthouse, the famous statue, designed by Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi and built by



Errors, 2016, lithograph with screen print, edition of 8, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)

Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, was a gift from the people of France in recognition of the friendship established during the American Revolution and to celebrate the centennial of the American Declaration of Independence. In Walker's composition, the torch appears to be pushed towards the Chinese man on the ground by the thrust of a steam locomotive above, perhaps in reference to the construction of the First Transcontinental Railroad in the U.S. (1863-1869), when thousands of Chinese immigrants were employed to do the most difficult and dangerous work for

significantly lower pay than their white counterparts. The violence enacted against the Chinese labour force in America both before and after the completion of the railway is further suggested by two weapons that also form part of the central mass: a Colt revolver aimed straight down at the Chinese man's head, and an American Maverick missile that overlaps and appears almost to penetrate the French soldier's body. Walker combines all this with the words "Also on the Soil" a fragment of the phrase "Heroism is necessary not only on the battlefield, but also on the soil of the homeland." This expression has been attributed to Adolf Hitler and was published in 1940 as part of a weekly poster series with motivational quotations, issued by the Nazis as the *Wochensprüch der NSDAP* ("Verse of the week of the National Socialist German Workers' Party"). More than a thousand such maxims were displayed in offices, government agencies, schools, community halls, work places, public buildings, and Party facilities throughout Germany and occupied Europe under Nazi rule.

Weapons, both in a metaphorical sense (art as a weapon, propaganda posters as a weapon) and literally (as military hardware) dominate Walker's print *Errors*. The top third of the composition is dominated by the figure of George Washington as it appeared in Emanuel Leutze's large-scale history painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851). The image of the iconic military leader and president is shown with an entourage of soldiers as in the original painting, but here he is decapitated by the upper edge of the print. Below Washington, Walker has positioned images of two figures created by Joseph Christian Leyendecker that were widely circulated during the First World War—both in poster form and as a cover illustration for *The Saturday Evening Post*—promoting the Boy Scouts of America's Liberty Loan Campaign. Known as *Weapons for Liberty*, this drive encouraged the purchase of war bonds issued by the federal government, in order to finance the huge expenditures of the war. The composition depicts Liberty personified as a woman holding a golden shield decorated with an American eagle and wearing a draped garment which, in the original, full-colour image from which Walker borrows, is clearly an American flag. A Boy Scout kneels before her, offering a sword inscribed with the words "Be prepared." George Washington's posture is echoed by that of the kneeling youth, creating a compositional device that effectively brackets the top and bottom of the print. Between these two figures is an assortment of air force armaments including an Apache AH-64 attack helicopter, Bell UH-1Iroquois helicopter, McDonnell Douglas F18 Hornet,

Time, 2017, lithograph, edition of 10, 30x40 in. (76.2x101.6 cm)

and the engines of a Boeing B-29 Superfortress heavy bomber. These examples of highly advanced, deadly military equipment are combined with an image of a nineteenth century locomotive and the words "I may have committed many errors." This text is taken from George Washington's farewell address as president, delivered in the form of a letter that was published in newspapers and pamphlets across the nation in 1796. In it, Washington apologized for the mistakes he had made as president while also warning his readers/compatriots to be wary of individuals and special interests having too much influence on public policy.

By situating this quote from Washington amidst a jumbled representation of twentieth century military power (indeed, the

propellers of the bomber appear to slice through the text itself), Walker also evokes the farewell address of Dwight D. Eisenhower, another American general-cum-president. In 1961, during the thick of the Cold War, Eisenhower delivered a parting address that sent a message to the nation that Walker has described as a warning "about the looming influence of forces that would lead politics towards a codependent relationship with industry and capitalism."[3]

Soil and *Errors* are two examples of works in the exhibition that deal specifically with American history and imagery, but Walker's critical gaze and sharp visual commentary does not shy away from a close consideration of how industry, agriculture, and warfare have also reinforced each other in her adopted homeland to the north. In *Time*, Walker turns her attention to the colonial project in Canada, particularly to the ways that posters produced by the Canadian government towards the end of the nineteenth century—following the completion of the transcontinental railroad—encouraged Western European settlers to move west and settle the Western provinces. In an endorsement of imperial masculinity, such posters often featured a towering, muscular, Anglo-Saxon farmer rolling up his sleeves. In Walker's print the central figure does just that, although here he is rendered almost transparent: an apparition from the past lingering over in the present. This figure is superimposed over the image of a tree harvester, a contemporary machine used in the forest industry. The phrase "From Time to Time" is split into the upper left and lower right registers, and appears in the same industrial rust colour that recurs elsewhere in Walker's works. The words are taken from the text of Treaty 3,[4] specifically the sections that refer to logging

[3] Ericka Walker, e-mail message to author, April 17, 2017.

[4] The Numbered Treaties, or Post-Confederation Treaties, are a series of eleven treaties signed from 1871 to 1921 between First Nations peoples and the then-reigning monarch of Canada to allow the Canadian government to pursue settlement and resource extraction in the affected regions in what is now Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories.

Yield, 2017, lithograph, edition of 10, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)

and resource extraction. Signed in 1873, Treaty 3 is important particularly because it served as a model for subsequent Treaties in many respects, including the addition of a "harvesting" or "taking up" clause that allowed the government to authorize activities that interfere with Indigenous rights related to hunting and fishing.

The image of the tree harvester also appears in the complementary print *Yield*, again paired with a spectral image of a man taken

from a historical Canadian poster. In this case an image of the technologically advanced equipment for deforestation is paired with the figure of a lumberjack that originally appeared on a 1915 recruitment poster, proclaiming "Bushmen and Sawmill Hands WANTED – Join the 238th Canadian Forestry Battalion." The Canadian Forestry Corps provided lumber for the Allied war effort by cutting and preparing timber in the United Kingdom and Europe during both World Wars. In Walker's print a single word—"Yield"—runs through the upper part of the composition, intermingling with the machinery and the lone figure. The word is deliberately ambiguous, suggesting both the spoils of the land, as well as a demand to relinquish or give way to argument, pressure, or demands. Indigenous communities in Canada have been closely associated with forests, using them for resources such as hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering herbs and medicinal plants. Forests are the source of many Indigenous cultural traditions, spiritual knowledge, traditional foods, and revenue. But industrial forestry, logging, and timber production have negatively impacted First Nations communities and their relationships to the land, as well as presenting problems for environmental sustainability. Walker's image urges consideration of what is truly yielded through aggressive programs of industrialized resource extraction.

Walker continues to address issues related to the Numbered Treaties in several other prints presented in *The Great Experiment* that combine excerpts from the historical documents themselves with visual representations of turbines used in hydroelectric projects in Canadian facilities. In *Bounty*, for example, a turbine appears superimposed with an image taken from a 1969 poster advertising the Calgary Stampede, depicting a rodeo scene of a cowboy riding a powerful bull. The Stampede first featured a rodeo component in 1912, the same year that the five First Nations communities of Treaty 7 were first invited to participate in the show in an attempt to lend "authenticity" to the western narrative that the show promoted. The participation of First Nations in the Stampede was originally met by a lack of support from the federal government's Indian Department; during this same period, the Indian Act forbade First Nations peoples from celebrating their cultures and performing their ceremonies on their own reserve lands. Ironically "The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth," as the organizers call the event, was one of the only places where First Nations peoples were welcomed to celebrate their traditions publicly. Susan L. Joudrey has argued that the Stampede is a prime example of how members of the Treaty 7 First Nations developed strategies for resistance within the oppressive frameworks created by the government.[5]

[5] Susan L. Joudrey, *Hidden Authority, Public Display: Representation of First Nations Peoples at the Calgary Stampede, 1912-1970,* Ph.D. thesis, Carleton University, Department of History, 2013.

The words "Bounty and Benevolence," that run along the top and bottom edges of Walker's print refer specifically to the language of the Numbered Treaties. In the opinion of the Crown, the Treaties were a mechanism by which First Nations groups traded territory for "bounty and benevolence," but the language used, and the economic and power structures the treaties enforce, in fact made Indigenous peoples wards of the state under government protection. This specific phrase was used in a number of Treaties including Treaty 9, signed in 1905, and also known as the "James Bay Treaty" because the eastern end of the affected territory skirts the shore of James Bay on the border of Ontario and Québec. It was here on the east coast of James Bay that the Québec government initiated a series of hydroelectric power stations in the 1970s, known as the James Bay Hydro-Electric Project. The project drew harsh criticism for its environmental, social, economic, and political impact, and in particular for the damaging effects on Indigenous communities in the area. In total, 11,500 square kilometers of land that was home to James Bay Cree and Inuit were flooded by the project. As a resident of Canada, Walker draws our attention to the consequences of the Treaties, and acknowledges the advantageous position that they afford her, stating "[b]ecause of these agreements I have certain rights, privileges and benefits—these documents make it possible for me to flip a light switch and draw my electrical energy from Muskrat Falls."[6]

There is ambivalence within the ambitious, entangled imagery that abounds in *The Great Experiment*. Ideas and images are conceived, adopted, hybridized, and transformed by the artist in a way that suggests that the desire to persuade is not always at odds with aesthetic aims. Such a strategy demonstrates, as Lucy Lippard has suggested, that aesthetic pleasure and politics are not mutually exclusive.[7] At the same time, Walker's work is a visual manifestation of the complex relationship between the current socio-political moment and historical circumstances, between politics and art, and between visual communication and propaganda. Walker's prints are a graphic intervention that tackles the past by invoking its "ghosts" again and again, critically redressing the contemporary moment through a lens that situates our current grievances in the context of an intricate and troubled social, political, and cultural past.

[6] Ericka Walker, e-mail message to author, April 17, 2017.

[7] Lucy R. Lippard, "Too Political? Forget It," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999), 39-61.

Bounty, 2017, lithograph, edition of 10, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)

ARTIST BIO

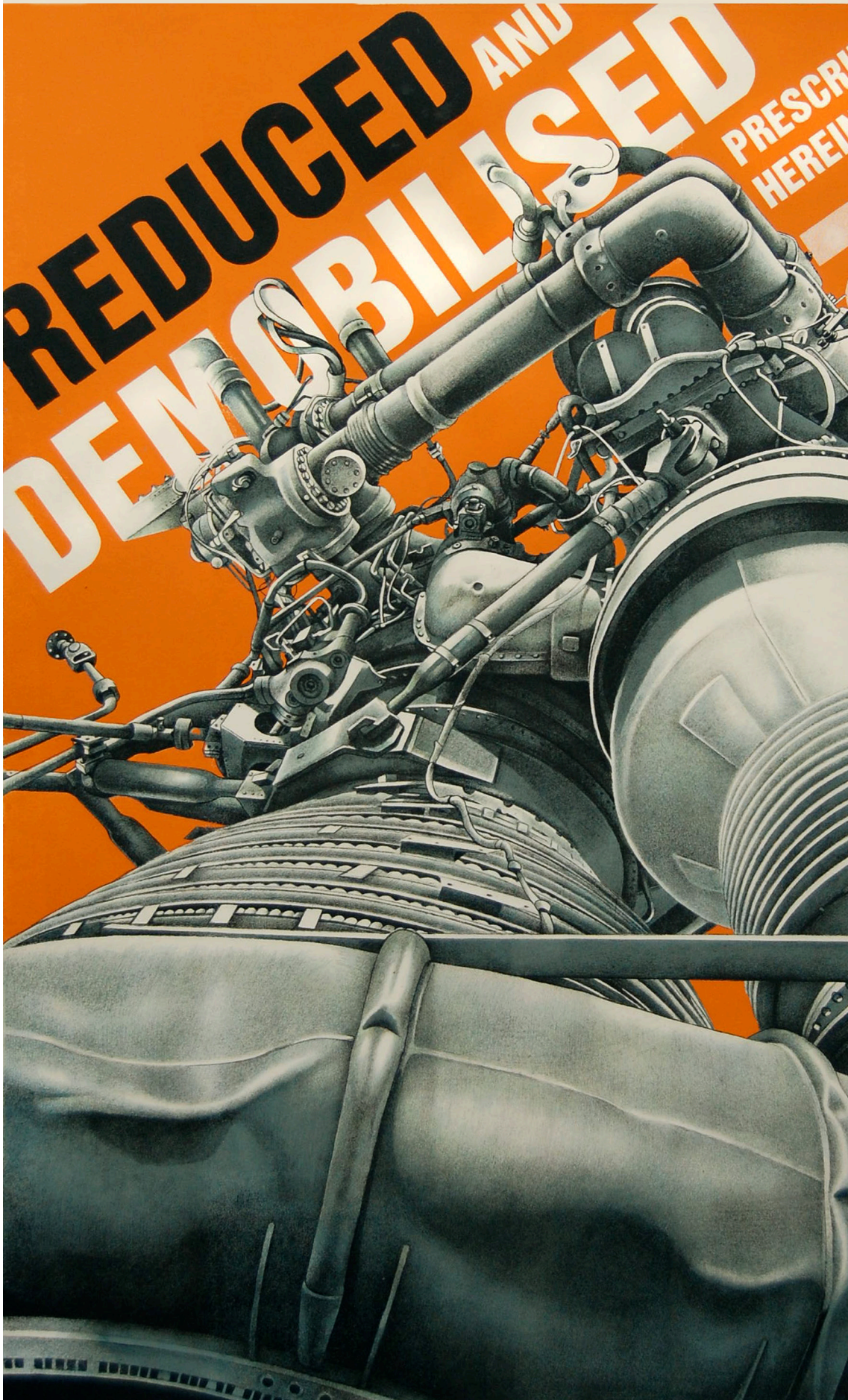
ERICKA WALKER

Ericka Walker was born and raised in Hartford, Wisconsin. She received a BS from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and an MFA from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. She currently lives and works in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada where she is an Associate Professor of Art at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

Walker's creative interests frequently intersect with the political, moral, and technological histories of nineteenth and early twentieth century Western civilization. She values printmaking both for its historical relationship to the graphic arts, and as a tool that allows her to graft contemporary extensions of these histories onto the imagery and motifs that have helped shape visual culture, political landscapes, and public opinion since the media explosion of the Industrial Revolution.

Walker actively exhibits her work widely throughout North America, and internationally in Europe and Asia. Her prints are housed in multiple public and private collections, and have been selected for numerous purchase and juried awards.

Opposite: *Reduced*, 2011, lithograph, edition of 10, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)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WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Reduced, 2011, lithograph, edition of 10, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Ecstasy, 2013, lithograph, edition of 7, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Liberty, 2013, lithograph, edition of 7, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Nuts, 2013, lithograph, edition of 6, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Errors, 2016, lithograph with screen print, edition of 8, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Havoc, 2016, lithograph with screen print, edition of 8, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Protect, 2016, lithograph with screen print, edition of 8, 30x40 in. (76.2x101.6 cm)
Soil, 2016, lithograph with screen print, edition of 8, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Bounty, 2017, lithograph, edition of 10, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Development, 2017, lithograph, edition of 10, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Dispute, 2017, lithograph, edition of 10, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Environment, 2017, lithograph, edition of 10, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Moderate, 2017, lithograph, edition of 10, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Molest, 2017, lithograph, edition of 10, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)
Time, 2017, lithograph, edition of 10, 30x40 in. (76.2x101.6 cm)
Yield, 2017, lithograph, edition of 10, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)

Opposite page: Installation documentation from *The Great Experiment* at The Reach Gallery Museum May-September 2017.
Following page: *Protect*, 2016, lithograph with screenprint, edition of 3, 40x30 in. (101.6x76.2 cm)


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