



Leslie Correll displays her father's 1953 print "After the War." (Karl Mondon/Times)

## Artists' visions are still potent

By Robert Taylor

Leslie Correll was opening drawer after drawer of her father's prints in the archive that doubles as a laundry room in her Oakland home. It was like a movie montage of dramatic images from social and political causes of the 1950s, '60s and '70s: stooped-over agricultural workers, sharecroppers, civil rights marchers battered down in Selma, Ala.

Then out came the poster with a simple image in black, red and orange that read "No Wars for Big Oil." Richard Correll had designed it 26 years ago, in 1979.

"I'm not even sure which war it was," Correll mused. "But when the first Gulf War came up, my mother took it to a meeting of her peace group, and they printed more."

Art that's meant to have political and social impact may be rooted in the past -- such as a Depression-era photograph by Dorothea Lange -- but eventually the issues come back to the surface, commentators make parallels to "the McCarthy era," and anti-war demonstrators carry fresh posters about war and Big Oil.

"Periods of uncertainty make people aware of why we do art in the first place," said artist Art

Hazelwood, who lives in San Francisco and has a studio in Richmond. "The best political art makes you think of something in a different light -- it's not just a slogan parading as an image." Hazelwood is curator of an exhibition opening today that puts two of the Bay Area's foremost political artists in perspective, and offers a chance to compare their powerful images with the ones surfacing now.

"As They Saw It: Richard Correll and Frank Rowe, Six Decades of Their Art of Social Conscience" runs through March 5 at the Meridian Gallery near Union Square. It is sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee.

The show consists of more than 50 prints, drawings and paintings from the artists' estates, and includes images of laborers, war casualties and the McCarthy hearings. The works span the years from the Depression to the Reagan era.

The art movement known as social realism -- which includes the big, striking works of Mexican muralists -- got pushed aside in the 1950s for a number of reasons, Hazelwood said. But social realism is still a valid approach as he defines it: "People committed to the use of art for revealing social injustice."

Despite the flurry of posters, banners and gallery shows in the past two years, most of them protesting the war in Iraq, few new artists have come to the genre's forefront. But established Bay Area artists have continued their politically inspired work, among them Enrique Chagoya, Rupert Garcia and Hazelwood himself, who produced a series of 10 engravings in response to the war.

"My father bemoaned being considered a political artist, not just an artist," Leslie Correll said, "but he became political early on. My parents were not in the forefront -- they were more the stuffers of envelopes, the designers of the leaflets.

"But they were involved in the environmental movement, the civil rights movement, the anti-nuclear movement, the Native American movement, the women's movement. If my father had lived longer I'm sure he would have been involved in the gay and lesbian movement," she said. "At the end of his life (he) caught pneumonia registering people to vote in Oakland!"

Richard Correll (1904-1990), grew up along the Columbia River in Washington state, drew political cartoons for liberal publications and became part of the federal government's Works Progress Administration, creating prints and murals during the Depression of the 1930s.

He later worked as a graphic artist in New York City (creating glamorous ads for cruise ships by day, drawing bold images of dock workers at night), and moved to the Bay Area after World War II. He was associated for many years with the Graphic Arts Workshop, which grew out of San Francisco's California Labor School.

Frank Rowe (1921-1985) was born in Portland, Ore., and received a master's degree in art from Mills College in Oakland. During World War II, he fought with the Army's 101st Airborne Division, participating in the D-Day invasion and the Battle of the Bulge and receiving the Silver Star, Bronze Star and Purple Heart.

Another battle came after the war: Rowe was fired in 1950 from his art teaching job at San Francisco State when he refused to sign a newly enacted state loyalty oath. He didn't teach again in a public school until the state Supreme Court declared the oath unconstitutional in 1967. He taught art at Laney College in Oakland and lived with his family for many years in Pleasant Hill.

Rowe's works in the Meridian Gallery exhibit include drawings that recall war casualties, which he knew so well, and watercolor and silk-screen images of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, one of them slapped with bold red type reading, "Are you now or have you ever been?"

Finding images that striking 50 years after the McCarthy era is rare. "There's a hostility among many artists about political art," Hazelwood said. "Right after the election, I read an interview with (artist) Laurie Anderson, who said 'I hate political art. I hate being told what to think.'

"I think the big change over the years in political art is this ironic distance -- a sense that the artist isn't really involved in it, sort of standing back and smirking," Hazelwood said. "You don't get any of that in Correll and Rowe."

## EXHIBIT PREVIEW

- WHAT: "As They Saw It: Richard Correll and Frank Rowe, Six Decades of Their Art of Social Conscience"
- WHERE: Meridian Gallery, 545 Sutter St., S.F.
- WHEN: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays through March 5
- HOW MUCH: Free
- CONTACT: 415-398-7229, [www.meridiangallery.org](http://www.meridiangallery.org)
- EVENTS: Free programs: A panel discussion, "Against the Grain -- Art and Activism," 7-9 p.m. Jan. 27; an informal presentation with the artists' daughters, 4 p.m. Feb. 12.