

A Considerable Town



PHOTO BY DANNY LIAO

85,000 OF THE WORLD'S ANGRIEST POSTERS

In an unassuming Culver City building, Carol Wells is digitizing political history, one poster at a time

BY DAVID FUTCH

Carol A. Wells hopes her work offends everyone. If not offend, at least piss people off. Just enough to get people to stir the pot of change.

Wells runs the nonprofit Center for the Study of Political Graphics, a treasure trove of 85,000 political posters that includes rare lithograph caricatures of 19th-century French politicians by satirist Honoré Daumier, all of it housed in a forgettable Culver City building squeezed between a Ramada Inn and a Christian bookstore. There's no sign, no window display.

Documenting the world's anger is "the point" of the thousands of political posters that longtime activist Wells, who founded the center in 1989, has amassed. "We have white supremacist posters," she says. "We have Angela Davis posters. We're the only place with more Black Panther posters than the FBI."

Wells' endeavor might be seen as yet another Los Angeles collection of fringe memorabilia — except for the fact that posters are key elements of political and cultural debate in many European, South American and Central American countries. There, museums devote space to such activist art and, especially in the Third World, posters are used to get messages to the illiterate and very poor.

Wells, who is the only executive director the center has had in its 25 years of operation, has lived in L.A. since she was 11. She earned a master's in Medieval art

from UCLA, and has a calm air for someone who's personally protested during nearly every key national flashpoint since the Summer of Love in 1967.

When Wells was in Nicaragua 35 years ago, she says, 56 percent of its people were illiterate. The instantaneous messages communicated via poster imagery were used to educate villagers about domestic violence and crucial health issues such as basic sanitation techniques. She returned here, Nicaragua posters in hand, and created an exhibit of them at UCLA, ultimately touring with her show in the United States for nine years.

"I wanted to contradict what Ronald Reagan was saying," she recalls. "Reagan kept repeating that the Nicaraguan people were 'godless communists,' when in fact their posters were about their dreams and aspirations."

People who attended her talks about the power of poster art to "provoke, educate and agitate" were happy to "empty their shelves" of the imagery they had collected, and now between 2,000 and 5,000 posters arrive at the center each year.

Protest posters of every kind are preserved in the center's archives, along with thousands of bumper stickers and political buttons. Online, at politicalgraphics.org, the center features a poster of the week, such as one recognizing the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Malcolm X. It features his photograph and the words, "I believe that there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those who do the oppressing ... but I don't think it will be based on the

colour of the skin." (*Colour* because the poster was printed in London.)

A more recent print, posted Feb. 15, depicted President George W. Bush pulling off a war mask, revealing a death head underneath. Below Bush, President Obama is pulling on his own war mask — after asking Congress to authorize military force against the Islamic state.

Another poster comments upon the mass murders at the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. The design is a stark depiction of three pencils — the first is intact and perfectly sharpened, labeled "yesterday"; the second is snapped in half and labeled "today"; the third is snapped in half and labeled "tomorrow" and has been sharpened to a fine point — ready to carry on.

The center preserves its posters laid flat inside 465 special drawers that measure two inches tall, two to four feet wide and several feet long. While important posters of the last half-century are on the walls, the center is not a gallery. Unless somebody is doing research, there's no access to the physical prints. However, the public has been granted extensive access another way: the 6,500 most significant posters have been digitized thus far, and anyone can make an appointment to use one of the center's five computers to view them.

Many posters also are online, and the center has two poster exhibits coming up — a show on the theme of justice set for May 1 to 10 at 3741 S. La Brea Ave., and a second show, still lacking a date, titled "No Human Being Is Illegal," at Mercado La Paloma near USC. The Victoria &

Albert Museum in London has set a '60s counterculture show for 2017, and the center will be a key contributor.

Wells didn't start out with an eye to collecting a sea of posters. She says they piled up due to her sense of solidarity.

"I had two or three thousand under my bed and in a hall," she tells *L.A. Weekly*. "I didn't see it as art. They were posters. ... When we started the center, political posters weren't considered an art form."

She believes posters are wrongly seen as a stepchild of art, and she wants them to be taken seriously. She realized the power of posters as political art while in Nicaragua in 1981, when President Ronald Reagan was secretly funding the Contras. The majority of Nicaraguans supported not the Contras but Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas. She remembers watching the poor fearlessly rally behind posters extolling the Sandinistas, a memory that has fueled her collecting.

She has opposed the Vietnam War, the shooting of students by National Guardsmen at Kent State University, the United States' illegal bombing of Laos and Cambodia and U.S. actions in Central America. And she's protested for women's rights, farmworkers' rights, gay and lesbian rights and immigrant rights.

She credits the actions of the Los Angeles Police Department in 1967 with propelling her political activism to a new level and giving meaning to her life's work as an activist.

In June 1967, Wells went to the Century Plaza Hotel, where President Lyndon B. Johnson was staying. Hundreds of people had gathered to protest further troop escalation by Johnson in Vietnam. The protest outside the hotel was an officially arranged, city-permitted gathering. But after speakers Muhammad Ali and Leonard Nimoy had their say at a microphone, a cop with a megaphone told the crowd the protest party was over because the city's permit had been rescinded.

People in the back couldn't hear and didn't move. Moments later, she recalls, LAPD officers on motorcycles moved in and began to beat protesters with night sticks. The next day the *Los Angeles Times* congratulated the police for dispersing the crowd in a reasonable manner.

But Wells knew that wasn't true. She'd seen an officer strike a woman in front of her and a person behind her. She felt lucky she didn't take a blow — recalling that she wasn't injured because the cop was in his backswing when she got out of the way.

"That's when my activism was galvanized," she says. "If [a gathering] was against the Vietnam War, I was there, demonstrating."

An iconic anti-war poster hangs just inside the center's door — a daisy scrawled on a yellow background, seemingly drawn by a child. But the words and the simplicity of the famous poster brought millions of people together: "War is not healthy for children and other living things."

A duplicate in miniature is pressed into metal that hangs on a chain around Wells' neck. She's still fighting.