

REMAINING SILENT IS NOT AN OPTION: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN MAVROUDIS

INTERVIEWED BY GABRIEL ERTSGAARD

John Mavroudis is the co-creator of three New Yorker covers including the 5th Anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. It was named Cover of the Year by the American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME) and named one of the 10 Best Covers of the Year by *Advertising Age*. He won his second Cover of The Year award for his 2018 typographic portrait of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford for *TIME* magazine. His cover portrait of Joan Didion for *Alta* magazine won the 2020 Los Angeles Press Club National Arts & Entertainment Cover Art Award.

Various other work includes multiple covers for *The Nation* magazine, over two dozen posters for the legendary Fillmore series, dozens of posters for Moonalice, and the 60th Anniversary poster for the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in Greece. He has created work for his hometown teams (San Francisco Giants and the Golden State Warriors), and recently completed a limited-edition typographic portrait screenprint for the brand new Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa, OK

GE: You're known for your magazine cover illustrations on political topics, and especially for your text-based portraits. What led you toward this type of artistic work?

JM: I've wanted to be an artist since I was a kid. My uncle was an artist, and I always liked looking at his work. I used to trace comic books and practice drawing on my own. I was also interested in politics from an early age and started doing political cartoons for my high school newspaper. When I went to college, political cartooning was basically my sole interest. I was very lucky that we had a paper where the publisher wanted cartoonists to have free reign. I was getting outraged about everything – some of which, looking back, might not have been so big a deal. But there was still stuff that I think holds up.

From there I learned to draw on the computer and tablet. I started working on film and music posters, but mostly I did illustrations for all sections of a local newspaper. Still, I was always sending out ideas to either the *New Yorker* or *The Nation* magazine. I did some work for the *New Yorker* where they paid me for just the ideas,

not the artwork. Then in 2009, my political big break came. I sent *The Nation* a cover illustration idea about Obama being inaugurated by Thurgood Marshall while surrounded by Civil Rights figures from throughout history. *The Nation* wanted it. That was a pretty intense drawing. There were over 60 historical figures that surrounded him. That got a lot of good response.

I did a couple other covers for *The Nation*. One was on the US torture in Iraq. Then in 2016, I was really exercised about the idea of Donald Trump becoming president. I decided to make a portrait of Trump with basically every word that I thought applied to him. That took me a few months to do, and when I was finished with it, I submitted it to *The Nation*. They ended up running it as the cover of their election special issue in November. I still think that's one of the best things I've done. I'm not Nostradamus (and you didn't really need to be to see what kind of personality he was), but I think every word I put on there holds up.

A couple years later, I got a call from *Time* magazine to do an illustration in the same type of style. I call them typographic portraits – where you fit different words and phrases together like a puzzle to form the image. But you also want to be able to dive deep and have it be something that you can look at

multiple time and get more out of. I did one for Christine Blasey Ford when she was testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee for the Kavanaugh nomination. I did a couple other covers for *Time* as well, but those were the big landmarks for my career.

GE: Our theme for this issue is “activism.” What are your thoughts on the relationship between art and activism?

JM: For me, it's in the DNA. Now, not everything I do is political. I love doing music posters. I'm working on a series of songwriter typographic portraits. But I think it's a lost opportunity when artists won't comment on what's happening in society. There are a lot of artists whom I admire just for the beauty of their work, but my favorite artists made statements one way or another. I'm a huge fan of Francisco Goya because he had his portraits, but he also had his *Disasters of War* series and his Black Paintings. In his own way, he was a political artist. I don't think it's strange at all to reflect on what I see, since that's a big part of my being. Especially in the time of Trump, I don't know how people can remain silent. I think the parallels to 1930s Germany are too stark. If I'm wrong, then at the end of the day, good! I hope I'm wrong. I hope nothing horrible happens. But we've already seen a lot of horrible stuff happen. To remain silent in these times is not really an option for me.

GE: Could you talk a little more about your typographic portraits? What does this type of visual wordplay offer to an artist-activist?

JM: I'm pretty opinionated. One of the good things about that style of art is that you can put extra things in there that you otherwise might not. I've seen some pretty devastating political portraits done by masters like Ralph Steadman and Marshall Arisman. They can do a political cartoon or illustration which is completely devastating to the intended victim. I really admire that. Sometimes I can come in the general zip code of something like that, but my style is a little bit different.

Since I can be verbose (sometimes to my own detriment), I'm able to think about a portrait and what words it needs. The simple thing would be to just call a bunch of names, but I try to put some thought into the words that go into the portraits. The beauty of a typographic portrait is that you can actually say a lot through the position of a particular word, or by making an especially applicable words stand out more than others. Hopefully, when I'm done with a piece, if someone has a question about it or wonders why I used a certain word, I can back it up with all the evidence that is necessary to defend that word choice. The more you read about certain situations and see parallels in history, the more you want the art to reflect that. You want it to be a little deeper than just a mean

portrait and have something that will stick like a tattoo.

GE: How does the interplay between art and commerce affect the choices you make? How does that impact art as activism?

JM: At one point I was doing design work for a couple different places. Although I got to work in the field, I couldn't really be a voice for anything. But even when I was doing that kind of work, I was still submitting my ideas to publications because I needed an outlet for my feelings. If you said, "You're going to do this job, and you'll never be able to comment on what's going on in the world," I would find that difficult. I would feel like a caged animal at that point. One of the things I'm pleased about is that if somebody picks up an idea, usually there's not a lot of editing that goes on. Sometimes there is, but most of the art directors I've worked with have been really amazing about not defanging the point of the illustration.

I've also been lucky to find patrons. There's a venture capitalist named Roger McNamee, and he's in a band called Moonalice. He's given a lot of artists opportunities to do artwork for their concerts. In 2023, I felt really strongly about the Tyre Nichols situation where he was beaten and killed by police in Memphis, Tennessee. Roger gave me a call and said, "If you want to do something, let me know, and I'll help you publish it."

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