

A Collaboration: Kurt Vonnegut Jr. & Joe Petro III

by Jocelyn Scears



Better known for his efforts as an author and for his expertise in combining the realm of science fiction and that of reality with a fantastical and satirical twist, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. began to grow weary of literature in the later part of his life and soon found his escape in art.

In regards to his artistic background, Vonnegut said, “I’ve drawn all my life, on the edges of manuscripts and things like that. But I started thinking, ‘This is the amateur approach.’ ...So I decided to take myself seriously as an artist... My father was an artist, my grandfather was an artist, and I have three children who are accomplished artists.”¹ And that was the beginning of a new identity: Kurt Vonnegut, the graphic artist. It started with the simple illustrations he did for his novels *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, “which included numerous felt-tip illustrations of sphincters and other, less indelicate images.”² He also experimented with etchings that were typically self-portraits very similar to those found in *Breakfast of Champions*.

It was in 1993 that Vonnegut made an acquaintance that would initiate what was quite possibly the climax of his artistic career. After agreeing to speak as part of a fundraiser for a new library at Midway College in Lexington, Kentucky, he was set up with a local artist who would silk screen his graphic for the poster. That artist was Joe Petro III.

Petro is a self-taught printmaker who specializes in serigraph. He “uses the word ‘caveman’ to describe his approach to serigraphy.”³ This is because he prefers to use a manual process of hand-drawn positives as opposed to the norm of technology based photographic separation techniques.

Vonnegut, while speaking of the first collaboration with Petro, said, “I did a self-portrait and Joe printed it above the where and when and why of that appearance. He said, ‘Why don’t we keep on going?’ I said, ‘OK.’ And we have worked together on about twenty more images since then.”⁴ And that was in 1995. Since then the two have collaborated on at least 200 images.³

As the collaboration continued Vonnegut and Petro developed a system. Vonnegut would draw on large sheets of acetate with black ink and Petro would then silk screen the images. This system left Vonnegut able to remain in New York while Petro printed most of the images on his own in his studio in Kentucky. Eventually because Vonnegut was an established and well-known author before he became known as an artist, comparisons between his writing style and his artistic style were commonplace. And at the beginning, there was a direct correlation between some of his art and his writing due to the fact that he recycled some of the simple drawings found in his novels. But ultimately when asked about and connection between the two he stated, "the only thing they have in common is that they're both by me."⁵

The relationship between Kurt Vonnegut and Joe Petro would last until Vonnegut's death in 2007.

Notes

1. Reed, Peter. "Kurt Vonnegut -- Vonnegut.com." *VONNEGUT•COM -- The Official Website of Kurt Vonnegut*. Web. 08 May 2011. <<http://www.vonnegut.com/artist.asp>>.
2. "Sphincters Take Note!" *Screenprinting News*. 26 Dec. 2004. Web. 08 May 2011. <<http://screenprintingnews.blogspot.com/2004/12/sphincters-take-notenew-york-ny.html>>.
3. Newman, Ed. "Serigraphy, Celebrities, and Joe Petro III | ScreenWeb | Screenweb.com." *ScreenWeb | Screenweb.com | A Companion Site to Screen Printing Magazine*. Web. 08 May 2011. <<http://www.screenweb.com/content/serigraphy-celebrities-and-joe-petro-iii>>.
4. Vonnegut, Kurt. "About Joe Petro III." *Joe Petro III*. 28 Oct. 1995. Web. 08 May 2011. <<http://www.joepetro.com/bio.html>>.
5. Comiskey, Daniel S. "Works in print." *Indianapolis Monthly* 30.9 (2007): 124. *MasterFILE Premier*. EBSCO. Web. 8 May 2011.