

# Shepard Fairey: The man behind the Obama poster

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**These Sunsets are to Die For** will be among Shepard Fairey's artwork displayed beginning Friday at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. It is his first major museum exhibition.

*ICA / Shepard Fairey*



Happy anniversary, André the Giant.

Twenty years ago, the onetime pro wrestler whose real name is André Roussimoff inspired what may be the most famous street-art image in history — a tightly cropped close-up of Roussimoff's craggy, heavy-lidded face rendered in stark black and white.

The image, often accompanied by the word “Obey,” has been widely reproduced on posters, bumper stickers and T-shirts as well as on more controversial locations such as office buildings and traffic signs. It also made its teenage creator, Shepard Fairey, a star.

Two decades later, Fairey and his “Obey” posters are still going strong.

In fact, the 38-year-old RISD graduate's reputation has never been higher, thanks to another iconic work: the Obama “Hope” poster Fairey designed during last year's presidential campaign. The poster, which Fairey literally created overnight, proved to be so popular that the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery recently acquired a painted version for its permanent collection.

And now Fairey has another reason to celebrate: On Friday, Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art opens the first major museum exhibition devoted to his work.

Organized by the ICA — and scheduled long before Fairey's Obama poster made him the Rembrandt of the Facebook generation — “Shepard Fairey: Supply & Demand” will feature more than 200 pieces, ranging from prints and posters to paintings, collages and album covers.

Besides showcasing his work, the exhibit confirms Fairey's status as one of the leading practitioners of street art, a subversive — and often controversial — genre that includes graffiti, posters, stickers and stencils. For many people, of course, street art is synonymous with vandalism. But thanks to Fairey and other artists — including the late Pop Art muralist Keith Haring and the contemporary British artist Banksy — the genre has increasingly become part of the mainstream art world.

At the same time, Fairey's recent string of successes — the Obama poster, the National Portrait Gallery commission, and now the ICA show — has at least some of his old street-art comrades wondering if he's gone soft — or worse, sold out.

Not surprisingly, it's a charge that Fairey himself hotly disputes.

“Frankly, I’ve never understood people who think that way,” he says during a phone interview from Boston, where he and a posse of assistants are helping to install the ICA exhibit. “For me, making art isn’t an either/or proposition. It’s not a matter of either being out on the street or in a museum. It’s not about being cool or being successful. Why can’t you do both?”

Fairey also has an answer for critics who accuse him of selling out.

“As far as I’m concerned, they’re a bunch of losers who really need to get a life,” he says. “I still go out and put up posters and stuff, not because I’m worried about what somebody else might think but because I really enjoy it. Of course, you can’t please everybody.”

At the same time, Fairey happily concedes that his career is in a pretty good place right now.

In 2003, Fairey and his wife Amanda founded Studio Number One, a Los Angeles design firm that handles everything from rock posters to corporate advertising campaigns. A client list posted on the company’s Web site ( [www.studionumber-one.com](http://www.studionumber-one.com)) includes Honda, Dewar’s Scotch, the Guggenheim Museum, the movie studio Fox Searchlight and the rock band Linkin Park.

Another Fairey-owned business, ObeyGiant.com, sells the artist’s original prints and posters. Other interests include a line of street clothing and skateboarding equipment.

“No question, things are pretty good at the moment,” he says. “My family life is great. My businesses are making money. People actually want to buy my art. You can’t ask for more.”

Meanwhile, the success of Fairey’s Obama poster has introduced his work to a much wider — indeed, global — audience. Fairey says he created the image, which shows an earnest-looking Obama outlined against a background of muted red, white and blue, over the course of one evening. He also says that the poster was entirely his idea — it wasn’t commissioned by the Obama campaign — but that he did check with campaign officials before going ahead with the project.

“Basically, I didn’t want to cause them any embarrassment,” Fairey explains. “Like most street artists, I’ve been arrested a few times over the years and I didn’t want it to become an issue.”

Fairey says the poster, which harks back to Soviet-style propaganda posters from the 1940s and ’50s, was an instant hit, selling more than 10,000 copies in the first week. By the end of the campaign, versions of the image had appeared on everything from T-shirts and coffee mugs to the covers of Time and Esquire. Fairey says the Obama poster alone has sold more than 300,000 copies.

“It was incredible,” he says. “At times, you just sort of stood back and said ‘Whoa, what’s going on here?’ On the other hand, it’s clear that poster wasn’t the only thing, or even the main thing, that people were responding too. I think a lot of people wanted to see a change in the country and they responded to Obama for that reason. The poster just became part of that larger shift.”

A few weeks after the poster appeared, Fairey says he got a letter from then-candidate Obama.

“He actually sent me a letter,” he says. “This was before the image had really gone mainstream, so it took some guts to actually acknowledge it. But he said he’d seen the posters and that whether they were in a gallery or pasted over a street sign, he thought they were pretty cool.”

More recently, Fairey had a chance to meet Obama in person. That was during last month’s inaugural, an event for which Fairey designed the official inaugural poster and where he was treated more like a visiting dignitary than a possible threat to public order.

“It was a great experience,” he says. “I actually had a pretty good seat for the swearing-in ceremony, which was extremely moving. Looking out across the National Mall and seeing tens of thousands of people all completely tuned into this one moment was awesome.”

Fairey’s life wasn’t always quite so charmed.

A self-described troublemaker, he grew up in Charleston, S.C., where his parents — his father was a doctor, his mother ran a booking service for local bed-and-breakfasts — struggled to rein in his rebellious energy. He dropped out of one high school because officials wouldn’t let him wear Vans sneakers — a favorite fashion accessory among skateboarders. (Fairey was — and remains — an avid skateboarder.) Another school, the North Carolina School of the Arts, expelled him after he was caught sneaking out of his dorm room at night.

After graduating from the Idyllwild Arts Academy, a private arts high school in California, Fairey enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design. It was there, in 1989, that he first stumbled on a grainy photograph of André the Giant.

“At the time, I really didn’t give it much thought,” he says. “In fact, it was almost completely random. I was just leafing through a newspaper and there it was.”

Fairey says that cavalier attitude began to change after he’d posted some stickers featuring the wrestler’s face and the phrase “André the Giant has a posse” on buildings around the East Side.

“I started hearing people talking about the stickers,” he says. “They were, like, ‘What is this stuff?’ ‘What does it mean?’ ‘Who’s behind it?’. It was obvious that the image was getting noticed. After that, it just sort of snowballed.”

While still at RISD, Fairey set up a small screen-printing studio, Alternate Graphics, where he produced T-shirts, stickers, skateboards and posters. Located in the sprawling Atlantic Mills complex in Olneyville, the studio also featured its own indoor skateboard ramp.

Though Fairey now lives in Los Angeles, he has fond memories of his time in Providence. In fact, he says, he recently took a break from installing the ICA show to revisit some of his old haunts.

Not coincidentally, perhaps, several area buildings (notably AS220’s Dreyfus Building on Washington Street) now have some new exterior decoration. Look closely and you might even see André the Giant staring back.

“Shepard Fairey: Supply & Demand” opens Friday at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.

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