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## Picturing Obama

By CHRISTINA S.N. LEWIS

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This week's New Yorker magazine cover, an illustration depicting Sen. Barack Obama and his wife as fist-bumping terrorists, has been all over the news. But that isn't the only Obama-related artwork attracting attention these days. Collectors, investors and fund-raisers -- many of them looking to cash in on the candidate's popularity and place in history -- are snapping up campaign posters and other works depicting the presumptive Democratic nominee.

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Obama's "Progress" Report

On Saturday, Def Jam Recordings founder Russell Simmons will host his annual celebrity-studded benefit at his home in East Hampton, N.Y., to raise money for his arts-education charity. Attendees can bid on the leading auction item, a stenciled Obama portrait titled "Hope" by artist Shepard Fairey. On Wednesday, presale bidding for the work donated by the artist had reached \$60,000, double its initial estimate.


"I have a feeling that this painting is going to be very valuable," says Mr. Simmons, a supporter of Mr. Obama. Mr. Simmons says he bought a similar work from Mr. Fairey for himself and plans to hang it in his 8,000-square-foot Manhattan apartment.

Much of the Obama art market is centered on "street art," a graffiti-inspired genre that takes the form of posters, stickers and other works that are meant to be plastered in public spaces. Limited-edition campaign posters that originally sold for as little as \$45 are now selling at online auction site **eBay** Inc. for thousands of dollars, bid up by people assuming that prices will rise even further if Mr. Obama is elected.

The expected price appreciation extends to works by artists who aren't well-known. For example, a Scott Hansen poster called "Progress" (edition of 5,000) sold on the campaign's Web site for \$70 each. After it sold out, it went for as much as \$300 on eBay, but now it sells for roughly \$120.

Knowledgeable collectors have already turned a profit by buying multiples. Tanley Wong, a 30-year-old consultant for Fannie Mae in Washington, D.C., owns 30 to 40 Obama art prints, including several of Mr. Fairey's "Hope" prints, which were originally handed out at a rally at the University of California, Los Angeles. Mr. Wong, who has donated \$1,000 to the Obama campaign, bought the

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posters for roughly \$75 each on eBay from UCLA students and has subsequently resold some online for about \$700 each.

"I'm really happy I was able to sell those and use the money to buy more art," Mr. Wong says. "Art's an investment."

Presidential campaign paraphernalia has been collected since the days of George Washington, but never on this scale. Noted artists have created prints in support of a campaign before. Andy Warhol's 1972 "Vote McGovern," showing Richard Nixon's face tinted green, is now a classic piece of political art. In June, one sold for \$23,000 at Santa Monica Auctions.

There appears to be little demand for art promoting Sen. John McCain, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, art experts say. According to statistics from eBay, only six McCain-related art items sold on the site in the past 60 days, with an average selling price of \$57. That's compared with 889 Obama-related art items that have sold in the past 60 days, with an average selling price of \$127. Of course McCain-related art sales may be lagging behind because there are fewer pieces available.



Clockwise from top: Evolutionary Media Group, Ray Noland, Van Taylor Designs

Clockwise from top left: Shepard Fairey's 'Hope,' Ray Noland's 'Got Next' and Van Taylor's 'Obama Sneaker.'

"The art world is always entirely left of center," says photo-realist painter Chuck Close, who has previously done portraits of Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton and Al Gore.

To be sure, it is far from clear that the value of the Obama works will hold up. Prices have fluctuated, driven by news and events throughout the campaign season. For example, prices for Obama-related items on eBay dipped in March during the controversy over the candidate's pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, according to Ken Harman, a collector and art blogger.

Some might say the market shows signs of a bubble: a swift run-up in prices, speculators buying as an investment, and frequent flipping. But street-art experts say values for the prints by prominent artists are likely to hold due to Mr. Obama's celebrity, the historic nature of his campaign and the talent of the artists.



Gallerv XIV Boston

The most-coveted works include limited-edition posters by noted street artists Mr. Fairey and Ron English. In January, Mr. Fairey designed "Progress" (edition of 350), a Kennedyesque image of Mr. Obama that has become closely tied to the campaign. Mr. English created "Abraham Obama," (edition of 200) of Mr. Obama's face merged with Abraham Lincoln's.

"It's a nice crossover between fine art and propaganda," says Alex W. Smith, a contemporary and urban art specialist for Phillips de Pury & Co., an auction house. "Obama is such an icon to the public already that would suggest that the work will be valuable no matter if he

A massive multipaneled billboard titled 'Abraham' features artwork by Ron English. wins or loses. ... It's partially the hype of the times."

In a sign of how the traditional art community has accepted these posters, this fall, fine-arts auction house Bonhams will sell one of Mr. English's prints with a presale estimate of about \$2,000; they originally sold online for less than \$200.

Not all Obama-related items are on canvas. The arts-and-crafts online marketplace site Etsy.com sells Obama jewelry and night lights. And Cincinnati artist Van Taylor has created "The Obama Sneaker," a hand-painted portrait on Nike Air Force Ones.

The growing appetite and prices for Obama-related campaign material has led some people to criticize speculators for buying and reselling the posters without donating money to the campaign.

In February, Mr. Fairey's blog lambasted the profiteers as "greedy," explaining that he sells the work for \$45 with the hope that fans will use them to spread awareness of Mr. Obama. He says resellers should give part of their proceeds to the campaign. As for himself, Mr. Fairey applies all of the profits from his Obama-related sales to making more posters promoting the candidate.

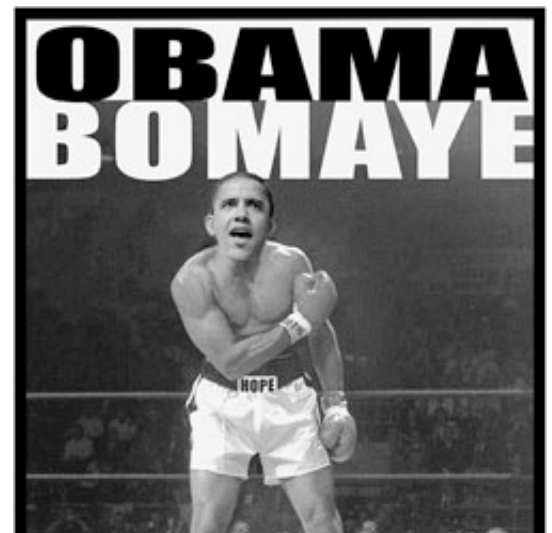
Other artists are retaliating as well. To bring prices down, Ray Noland, a Chicago-based freelance designer has issued a second edition of "Coast to Coast," a block-style print featuring Mr. Obama on a basketball court in front of the White House. Last week, it sold on eBay for \$200. Mr. Noland's Web site now sells a similar print for \$75.

Separately, the nonprofit, poster-tracking Web site expressobeans.com lists details on a number of Obama-themed posters whose prices are stable. And last month, Mr. Harman, a 25-year-old part-time artist, started the Obama Art Report online blog to track the art's skyrocketing prices and point out places to find it more cheaply. He began collecting screen prints of Mr. Obama when they cost hundreds of dollars. The roughly \$4,000 he's spent on various works are now valued at \$15,000 to \$20,000, he says.

"Who's to say that it's unfair or unethical to try and sell a print to make a little extra money on the side," says Mr. Harman, who is auctioning off a "Progress" print by Mr. Hansen to benefit the campaign; bidding is at \$142.55.

Sensing high demand, a host of other artists are now making Obama posters, including rock-poster designer Emek. Emek's "Obama Bomaye," released last week, shows the famous photograph of Muhammad Ali standing triumphantly over Sonny Liston but with their faces replaced by Mr. Obama's (as Mr. Ali) and Mr. McCain's (as the supine Mr. Liston). It is for sale on eBay for more than \$200.

In Boston, Gallery XIV is exhibiting a massive multipanel billboard showing Mr. English's "Abraham." While the exhibit has drawn controversy due to an unauthorized sticker advertising campaign by Mr. English's fans, the gallery's director, William Kerr, says he has gotten so many purchase inquiries that he plans to auction off parts of the billboard to



raise money for the campaign.

Charles Nesson, a professor of Internet law at Harvard University Law School, who was taken with Obama art after reading about the billboard in the news, says he will start the bidding at \$1,000.



EMEK Studios

Rock-poster designer Emek created 'Obama Bomaye' using familiar boxing imagery.

"If [the image] becomes significant in the campaign," says Mr. Nesson, "I think it could be really, really valuable."

Not all of the art is flattering to the Obama campaign. In Texas, Austin-based designer Baxter Orr, an Independent, created "Dope," a parody of Mr. Fairey's posters that makes sport of Mr. Obama's cocaine use as a young man. The posters are still available for \$30 on the artist's Web site, and sales are slow. Mr. Orr says that buyers only want posters glorifying Mr. Obama. "If I [had] followed the herd and created pro-Obama posters," says Mr. Orr. "I am certain I would have made more money."

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