

Poster by **Rebecca Murray**



# Peace of Art

What is obvious about peace?

What *does* 'peace' mean to you?

In Lolli Aboutboul's class, the response was graphic...

by **LOLLI ABOUTBOUL**

It was on the flight back home from India that I started to think about the next topic for my poster design course, due to commence in two weeks. I was trying to bring myself back to my work reality, and watching the clouds from my window I was pondering about the fact that my mental and physical states were in perfect tune...travelling somewhere between heaven and earth, I decided to search for a mental and visual challenge that would act as a bridge between those two planes.

My poster design course brief for the second year graphic design students at The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, Epsom, read as follows:

### **Peace as vision and challenge**

'Informed adults, if asked what wars have taken place in the years since the end of World War II, would have little trouble ticking off the Korean War, the Vietnam war, the Arab-Israeli wars, the Persian Gulf war, and perhaps several others.

Few, however, would know that, depending on how we count, between 150 and 160 wars and civil conflicts have raged around the world since 'peace' broke out in 1945'. (*War and Anti-War: Survival at the dawn of the 21st century* by Alvin and Heidi Toffler).

Peace is a visionary word of hope commonly mentioned by politicians and heads of states in their speeches, and widely used to decorate election campaign posters in war infested areas. It is also one of the most stereotyped terms in social and political context, like a flag, it is assumed to automatically carry the same meaning for all people worldwide.

**'We do not even know that it is there inside of us and perhaps we never will...'**

But peace is a challenge as much as it is a vision. However natural and obvious the striving for peace, it is a concept charged with emotional and political complexities which are not always explored in depth. Nowadays the subject of Conflict Resolution is widely taught in universities and there are as many peace conferences as there are wars. We seem to be forever looking for the 'peace formula' in ourselves as people and in our environment.

Peace had inspired many artists and designers, and countless exhibitions and poster biennials had been organized around the subject throughout the world. White doves, guns and roses, falling soldiers in battlefields etc are official clichés, however, I suspect that there

are as many definitions for Peace as there are people.

### What does Peace mean to you?

I was watching the students closely as I presented the brief. They seemed detached. I knew that they were under great pressure from other tutors and I knew that it might not sound particularly stimulating to them at first. I was also aware of the fact that the subject of Peace as a poster brief sounds unoriginal and obvious ('Hippie stuff' as was pointed out to me by some of my colleague friends), but it was precisely that which I found challenging: what is so obvious about peace?...

I grew up in Israel and my father was killed by Palestinian terrorists when I was 8 years old. I had been 'politically mute' for the next 20 years or so, in other words, I was probably the only citizen in that country who never took part in any kind of social or political debate. I simply did not know what was my real opinion. It took some years of self work in exile to be able to face my 'real' opinion and then to be able to separate my grief from my human values. In September 1993 Izchak Rabin shook hands with Yasser Arafat. Nelson Mandela had been free for 3 years and there were talks about peace in Northern Ireland. That afternoon, I felt an overwhelming sense of inner peace for the first time in years.

### Peace survey

The next time I came across Peace it was a printed word. There were so many of them, everywhere, on posters, on stickers, on leaflets, you would have thought that somebody had stuck the same wall paper throughout the country. That was during the May 1996 pre-election campaign in Israel and I flew home especially to vote. The atmosphere was very tense, although judging by the poster campaigns everybody seemed to have wanted exactly the same thing: Peace. This is when my fantasy was born; I saw myself travelling the country and interviewing people by asking one simple and embarrassingly obvious question: 'what is peace?' ... I myself was not sure anymore what it meant to me, it had really become a piece of wall paper.

I told my students about my Peace survey fantasy. As soon as they had finished reading the brief I conducted a quick and spontaneous classroom survey. I wanted to know what was the first image associated with the word Peace for each of them. The results had partly confirmed my suspicion that Peace is initially a deeply rooted clichéd concept,

not just for design students: one third of the class saw a white dove, one third saw battlefield associated images, and one third saw blue skies. There were very few exceptions and those were mostly variations on the mentioned themes. I took a deep breath and explained that the real purpose of that exercise is to clarify one's very own message. I ruled out white doves.

'This is nonsense, there is no such thing as Peace, there could never be Peace!' was the first comment I heard. Another student immediately added 'My dad says that Peace is the time when we prepare for the next war.'

Indeed, the most enriching part of that Peace project for me was hearing the students' comments directly or indirectly. I found myself more than once in comical situations such as hiding behind a pillar in order to overhear various interesting comments and being caught much to the amusement of the students. When it was high time for each of the students to establish personal idea concepts to be developed as visual messages I was worried. Peace seemed to be falling in between two stools: it seemed either

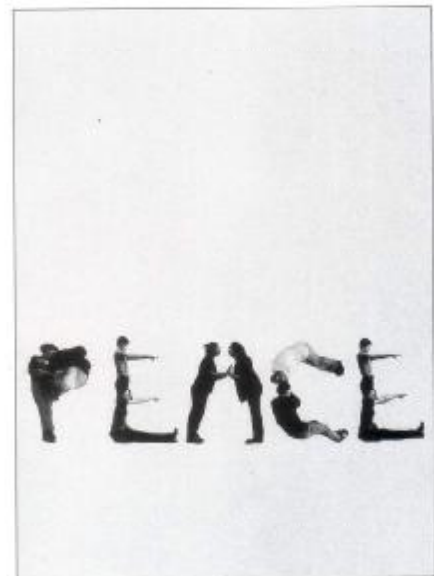
**'We do not even know that it is there inside of us and perhaps we never will...'**

too large and global a concept to be treated as a personal message, or too personalized to the point of triviality, therefore failing to provoke any sense of identification and interest by the spectator. 'I am at peace when I take a bath' ('well, how about sticking a soldier with his helmet in the bath?' ...) 'Oh I am definitely at peace when I play my guitar', some reported enthusiastically. But when I heard the next explanation for a pretty violent visual proposal 'the only way for me to gain a real sense of peace is when I've murdered my stepmother!' I really thought that the whole thing was simply a bad idea.

### No idea

The breakthrough came rather late. I was sitting with one of the students who was really struggling with the subject. I was pointing out to him that none of his visual proposals were communicating a message about Peace and he suddenly broke down and confessed that in reality he had no idea what Peace meant to him. We decided there and then that this was to become his message: 'I don't know what Peace is' in big letters on coloured background.

A week later things were looking up.

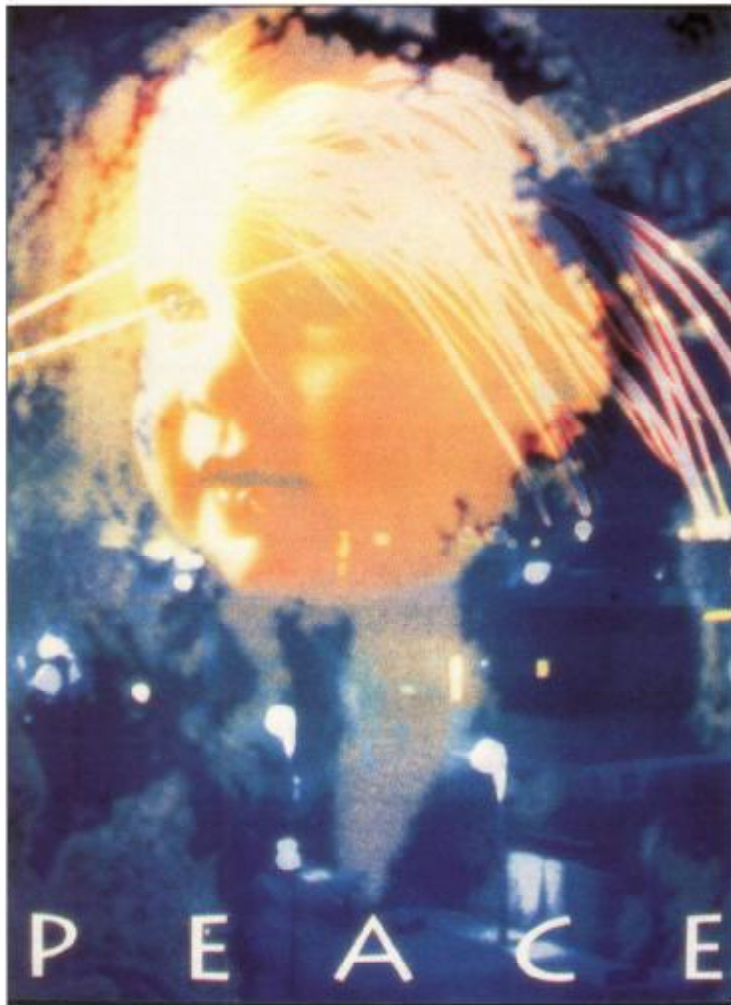


Poster by **Natalie Curtis**

Many students had clearly thought about the brief and were trying to find visual means to best suit their message. The clichés were fast dying out leaving us with challenges I did not quite expect. One student wanted to find a way to visually express a very moving moment he had experienced while watching a scene from the film *The Shaubank Redemption* (Dir Frank Darabent, 1990): The main character who is a prisoner willingly confronts the jail authorities by connecting his record player to the jail loudspeakers in order to play a beautiful Mozart aria for all of the inmates. All activity comes to a halt for prisoners and wardens alike, and for just one magical moment they all listen to the piece and seem to be carried away together to a different dimension. For that student this short moment truly embodied the ultimate manifestation of Peace.

Later at the break I saw the student who had previously exclaimed that 'there is no such thing as Peace' storming into the classroom and carefully examining the rough sketches on display. I called her over and asked her how she was doing with the project. Her answer caught me off guard, she spoke with sweeping ardour, sincerely searching to fully translate into words the glorious picture of her personal discovery:

'How would I express peace visually?...For me the best way would be to show a white, totally empty, blank poster...but obviously I can't just present an empty poster, can I...you see, I think that peace is something which is here,



not out there and we all have it in us...it's really difficult to explain in words because it's simply there, I mean here, but it's not a religious thing or anything like that, it's more spiritual, no, spiritual is not even the right word, it's beyond spirituality...it's really simple, we do not even know that it is there inside of us and perhaps we never will...actually, knowledge is the wrong word, it is an understanding but it is not an intellectual understanding or anything like that, it's just here, do you understand what I mean?...! As she spoke, obviously trying very hard to clarify to both herself and me exactly what she was trying to get across, I suddenly felt hot. I looked around and saw that the gloomy weather had changed, the classroom was filled with sunlight. I thought that it was a nice little coincidence.

At the presentation her poster showed a large close-up photograph of a baby's face smiling and looking to a far away place. The baby's image is superimposed onto another photograph of a cityscape, it's face carefully positioned on top of what seems to be fireworks in a deep blue sky above a dormant city. It turned out to be a photograph of a Scud missile flying above Tel-Aviv during the gulf war. Looking closely into the baby's face, one could swear that its smile is triumphant, almost illuminated. Some students found the image deeply disturbing, others found it profoundly peaceful. ●

*Dedicated to all my students.*

**Lolli Aboutboul** is the graphic designer and consultant who works for a range of social and arts institutions.

Posters by  
**Christine Loizou** (above)  
and **Sarah Edwards** (right)

