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# In a Strange Place

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IN A STRANGE PLACE

by

BENJAMIN M. GOLDMAN

Under the Direction of Pam Longobardi

ABSTRACT

My work is about stress and strain in our modern times. I am using self portraiture as a way to discuss the world around me and hope that the viewer will relate to my experiences. Drawing, painting and video are used to convey different aspects of my observations, and old techniques are mixed with new technologies. Personal observations, artistic and scientific influences, and the art-making process have shaped this body of work.

INDEX WORDS: Ben Goldman, Painter, Video, Stress, Modern life, Watercolor, Mixed media, Self portrait, Beng

IN A STRANGE PLACE

by

BENJAMIN M. GOLDMAN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

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2010

IN A STRANGE PLACE

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Committee: Teresa Bramlette Reeves  
Joe Peragine

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University  
May 2010

## DEDICATION

To my Mother, Brenda Goldman, who helped me through the trials of daily life as I worked on this MFA.

To my brother, Tim Goldman, whose assistance and support was always an important part of this journey.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my committee, Pam Longobardi, Teresa Bramlette Reeves and Joe Peragine for the help with my work and growth as an artist.

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

My work is about stress and strain in our modern times. The experiences of my life inform my art. Modern America is full of experiences that can create a very stressful world. Work, bills, relationships, politics, a turbulent economy, war, and crime are just a few of the daily stressors Americans contend with. Stress can cause many problems, from psychological to physical health issues. Through direct observation I learn about how stress effects the Human Animal. I watch myself and my reactions as much as I observe other people. Stress in my life motivates me, drives me to work hard and perform at my best. It also weighs upon me, slows me and drags me into dark moods. I am not alone in these behaviors and I seek to connect and communicate with others about these modern stressors through my art. I use self portraits as a way to show my experiences dealing with stress and hope that the viewer will relate the work to their own lives. Drawing, painting and video are used to convey different aspects of my observations, and old techniques are mixed with new technologies. Personal observations, artistic influences, and the art-making process have shaped this body of work.

## **2 PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS**

Stress causes Humans to act out in various ways, some good and some bad. My life changed when my Father had heart surgery. In the hospital my Father suffered two strokes that permanently damaged his brain. I spent the next ten years working and helping my Mother take care of my Father until he died in the hospital in 2004. Since then I have struggled with bills and debt, as well as the emotional response to the loss. These stressors have driven me to work harder, create more art, and try to rise above the problems of my daily life but

every day I hear stories from people who are under a tremendous amount of stress. They suffer negative physical responses such as sickness, depression, and premature aging. There are many definitions of stress. Stephan Palmer of the Center of Stress Management in London defines stress as, "the psychological, physiological and behavioral response by an individual when they perceive a lack of equilibrium between the demands placed upon them and their ability to meet those demands." Stress can come in physical and emotional forms. In the pop culture "stress" has come to refer to any undesired or unpleasant event or aspect of a person's life.

I am the son of a scientist, and was raised to observe and study things around me. My Father studied animals and the environment. My Mother has a degree in Journalism, another field that makes observations and then creates commentary. I was taught to observe life and respond in writing and art. I grew up in university towns surrounded by scientists. My Father taught and worked on insect studies at Yale University. He would show me the labs full of research equipment and animals. I spent hours in the Peabody Museum at Yale University where I would stare at the giant murals by Rudolph F. Zallinger. *The Age of Reptiles* is a 110' long by 16' high mural painted in the dry fresco technique. This is one of my first exposures to art, and it is one that still influences me. Giant dinosaurs are represented in their environment, behaving in the way scientists of the 1950's theorized they would act. My work often is about depicting animals in modern environments and how they behave. When my Father's job shifted to the study of bats and sonar, I was exposed to animal behavioral studies. The lab where my Father worked had many animal studies and I saw rooms of bats, owls, and insects. My exposure to animals and the study of animals is key to my art and thinking about life.

### 3 ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

I often look to see how previous artists conveyed man's struggles in life. Peter Paul Rubens and Francisco Goya are two examples of classical masters that influence my work. Rubens was a 17th century Flemish Baroque painter who filled his canvas with fleshy figures and motion. Many of his paintings are allegorical and full of symbols. I try and use symbols and allegory whenever possible because it is a way to add extra meaning to a simple work. Rubens often paints fat, fleshy nudes. I use that imagery of fat people to discuss our modern obsession with consumerism and consumption, two things that I feel contribute to the stress levels in our society. Being overweight is a stressor that I, a slothful artist, must contend with. Rubens often depicts fat people engaged in a struggle or a combat. The scenes are full of twisting figures and motion, such as can be found in *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (Figure 1) and *Castor and Pollux Abduct the Daughters of Leukyppos* (Figure 2). This depiction of conflict is a symbol I am trying to incorporate into my work as a way to show Americans everyday struggle through life. In some of his paintings Rubens also depicts man engaged in combat with animals, such as *Hippopotamus and Crocodile Hunt* (Figure 3). The use of animals as symbols is of great interest to me and I often incorporate them in my art. Rubens also painted some excellent fat drunken people, such as: *The Drunken Silenus* (Figure 4). The drunken fat figure is to me a symbol of modern man and his overindulgences. I relate to the stumbling drunk in the paintings and feel that it represents my stumbling through life. As I create more self portraits, I am looking at these types of scenes and trying to utilize their compositions and symbols.

Francisco Goya created two series of prints, *Los Caprichos* and *The Disasters of War*. I am influenced by these works and how Goya offers social commentary, often with satire. *Los Caprichos* was published in 1799, and *The Disasters of War* was not published until 1863, long after Goya's death. Goya created *Los Caprichos* to comment on the follies of his time.<sup>1</sup> The world he lived in was full of ignorance, corruption, crime and death. In this series of aquatint etchings, Goya uses fantastical imagery to criticize the church and state. *Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (Figure 5) is a self portrait of Goya, asleep at his desk. Behind him is an attacking swarm of owls and bats. Owls are a symbol of stupidity, and bats are a symbol of the devil.<sup>2</sup> Goya is commenting on the lack of education in his country which during the time of the Enlightenment caused great problems.<sup>3</sup> He also uses the device of distortion to convey meaning. Humans may be deformed with misshapen heads, looking like monsters. Goya used the deformation of people as a metaphor to talk about their behavior in modern times,<sup>4</sup> the deformities reflect their inner nature. Physiognomy is the study of a person's outward appearances to determine their inner nature. This was a popular belief in Goya's time. Examples of this kind of distortion can be seen throughout *Los Caprichos*. *What a sacrifice!* (Figure 6) shows a rich man as a hunchbacked monster.<sup>5</sup> *Nothing could be done...* (Figure 7) shows a young woman being punished by the Inquisition<sup>6</sup>. She rides on the back of a donkey but she is depicted as a normal human. It is the crowd around her that Goya shows as ugly and grotesque, as a way to discuss their inner ugly nature.<sup>7</sup>

Along with his use of distortion and fantasy scenes, Goya also provides realistic depictions based on his observations of life. *The Disasters of War* has many images that Goya witnessed during the French invasion of Spain. He shows the brutalities of war and the horrors of

mass starvation that occurred in cities around Spain. Goya uses negative space as a way to focus the viewers attention on the events depicted in the prints. This can be seen in *The Same* (Figure 8) , which shows figures engaged in combat in a white space. No effort was made to show the background as it was not necessary to convey the horrors of war. An excellent example is the plate, titled *There is no one to help them* (Figure 9). It shows one figure with head in hand, surrounded by corpses in an barren landscape. This minimal scene conveys a sense of isolation and hopelessness. I am trying to use this simple compositional approach in my drawings and paintings to help convey the feelings associated with many stressful situations. By isolating myself in the image I can convey how I am feeling through simple actions and colors.

Another artist that uses distortion and simple compositions is Francis Bacon. Like Goya, he shows the darker aspects of human nature through the distortion of the face and body. His figures often scream, with teeth exposed, against simple colored backgrounds. The focus is on the figures and their raw state of emotion. Bacon stated that he is painting the reality of the moment.<sup>8</sup> He paints the flesh in twisted, shifting forms that seem to be in motion. I relate to the emotional energy he depicts. I often have figures in mid scream as they exhibit their raw inner animal emotions. I am trying to inject that feeling into my self-portraiture. *Study for a portrait (Man in a blue box)* conveys a sense of anxiety, stress and isolation that seems relevant to my work. *Self-portrait* painted in 1971 shows Bacon's face, twisted and churning in a field of black. The distortion of form depicted by Bacon is similar in feeling to the way I show myself coming apart. There is a sense of trying to capture a shifting state in time, while trying to relate how the subject is feeling at that moment. *Study for a self-portrait Triptych* painted in 1985-1986 shows the artist sitting in an empty room. His head shifts and collapses upon itself, chang-

ing in each panel. This sequence of images is related to the photographs by Muybridge, which Bacon often used as references.<sup>9</sup> I also show changes through sequential drawings and paintings.

Bill Plympton is an animator whose work I have been studying. Like Bacon, he also distorts the figure, but in his case he is doing so for humor. Plympton creates strange animations that are often in very minimal settings, which creates a strong sense of focus on the characters. This was a necessity since he often hand animated his earlier works. He hand animated his entire first full length feature film *The Tune*, which consists of over 30,000 animation cells.<sup>10</sup> Another trick he uses to speed up the process of animating entire films is to only create only 3 to 4 frames per second rather than the standard 24 frames a second.<sup>11</sup> This creates a strange choppiness in his work, but it is enough to convey motion. I utilize both of these techniques when creating my simple animations.

Bill Viola is a contemporary artist who makes simple and beautiful videos that often deal with life, death and time. His videos are simple scenes that often are often shown in very slow motion. The distortion of time creates a mystical quality and it allows the viewer to focus on the work. He also often uses simple, saturated colors to convey feelings. In his work *Five Angels for the Millennium*, Viola shows figures plunging into water in slow motion. The piece is projected onto five screens and each screen depicts one figure as they sink or rise in the water. The piece is discussing life and death and rebirth. Through the imagery of water, bubbles, color and reflection, Viola creates an ethereal experience. In *Ocean Without a Shore*, Viola uses three large screens to show figures transitioning from the afterlife back into the world of the living.

The figures initially appear in a dark background, filmed in black and white grainy video. They slowly walk towards the viewer and pass through a wall of glass-like water and emerge as high definition color figures. This simple use of the black and white figures transforming into high definition color is Viola's way of showing spirits returning to the world of the living. Viola's work costs a great deal to create and display. The expenses of the materials he works with prohibit me from utilizing some of his techniques, such as large immersive video screens, high definition digital cameras and special effects. I am conscious of how his work looks and feels as I create my own video work, but my process is very simple and inexpensive.

#### **4 THE ART-MAKING PROCESS**

My process for creating art effects the end results as much as the concepts for the work. My observations of stress in modern times begin as quick sketches of ideas. Often I will then photograph myself in poses that will work with the idea of the piece. I will either draw free hand using the photo as reference, or I may actually transfer the main lines of the scene to capture a more realistic feel to the image. Depending on the feeling I am trying to convey I may ink the figure and then add color. The inks and watercolors run and blend in unexpected ways. The fluidity of the medium changes the feeling and may transform an initial idea into a piece of art that represents something different. I realized that the reference photos were often as interesting as the drawings. I wanted to take the photo and add to it the element of the unexpected results that came with the water-based medium. The reference photos are altered in Photoshop in various ways. Working with printed images that have less detail allows more room for the drawing and painting process. I print a photo of myself that has been reduced to minimal



colors and planes, and then draw details back on top of the image. Some of the altered photos are printed onto watercolor paper which allows me to distress the inkjet prints with water. The wet inkjet ink blooms and runs in random patterns which I enhance with watercolors and inks. The end result is an image that strives to convey a sense of coping with a stressful situation. The use of controlled chaos adds a slight element of randomness that feels appropriate to the subject matter.

I create my videos with animation or by rotoscoping my footage. Rotoscoping involves tracing and painting over each frame in a movie to create a new effect. I shoot the videos with small and inexpensive video cameras. These pocket sized cameras are easy to carry with me on my daily routine. This allows me to concentrate more on what I am shooting, rather than get bogged down in the technical aspects of more complex camera systems. My one button video camera allows me to shoot video, watch it and then quickly reshoot material as needed. It is small enough to be used with one hand, which has allowed me to film driving scenes, that would otherwise require mounting systems. There are draw backs to these video cameras, such as their limitation to the one small fixed lens that is built into the camera body. The sound recording from these cameras is also very limited. However since sound is not an important part of these videos at this time, this is not a problem. My ideas for videos have been altered to fit the limitations of the cameras. I have to work close to the subjects since I have no options for a telephoto lens, but this helps create a more personal space. I feel the tighter cropped shots also my help convey a sense of stress. The video is transferred to the computer where I alter the images and crop and edit the desired parts. Due to my lack of knowledge of video editing systems and compositing software I have had to rely on my experience with Photoshop. This pro-

gram is often associated with digital painting, graphic design and manipulation of photographic imagery. The new Photoshop allows importing of video. Every frame of the video is shown and can be manipulated. This gives me the ability to slowly rotoscope the video. To do this I am using a mix of common filters on the videos to create different moods. Some of the filters turn the imagery into colored line work, that changes in every frame. I find it beautiful, strange and sometimes visual confusing. This is appropriate to the way life flows around me as I travel around the Atlanta metropolitan area. The filters also create a line drawing look, which ties in with the drawings and paintings I make. The videos are movement and light, which complement the static nature of the other work. The video and animation process can be very time consuming, which is frustrating when trying to convey different emotions each day, so I am constantly trying to find ways to speed up the process. This is why I started to copy Bill Plympton's technique of low frame rate animation.

## **5 CONCLUSIONS**

This body of work about stress and modern life is evolving from my interests, influences and daily art practice. I am using self portraiture as a way to discuss the world around me and hope that the viewer will relate to my experiences. The shifting, swirling moments of the day flow through colors around my figure in the paintings to show the passing of time. The sensation of being overwhelmed by the stress is conveyed by having my figure fade into the background. The animations show a world of colors and lines that pulse and vibrate with each new frame. I am immersed in these confusing and beautiful environments. The animation also allows me to show the motion and speed of daily life. Video and the computer are becoming a

more integral aspect of my art making. Utilizing a wide variety of tools to create my art allow me to better convey my ideas. My art is about our society as well as being about our animal behaviors. We live in modern times but our reactions are rooted in our primal animal self.

## END NOTES

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## FIGURES



Figure 1: Peter Paul Rubens, *Fall of the Rebel Angels*, 1620

Source: ArtStor



Figure 2: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Abduction of the Daughters of Leucippus by Castor and Pollux*, 1617

Source: ArtStor

(more cited works will be added)



Figure 3: Peter Paul Rubens, *Hippopotamus and Crocodile Hunt*, 1615

Source: ArtStor



Figure 4: Peter Paul Rubens, *Drunken Silenus*, 1616

Source: ArtStor





Figure 5: Francisco Goya, *Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, 1799  
Source: ArtStor

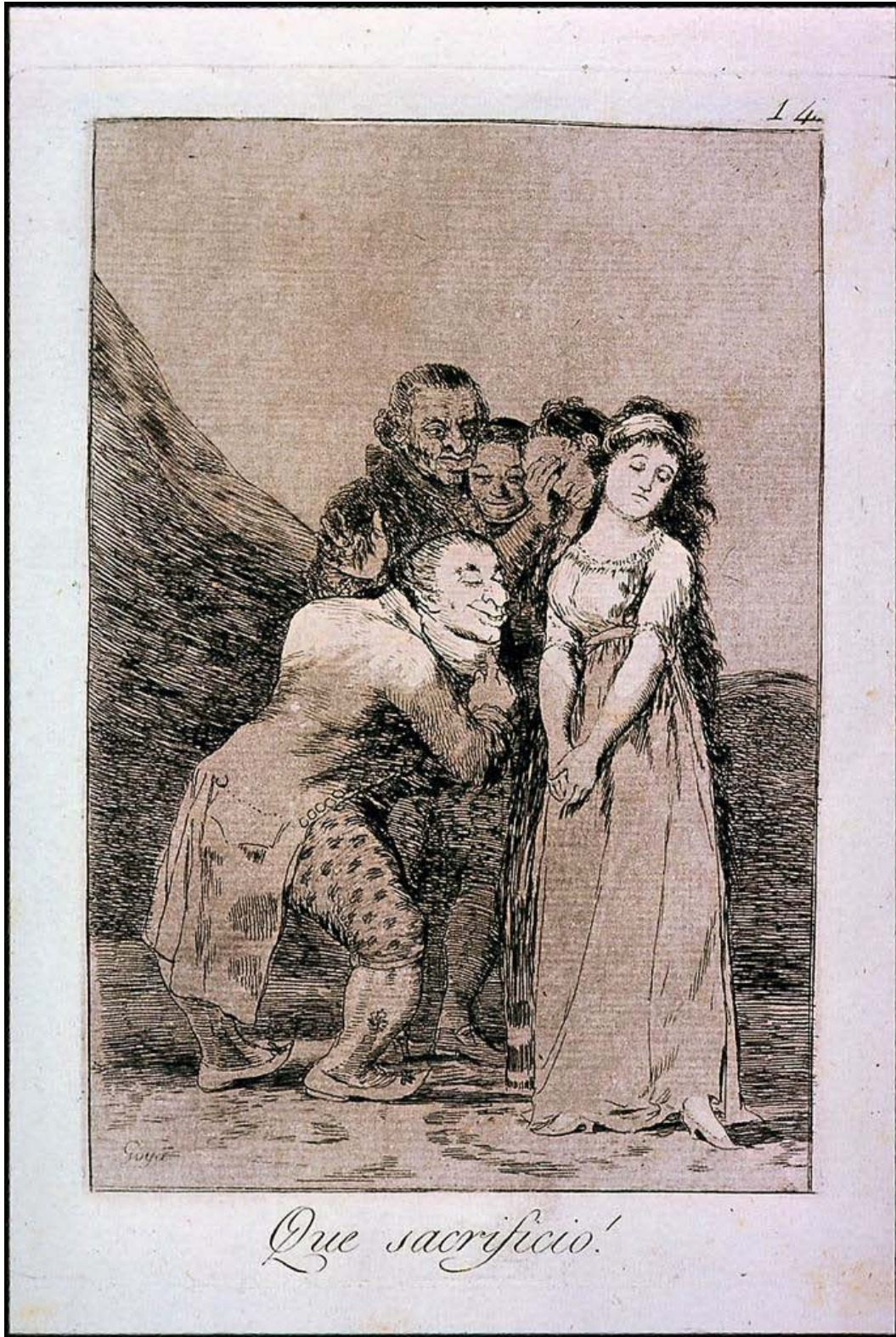


Figure 6: Francisco Goya, *What a sacrifice!*, 1799

Source: ArtStor

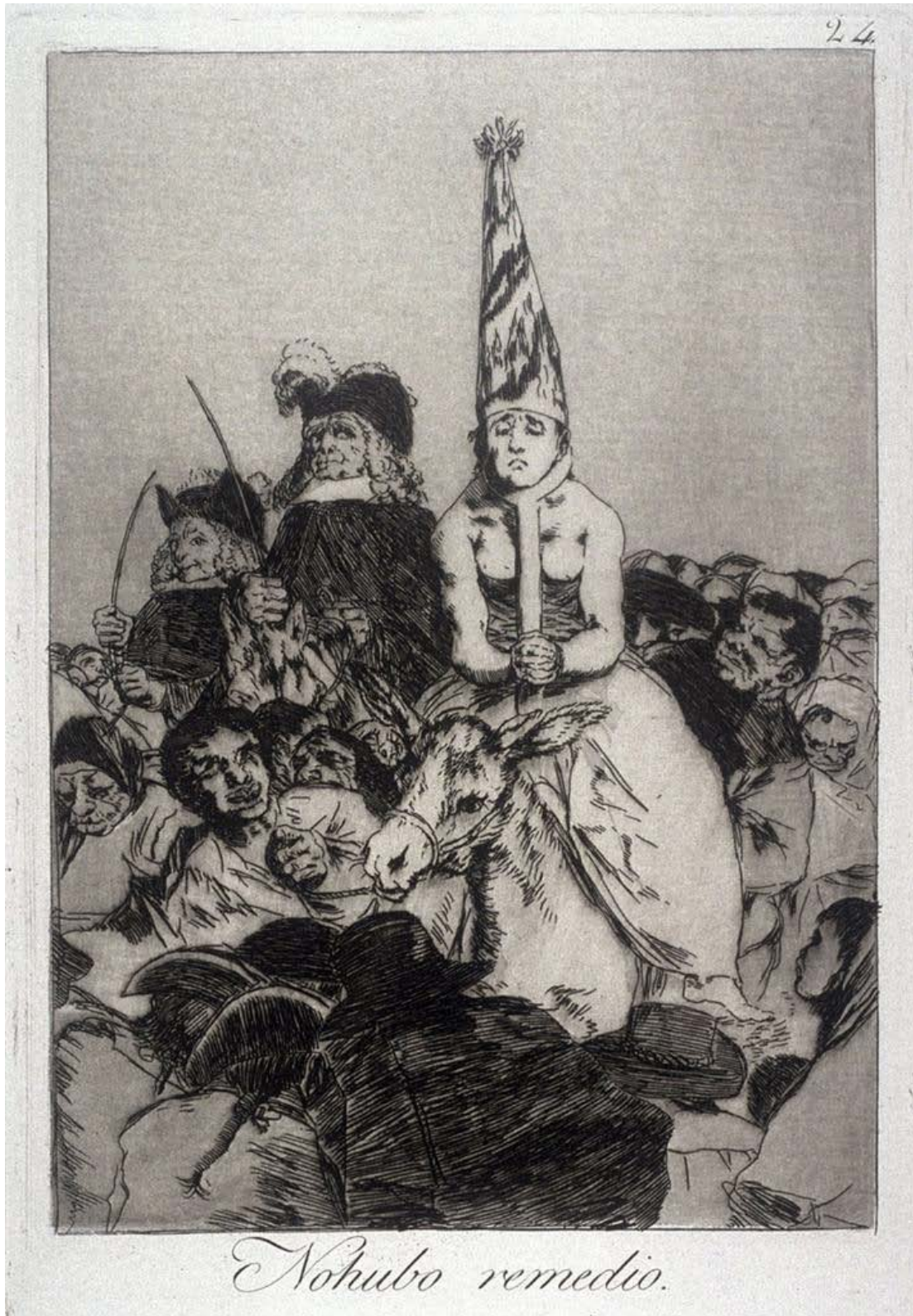


Figure 7: Francisco Goya, *Nothing Could Be Done About It*, 1799  
Source: ArtStor



Figure 8: Francisco Goya, *The Same*, 1810-15

Source: ArtStor



Figure 9: Francisco Goya, *There is no one to help them*, 1810-15  
Source: ArtStor

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