

# Art as commentary

## Treading the delicate waters of OSCE diplomacy



Shared values and deep historical and cultural ties within the OSCE community were put on artistic display when the Lithuanian and U.S. Missions pooled efforts to bring the published lithographs, etchings and pencil drawings of artist Rimvydas (Ray) Bartkus to Vienna in October 2005. A graduate of the Vilnius Art Academy, Mr. Bartkus, 44, is one of the most successful illustrators in the United States today. The *OSCE Magazine* spoke with the New York resident after the opening of his exhibition at the Hofburg.

**OSCE Magazine: “Connectivity Power”:** What exactly did you have in mind when you chose this as the theme of your exhibition?

**Ray Bartkus:** It was actually U.S. Ambassador Julie Finley who turned it into the title of the show after coming across it in one of my illustrations. Americans are great at marketing and come to think of it, the choice seemed very appropriate. What were your prime considerations in choosing which works to display at the Hofburg?

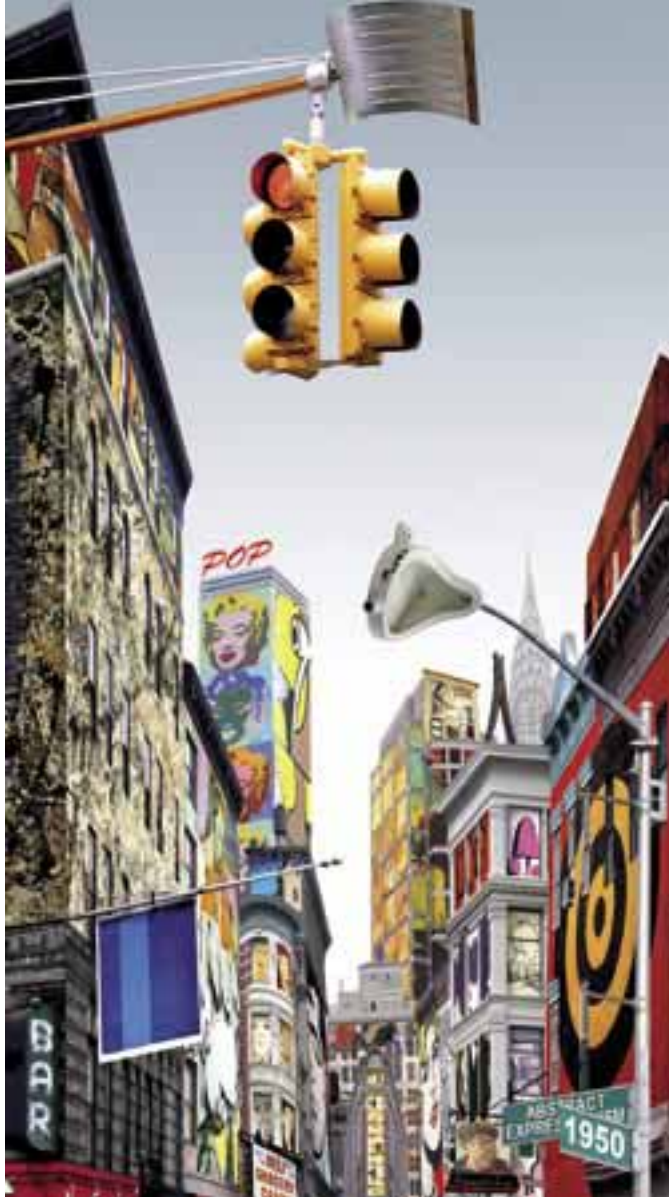
As I was going through hundreds of my sketches and art work, I was surprised to see how many took quite a critical or

sarcastic or ironic view towards world affairs. I had a hard time selecting those that would be relevant and at the same time “inoffensive” to the OSCE ambassadors present. But hey, we like to criticize everybody and everything in New York — it makes the world spin and maybe improve a little.

**Does one have to be a “political animal” to be able to illustrate global concerns such as nuclear proliferation and terrorism?**

Politics, the economy, science and the arts affect everyone — unless one is an ignoramus. Some of us choose to express an

“Psychomanhattananalysis”  
by Ray Bartkus for *New York Times Book Review*, 1995



Illustrations by Ray Bartkus

1 "Paint City", *New York Times Book Review*, 25 December 2005

2 "Deglobalization", *Harper's Magazine*, 2004

3 "Witch", *New York Times Book Review*, 2001

4 "Cleanup of Ground Zero", *New York Times Book Review*, 2002

5 "Peace Now?", *Time Magazine* cover, 6 November 1995

idea or two through an artistic medium — and those who are not "political animals" might actually have a fresher perspective. **Do give us a peek into the world of magazine illustration, especially in a city known for its vibrancy and its diversity.**

Every day, art directors at the better magazines receive up to 50 portfolios from all over the world from artists and illustrators hoping for a "gig". It is this diverse competition that keeps me on my toes. Once in a while it so happens that I've had too many conflicting deadlines, and I've had to refuse assignments, but that's risky — that art director might never call again. **What is it like to be on the covers and in the pages of some of the most prestigious publications in the United States?**

The pay is good and the assignments are extremely interesting — most of the time anyway. I've had the opportunity to illustrate the writings of Salman Rushdie, Francis Fukuyama, Margaret Atwood, to name just a few.

**How easy or difficult is it to illustrate articles whose editorial line or message you don't agree with?**

I am always interested in listening to an opposing opinion, and I am rarely forced to be very literal and to follow the text exactly. A strong visual image is more important than a literal explanation.

**When is an illustration more effective than a photograph?**

Computer programmes such as Photoshop have blurred the line between the two media.

Recently, with the help of Photoshop, I created a fictional Greek god for a book on ancient Greece. Later, I received a few e-mails from prominent scholars asking me which museum had the piece!

**What's the shortest time you've been given for an assignment?**

Three to four hours is quite standard for *The Wall Street Journal*.

**Any favourite publications to work for and why?**

This is my ideal scenario: The editor has given the art director a great deal of free-





"Alive", *New York Times*  
Book Review, 2005

dom and responsibility to carry out a vision for the publication's overall design and concept. The art director in turn gives the artist the freedom and responsibility to create a needed illustration — from conceiving the idea to its final realization.

In my 15 years of working in this field I know of only one publication that operates under conditions similar to these, and I am proud to say I work for it: It's the *New York Times Book Review* under Art Director Steven Heller.

**How can someone with deep Lithuanian roots illustrate articles by (mostly) American writers so effectively?**

Years ago, when foreigners would come to a Soviet bloc country, they would notice all the red banners on every corner advertising the Communist Party. Growing up in this environment, I hardly took notice of them. Sometimes it takes an outsider to point out the most obvious aspects of American life, to come up with a different interpretation. Luckily for me, New Yorkers are accepting of differing points of view.

**What role did the exhibition at the OSCE play in your personal and professional life? And in your parents' lives?**

It's always good to observe one's works from a different light — their faults and strengths can be seen more easily. As for my parents, they were of course thrilled to be present at the opening. Ten years ago, they would have had to apply for a visa from the Austrian Government. And some 15 years ago, Soviet authorities wouldn't have allowed them to travel abroad at all, especially to meet a son who works for the "rotten mouthpieces of capitalism". At that time, too, to have been able to afford to fly from Vilnius to Vienna just for a show would have been the stuff of fairy tales. I am thrilled by the opportunities that the expansion of the EU has opened up. Connectivity Power!



Ray Bartkus: "I consider myself a 'Vilniuser' in New York."



U.S. MISSION/PETER KLOPF

"The United States, a nation of immigrants, has always been enriched by the talents of those who came to our shores," U.S. Ambassador Julie Finley said at the opening of "Connectivity Power" at the Hofburg's *Neuer Saal*. "Mr. Bartkus, who will always draw from his Lithuanian roots, now takes his energy from the vibrancy of New York."

Lithuanian Ambassador Rytis Paulauskas added: "Working as an illustrator is a delicate task in this rapidly changing world. Rimvydas' creations must quickly and accurately reflect political and cultural developments. Although the art of illustration seems to focus on the fleeting, the artist's reflections on the issues are lasting and relevant to us all."



U.S. MISSION/PETER KLOPF