

# Art for justice

Fulbright Visiting Research Chair Richard Lubben uses the power of visual arts to tackle human rights issues

by Rick Boychuk

**W**hen Texas-based art professor **Richard Lubben** made his first trip ever to Canada last summer, he shipped to the University of Ottawa works of art whose disturbing themes range from abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq to sex trafficking, homelessness, political repression and other violations of human rights. The paintings, photographs, prints and mixed-media works, which were on display in Fauteux Hall from September 20 to October 11, 2013, are creative, passionate and arresting responses to injustice.

"Art can be an effective means of opening dialogues on sensitive or disturbing subjects," says Lubben, who teaches at South Texas College in McAllen, Texas, and is the recipient of a Fulbright Visiting Research Chair in Human Rights and Social Justice at the University of Ottawa.

"Sometimes you can make a special connection with an image. Often an image will stay with you for the rest of your life, especially if it is disturbing or powerful. I think art expands the conversation."

The works that Lubben brought with him are from his college's permanent art collection. They were donated by artists who participated in the annual Human Rights Art Exhibition that Lubben founded and coordinates.

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### Paving the way for more Fulbright scholars

The Fulbright Program in Canada, which was founded in 1990, supports residential academic exchanges and is open to students, scholars, university professors and independent researchers in Canada and the United States. In addition to hosting art professor Richard Lubben, the University of Ottawa will also receive Eric Zeemering of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, who was awarded a Fulbright Visiting Research Chair in Governance and Public Administration. He takes up his position in January 2014, and will be researching urban sustainability in Canada.

In collaboration with Fulbright Canada, the University of Ottawa is increasing its financial commitment and efforts to attract more scholars by doubling the number of Fulbright chairs it hosts from two to four. Besides its current chairs, the University will receive a chair on the Environment and Economy and a second on Science and Society in 2014–15.

In Lubben's project submission to the Fulbright Program, the most prestigious international educational exchange scholarship offered by the United States government, he noted that while art is often used to advocate for social justice, "there is very little communication between art, law and the social sciences." He proposed a variety of initiatives to connect departments, including the University of Ottawa's Human Rights Research and Education Centre and the community at large, through art. For example, in October, Lubben helped organize a panel discussion that focused on labels and judgments.

"One of the panels was composed of three artists, a law professor and a federal court judge. We talked about different ways of making judgments. And why we tend to label."

Lubben also organized an exhibit of human rights art created by local and invited artists from the United States, Mexico and Puerto Rico.

But the core project he undertook during his six-month stay is the creation of an online global learning tool. The site he is building, with the assistance of the University's Centre for e-Learning, will be open to scholars, artists, students and higher education institutions.

While the site won't be password-protected, Lubben doesn't imagine it as an open blog. He wants to use it to connect with colleges and universities worldwide.

"It will start with professors who are interested in a shared interdisciplinary course project and then will be open to their students. I would like to start with my drawing course, which is online, and then connect to another art, law or humanities course. It could be in a discussion format or a shared art project. It doesn't necessarily have to focus on art in the long run. But it will start with art."

He expected to have a pilot completed by December, when he returned to Texas, and to have the final site up and running by spring.

Lubben says he is grateful for the opportunity the Fulbright grant gave him to undertake research at a bilingual university. Texas higher education code prohibits him from delivering courses in anything but English, despite the fact that the city of McAllen, which lies within a few kilometres of the Mexican border, is 90 percent Hispanic.

"Comparing language rights here with Texas and learning about the history of Canada has been very helpful," he notes.

Lubben says the grant also allowed him to take a course on art and the law and to interact with law professors and students. Those interactions, he says, have shown him parallels between the work of artists and legal professionals.

"Art is an investigation. It's a way of thinking about things consciously or subconsciously," he says. "Judges and lawyers are engaged in a similar process. They can't draw a conclusion until they see all sides." RP



*Sugar Cane* (ABOVE), a digital print by Holly Wilmeth, and *Cane Worker* (RIGHT), oil on canvas by Richard Lubben, were among the works featured in a recent exhibition of human rights art organized by Lubben.

