



Prix de Print No. 27

Our Good Earth? by Nathan Meltz

Juried by Christina Weyl

This iteration of the *Art in Print* Prix de Print has been judged by Christina Weyl. The Prix de Print is a bimonthly competition, open to all subscribers, in which a single work is selected by an outside juror to be the subject of a brief essay. For further information on entering the Prix de Print, please go to our website: <https://artinprint.org/about-art-in-print/>.

Nathan Meltz, *Our Good Earth?* (2017)
Screenprint, 40 x 34 inches. Edition of 25. Printed and published by Lake Effect Editions, Syracuse, NY. \$500.

Last fall, I began teaching a course at the Cooper Union on 20th-century American printmaking. When, about a month into the semester, I lectured on American Regionalist artists of the 1930s and '40s, the students' reactions were subdued. What relevance did Grant Wood's lithographs of hot, sweaty farmers, or Thomas Hart Benton's translations of folk songs have to their lives in October 2016 as twenty-somethings living in New York City? (Cue the sound of grasshoppers chirping.) Flash forward one year. I again offered the course at Cooper, but this time the discussion about Regionalist prints was dynamic. Over the previous 12 months, students had experienced the disappointment of the tumultuous 2016 election, the rise of Trumpian populism and nationalism, and the entry of neo-Nazism and white supremacy into "mainstream" American political dialogues. Now, they eagerly engaged with the ideological strife that rocked the '30s and '40s and with the efforts of those earlier American artists fighting against fascism and other nefarious forces that drew the world into chaos.

With this context in mind, Nathan Meltz's screenprint piqued my interest as I reviewed submissions for the Prix de Print. *Our Good Earth?* is part of a continuing series titled "Anti-Fascists" that Meltz, a lecturer in the art department at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, is making at Lake Effect Editions on its large-scale, semiautomatic press (known around the shop as the "one-armed bandit"). The straw-hatted robot and the field of "wheat" reinterpret John Stuart Curry's famous eponymous painting (minus the question mark), commissioned by Associated American Artists to support the American



John Stuart Curry, *Our Good Earth* (1942), oil on hardboard, 60 1/8 x 48 1/8 inches. Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, on loan from the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison (Gift of the U.S. Treasury Department to the College of Agriculture).

war effort.¹ It was reproduced on war bond posters, and Curry translated the composition into a black-and-white lithograph sold through AAA.² Though he had been an isolationist prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Curry signed onto the war effort to oppose fascism. *Our Good Earth* is emphatically nationalistic: the sweeping wheat fields and the muscular farmer with his two young children suggest that America's vast natural resources and its strong and enduring people will prevail over any external menace.

In the year since Trump's electoral victory, Meltz has appropriated anti-fascist images by American artists of the '30s and '40s to confront challenges facing

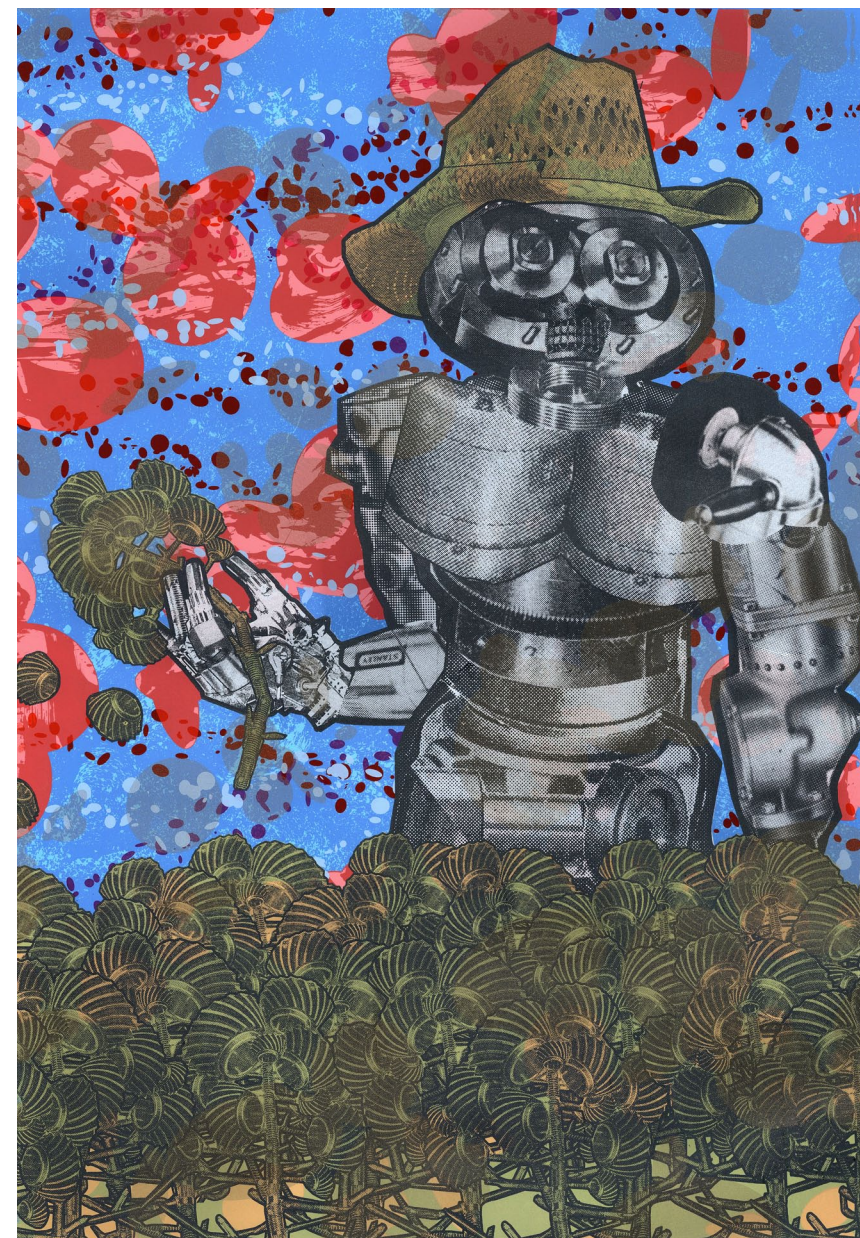


Detail of *Our Good Earth?* (2017).

the nation today. (The echoes between their challenges and ours can be found in newspapers every day: Trump's invocation of "America First," for example, recalls the often anti-Semitic isolationist opposition to American involvement in the fight against Hitler.) He reinterprets the work of Curry, William Gropper, Michael Lantz and others through a 21st-century lens, concerned with contemporary issues such as the "infiltration of technology into every facet of our lives."³ His collages, prints and animations of "nightmarish industrial creations" have long told the story of "a doomed robotic populace" built from second-hand parts in a "technodystopia."

Meltz invokes Curry's farmer—a figure AAA's founder Reeves Lewenthal urged Curry to make "as forceful, as heroic, as breathtaking as your *John Brown!*"⁴ But instead of embodying resistance to surveillance devices, drones and algorithms—technologies Meltz considers instruments of contemporary fascism—his farmer is composed of industrial byproducts of these technologies. The children who represented the American future in Curry's painting are absent here, and the crop is not viable for human consumption.

Meltz's call-back reminds today's viewers of the importance of historical literacy and the obligation to be critical consumers of visual culture. The pessimistic terminal punctuation of Meltz's *Our Good Earth?* suggests that American



Nathan Meltz, *Our Good Earth?* (2017).

society may have become so dehumanized that it is unable or unwilling to stand up to its aspiring oppressors. In this way, *Our Good Earth?* is a call to arms. ■

[author bio here](#)

Notes:

1. Meltz discovered Curry's painting while studying at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where Curry had been artist-in-residence from 1936 until his death.
2. For more on the AAA commission, see Lara Kuykendall, "John Stuart Curry's 'Our Good Earth,'" in *Art for Every Home: Associated American Artists, 1934–2000*, ed. Elizabeth G. Seaton,

Jane Myers, and Gail Windisch (*Manhattan, KS: Mariana Kistler Beach Museum of Art, 2015*), 126–29. For literature about Curry's lithograph, see Sylvan Cole, *The Lithographs of John Stuart Curry: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Associated American Artists, 1976); Joseph S. Czeszchowski, "John Stuart Curry's Lithographs: A Portrait of Rural America," *The American Art Journal* 9, no. 2 (November 1977): 68–82.

3. Artist's statement: <http://nathanmeltz.com/home.html>.

4. The reference is to Curry's 1939 painting of that name, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Reeves Lewenthal letter to Curry, 6 Feb 1942, cited in Patricia A. Junker, *John Stuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 236.