

Sullivan Goss: An American Gallery

## Amos Kennedy: Put The Message In The Hands Of The People And Move On

By Kerry Methner, PhD / CASA

**FIFTY YEARS AGO MARTIN LUTHER KING JR** orated "I have a dream." And, 50 years ago people tried to snuff that dream out when they bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Now, those two marker events have come together in the heart and mind of another civil rights activist, the dynamic upbeat personality Amos Kennedy, whose print work makes up the exhibition, *Amos Kennedy: Put The Message In The Hands Of The People And Move On* at Sullivan Goss: An American Gallery through September 29th.

"I can choose my own heroes. It's my own printing press. I can print what I want," Kennedy can be heard iterating in a documentary about him that can be found on YouTube called *Proceed and Be Bold*, by Laura Zinger.

The self identified printer will meet and talk with 1st Thursday participants on August 1st at 6:30pm at the gallery.

A focus of Kennedy's work is to hold up the memory of the non-violent freedom fighters who were murdered during the civil rights movement. The exhibition includes 136 fans printed with the names of individuals who were murdered during the civil rights



Handmade letterpress print on a fan by Amos Kennedy

movement between 1934 and 1968.

Viewers will recognize the names of Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, and Viola Liuzzo on fans hanging next to the names of people now largely forgotten. As they explore, they'll see several state maps, blazoned with large red numbers, reflecting the number of people murdered during the struggle to bring voting rights and equality to that state. Those maps range from New York to Florida. America failed to protect these citizens.

"The American Dream is about self-determination," Kennedy continues in the documentary. "Self-determination can only occur through the cooperation of all people. You can not be free unless you can depend on other people."

Also mingled in the exhibition is another of Kennedy's bodies of work featuring the lyrics of civil rights songs. Some of the songs were adapted from slave spirituals such as *Keep your hand on the plow/Hold on*, which was adapted to be sung as *Keep your eyes on the prize/Hold on*. A map of Mississippi has been smeared with the red letters "Goddam" bringing to mind the lyrics for the famous Nina Simone song, *Mississippi Goddam*, one of the anthems of the civil rights movement.

"The exhibit inspired me to be more passionate about my own life and what is important," shared Susan Bush, Curator of Contemporary Art at Sullivan

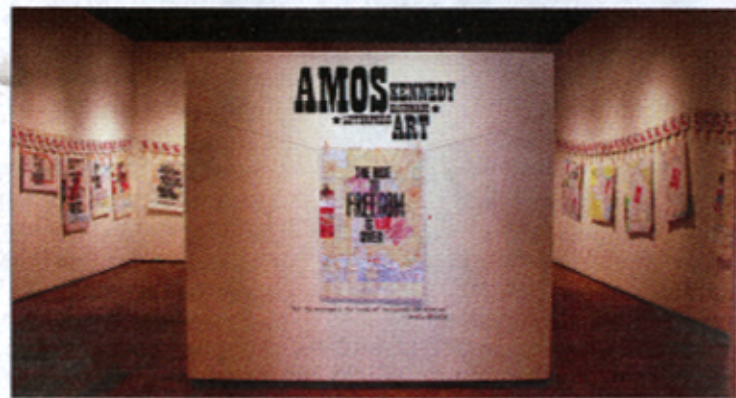
Goss.

Kennedy has spent a lot of his time in the arena of voting rights, which is yet another of the themes reflected in this exhibition with its vivid red and striking black letters. His message is powerful, potentially devastating, and could even be life changing.

The tools of Kennedy's trade include simple things, a press and various papers pulled from our daily life of the period. This is the gallery's first solo exhibition of his handmade letterpress prints. In it viewers will find that the heart of the civil rights movement continues to beat, powerfully.

"There are certain things you can't avoid," Kennedy declares. "One is politics and one is art." He's at home in both worlds... "I was told a long time ago, everything you do is political. So, I live by that code," he explained.

Walking around, reading, many will recognize names of people and places... Looking at the fans, I wondered, "Are those the ones they used in churches?" and "How did he choose which maps to print on?" Soon I was looking for maps from my neck of the woods, Michigan, anxiously. The Wisconsin map stood out, with its dream of freedom. *But shouldn't there be*



Installation of handmade letterpress prints by Amos Kennedy

*some more recent dates?* Then I noticed the maps with big, blood-red numbers...

UCSB has a large holding of Kennedy's work, according to Bush. YouTube even offers a video of a talk he gave while teaching there.

After working in the corporate world, Kennedy quit to become what he calls "a humble negro printer." He received his MFA from the University of Wisconsin. He now works in Detroit, Michigan. Using Vandercook, Heidelberg, Asbern, and FAG presses, he makes posters, cards, and artists books with handset type. His work has been shown across the United States and in Italy. It is priced to do just what the exhibit is titled, *Put The Message In The Hands Of The People*. Fans are just \$10 and posters \$50. Everyone's welcome.

Sullivan Goss is located at 7 E. Anapamu St. Reach them at 730-1460 or visit [www.sullivangoss.com](http://www.sullivangoss.com)