An Artist’s Statement
John Risseeuw

The history of the arts is a history of creative individuals responding to crisis and to their cultural environments. I take as my models artists like Hogarth, Goya, Kollwitz, Grosz, Hausmann, Picasso (Guernica), Weege, Conal and many others who recorded the social and political conditions in which they lived. I have few illusions about the efficacy of art to cause change, but much confidence in the necessity of art to witness to future generations. Howard Zinn has said, “In addition to creating works of art, the artist is also a citizen and a human being,” which implies that the two are not separate conditions. As a concerned, informed citizen, I continually add to my knowledge of the world and seek to bring it into my art, sometimes because I cannot ignore the possibilities.

Over four decades, my art has often touched on political and social themes, including political corruption, equal rights, environmental abuse, fascism, illegal wars, arms proliferation, and sheer idiocy. Spirit Land was created collaboratively with Margaret Prentice, Gary Paul Nabhan, and Kim Stafford out of mutual concerns for man’s impact on the environment.

Recent prints (and soon, an artist’s book) on handmade paper about landmines and the detritus of war are generating fundraising for agencies that assist mine victims and work for mine clearance. I came to do this work because 1) I was aware of the problem, 2) I wanted to learn more about it, 3) I wanted to educate my fellow citizens about the issues, 4) I felt a compulsion to contribute something to the solution by generating funding for survivors and demining operations, 5) I had the unique means at my disposal, through papermaking and print media, to produce work that could, I thought, connect with people. In 1996, I had printed a piece about the world arms trade on paper handmade from clothing of victims of armed conflict mixed with the recycled currency of the top ten arms exporting nations. It turned out to be especially effective in impacting viewers and creating an emotional connection with them. A few years later, I realized that I could do the same thing with landmine issues; my media gave me the agency to produce singularly dynamic results.

I also feel a responsibility as a teacher and mentor, in the privileged position of the university professor, to share a larger perspective on the world through the arts, to serve as an example to young artists and point them toward meaningful cultural contribution, and to use the benefits of an entitled position for the greater good. It may simply boil down to the artist/printer responding to and expressing the human condition.