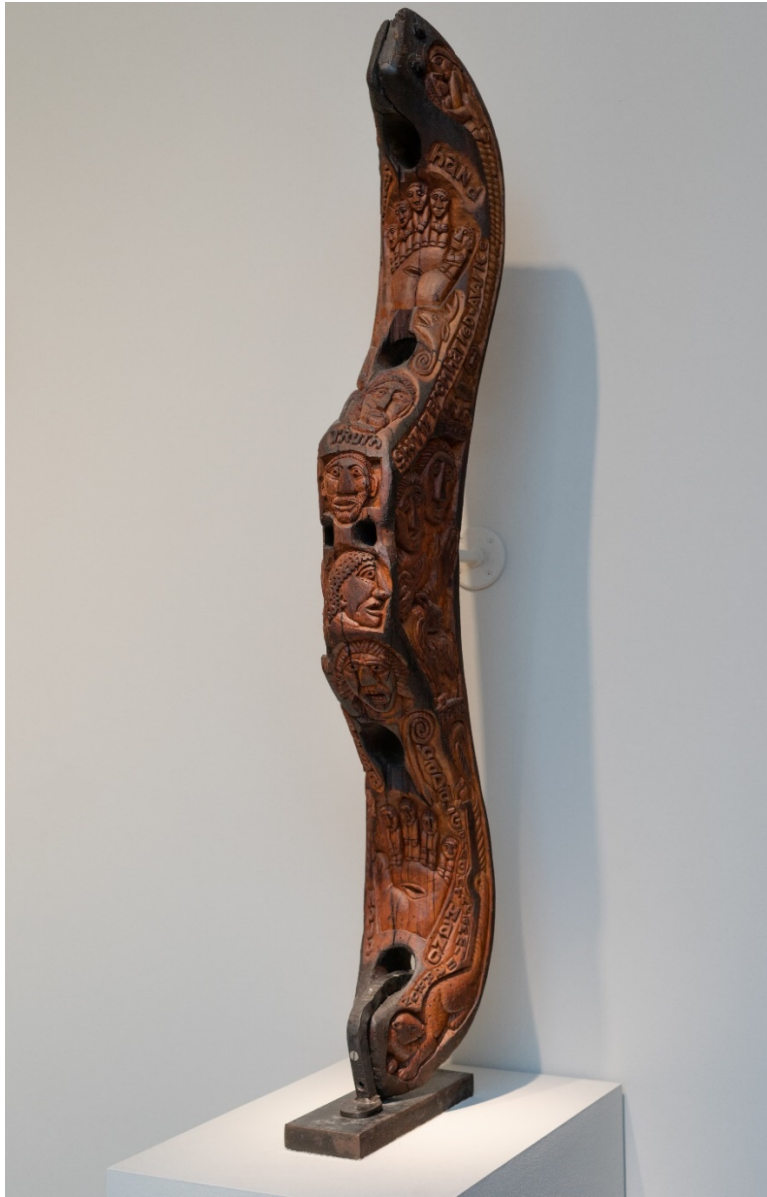


Peter Gourfain, *Michael Stewart*, 1989



Wood, 53 x 7 1/2 x 9 in.

Elvehjem Museum of Art General Endowment Fund purchase, 1989.58



### Artist Biography

*I read newspapers; I read books. You get inspiration from your own life, from the lives of others, from art, from wherever you find it. All artists do the same thing. They reflect the stimuli in the world, and I'm doing what other artists do—getting it wherever I can find it.*

—Peter Gourfain <sup>1</sup>

Peter Gourfain (American, b. 1934), is a Chicago native. His parents were passionate antiracists and growing up Gourfain was deeply affected by a cross-burning incident that took place on the family's front lawn after his parents had entertained a black person. He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he earned his BFA in 1956. He is known for his printmaking, along with his terracotta and bronze sculptures and his carvings into repurposed wooden objects.

Gourfain moved to New York City in 1961, first living in the bustling artists' bohemia of SoHo. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he became well known for his geometric painting and large Minimalist sculptures. In 1966, his work was included in a group exhibition entitled *Systemic Painting* at the Guggenheim Museum. The following year, he was featured in the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington DC's biennale, and in 1968, the Whitney Museum of American Art's. He held a one-year teaching position at the School of the Visual Arts in New York from 1969 to 1970, and periodically served as a visiting artist or lecturer at a variety of institutions since. During the 1960s, Gourfain was largely apolitical. He moved to the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn in 1974, where he still lives today.

In the mid-1970s, Gourfain's style shifted dramatically and he gave up minimalism for figurative works that mixed sculptural relief and painting and incorporated narrative and graphically strong forms of artistic expression. He started making a monumental sculpture in 1976 entitled *Roundabout* that melded wood, bronze, and terracotta elements, which is now considered an important transitional piece and is now in the Chazen Museum's collection. Gourfain's first explicitly political image was made in the late 1970s: A carving depicting the result of violence in Latin America inspired by his partner at the time, an activist and journalist. Between 1979 and 1980, while teaching at Kent State University, he and his assistants made a set of large oak doors inset with ceramic reliefs that commemorated the death of four students killed on the college campus by Ohio National Guard troops during a 1970 anti-Vietnam War demonstration. In 1980, he began making a series of unconventional ceramic urns covered in scenes of figures.

In the years since this dramatic change in his practice, he has eschewed the commercial trajectory of the art world. Instead, he taught ceramics in a local pottery studio, made art for public spaces, and produced a prolific quantity of work fueled by the energy and compassion with which he interacts with the world around him. Between 1980 and at least 1988, he was a recreation director for the Division of Senior Citizens of the City of New York, teaching painting and ceramics to senior citizens. In the critic Lucy Lippard's words: "All the passion, tenderness, and rage he feels for the world is channeled (or

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Panczenko, "Interview with Peter Gourfain," in *Peter Gourfain: Clay, Wood, Bronze, and Works on Paper*, exh. cat. (Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002), 10.



captive) in the work, which exudes a cantankerous *generosity*... He puts into each piece everything that he's got, all the moral force of his convictions and his doubts."<sup>2</sup>

In addition, since the late 1970s, in his role as a fiercely independent social commentator, Gourfain has fought for national and international issues, including civil strife in Northern Ireland, nuclear disarmament, and ecology. He has contributed to grassroots community organizations in New York City and elsewhere, such as creating political banners, buttons, postcards, and logos for events and organizations such as: Art Against Apartheid, Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America, the Alliance for Cultural Democracy, and the Irish nationalist group H-Block Armagh. He has used printmaking as a means to contribute to activist actions and disseminate political and social justice messages in support of organizations that enact social change, creating leaflets, banners, graphics and buttons.

These activities are directly reflected in his artwork, which showcases themes such as the victims of racial injustice and police brutality, appreciation for the working class, disdain for capitalism and corporate culture, and the destruction of the environment. These references are interspersed with keen observations of the everyday urban environment that he inhabits, references to literary classics, particularly James Joyce, and letters from an alphabet of his own invention. Above all, however, he retains a pervasive curiosity and care for his fellow human beings.

An exhibition of Gourfain's work was held at the Chazen Museum (formerly the Elvehjem Art Museum) in 2002. He has also had a major exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1987.

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<sup>2</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, "Silence Would Be a Compromise," in *Peter Gourfain: Clay, Wood, Bronze, and Works on Paper* (Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002), 20.

### Location

*Michael Stewart* is currently installed at the Chazen Museum in Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 13. To view this work in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

### Visual Description

*Michael Stewart* is a wooden sculpture created by Peter Gourfain in 1989. The sculpture began as an agricultural yoke which Gourfain repurposed by carving images in all sides. Displayed upright, on its end, on a pedestal, the sculpture measures fifty-three by seven and one half by nine inches overall. Looking at the sculpture straight on reveals a series of six holes of varying sizes down its center. Starting from the top, the palm of a left hand appears, its fingers carved into individual people. The words "Mike's hand" flank the hand and a deep gash runs through the palm. Below the hand, a series of four faces that look masculine appear. One of the four faces is in profile, though all have exaggerated facial features with large noses, lips, and eyes. The word "TRUTH" sits among the column of faces. At the bottom of the column, a right hand appears, palm up, resembling the hand at top, with fingers carved into people and a deep palm wound. The words "mojo hand" flank this palm. Looking at the right side of the sculpture, its shape changes significantly as the curvature of the yoke is revealed. The center of this side depicts two people who appear to be embracing each other. An animal that resembles a horse stands in front of them. Above the pair, the phrase "STONDWE" appears and beneath them, the phrase "TOGIDRE" sits. Beneath the couple, the head and neck of a bird wind down the length of the yoke and curl into an animal that resembles an otter. The phrase "SHUT IT FROM HATRED, AVARICE" winds along the left side and up the top curvature of the yoke. On the back of the sculpture, or flat part of the yoke, an image of Michael Stewart appears, his name flanking the top of his head while three stylized letters "EMX" flank his chin. Above his head, the circular hole has been carved and lined in a star shape suggesting a halo of some type. Two pelicans sit underneath Michael, the date "9.3.89" separating the two. Towards the bottom of this side, a face in profile appears, mouth agape, the phrase "BEWAROR YEBOWO" written above its head. A star shape is carved around the lowermost hole and the phrase "BITTEREST ANGUISH" winds around the top of the hole. The left side of the sculpture shows a central male figure holding what appears to be a candle in his left hand. He is framed by a rectangle of words, the phrase "WE TOO BURN" above his head and the words "WITH HOLY FLAME UNSHAKEABLE" running down the left side. This figure is surrounded by birds, again, and an otter sits at the very bottom.

## Content and Context

Peter Gourfain's sculpture *Michael Stewart* was made in 1989 in response to the murder of Michael Stewart, a twenty-five-year-old African American man from Brooklyn who was arrested and brutally beaten by transit police for writing graffiti in the New York City subway on September 13, 1983. Stewart arrived at Bellevue Hospital in a coma and died of his injuries thirteen days later.

Michael J. Stewart was an aspiring artist and model who was part of the downtown East Village dance club scene, alongside artists Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) and Keith Haring (1958-1990). All three also wrote graffiti, though Stewart less so than his friends. Although Haring was arrested many times for drawing graffiti in the subway, he was never brutalized at the hands of police. Basquiat was deeply shaken by Michael Stewart's death and is known to have said "It could have been me."<sup>3</sup> He also created an homage to Stewart in the form of a painting, as did Haring in 1985. Stewart's death further radicalized artists in and outside his circle and their art became a form of activism. They infused their work with imagery that depicted aspects of society and culture that were unjust and morally or politically corrupt. Some artists, like Gourfain, also became engaged in actions for social change and used their art in the service of protest.

Demonstrations were quickly organized in New York to protest police brutality and the unjust death of Michael Stewart. During the demonstrations that took place in NYC in 1983, protestors chanted Stewart's name and called for an investigation into his death. They called out the subsequent falsifying of the medical evidence in Stewart's cause of his death by city officials, which was used to exonerate the officers involved. Two years later, in November 1985, six of the eleven police officers involved were indicted and tried for criminally negligent homicide but were acquitted of all charges. In June 1986, a federal investigation concluded, citing insufficient evidence, that Michael Stewart's civil rights were not violated. In March 1987, the Metropolitan Transit Authority cleared ten transit officers in the death of Michael Stewart, but paid Stewart's family 1.7 million to settle a wrongful death suit.

Gourfain carved this sculpture on an old wooden ox yoke. This is not unusual in the artist's practice, as he began only using recycled wood for his sculpture around the 1980s, and therefore often incorporates old tools into his work. The artist had in fact created an earlier homage to the deceased youth, *For Michael Stewart*, carved in 1986-87 into a carpenter's jointer. The 1989 piece is carved into a yoke, a farm implement used for harnessing animals of burden for agricultural labor. This device could also serve as a symbol of enslavement, given its associations with labor, and that it was used to coffer enslaved individuals. Gourfain utilized a rich vocabulary of imagery for the vignettes he carved into the yoke, some of which is repeated from previous works, and some unique to this sculpture. While Gourfain's sculptures contain narrative content, it does not flow in a proscribed linear format, and therefore meaning is dispersed throughout the work. The viewer is left to link together the scenes and decipher their meaning (in the case of a 1987 Brooklyn Museum exhibition, the artist created a "key" for the public to assist in the interpretation of his work).

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Erik Nielson, "'It Could Have Been Me': The 1983 Death of a NYC Graffiti Artist," *NPR Code Switch* (September 16, 2013)



The subject's portrait appears on the flat side of the yoke with the carved inscription "MICHAEL STEWART" surrounding his head like a halo, surmounted by a star flanked by faces, some with gaping mouths, and some with hands raised in a gesture honoring Black Power. To the right of his chin is the monogram "EMX" composed of letters from an invented alphabet that Gourfain often used in his works. On the opposite side of the yoke at the top and at the bottom Gourfain carved two hands, the right hand identified as "MIKES HAND," and the left hand identified as "MOJO HAND," both displaying open palms with wounds, or stigmata, like Christian images of Jesus Christ showing his wounds from the Crucifixion or of martyred Christian saints showing theirs. Placed in the center above a bearded Christ-like face is the word "TRUTH."

The sculpture seems to speak out through the many open-mouthed faces and numerous inscriptions, including, "WE TOO BURN WITH HOLY FLAME UNSHAKABLE" surrounding the figure of a man holding a burning candle at a vigil; "SHUT IT FROM HATRED, AVARICE," "STONDWE" (stand we?), and "TOGIDRE" (the Middle English adverb meaning two or more gathered in one place or joined by marriage) surrounding the image of an embracing couple with a calf, possibly a reference to the victim's parents with a sacrificial animal at their feet; "BITTEREST ANGUISH" carved below the head of a woman in profile with an open mouth as a counterpart to the portrait of Michael Stewart above.

Gourfain employs a figurative style that is inspired by Romanesque sculpture, which, in his opinion, is unrealistic but not quite abstract. The artist draws on the medieval tradition of narrative sculpture found on church façades that, teeming with figures and inscriptions, offer the viewer a visual recounting of the Christian stories of martyrdom, damnation, and redemption. Similarly, carved on this wooden ox yoke, Gourfain symbolically narrates the modern-day martyrdom of Michael Stewart, and by extension the story of oppression suffered by Black men like him past and present. Gourfain's sculpture *Michael Stewart* still speaks eloquently to the power of art as a catalyst for personal reckoning, social commentary, and activism over thirty years after its creation.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Peter Gourfain memorialized the life of Michael Stewart through a carved wooden yoke. What associations do you have with a yoke? Why do you think Gourfain specifically chose this shape?
2. White artists have been increasingly criticized for creating work about black experiences that focuses solely on black pain and suffering despite well-meaning intentions. Does this sculpture fall into that category? What were Gourfain's intentions when creating this work? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. Have you ever created an homage to someone, living or not? If so, what objects did you include in your homage? How did you decide what to include? Who is an homage for – the maker or the honoree?
4. Compare Gourfain's work to the ways in which artists are currently responding to contemporary events of social justice, inequity, police brutality, and the pandemic. How is it the same? How is it different?

**Collection Connections for Further Engagement:** *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

Peter Gourfain (American, b. 1934). [41 Shots](#), 2000. Woodcut on newsprint, 23 3/4 x 14 3/4 in. Gift of the artist, 2002.19.

Gourfain created this print in 2000, when four plain-clothed New York City police officers fired forty-one gunshots at unarmed Amadou Diallo, killing him.

Peter Gourfain (American, b. 1934). [Powerful Days](#), 1991. Linoleum cut, 70 x 46 in. Art Collections Fund purchase, 2001.53.

*Powerful Days* is a print that documents a study for a bronze sculpture that Gourfain created for a school in Brooklyn. The print (and sculpture) depict images tied to the Civil Rights movement and that incorporate sign language.

Juan Logan (American, b. 1946), [Ghost](#), 2009, six polymer plate etchings, 10 x 10 in., Shirley G. Epstein Endowment Fund purchase, 2012.43a-f.

In this series, Juan Logan uses photography to transform tools of enslavement such as leg irons, shackles, and iron neck rings into eerie reminders of America's dark past.

**Additional Resources**

Jan Garden Castro, "In the Studio with Peter Gourfain: 'peculiar energy' and 'cantankerous generosity,'" *International Sculpture Center re:sculpt* (November 2, 2016) <https://blog.sculpture.org/2016/11/02/in-the-studio-with-peter-gourfain-peculiar-energy-and-cantankerous-generosity/> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Franck Goldberg, *Who Killed Michael Stewart?* (1984), 35 minutes, <https://vimeo.com/350125872>

Peter Gourfain and Noon Gourfain (his daughter), excerpts from *Cultural Correspondence* (Summer 1985) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Niloufar Haidari, "When Basquiat Took a Stand Against Police Brutality," *i-D* (December 5, 2016) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Erik Nielson, "'It Could Have Been Me': The 1983 Death of a NYC Graffiti Artist," *NPR Code Switch* (September 16, 2013) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Russell Panczenko and Lucy R. Lippard, *Peter Gourfain: Clay, Wood, Bronze, and Works on Paper* (Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 2002), <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/Arts/Arts-idx?type=header&id=Arts.Pgourfain&isize=M&pview=hide>