



REVIEWS

BOSTON

Dave Cole

JUDI ROTENBERG GALLERY

Providence, Rhode Island–based artist Dave Cole blurs the lines between homespun and manufactured, innocent and subversive, nostalgic and postindustrial in his knitted, quilted, and hand-sewn sculptures that range from three-inch-tall Kevlar booties to a 450-square-foot American flag quilt stitched together from the red, white, and blue areas of the “192 Flags of the World”—the official United Nations set. Cole first became known around 2003 for his series of variously sized lead, Kevlar, and fiberglass teddy bears, but his career surged with *Knitting Machine*, 2005, a work that utilized John Deere excavators to purl rolls of red, white, and blue felt into a thirty-five-by-twenty-inch American flag outside Mass MOCA, in North Adams, Massachusetts. For his second Boston solo show, “All American,” Cole continues to recraft the American flag and to suggest sociopolitical punch lines in impressive recombinations of found and laboriously handcrafted objects. Cole has noted that P. T. Barnum is his greatest influence (“for his interest in the all-American spectacle”), but his sculptures also betray affinities with Jasper Johns’s collaged flags and bronze sculptures, Katharina Fritsch’s knit sweaters, and, in their irreverent humor and incisive social commentary, Claes Oldenburg’s monuments to the mundane.

The eighteen sculptures and installations in this show—all but two from 2008—are open-ended and often adorable, even while being loaded with meditations on United States imperialism and warfare. In fact, all the new work is related in some way to ballistics. *Flags of the World Study #1 (1:4 scale)*, 2007, an impressive model of Cole’s colossal quilted flag (which itself was not on view, though an entertaining video of its creation was) hung on the rear gallery wall next to a rolling textile bin containing remnants of the flags used in the study, some of which were scattered on the floor alongside a pair of large scissors. This beautifully sewn-together American flag (crisscrossed by patterns of flags from other countries) suggests two equally viable takes on the United States: as a nation of immigrants, and as global usurper.

Bullet Flag, 2008, is a regulation-size flag complete with stars and stripes made from exploded bullets and projectile fragments that, according to Cole, “could have killed somebody.” The flag contains almost forty thousand of these ammunition parts; its exquisitely textured surface is an apocalyptic wasteland that sharply condemns our nation’s lethal history. *Knitted with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)*, 2008, consists of two twelve-gauge shotguns that, crossed over each



Dave Cole, *Flags of the World Study #1 (1:4 scale)*, 2007, mixed media, 48 x 92".

other like mounted hunting trophies, have been transformed into giant knitting needles holding a dozen stitches of “yarn” made from spun bronze wool and leading into a glistening bronze blanket that cascades to the floor. Two discharged shells placed beside the unloaded firearms attest to the artist’s having knitted this shimmering object with guns full of buckshot.

Baseball Study #6, 2008, is a simple pairing of an ordinary baseball with an M67 fragmentation grenade mounted on a found piece of wood. This type of grenade, currently used in Iraq, was deliberately based in size and shape on the baseball—for the purpose of easy, familiar handling. This and other of Cole’s sculptural works—a tricycle pulling a Radio Flyer wagon bearing an M60 machine gun and bullet belt (*Machine Gun Nest*, 2008); baby clothing fashioned from the Kevlar lining of two bulletproof vests used in the first Gulf War—imply that as a nation we have been tainted by a pervasive war mentality that facilitates indoctrinating our youth for battle. These seemingly playful corruptions of the symbols of an all-American childhood are perhaps Cole’s most alarming sculptural forewarnings.

—Francine Koslow Miller