

ART PAPERS



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STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2008 US \$7 CAN \$9 UK £6 EU €8DAVE COLE
BOSTON

Dave Cole successfully crosses conceptual craft and political assemblage. His recent show savvily mixes black humor and mordant political commentary, and features monochrome American flags assembled from discharged bullets, an ex-military tricycle pulling a wagon carrying a decommissioned M60 machine gun, baby bottles cast of industrial metal, an American flag made of eviscerated fragments of other countries' flags, and a curtain-sized "scarf" [Judi Rotenberg Gallery; September 4—October 12, 2008]. While Cole knitted this scarf from specially-ordered spun bronze using two loaded shotguns, the delicate beauty of the metal fibers makes it almost impossible to simultaneously uphold the material's connotation of permanence. The mounted shotguns mimic some sort of twisted monument. What's more, firearm regulations in the state of Massachusetts prevent the work's availability for sale. Cole's basic idea is simple yet profound: a visceral declaration of the direct relationship between the military-industrial complex, more bloated and powerful under Bush II than it has been for decades, and the privileged daily life of the average American, who still enjoys one of the highest living standards in the world.

Each piece operates on multiple levels: the juxtaposition of mundane, everyday objects with deeply disturbing, specialized military gear—culled from U.S. army storehouses and related outlets—leads us from initial provocation to deeper insights. Take, for example, Cole's strikingly fashionable, handmade baby clothes. While they feature careful details such as swaths hand-knit from strips of kevlar and adorable booties and hoods, these are still fabricated from the yellow bulletproof kevlar worn under army-issue camouflage. This clothing evokes the ridiculous heights of yuppie protectionism and comically suggests some actual use value in protecting America's Most Vulnerable. It is as if Cole tapped directly into the unconscious fantasies of paranoid Washington bureaucrats.

The bronze-colored stars and stripes of *Bullet Flag*, 2008, were produced by alternating the matte and sheen surfaces of actual discharged bullet fragments. The carefully arranged, twisted metal pieces yield a compelling, tactile, undulating surface. The work pays direct homage to Jasper Johns, whose monochrome drawn and painted flags were recently featured in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition, *Gray*, as well as the artistic tradition of political statements that enlist the flag, from Faith Ringgold to Hans Haacke. This weighty piece also evokes George Bataille's famous remark on Manet's *Olympia*: "...the silence that emanates from her, like that of a sunken ship." *Bullet Flag* is a stark critique of the hypocrisy of our government's spread of "democracy" abroad through violent occupation while it turns a blind eye to the ongoing violence raging in our own inner cities. The piece suggests the inherent relationship between violent scapegoating and nationalist cohesion in general. More poetic is the study for Cole's major in-process flag installation, *Flags of the World*, 2007, whose production and intended scale—two stories high—are documented in the gallery by a video. The study features an American flag sewn with gray thread out of bits of red, blue, and white fabric from a set of 192 "Flags of the World." Eviscerated, fragments of the other 191 national flags are strewn underneath the U.S. flag, scattered across the floor, and piled in a cloth bin. Haphazardly thrown in, a pair of large scissors carries the point home. The installation speaks to both the American dream of a multicultural melting pot and the nightmare of imperialist wars fostered in its name, which have destroyed the social fabric of other nations. The large-scale piece will be a spectacular critical statement wherever it is exhibited.

—Karen Kurczynski

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Dave Cole, *Baseball Study #6*, 2008, mixed media with M67 fragmentation grenade, 8 x 10 x 5 inches (courtesy of the artist and Judi Rotenberg Gallery, Boston; photo: www.theknittingmachine.com)