

For Immediate Release

Dave Cole: *Unreal City* October 2 – November 7, 2010

Dave Cole, an artist known for his ambitious, public sculptures, including excavators that knit an enormous American Flag with utility poles, a story-high toxic teddy bear, and a bridge tagged with florescent knit camouflage, has produced a somber, reflective body of work for his NYC debut titled, *Unreal City*. It is a body of work that draws inspiration from modernist literature, demonstrates his signature material rigor, and provokes intense, reflective readings.

Military tank treads, fired bullets, United Nations Flags, and shotguns are some of the materials that Cole deconstructs and re-purposes for this laborious body of work. Despite the political content that is both literally and conceptually integral to Cole's sculptures, Cole is not proposing an argument. In fact, a driving intent in his work is his commitment to reflecting multiple perspectives that are often contradictory. He is interested in depicting what is, not what should be.

Cole's new work is about history, war, and industrialization. However, if there is an omniscient subject directing the show, it is this: Time erases and renews all things. The title, *Unreal City*, is a direct reference to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, addressing the brutal, yet impartial course of time, an agent of birth and death. It is about the permeability of grandeur, the temporality of human accomplishment. The subject of the rise and the fall also brings to mind American Hudson River painter, Thomas Cole. His series of paintings titled "Course of Empire," depict the transition of a landscape from untouched nature, to increased development, to an erected city, to the destruction of its monuments and buildings, and finally, to the return of nature. Human contribution, and human vulnerability to the impartial course of life, is the crux of Cole's work.



Salt Print (La Somme, 1916), 2010 is a double-track spine of military tank treads that Cole cast with pure table salt. Traditionally, casting (specifically in bronze) is intended to embed an event or a figure in history or to script one's legacy. However, Cole selected salt because of its transient relationship to landscape and to mankind. In fact, it is a seemingly simple, innocuous material that is wrought with historic significance, complexity and contradiction. (Read [Salt](#), by Mark Kurlansky) Salt has been used to preserve, and to destroy; it once held coveted value, and has become commonplace; it has powerful cultural and ritualistic significance for some, while being utterly valueless to others. In one of his most ambitious, unprecedented and expensive material feats to date, Cole spent the bulk of his Rappaport Prize on fabricating a custom furnace designed to melt salt for the experiment of casting it (a process that he was told is impossible). After several trial and error toxic attempts, Cole succeeded. Significantly, Cole chose to cast the part of a tank that touches ground and leaves a temporary print on the earth as it passes through its own wake. Landscape, the ultimate canvas of time, is a recurring metaphor throughout Cole's exhibition. *Salt Print (La Somme, 1916)*, is at once a ghostly remnant, a loaded memory of violence, and a beautiful, light-permeable, abstraction.

Leaves of Grass, 2010 is a landscape of decay overcome by the persistence of renewal, which Cole symbolizes through glimmering, hand-cut bullet shells pocketed in groups over the dark terrain of melted bullets. The result is a combination of apocalyptic doom, and the humble revelation that life persists. Inspired by Walt Whitman's book of poetry that bears the same title, *Leaves of Grass*, is a eulogy to the entangled relationship between nature and mankind. It is also perhaps the most direct nod to death in Cole's exhibition. Each mangled bullet literally contains the memory of violence. And yet it also retains the strongest declaration of life and growth. In his poem "Grass," Carl Sandburg writes, *I am the grass. Let me work. Bodies fall, and the landscape regenerates. Or, made present (as Cole's work insists), we die in order for others to live.*

American Flag (Rust) 2010 is a mesmerizing wasteland of decaying industrial objects- steel bolts, washers, and gears- that Cole collected, sorted, and arranged to compose a relief of an officially proportioned American flag. The result is a highly textured object that is void of color, save the tonal variation produced by the natural process of rust. (Incidentally, steel deteriorates most rapidly through exposure to salt.) The piece is a landscape of the passage of time, an homage to change, a memorial to human, and specifically American development. Much of the nostalgia in Cole's work, which exudes from this piece, harkens to a pre-WWI era when industrialization was synonymous with progress. Important to

Cole, his materials are not simply symbolic; they literally hold their own history. The thousands of disintegrating, irregular, steel and iron detritus were collected from the ground surrounding the artist's studio (an area where industry once boomed). Many of the scraps are so degraded they have lost their original form and have begun to resemble bark, sticks, and leaves. They are returning to nature.

Knitting with Loaded Shotguns, Safeties Off, 2008/2010 is a piece that was literally dangerous for the artist to make, as the title indicates. In an antithetical twist, Cole knit with spun statuary bronze (special ordered from the manufacturer), a metal that is traditionally used to make statues and monuments, but which resembles loose, billowing fabric here. It shimmers and bends through itself, an apparition of excess suited for a fairy-tale. In direct contrast, are two angular rifles that once served as the perilous knitting needles and now exist as decorative hangers for the cascading bronze. Hung high, and formally crossed at their tips, the rifles mimic a trophy commemorating a heroic achievement, a victory over death. In fact, the artist could have shot himself while making it- twice (Cole first exhibited this piece in Boston, and has remade it for his exhibition in New York). But the real power of this piece lies somewhere between its urgency and its indulgence, the defiance of death and the quest for grandeur and beauty.

Flags of the World, 2008 is the most monumental achievement of Cole's exhibition, and the largest American flag in the artist's oeuvre. Spanning 28 feet in the inner gallery, it pushes the perimeters of the room and towers above the viewer. The textured, patterned 450 square foot piece is comprised of 192 international flags that were deconstructed and sorted by color, then reorganized and painstakingly assembled to create an enormous patch-work quilt of an American flag. Lying at the foot of the elevated piece are discarded colorful scraps of frayed fabric. The surprisingly varied tonality of the red, white and blue is testimony to its assembled construction, and therefore, its poignant implications. *Flags of the World* is a piece that invites multiple points of entry and provokes contradictory responses. In light of the title of his show, and standing in front of this piece, a question lingers, What is an American flag if not the symbol of an empire that is becoming increasingly more unreal?