

A New Standard

Dave Cole '95, a 2000 Brown graduate (with honors in visual arts), puts a lot of thought into his sculptures. So don't you dare suggest that this issue's cover art is just window dressing. The work shown here was unwittingly (he swears) inspired by the time he spent as a volunteer at Ground Zero. The first of his American Flag series appeared in a show entitled Crisis Response at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Museum in Providence, Rhode Island. Besides toy soldiers, his flags have featured cowboys/Indians and police/fire-fighters. In addition to sculpture, he's done installations, such as a gigantic teddy bear made of pink fiberglass insulation and construction excavators knitting an American flag with telephone poles, in all sorts of likely and unlikely venues. On a recent visit to Putney, he dug an old brick out of the Houghton Brook and cleaned off the mud. The face bore a single word: PRAY. He left it on my desk as a gift and I'm afraid to move it, lest it become something less than art. I know he left it there for a reason. Conversations with Dave are often non-linear, so rather than a Q&A we'll just give you a peek inside his mind via sound bites:

"A Viet Nam vet came up to me when I was showing my flags at RISD and said, 'Your piece was true to my experience.' That's the response I wanted. I don't want to pull any punches, but I also don't want to be disrespectful. My sculptures are not an interpretation of a flag or a representation of a flag. They are flags. I acquired the official military spec blueprint from the Government Printing Office and made them that size."

"I'm working on a flag right now that's 9.5 by 5 feet, the official size for covering caskets. It's going to take about 13,000 toy soldiers to cover it. The one on the cover has about 1,000."

"Lately I'm painting things pink. First it was teddy bears. The paint is really viscous, like slimy Pepto-Bismol. They look like they've survived some sort of Mary Kay holocaust. There's something evocative about the juxtaposition

of images of comfort maimed and destroyed. I've tarred and feathered quite a few teddy bears, as well. Now I'm doing guns: a Mossberg shotgun and an AK-47. They look foul. I wrapped them in string, then painted them so they look like muscle."


"I hold the Guinness record for making the world's largest knitting needles: 27 feet. Those beat the previous record of 14 feet, which was also my record."

"After three days of wandering around wondering what I should do, I put on my construction clothes and headed for New York. The National Guard hadn't yet taken over the security checks from the NYPD, so I tucked myself in with a union crew and found myself a job resupplying the search teams. I didn't even realize, incredible as it sounds, that American Flag was the first new series of work that I started when I came back from Ground Zero. I didn't see the connection."

"John Boswell '55, who works with my dad, says his class was the first allowed to watch television at The Putney School because some parents were on trial during the McCarthy era. Not sure if that's true, or just rural legend."

"American Flag (public safety) is the cops and firefighters piece. Right now it's hanging over the chief's conference table at the Providence, Rhode Island police department."

"No simple answer about any of this stuff is going to be real or true. Nationalism versus violence. Patriotism versus the idea of patriotism. History versus nostalgia. There's a playfulness about the American Flag series, but much more obsessive. Play versus perseverance."

"Often people will be in the room with one of the flags and not realize it's not a fabric flag. I'd rather engage someone that way than by shitting on the Virgin Mary. I got done making shock art in the seventh grade. I'm totally of the post-sensation generation of artists." 



Pieces from the American Flag series range from \$1,500 to \$4,000. People can e-mail me at davecole@openarts.org if they're interested.