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Nationalism: Pubic Voices, Private Lives

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Figure 1. Jerry Bleem, *The Flag of the Un-United States of America*, 2006; 54" H x 90" W, U.S.A. and Texas flags; collection of the artist; photograph by Tom Van Eynde.

For millennia fabric banners have served as indicators of political affiliation and national allegiance. Flags are steeped in the foundational mythology of a country, region, or group. Flags sum up moments of glory (while ignoring ignominious history). Flags foster a pride in identity that can unite people. Flags are the stuff of swelled chests and Independence Day parades.

But countries are composed of individuals who have private histories, relationships, hopes and dreams. Some people (or their ancestors) know firsthand their country's failure to offer equality and justice to all its citizens. Most people use this national symbol to shade patriotism with their own particular concerns. By visually associating a position with the national icon, groups can wave the flag of patriotism—and lobby for their candidate, depict history in a particular light, or justify their special interests.



Figure 2. Jerry Bleem, *The Flag of the Un-United States of America*, 2006. 54" H x 90" W, U.S.A. and Texas flags; detail. Collection of the artist. Photograph by Tom Van Eynde.

Not surprisingly artists have employed flags or the depiction of flags. Like all material culture, these objects and images may be read superficially as reflective of nationalistic or geographic influence. Or they might be read more deeply—taking into account what precipitated the work. In Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* from 1830, the historical context is not the French Revolution but the three-day revolt of 1830 that forced the abdication of Charles X. Besides serving as a national or public record, this painting also holds Delacroix's ideology. Wearing a tall, black hat, Delacroix included himself in the scene as both witness and supporter of this group act.

Similarly, Claude Monet's *Festival of June 30, 1878 [Rue Montorgueil, Paris]* aflutter with flags illustrates a scene of national pride. The title of the painting corresponds to the opening day of an international exhibition held in Paris. The real teeth of the flags are revealed when the viewer remembers that a scant eight years previously France had been defeated in the Franco-Prussian (Franco-German) War. The enthusiastic scene Monet gives us might be modeled after what he saw that day; the painting certainly announces that France is back on the world scene, a power that cannot be ignored.

In a developing body of work, I am also relying upon my national flag and its allied meanings. However, rather than using a depiction of this familiar pennant, I am using actual flags--nearly all flags of the United States of America. Many of these flags bear evidence of their having been flown or displayed in the classic gesture of patriotism. They are faded, discolored, stained and worn. After cutting these flags into thin strips, I am crocheting them into new surfaces. Though clearly not treating the stars and stripes in a traditional or widely acceptable manner, my goal is not to desecrate this symbol or offend people (though that might result.) By physically altering the cloth and crafting a different visual product, I want to document the time I have spent reflecting upon the complex relationship any person might have with one's country.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, reminded the American people of our identity as a nation. Not surprisingly, the days that followed found the national emblem pressed into service to represent a unity both present and desired. As frequently happens during disasters, people came together in unprecedented ways. The flag became a sign of the nation facing and recovering; at the same time, flying and waving flags hid negative responses and pertinent questions, and encouraged conclusions that were later proved inaccurate. Of course, the stress of the moment and the need to act quickly contributed substantially to misjudgments and favoritism. More thoughtful responses came in time. Nonetheless, waving the stars and stripes often served to gloss over disagreements and stifle critical dialogue.

Three years later, the façade of national unity forged in adversity cracked in the face of a presidential election. Though elections are time-honored events for flag-waving, 2004 seemed to find every contender and his/her supporters waving the national colors at every event. As is usually the case, the flag was pressed into service to demonstrate one's worthiness for office and a candidate's truly patriotic position on any issue. One of those issues, the presence of United States troops in Iraq, focused a great deal of the election discussion and its sound bites. But, predictably, the campaigning discourse revealed the diversity of opinions held by citizens of the United States of America. This wide variance certainly raised the issue of the foundation of our national unity. However, the election also highlighted an observation familiar to sociologists: civic responsibility in the United States has been fading in the face of increasing individualism. Though all national offices had contenders, local governmental positions frequently offered a choice of only a single candidate and, in some cases, none.

The Flag of the Un-United States of America (2006; 54" H x 90" W; U.S.A. and Texas flags), figure 1, is my version of the stars and bars for a country lacking a group identity, a country composed of individuals looking out for themselves. Instead of the usual 13 stripes, I have changed colors with each line of crochet. I wanted to imply that everyone gets his/her own stripe. No sharing needed; no group consciousness necessary. Because the flags utilized to construct this piece had been used, there is a wide variation in the hues, a variation that hints at the intrinsic mixture of peoples and opinions that compose any country including the United States. Employing the solid blue areas of Texas flags enabled me to create a blue field without stars except for the shaggy, tentative specter of the familiar stars created from bits of the cut blue field of a U.S. flag. In effect, my version does not require the components of the nation to show up to be counted. They might have better things to do or absent themselves because of an inability to agree on a national identity.

A compelling aspect of the current national scene is the way the media presents the news of the U.S. presence in Iraq. Namely, I observe two kinds of stories: those that deal with the formulation of public policy and decisions made in the name of the country, and those that report on individuals whose lives were altered, sometimes permanently, by this conflict. The latter includes stories that detail parents leaving children, especially very young children, and spouses to go to war; recount the lives of those killed and the means of their deaths; and describe the recovery of the wounded. However, these two sets of stories seem to exist apart from each other; personal struggles and tragedies are kept separate from the public life of the nation. It is as if no one wants to admit that national, governmental, public choices impact citizens' private lives.

My desire to bring together national policy and the individuals that comprise this country lead me to use crochet. Crocheted items elicit associations with older women, the quintessential providers of the comforting home, the grandmothers of our lives or fantasies. By employing the domestic craft of crochet to transform the icon of the nation, I hoped to join the private to the public. *Measured for Nationalism* (2006; 76" H x 30.5" W; U.S.A. flag, cloth) faces the ultimate connection between a nation's policy and an individual's life. A single U.S. flag is cut and crocheted: a red-white-and-blue surface turns into a red-and-white surface because of the way the flag was dissected. When I had finished crocheting the flag, I continued with white cloth to complete a rectangle corresponding roughly to the size of a body or a grave.

Because crochet is a time-intensive process, the works of this series present the time I have chosen to devote to the making of these objects. That time is coextensive with the time I have spent thinking about the implications of being a citizen of my country, and of being associated with my country's actions on the world stage. I have considered my responsibility to participate in the group action of being a country, and to scrutinize the leadership of governmental officials, and local, state and federal policy. Having an opinion does not seem as important as being aware of the complexities of national, commercial and social norms that become part of our lives simply by virtue of where we live or what passport we hold. *Nationalism's Strategy* (fig. 3) alludes to the importance of finding one's way through complex issues and recognizing the power struggles involved. Nine flags have been reduced to their colors of red, white and blue; they are crocheted into simple shapes of circles and squares in three bands of color. Their arrangement on the floor suggests both household articles (e.g., rugs), and competitive games (e.g., tic-tac-toe).



Figure 3. Jerry Bleem, *Nationalism's Strategy*, 2006.
 Dimensions variable (as installed, ca. 6' x 6'), U.S.A. flags.
 Collection of the artist. Photograph by Eric Mattlin.

My hands cut up the flags and reconfigure the resulting strips of cloth. As an agent of an action, as the maker of objects, I think of these simple processes as a way to make my thinking physical. Perhaps that is always the reward for those who create things: seeing one's product and being able to know one's self as author. By the same token, deciding between the significant and the trivial, and being aware of the measure used, endows one with the perception to understand the underpinnings of a value system, of the human ability to choose. Displaying a flag can signify a variety of meanings, not all of them important. Sometimes the flag becomes no more than an ornament and patriotism is simply fashionable. This perspective is considered by *Decorative Nationalism (prototype)* (fig. 4).



Figure 4. Jerry Bleem, *Decorative Nationalism (prototype)*, 2006.
 5" H x 7" W x 6" D, U.S.A. flag.
 Collection of the Artist. Photograph by Eric Mattlin.

Though it could have been any national policy, it was the decision of the government of the United States of America to invade another sovereign nation that triggered this body of work. As weeks turned into months, as weapons of mass destruction remained elusive, as the public rhetoric focused on justifying this incursion, I persisted in reflecting upon my relationship to my country by cutting the national icon into thin strips and crocheting loop upon loop. Thinking. Wondering. Trying to understand. When one of my nephews was sent to Iraq with his Army unit, the unknown soldiers included one that I could name. I joined his parents, siblings, and grandmothers in praying and hoping for his safety. I thought about patriotism, about how I would describe my allegiance to my country, about the implication of “with liberty and justice for all.”

Looking at life both globally and personally is part of what artists do. Trying to reconcile what does not fit neatly together is everyone’s realm. As Michael Brenson has written: “Real-life situations are not intrusions that diminish our aesthetic experience. They are the conditions that make them possible” (Michael Brenson, “Experience, Complicity & Quality,” *Sculpture*, November 1998, p. 21).