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Art lovers find patchwork flag awesome, awful

By Frank Cerabino

When Wileen Coyne stepped into the cavernous gallery on Tuesday morning and saw the enormous American flag towering above the carelessly strewn scraps of flags from other nations, she said, "Oh, my God!"

Thousands have come before her to this room in the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach to try to make sense of a provocative exhibit called *Flags of the World* by Rhode Island-based artist Dave Cole.

Cole will be at the museum on Thursday to talk about his work, which will end its two-month exhibition at the Norton on Sunday.

Until then, the Norton's visitors will continue debating among themselves, taking the time - at the artist's invitation - to scribble their impromptu art reviews on 65 poster-sized sheets of paper that line the white walls of the exhibit.

These commentaries are absorbing in their own way, or as some visitor wrote: "Best part are the comments of the viewers. That is the real America."

Cole stitched a 15-foot-by-28.5-foot American flag by cutting out the red, white and blue in the flags of the remaining 192 nations that make up the United Nations.

Some people look at this floor-to-ceiling flag and see a jigsaw puzzle of a banner, an ingenious representation of America as a melting pot of world culture.

"Thank you for this beautiful display," one viewer wrote. "We have helped many countries globally, so it is similar to them being part of who we are today."

But others focus on the floor beneath the flag, where the scraps of the world's flags lie in haphazard disarray.

"I believe this shows the ugly side of America that abuses its power and takes from other countries, leaving only remnants behind," one viewer wrote.

It's not uncommon to see wildly divergent interpretations appearing side by side among the scribbled art reviews on the walls.

"This is fabulous. It proves we are one world," is written near, "It made me very sad."

"So wonderful. God bless the U.S.A." shares space with "Why don't you win a World Cup?"

The commentaries are sometimes in other languages and sometimes funny.

"My daughter just walked through the flags on the floor. Guess she didn't get it."

Other kids, though, were more observant: "I think they would be angry to see there (sic) flags on the floor," wrote "Lucas, age 7."

And a Canadian was stereotypically docile: "Happy to lend you some red & white."

If you take stock in the commentary, Cole's work is either making John Lennon happy, or Betsy Ross roll in her grave. And he has either pegged America perfectly, or has it all wrong.



Courtesy Norton Museum of Art

Dave Cole's *Flags of the World* exhibit at the Norton Museum of Art -- a 15-foot-by-28.5-foot American flag made by cutting out the red, white and blue in the flags of the remaining 192 nations that make up the United Nations -- has drawn controversy from art lovers.

Depending on what it is you think he's saying.

"You got balls, Cole," one viewer wrote.

But the artist prefers to stay out of the fray he has created.

"I'm not trying to tell anyone what to think," he has said about his work. "I'll take elegant expression of a complicated truth over clear and persuasive presentation of an argument any day."

And yet, there's so much to wonder about his flag.

Why is one of the points on the top right star gray, rather than white?

Is it the artist's "sub-conscious feeling about the nation's future," as one viewer observed? Or is that reading too much into the work?

If you'd like to hear what Cole has to say about his piece, he'll be at the museum Thursday at 6 p.m., talking with Palm Beach Post editorial page editor Randy Schultz in a presentation called "Politics of the Flag: A Conversation with the Artist."

Don't expect Cole to clear up the raging debate he's created on the walls of the museum.

As for Coyne, the woman who said, "Oh my God!" when she saw the flag, she too was eventually drawn to the commentaries along the wall to validate her impression.

And she was surprised to discover people who didn't see the work as a celebration of America.

"I don't see it as destroying the other flags, but bringing everybody together," she said.

Then the 78-year-old Boca Raton woman noted ruefully that her community association in Broken Sound would never condone displaying a flag that big.

It would be against the rules," she said.