

Art in America

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DAVE COLE

DODGE

Dave Cole's "Unreal City," at the newly opened Dodge Gallery, featured meticulously crafted, frequently beautiful sculptures that grapple with big themes: patriotism, masculinity and American poetry, specifically works by Walt Whitman, T.S. Eliot and Carl Sandburg. They also engage a host of monumental sculptures past and present, by artists ranging from Kienholz and Oldenburg to Koons, Whiteread, Barney and Fritsch. This was Cole's first New York solo, although he has shown internationally and had one-person exhibitions at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (2009) and Mass MoCA (2005).

The centerpiece of "Unreal City" was Cole's *Flags of the World* (2008), an enormous U.S. flag that occupied an entire wall of the lower gallery, which is accessed by a staircase from the mezzanine-like upper gallery and partly viewable from above. *Flags of the World* is made up of all the red, white and blue fabric from the 192 banners included in an official United Nations flag set. Impeccably sewn together with gold thread by Cole himself—needlework is central to his practice—the conglomerate flag is a vivid critique of America's role in the world. It is possible to identify other countries' flags in the disembodied swatches that have been subsumed within Old Glory. Additionally, one found unused scraps from the harvested flags strewn on the floor beneath the composite, and Cole encouraged people to tread on them.

The upper gallery included a vitrine displaying some of Cole's plans for as-yet-unrealized large-scale projects, such as a mobile featuring real pickup trucks. Four slablike salt casts of WWI-era tank treads (each 5 by 21 by 34 inches) lay near the door on square white podiums, and beyond were devastated landscapes, terrain models fashioned out of spent bullet casings. On one wall hung a blanket that



Dave Cole: *Flags of the World*, 2008, United Nations official flag set and mixed mediums, 15 by 28½ feet; at Dodge.

Cole had crafted using shotguns as knitting needles; the specially fabricated yarn was spun of statuary bronze. The shotguns, displayed at the top of the artwork, were allegedly live when Cole created the work, hence the title: *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)*, 2008/2010.

Especially impressive in both craft and program was Cole's 2006 *Breastplate No. 6 (Oglala Sioux Tribe, circa 1891)*, an exact copy of an Oglala Sioux breastplate made of American bullet casings and strips of lead that have been carefully knit together. Cole has made a series of these works, each as faithful as possible to breastplates he studied in the Smithsonian's collection. These and the other powerful works in "Unreal City" showed Cole to be an artist who tackles ambitious political and historical subjects with a great deal of material ingenuity and not a trace of dogmatism.

—Matthew Israel