



DAVE COLE

American Lullaby

DAVID WINTON BELL GALLERY, BROWN UNIVERSITY



Porcelain Baby Blanket (detail) 2002

COVER
Untitled (Baseball Study #6) 2008

FROM BABY BLANKETS and baby bottles to souped-up tricycles and baseballs, the work included in *Dave Cole: American Lullaby* summons images of an idyllic American childhood—at first glance. *Fiberglass Teddy Bear* (2003 – 2014), an enormous stuffed pink bear visible through the windows of List Art Building, appears like a charmingly silly commemoration of youthful innocence. What, after all, is more emblematic of uncorrupted childhood than a teddy bear? Likewise, *Porcelain Baby Blanket* (2002), a white swaddling cloth encased in a glass vitrine, sits like a perfectly preserved relic. However, close inspection of either of these objects quickly reveals how monstrous they actually are. Both are knit from materials laden with tiny shards of glass, making them abhorrent to the touch and dangerous to the lungs: the bear from Owens Corning Fiberglas (typically used for home insulation) and the blanket from Fiberfrax (an industrial porcelain developed to replace asbestos). Throughout his practice, Dave Cole juxtaposes such hazardous materials with the nostalgia of childhood to elucidate tensions between the ideal and the real.

After graduating from Brown University in 2000, Cole began his career as a practicing artist in a world almost immediately turned upside down by the tragedy of September 11th and the ensuing War on Terror. In the wake of these events, “the emblems of American patriotism” abounded in the United States, from flags and bumper stickers to public recitals of the Pledge of Allegiance.¹ Cole responded to this rising tide



Three Generations 2013

Cole’s work seems to ask us to rethink patriotism in relation to human lives.

JAN GARDEN CASTOR

of nationalism by questioning “the sentimental unity” of such popular patriotism through his sculptural practice.² In his many children’s toys and accouterments he explores the ways in which such a false sense of community is cultivated while offering a dystopic vision of the future, in which children wear clothing made out of Kevlar and play with rattles in the shape of hand grenades. In his essay “A Citizen’s Response to the National Security Strategy of the United States,” cultural critic Wendell Berry warns against allowing patriotism to “degenerate into unquestioning deference to the objects of its affection... .”³ Cole repeatedly returns to the signs and symbols of American military and economic power—from guns and flags to icons of industrialism—using various loaded materials to critically reconstruct their meanings. His work is at once aggressive, incisive, and nostalgic. Drawing on the adage that it takes a village to raise a child, his sculptures suggest we are all complicit in the construction of the symbolic meaning of our national icons.

Cole is perhaps best known for his series of American flags which he has knit together using John Deere excavators and light-poles as part of a sensational performance at MASS MoCA; sewn together from the flags of other countries; compiled from used bullet casings; and melted



Porcelain Baby Blanket 2002

together from toy soldiers. Like Jasper Johns before him, Cole has used the flag for its inherent indexicality—an image of a flag is necessarily also a flag itself—and for its ubiquity. However, where Johns was interested in the nature of painting and the viability of representation after abstract expressionism, Cole is concerned with how his material choices alter what the stars and stripes are able to communicate, from industrial grandeur to neo-colonial ambition. In *American Flag (Toy Soldiers)* (2002), small green arms and legs protrude through the surface, reminding viewers not only of the organized violence underpinning the flag’s status, but also of the ways in which this violence is normalized from our earliest days playing children’s war games.

As Jan Garden Castro has noted, “Cole’s work seems to ask us to rethink patriotism in relation to human lives.”⁴ Sculptures such as *Untitled (Baseball Study #6)* (2008) and *Baby Bottle (After Discovery by the Artist of Military Specification MIL-B-16755B: Bottle, Nursing)* (2008) make this point unambiguously, declaring the very physical

RIGHT
American Flag (Toy Soldiers) 2002

BELOW
The Knitting Machine 2005
Acrylic felt with excavators and aluminum utility poles
Flag approximately 30' x 20' x 1'



Kevlar Romper (3-piece Suit) 2008

placing his baseball study on a wooden pedestal and casting his bottles in metal to give them the veneer of value. Mounted on the wall, the baby bottles are transformed, like bronzed baby shoes, into icons of a fugitive moment. By contrast, as Francine Koslow Miller notes, *Fiberglass Teddy* “responds in scale, subject and absurd humor to Claes Oldenburg’s *Proposal for a Colossal Monument for Central Park North, New York City Teddy Bear*, 1965.”⁵ Oldenburg proposed a series of similar monuments, each of which imagined a significant spatial intervention that, while humorous, also offered pointed social criticism. Produced as dangerous three-dimensional objects, Cole’s sculptures boldly realize the socially disruptive potential only implied in Oldenburg’s hypothetical project.

Cole persistently returns to themes of nostalgia through both his use of childhood imagery and his carefully researched embrace of American material culture. In his monumental sculpture *The Music Box* (2012–2014), he repurposes a vintage 1980s CAT CS-553 compact vibrator into a functioning musical instrument that plays the first stanza of the national anthem. As critic Steve Litt observed, “the work communicates everything from the notion of steamrolling political opponents with aggressive patriotism to the idea that prosaic machines



The Music Box 2012–2014

connection between the human body and military strength. *Baseball Study #6* juxtaposes a standard issue baseball—the icon of America’s pastime—with the US-made M67 fragmentation grenade designed to similar specifications. The baseball grenade, as the M67 is known, was developed to make it easier for the average American to throw. The grenade’s proximity to the baseball casts a sinister shadow over the physiology of the sport. Similarly, Cole’s baby bottles are each named for the American military supply identification number assigned to such bottles during the Vietnam War. Thus, on the one hand, the bottles nod to the complex legacy of military social planning, including events such as Operation Babylift, in which the US Army evacuated orphaned children from South Vietnam to the States. On the other hand, the bottles are cast from Babbitt metal, a lead-based alloy, and their toxic material implies the dangers of being spoon-fed official narratives.

Cole’s use of common objects formally evokes the legacy of pop art, particularly early vernacular experiments by Johns and Claes Oldenburg, while conceptually expanding upon the genre’s critical potential. Both *Baseball Study #6* and the baby bottles take up Johns’ interest in elevating the quotidian value of common objects. In the late fifties and early sixties, Johns covered generic flashlights and light bulbs in sculpt-metal and placed them on small pedestals, thereby staging these objects within the signifiers of “art.” Cole harnesses these techniques,



Baby Bottle (After Discovery by the Artist of Military Specification MIL-B-16755B: Bottle, Nursing) 2008

RIGHT
Fiberglass Teddy Bear 2003–2014
Installation view from the DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum



can be repurposed for poetic uses.”⁶ The machine itself recalls the bygone glory days of American industrialism and the era in which we, as a country, invested in large-scale public works projects, from the Hoover Dam to the Interstate and Defense Highway System. In this light, the dull ringing of the Star-Spangled Banner plays out like a lullaby, putting this American past to rest.

Recently, NPR’s Tom Ashbrook, invited the historian Joseph Nye and New Yorker columnist John Cassidy onto his show, *On Point*, to discuss the notion of American exceptionalism in the 21st Century. Both argued that while the United States is still the world’s leading global power, its divisive political landscape threatens to undermine its international credibility. In this late era of American hegemony, Cole’s sculptural objects are prescient and relevant reminders of the importance of critical public discourse to a functioning democracy.

ALEXIS LOWRY MURRAY

1 Ian and Margaret Deweese-Boyd, “Flying the Flag of Rough Branch”: Rethinking Post-September 11 Patriotism through the Writings of Wendell Berry,” *Appalachian Journal* 32, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 214–215.

2 Ibid.

3 Wendell Berry “A Citizen’s Response to the National Security Strategy of the United States,” *Irish Pages*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Autumn–Winter, 2002/2003); 24. Also quoted in Deweese-Boyd, 216.

4 Jan Garden Castro, “Dave Cole” *Sculpture Magazine* 32, no. 4 (May, 2013): 76.

5 Francine Koslow Miller, “Dave Cole: Judi Rotenberg Gallery,” *Artforum International* 47, no. 3 (November 2008): 356.

6 Steve Litt, “Dave Cole’s ‘Music Box’ installation at Cleveland Institute of Art turns a compactor into a musical instrument” *Cleveland.com* March 25, 2012. http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2012/03/dave_coles_music_box_installat.html.



Lead Teddy 2010

DAVE COLE is a Brown University alumnus known for his use of scavenged and recycled materials in large-scale sculpture. Cole's work has been exhibited at regional and international museums, including MASS MoCA (which presented *The Knitting Machine* in 2005); deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum; Museum of Arts and Design; Nasjonal Museet, Oslo; Haifa Museum of Art; and the Textielmuseum, Netherlands. His work is included in the collections of the RISD Museum, Smithsonian American Art Museum, 21c Museum, and the Pizzuti Collection. Cole lives and works in Hudson, NY.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name
May 9 – July 5, 2015
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Designed by Malcolm Gear Designers

Works in the Exhibition

All artworks collection of the artist unless otherwise listed

The Music Box 2012 – 2014

Mixed media (Caterpillar CS-553 vibratory roller-compactor, cherry wood, spring steel, electric motor, leather drive belt)
11' 6" x 8' 3" x 19' 6"
Functional music box plays "The Star Spangled Banner" (by Francis Scott Key, arraignment for steamroller by Manya Rubenstein)

Fiberglass Teddy Bear 2003 – 2014

Mixed media (194 rolls of fiberglass insulation, hand knit)
16' x 16' x 14'

Lead Teddy Bear 2010

Lead ribbon, hand knit over lead wool armature
5 ½" x 5" x 4 ¼"
Collection of Lucy and Joe Chung

Untitled (Santa Fe Bear Study #5) 2004

Mixed media
33" x 29" x 14"

Kevlar Teddy Bear 2006

Used police body armor, dismantled, hand knit, and stuffed with shredded lead
4 ½" x 5" x 5"

Three Generations 2013

Hand turned hardwood and sterling silver
2 ¾" x 11 ¼" x 17 ½"

Untitled (Baseball Study #6) 2008

Mixed media with M67 fragmentation grenade
8" x 10" x 5"

Kevlar Romper (3-piece Suit) 2008

Used Gulf War body armor, dismantled and re-sewn
28 ¾" x 13 ¼" x 9 ⅝"

Kevlar Snowsuit 2008

Used Gulf War body armor, dismantled and re-sewn
21" x 19" x 6"

Porcelain Baby Blanket 2002

Fiberfrax refractory ceramic fiber, hand knit
40 ⅜" x 29 ⅝" with case and pedestal

Baby Bottles (After Discovery by the Artist of Military Specification MIL-B-16755B:

Bottle, Nursing) 2008

Cast babbitt metal
5 ½" x 2 ¼" x 3" each
Collection of the artist and Lucy and Joe Chung

American Flag (Toy Soldiers) 2002

Acrylic on panel with mixed media (toy soldiers)
22" x 41" x 4 ½"

Machine Gun Nest 2008

Mixed media with decommissioned
M60 machine gun
27" x 102" x 27"

The Music Box Credits

Shawn Gilheeny
Project Manager
Tim Ferland
Fabricator / Millwright
Curtis Aric
Fabricator / Mechanic
Rain Gilbert
Fabricator / Expediter
Christian Correra
Fabricator / Painter
Nate Nadeau
CAD Programmer / Painter / Patinator
Mark Dufault
Machinist
Michael Everett
Music Box Technician and Engineer
Robert Houllahan
Documenting Filmmaker
Scott Lizotte
Machinist
Dan Chaput
Machinist
Manya K. Rubinstein
Musical Arranger
Greg Pennisten
Painter / Patinator
Tessa Freas
Model Maker
William Cornwall
Typographer / Expediter
Tom West
Draftsman / Printer
Joel Taplin
Consulting Woodwright
Clark Sopper
Consulting Machinist
Luke Boggia
Consulting Musical Arranger
Ashleigh Carraway
Consulting Musical Arranger
Paulo Carvalho
Mechanical Music Consultant
Brian Dowling
Site Manager

Special Thanks to
Ken Taylor and Ohio Cat
Bruce Checefsky and The Cleveland Institute of Art
Kristen Dodge and Dodge Gallery
The Steel Yard
Craig Pickell and Bullard Abrasives
The Musical Wonderhouse
Precision Laser
Rhode Island Welding
Hall's Garage
Industrial Welders Supply