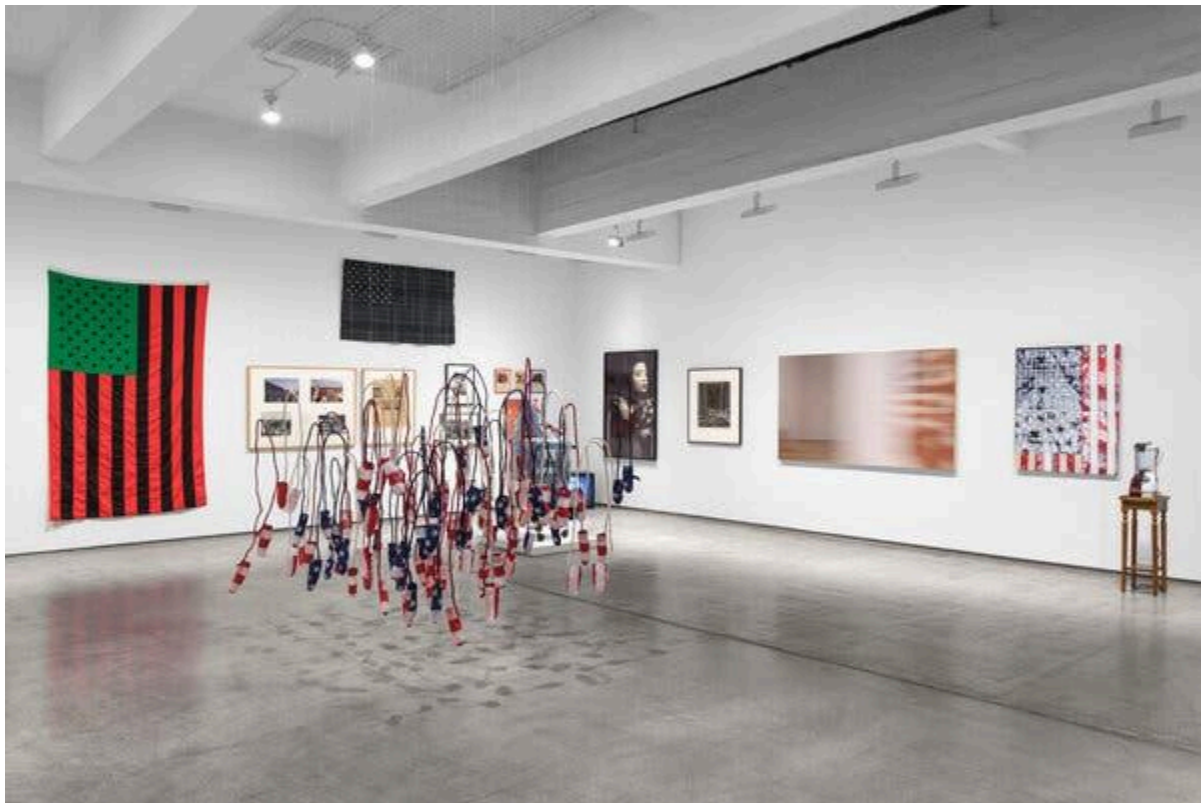


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CRITIC'S PICK

Flag-Waving Takes on New Meaning at Paula Cooper's Gallery

A timely group show in Chelsea considers the theme of the Stars and Stripes in 90-plus variations, including deep-fried and three inches tall.



Installation view of "Flags: A Group Show" at the Paula Cooper Gallery, including works by David Hammons, at far left. On the right wall, Lyle Ashton Harris, Robert Longo, Louise Lawler, Hank Willis Thomas, Josh Kline; hanging work by Sonya Kelliher-Combs Credit... via Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; Photo by Steven Probert



By Deborah Solomon

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Betsy Ross, the sewing heroine of our childhoods, is no longer credited as the creator of the American flag. Historians insist the maker of the flag remains unknown. Disappointing, I know,

especially since the American flag, if judged in purely artistic terms, is such a winning object. It has enormous “wall power,” to borrow a selling phrase that art dealers like to use. It is bright and instantly legible even as a tiny pin worn on a candidate’s lapel.

On the other hand, the flag is not a perfect design. It looks a little busy. Compared with the French flag, with its three equal bands of color, or the similarly serene Italian flag, the American flag is unbalanced and visually congested, with 13 stripes signaling the original colonies and 50 five-pointed stars squeezed into the upper left. In giving equal representation to each state, it misses the opportunity to promote the dream of a united democracy, of shared understandings.

Such vexillological thoughts sprang to mind as I made my way through “Flags,” a timely and often arresting group show at the Paula Cooper Gallery in Chelsea. It brings together about 90 flag-themed works that span eight decades and extend up to the ticking present. There are paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, a collage, a video and at least one work done in the non-art medium of deep frying: Kiyon Williams, the Brooklyn-based sculptor seen at the recent Whitney Biennial is exhibiting a nylon flag that they dipped in egg batter, cooked to a crisp and stretched inside a steel frame.



Sol LeWitt, “Wall Drawing #408 B.”

Credit... The LeWitt Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; Photo by Steven Probert

And no, in case your inner chef is wondering, it is *not* illegal to fry a flag. In 1989, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in *Texas v. Johnson* that even the burning of a flag is symbolic speech protected by the First Amendment.

But why burn a flag when there are so many more interesting things to do with one? The point is made in Cooper’s fetching storefront window, which contains a Sol LeWitt, a 13-foot-high wall drawing of a Tide-white star gleaming against a blue ground. It provides a festive and

benevolent backdrop for Hans Haacke's familiar "Collateral," a rusted supermarket cart overflowing with pro-war, flag-emblazoned buttons that seeks to make a point about the commodification of patriotism.



Hans Haacke, "Collateral," 1991, shopping cart with flag buttons.

Credit... Hans Haacke/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; via Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; Photo by Steven Probert

Of all mediums, photography is the one that best lends itself to incisive social commentary. Gordon Parks's "American Gothic, Washington, D.C. [Ella Watson]," from 1942, shows a Black cleaning woman in a government office building at night, a mop in one hand, a straw broom in the other, a flag unfurled vertically on the wall behind her. With her stiff-backed pose and wire-rimmed glasses, she evokes the gaunt farming couple in Grant Wood's "American Gothic" (1930) and similarly offers a model of individual resilience.

In those days, America had one flag and people mostly agreed on its meaning. But over time they realized that the flag did not speak for all Americans and additional flags were needed. In 1990, David Hammons created his now-classic "African American Flag," in a symbolic palette of black, red and green — the colors of the Pan-African flag (which was adopted by Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1920). The Hammons flag, an eight-foot-long banner, is that rare art object that has actually flown from a flagpole.



Gordon Parks's photograph "American Gothic, Washington D.C. [Ella Watson]," 1942.

Credit... Gordon Parks; via The Gordon Parks Foundation

The sculptor Chakaia Booker also reminds us that Blacks have historically experienced a different America than the one mythologized by the American flag. Her "Feeding Frenzy" (2012) is a handsome all-black flag made from recycled automobile tires. There's a ripple along the bottom edge, a clever nod to the postage-stamp cliché of a flag fluttering in a breeze.

Jasper Johns, by contrast, redefined American art by depicting flags that do not rise on flagpoles or flap against a blue sky. His tiny drawing "Flag" (1958), the smallest work in the show, consists of a flat, 3-by-4-inch American flag that could almost be mistaken for an abstract rectangle of ash gray. He gave us an image of the real that he isolated and etherized until it came to seem unreal.



Chakaia Booker, "Feeding Frenzy," 2012, a black flag made from recycled automobile tires.

Credit... Chakaia Booker; via David Nolan Gallery

Proving that you can choose your ancestors, at least in art, several other works in the show descend directly from the DNA of Johns's flag. Consider Louise Lawler's nervily near-empty photograph, "Three Flags (swiped again, two)." It was taken in 2022, when the Johns retrospective at the Whitney Museum was being deinstalled. It dissolves his painting "Three Flags" into lovely long-exposure blurs and streaks of red and white air. Art is long, but museum exhibitions are brief, to mangle a famous maxim.

There is much else to admire in the Paula Cooper show, including the work of several sculptors who were born after 1960 and remain locked in a love-hate relationship with consumer culture. Rachel Harrison's assemblage "© 2004 Hasbro Inc." (2015) is a heap of predominantly plastic objects that include ersatz sausage links, a toy machine gun and an American flag helmet, suggesting that an adult male is in there somewhere.

In "Make-Believe" (2017), Josh Kline creates a Surrealist-style *objet* composed from two sawed-in-half electric blenders, one an Oster, the other a costly and chic Vitamix, wrapped in American flag duct tape. Despite its aura of science-fair geekiness, the piece deftly conjures painful class differences and a nation in which Oster users and Vitamix users are unlikely to "blend" as a people with shared values.



Rachel Harrison, "© 2004 Hasbro Inc." (detail), 2015, plastic objects that include ersatz sausage links, a toy machine gun and an American flag helmet.

Credit...Rachel Harrison; via Greene Naftali, New York; Photo by Zeshan Ahmed

For a quieter thrill, Gedi Sibony, a New York sculptor, contributes a small, beguiling object: "All These Hands" (2024) a plastic puzzle that's just 3 x 5 inches. Its sliding white tiles scramble the boundaries of America's states and make a metropolis like New York disappear into the vast Midwest.

Finally, in the golden-oldie department, there is Claes Oldenburg's "Bunting," a plaster relief that he initially offered for sale at his famous "Store" on East Second Street in 1961. Painted

sloppily in red, white and blue enamel, it endows the prim semicircles of patriotic drapery with a raw, dripping, Rabelaisian life.

The show is far from definitive. I was surprised by the absence of Eric Fischl's "Late America" of 2016, an indelible image of suburban dysfunction set at a backyard swimming pool, where a blond boy with an American flag draped around his shoulders gazes silently at his naked and visibly despondent father. I also pined for Larry Rivers's "Berdie With the American Flag" (1955), which daringly introduced a holy trinity — the flag, figuration and the artist's rotund mother-in-law — into postwar painting during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism.



Claes Oldenburg, "Bunting," 1961. Muslin soaked in plaster over wire frame, painted with enamel.

Credit...Claes Oldenburg; via the LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT; Photo by Cultural Preservation Technologies

But then, the current show isn't trying to survey the peaks of flag-themed art so much as to remind us, in this season of heightened electoral excitements, that artists are patriots, too. They reclaim the lofty concept of freedom — of imaginative freedom — every morning when they wake up and think about what to make. Or as Jimi Hendrix put it, in 1967, "I'm gonna wave my freak flag high."

Flags

Through Oct. 26, the Paula Cooper Gallery, 521 West 21st Street, Manhattan, paulacoopergallery.com.