

## Art

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## Old Glory – In Detail



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By MIKE STEYELS JUNE 20TH, 2011

The American flag is a symbol that means different things to different people, often confined to extreme opinions. Many hold it up alongside their gods with blind faith. Others burn it as if it were a bedspread masking the devil. But for all the extremes the US has gone to as a nation itself, it has left a trail of gray areas not depicted in the color scheme of the actual flag. And whether or not the nation's value is ultimately worth anything more than those extremes, its record deserves inspection and introspection.

Gavin Sewell, who works out of a studio at [Brooklyn Fireproof](#), approaches the challenge by means of mixed medium collage with "Old Glory". It resembles [Jasper Johns' 1955 flag](#) with its weathered creases and aged colors, but takes a more substantive turn by means of the clippings that rest at the heart of Sewell's aesthetic. Buried within the 13 colonies and 50 states are the tales

Within this narrative based on a true story, he highlights images of our revolutionary birth and laws that benefited a select few in such liberating ways juxtaposed with controversial wars. The country's religious roots meet with the natives it supplanted. Public schools offering education for all are portrayed directly beside the scene of a black school girl entering a newly desegregated system as [painted by Norman Rockwell](#).

It's the subject of white-black race relations that garners the most attention within this work and this is also what makes it stand out so much. The purple image of Malcolm X is its most eye-catching feature. How often do you see such a revolutionary figurehead portrayed with pride in a piece of art depicting the flag? Black heroes figure prominently, raising the issue of their people's

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subjugation without any visual anger stemming from the violence wrought on them. This was due to the fact that the work's commissioner stated that the piece feature no disturbing imagery. But it does nothing to take away from Sewell's statement.

The United States' technological achievements also receive lavish attention. But paired next to its race struggles, "Glory" directly questions their worth. It makes a statement along the lines of Gil Scott Heron's "[Whitey On The Moon](#)," which compared the feat of reaching the heavens with the reality of many on Earth. Indeed, much of the technology featured in the artwork deals with flight and space. This would suggest that Sewell thinks these accomplishments were built on the backs of others. But the fact that he is allowed to make that statement means something in itself. Of course, the USA isn't the only country where that's possible.

Whether or not Sewell draws any conclusions is less important than the debate the piece raises. Perhaps statements like his will help lead to a country in which all the people benefit equally, as hoped for by the likes of those he holds a light to.

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