

A man is shown in profile, focused on painting a large American flag on a wall. The flag is partially completed, with the stars and stripes visible. The man is wearing a dark shirt and is holding a paintbrush. The background is a light-colored wall with some faint graffiti, including the word "RELEASE" and a peace symbol. The entire image has a blue tint.

Seeing Stars and Stripes

AMID ALL THE FLAG-WAVING,
A WRITER BEGINS TO PAINT
BY JENNIFER DE POYEN

*You should consider your flag a living thing that needs your care.
Treat it well. Keep it clean and dry. Display it so it always looks its best.*
From "Honor Our Flag: How to Care For, Fly, and
Otherwise Respect the Stars and Stripes," by David Singleton



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I've been living with the flag. Not in the usual way—I haven't hung it in the window of my apartment or flown it from my car's antenna. A few months ago, inspired by Jasper Johns and still reeling from post-9/11 flag-waving rituals, I bought myself a three-by-five-foot Stars and Stripes, locked myself in my living room and started painting a series of flags.

Johns, the most conspicuous of all flag painters, is famously reluctant to explain why he chose to paint the Stars and Stripes, or to elucidate the meaning of his pictures. He's said things like: "The painting of a flag is always about a flag, but it is no more about a flag than it is about a brushstroke, or about a color or about the physicality of the paint." And also: "There may or may not be an idea, and the meaning may just be that the painting exists." Art historians mostly don't believe these statements. But to other painters, they are completely credible, because figuring out what to paint is always the hard part; once you have a subject, all you have to do is work. Consider another oft-cited statement by Johns about his flags: "Using the design of the flag took care of a great deal for me because I didn't have to design it... That gave me room to work on other levels."

Last spring, when I started my own "flag" series, I was particularly susceptible to Johns' point of view; having dedicated myself to learning the craft of painting, I wanted nothing more than to dispense with the notion of subject matter and dive into the divine pleasure of putting paint on canvas. I was beginning to understand viscerally what art historians and critics don't often talk about: that painting is not some abstract act of creation, but an act of love and devotion.

At the same time, I wanted to sort through my feelings about a symbol that had suddenly taken on a new meaning for so many Americans. Bi-national by birth (I was born and raised in Canada by an American father and now live in the United States) and internationalist by temperament and principle (flag-waving of any kind has always raised the hair on the back of my neck), I wanted to see if I could really see the flag for what it is meant to represent: freedom, liberty, possibility. As long as I'd been alive, the flag had been the property of right-wing so-called "patriots," who had appropriated it to promote certain ideas of what it means to be American. It had been scorned by pro-flag-burning, free-speech liberals who saw flag-waving as a cover for ill-considered and sometimes illegal practices of the United States government. And it had been largely shrugged at—invoked at school events, sporting matches and national holidays—by the great, moderate expanse in between. I wanted to explore the possibility that the post-9/11 flag-waving was not proof of a terror-induced political and cultural shift to the right, but a broadening of the definition of what it means to love America. I wanted to believe what the choreographer Paul Taylor, who has used patriotic images (however ambiguously) in his work, told a *New York Times* writer about the flags flying all over New York in the wake of Sept. 11: "When you used to see a flag on a car, it usually meant a redneck. Now everybody's doing it. It's kind of nice!"

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*A flag should never be worn as clothing, or used
as bedding or drapery.*

I had never held Old Glory in my hands. My first instinct was to put it on, make it mine. I threw it over my shoulder like a shawl. I wrapped it around my head. I wore it like a toga. Then I tied it around my waist and began to paint.

Almost immediately I understood why Johns, who loves to work in that tense space between art and life—between image and object—found in the flag such rich source material. Despite its ubiquity and iconic symbolism, it was, in Johns' words, one of those "things which are seen and not looked at." Like a child who draws a head as a circle and a house as a rectangle—who instinctively creates a symbol rather than recording an observation—I had never actually looked at the flag. I was amazed at its beauty, its elegant design. I was surprised by the radiance and abundance of its colors in the afternoon light. I wondered, vaguely, why the flag is red, white and blue—the same colors, after all, as the flag of that other revolutionary democracy, France. And I began to wonder why I, who have never loved the flag, so loved Johns' iconic flag paintings. Did I think they offered a commentary on the excesses of patriotism? Did I admire their deadpan tone, levitated by Johns' exhilarating appropriation? Did I revel in the thick, luscious application of paint, which seemed to suggest an artistic process both as profound and as giddy as a child's sandbox play? And now that America was "under attack," did those facets of Johns' paintings cast fainter sparkles?

*The flag should not be flown upside down. This is a distress signal
and should only be used in a dire emergency.*

After the devastation of Sept. 11, there was a renewed interest in art objects that incorporate the flag, presumably for the same reason that there was renewed interest in the flag itself: as a locus for grief about the missing, the dead and the devastated; as a gesture of solidarity with those who labored to find bodies in the horrifying rubble; as an attempt to make sense of a desperately senseless act of violence; as an expression of defiance in the face of fear and loathing for those who had attacked us, and would attack again. As Johns him-

self noted, the flag is a ready symbol. In the post-9/11 context, it was an easy image from which to begin to construct a visual response to a horrific, but undeniably visual, event. For all the horror of the actual attack, and for all the suffering of family, friends and residents of Lower Manhattan, there was the added terror of images emblazoned in our minds through repeated viewings in the media: the towers struck with planes, stuck with planes, billowing smoke, collapsing into rubble. With such harrowing pictures in our mind's eye, is it any wonder that the flag, to which children are conditioned to pledge allegiance, became the symbol of our collective sorrow, our shared resolve?

Not surprisingly, the patriotic art that arose from the ashes of Sept. 11 did not come from academically, institutionally and critically approved artists, and still less from New York artists, who were daily confronted with the grim reality of the attacks. The responses came, instead, from folk artists, who have historically deployed flag imagery, from ordinary people, and from pop-culture sources—from culture-makers, who are happy to swim in the mainstream and are traditionally less troubled by the notion that their work is unsophisticated, or simple.

Will we ever forget the tragedy's first *memento mori*—that spontaneous gesture, captured and in some sense created by the photojournalist Thomas E. Franklin, of three firemen raising the flag in the ashes of the World Trade Center? Hauntingly, it echoed the famous Iwo Jima scene and, like that World War II-era photograph, it asserted a triumph of the spirit that no one, in the moment, actually felt. And who—especially heartbroken New Yorkers—failed to be moved by the spontaneous art of flower-strewn, flag-laden, candlelit memorials, full of prayers, poetry and pictures of the lost, that sprouted everywhere?

After those first, wrenching memorials to the dead came a slew of artistic responses to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. A week later, on Sept. 18, a group of schoolchildren in Atlanta put together a 16-by-18-foot rock-garden-cum-flag made of stones they had painted red, white and blue. Mort Kunstler, an artist in Cove Neck, N.Y., turned his art into a fundraising project by selling prints of his flag-themed painting "Old Glory"; for every \$25 donation to the Red Cross, he would ship a print to the donor at his own expense. The Yale-

trained Baltimore artist Tony Shore, best known for his large-scale works on black velvet, persuaded organizers of his “Oktavec Fish,” a public art project that needed refurbishing, to allow him to repaint his sculpture red, white and blue (he too renamed it “Old Glory”).

Vivianne Nantel, a Bay Area artist, found it too painful to go into the studio immediately after 9/11. But then a powerful image entered her mind. After a month and a half, she had produced “United As One,” a 36-by-60-inch oil painting of a flag with 11 stripes (to represent the date of the attacks) and 148 overlapping faces (to represent the multiplicity of ethnicities of the victims). Bonnie Mineo, a Boston-area painter and collage artist, suffered a creative block after the attacks until she decided to make her own version of the flag. “After that,” she told a *Boston Herald* reporter, “I could work again.”

And Alexis Owen, a freelance marketing writer who watched the attacks on the World Trade Center from her Brooklyn apartment, joined forces with her Denver-based mother, Pamela Moye, to produce a commemorative quilted flag. Inspired by the American tradition of quilting during crises and a renewed appreciation for the most noble values embodied by the flag, Owen and Moye envisioned a flag made up of 10,000 eight-inch cotton squares created by thousands of people from all over the world—a project, according to the September 11 Quilt Project’s official web site, that would individually and collectively symbolize the contributors’ “determination to rebuild and strengthen this country piece by piece” and serve “as a testament to America’s determination to rebuild, and to never forget.”

On the other end of the irony scale, but seemingly with the same desire for catharsis, the satirical newspaper *The Onion* published a story under the headline: “Not Knowing What Else to Do, Woman Bakes American Flag Cake”; it astutely reflected the mix of helplessness, bathos and newfound patriotism that so many Americans felt in the wake of 9/11.

Sometimes the flag is draped over the coffin of someone who has died. The union should rest over the person’s left shoulder. When the coffin is lowered into the grave, the flag is removed and not allowed to touch the ground. Although there is no official rule regarding being buried this way, it is usually reserved for veterans and important government officials.

But people also seemed hungry for responses from cultural institutions, from the realm of high art; perhaps we were eager for prominent picture-makers to substitute soothing, or at least sense-making, images for the hideous ones we kept seeing in the media. As Americans in their confusion and helplessness turned to other institutions—all branches of government, various state agencies, the Big Three network news organizations—to package and explain the unimaginable horror of the terrorist attacks, so too were arts organizations under pressure to provide cultural ballast. How many orchestras and operas opened their seasons with the playing and singing of the American national anthem, often with the Stars and Stripes flying overhead? After Mayor Rudy Giuliani urged New Yorkers to “see a show” and asked Broadway to reopen its doors on Sept. 13, dispirited casts joined sorrowful audiences in moments of silence before finding their way back into plays that suddenly seemed irrelevant.

The city’s museums also faced pressure to offer comfort through art, even though the artworks they house are more often vehicles for uncomfortable, or at least unsettling, ideas. When Lawrence R. Rinder, the chief curator for contemporary art at the Whitney Museum, was implored to put Jasper Johns’ superimposed “Three Flags” (1958) in the lobby as a gesture of solidarity with the victims of the terrorist attacks, he felt compelled to decline, saying he didn’t want to misrepresent the artist’s work. (Johns’ Flag series was begun in the waning days of the McCarthy era; whatever else those paintings might be, they are not straightforwardly patriotic works.) Still, the fundamental ambiguity of Johns’ flags left open the possibility, for some viewers, that the artist’s intentions were patriotic.

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180 And Lord, did we need those patriotic images. In the first hours after the attacks, walking around Greenwich Village in a daze of despair, I was amazed to see that people were already showing their colors—fatigue pants for the guys, flag head-scarves for the girls. Those who weren't sitting in bars waiting for the end of the world—remember how it felt like the end of the world?—were raiding stores for flags; soon the merchants were out in the streets, hawking everything from flag pins to patriotic T-shirts to NYFD baseball caps. It's hard not to believe that the months after Sept. 11 formed the most patriotic period in American history. (Possible exception: the months after Pearl Harbor. In July 1942, every major magazine across the land agreed to feature the flag on the cover in celebration of Independence Day.)

After 9/11, aside from commentary from the left, there was little internal debate over the pervasive use of flag imagery as a palliative for grief, a substitute for dialogue, a muzzle for debate. Even some devout liberals embraced the Stars-and-Stripes symbolism after Sept. 11. Todd Gitlin, a Columbia University professor and former leader of the radical '60s group Students for a Democratic Society, hung a flag across the balcony of his Greenwich Village apartment. Gitlin's gesture caused a stir on the left, but he echoed a common sentiment of

the swelling post-9/11 mainstream when he told a *San Francisco Chronicle* writer, "I want to affirm solidarity with my people, who have suffered and are showing in a variety of ways a solidarity with each other and thereby expressing the best of American values. And I don't want to leave the flag to those who affirm the most bombastic and aggressive or punitive of national values."

So uncontroversial was the deployment of flag imagery that when Pittsburgh artist Johanna Churma proposed to paint a triptych of American flags with the messages, "We Mourn," "We Pray" and "We Respond" for display on a public building, the city solicitor vetoed the plan because of the language encouraging prayer, not because of the work's patriotic fervor. And the Brooklyn sculpture atelier StudioEIS' proposed "Flag-Raising at Ground Zero" statue, intended for a privately owned but prominent location in downtown Brooklyn (and based on photographer Thomas Franklin's newly minted icon of 9/11 suffering and heroism), stirred debate mostly because of the decision to diversify the firefighters' racial makeup in a way that the New York Fire Department had never managed to do.

*The flag should hang vertically with the union to the north above
an east-west street. Above a north-south directional street,
hang the flag so the union is to the east.*

And what was the fate of those who dared resist the magnetic pull of flag imagery? In Colorado, a controversy erupted when Marcelee Gralapp, the library director at the Boulder Public Library's main branch, refused to display a 10-by-15-foot flag, either because (as she initially said) she thought that the library should welcome people of all beliefs and that the flag might alienate some visitors, or because (as she later said) she thought the flag so large that "people would have had to walk through it to get into the building." The library eventually installed a smaller flag in the lobby, but that did not satisfy disgruntled observers, who flew into a particular rage when it came to light that, over the

same period, the library had been displaying a phallus-themed art project. Calling the exhibit of Susanne Walker's colorful ceramic penises, intended to call attention to domestic violence, "a kick in the groin for our boys overseas," Bob Rowan, the self-styled 49-year-old "Dildo Bandito" filched the penises from the library in full view of silent onlookers, and took them home; he later called a local radio station to confess to the crime. (In a Nov. 11 interview, El Dildo Bandito offered a perfect précis of the post-9/11 culture war he was waging over flags and phalluses: "I detest the fact that they're hanging there, number one, but the timing; it's the wrong time to do something like this. And it should never belong in something I pay taxes for.") And there was an uproar in Berkeley when city administrators removed American flags from all fire trucks before a Sept. 20 anti-war rally at the University of California/Berkeley, a liberal stronghold since the '60s. A war of words broke out between the city manager, who made the call to remove the flags, and mayor Shirley Dean, who was bombarded with angry phone calls from around the country. He said he feared the kind of violent clashes between protesters and firemen—bottle- and rock-throwing—that had broken out during the Persian Gulf War in 1991; she said his decision was "flat-out wrong." At a time when even such a tireless defender of the Constitution as Floyd Abrams became an apologist for limiting civil rights for security reasons, such haggling over Stars-and-Stripes symbolism became hard for some to swallow.

When the flag moves past you in a parade or a procession, place your hand over your heart when it is about six steps away. Watch the flag go by while you hold your hand there until it is six paces past you.

For my second flag painting, I played it straight—red, white and blue, with 13 stripes and 50 stars. Working in the spirit of Johns' early studio practice, which produced the iconic red, white and blue "Flag" of 1954-55 (now in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art), and also in compliance with the National Flag Foundation rules on hanging a flag against the wall (*the union or*

canton—where the stars are—should always be on the flag's right and the viewer's left), I fastened my flag to the wall with some tape and went to work.

Looking at the flag straight-on, without interruption, for several hours, I noticed little things—how the stars are arranged in neat diagonal rows as well as in perfect horizontal lines; the fact that the stars are five-pointers; how if you look at them long enough, they start to resemble starfish. I developed admiration for Elizabeth (better known as Betsy) Griscom Ross, the Philadelphia seamstress who in 1776 was commissioned by George Washington to design the first American flag. She had the visual acuity to give the union extra prominence by setting the symbolic blue field of white stars in seven, rather than six, of the thirteen red and white stripes. And, according to legend, she sold George Washington on the five-point star (he preferred the six-pointer) by arguing, with characteristic Yankee pragmatism, that they were better because they were easier to make.

Again I wondered about the colors. Why is the flag red, white and blue? The historical record isn't clear (there aren't, apparently, any contemporaneous notes on the issue), but the colors did have specific symbolic import for European heralds, who traditionally designed coats of arms for families and nations: white for peace and sincerity, red for military fortitude and magnanimity, and blue for loyalty and truth. In 1782, when Congress approved a heraldic Great Seal for the United States incorporating the flag's colors, the secretary of the Continental Congress, Charles Thompson, explained the colors' symbolism: white for purity and innocence, red for hardiness and valor, and blue for vigilance, perseverance and justice.

All good things, of course, but I painted my third flag in eggplant-purple, lemon-yellow and sage-green. Organic colors, redolent of earth, the soil from which life springs. Concrete things, not abstract notions. Nothing to kill or die for; just the stuff of life.

Two people are needed to fold the flag.

By now, I had thoroughly absorbed the National Flag Foundation guidelines on “How to Care For, Fly, and Otherwise Respect the Stars and Stripes,” as described by David Singleton in the Foundation-sponsored book “Honor Our Flag.” I’d also completely disregarded those rules in my studio practice. I had draped and worn the flag; I had let it lie on the floor in a heap; I had spilled paint on it; I had lain on top of it. (I figured, if *they* can fetishize it as a sacred object, I can use it as a blanket. I called the painting “Flag Lover.”) What was left to do? I folded it carefully (though not in the officially sanctioned manner of exhibiting a triangle of stars) and put it in a plastic bag with old newspapers I used to protect my studio’s hardwood floor.

Walking around Manhattan in the months after the attacks, you could see all kinds of violations of the Flag Code: people wearing flag T-shirts, of course, but also tattered flags, flags flying at the rear of a car or draped over a back seat, flags hung with the canton on the wrong side, and flags flying unilluminated through the night. Such violations—mostly faults of devotion—don’t seem to raise anybody’s hackles. But artists who employ patriotic imagery without patriotic zeal—and whose devotion may be to raising questions or exploring form—those Americans risk both censure and censor. What if this year’s Whitney Biennial had included Mexican sculptor Marcos Ramirez’s tribute to John’s flags, which didn’t so much as raise a stir at the museum’s 2000 showcase of contemporary art? How would viewers have reacted to that piece, which re-imagines the Stars and Stripes as a corrugated metal fence on the U.S.-Mexican border, in this cultural moment? Would the Whitney have dared even show it?

When your flag is no longer in a condition to be displayed with honor, it should be destroyed in a dignified way. Burning it in a private place, in a dignified ceremony, is best.

At some point after I completed my flag series, I wanted to test a hypothesis I’d heard floated in liberal circles since Sept. 11. With all the fetishistic behavior surrounding the flag, the argument went, you could forget about your constitutional right to burn the flag and, by extension, your freedom of expression. The most radical provision of the Constitution—the one most pertinent to an artist’s practice—was no longer safe. It was an extension of a visceral reaction I had had on Sept. 12, when I saw all those flags flying all over New York: I’m not safe anywhere anymore. Not because of the terrorists; I knew that on Sept. 11. No—now I realized I wasn’t safe from my own government, my fellow Americans, my fellow New Yorkers. I wasn’t safe from the evil that the Founding Fathers fought hardest to banish from the fledgling United States: tyranny. The tyranny of the majority, the iron-clad might of the masses, the totalitarian urge that has surged up in every time and in every place since humans started running in herds.

I thought, why not burn the flag? Not in a tasteful indoor crematorium, not in a private ceremony of patriotic decorum, but out in the open, in Central Park, where children play in the petting zoo, and lovers pet on the Great Lawn, and John Lennon fans imagine peace in Strawberry Fields, and muggers lurk in the Rambles, and joggers circle the reservoir, and tourists ride in stinky horse-drawn carriages, and...

In the end, I didn’t have the heart for it. After 9/11, I was aggrieved by the command from on high to be “patriotic” and to defend “the American way of life”—dangerous abstractions, to my mind—but I was also moved by the solace so many people seemed to get from the flag. When push came to shove, I didn’t want to add to anyone’s pain.

Have my feelings about the flag changed since 9/11? Did the day that seemed to change everything really alter my sense of what the flag represents? Yes and no. I still see it as an object of fetish, a sacred cow that gets hoisted on the petard of patriotism every time *they* want to shut someone up. I still think, good liberal that I am, that it sometimes provides cover—like the sheep’s clothing in which the wolf is wrapped—for dubious, sometimes immoral actions on the part of both individuals and the nation. On the other hand, I no longer bris-

tle when I see it waving in the wind on a car going down the road. I no longer see it hanging in someone's window and think, I'm not welcome in *there*. Strange to say, but this change in me is not political but aesthetic; painting the flag forced me to really look at it. And when I did, I understood the voracious appetite we humans have to see the world as we know it, and the world as we would have it, reflected back at us. As visual nutrition, the flag is comfort food, and the hunger for it, post-9/11, was voracious. Created more than 250 years ago by a seamstress working in a folk tradition, the flag became a blanket with which we tucked ourselves to bed at night, a charm against nightmares about incinerated buildings, Osama bin Laden and his unfathomable followers, our unburied dead.

Not long ago, at Yankee Stadium, I struck up a conversation, as people do, with the guy sitting next to me. We talked baseball; we talked weather; we made sport of the guy in front of us who kept falling asleep, banging his head against the rail. Ouch, we would wince each time, laughing again and again. We were players in the theater of strangers who bond, immediately and fleetingly, over the shared experience of pleasure. During the seventh-inning stretch, we rose with the crowd to pay silent tribute to the victims of 9/11. Only after we sang "God Bless America" did I notice my new friend's jacket: Over his left breast, there was an image of the Twin Towers, joined together by the flag and framed by the words "WTC Gone But Not Forgotten." I looked up into his face.

"My best friend," he said, "died in Tower Two."

We started talking about that terribly beautiful morning last September—where we had been, what we had seen, what we couldn't remember, what we couldn't forget.

The last anyone heard from his friend was that he was fine, and that he was going back in to get a colleague out. It's a story we've all heard before, one that hasn't lost its power over us, and not only because of the heroism of those brave souls who went back into the burning buildings. It reminds us, painfully, that no one imagined the towers could fall, that the unimaginable happened, and that it happened to us. If 9/11 reminded many Americans that there is an "us" in the

U.S., the flag was a vehicle for communicating that communal feeling—a visual message about events to which no words are equal.

Today I sit 3,000 miles and a world away from Yankee Stadium, on San Diego Bay, in the 36-foot sailboat I share with my partner. We've always wanted to fly a flag from the mast because, let's face it, flags look terrific flying in the stiff wind of a boat under sail. But we've never agreed on which flag to fly. The U.S. flag, for me, was out. He wouldn't accept the Canadian maple leaf. We talked about the Kansas flag, to honor his place of birth, and the Alberta flag, to honor mine, but that fizzled out. We decided that the Rainbow flag was the only one that expressed our values, and that we should try to find one. Then 9/11 happened. To all of us.

I remain among those who wish that President George W. Bush had defended the constitution rather than the flag in the months after 9/11. My ideas about the dangers of American isolationism, of unilateralism in our foreign policy—9/11 confirmed rather than altered them.

But the other day, when my partner suggested we fly the Stars and Stripes—the very flag I had used in my studio—I found myself saying, "OK. I'm willing to try it, to see how it feels." With a changed heart in this changed America, I find, to my surprise, that I can bear the flag.