

LIBERAL ARTS ROXBURY



Erick Medel
Americans Only Flags, 2018
50 handsewn flags
Exhibited in the bed of a Ford F-150 pickup truck entitled, *Americans Only Pop-Up Gallery*, Rhode Island School of Design, 2018

LIBERAL ARTS ROXBURY: The title of the work is *Americans Only*. What is the meaning of exclusion here? How does it establish the context for the work?

ERICK MEDEL: The title *Americans Only* is meant to question the viewers, "Are you a real

LIBERAL ARTS ROXBURY
53525 State Highway 30, Roxbury, NY 12474 info@liberalartsroxbury.com

LIBERAL ARTS ROXBURY

American?” “If so, prove it.” I had people come up to me and telling me that they felt they didn't feel American enough—or at all—at the opening reception of the Americans Only project. The title opens a conversation regarding what metrics determine one's level of Americanness, as well as who gets to be called an American.

LAR: Your work employs a very particular visual language. Can you talk about its origins, syntax?

EM: I'm constantly adding new imagery to my visual language. I've been drawn to visuals that capture Americanness as well as Mexicanness in succinct ways for a long time. My language helps me navigate and define my own identity, as someone existing within two cultures. I like to contrast them—to highlight their similarities more than their differences. Truck culture, for example, represents an idealized American life, or promise. Lift kits, off-road tires, menacing presence, machismo, and toughness are embraced by both working class and middle class Americans as well as Latinx immigrants.

LAR: Do you consider your practice to be archeological?

EM: My practice is somewhat based in archaeology, but mostly cultural anthropology. I'm drawn to how people attach themselves to ideologies by culture, identity and consumption. I work from an archive of iPhone images and fabrics I've collected over the years. Through the process of gathering and examining items in my archive, I'm able to bring together disparate elements to create something new.

LAR: Where does visual language fit within this context?

EM: The flags symbolize a fragment of the American conscious. I present the viewers a collection of Americanness markers and symbols. It's up to them to decide which flags

LIBERAL ARTS ROXBURY

they relate to or identify with.

LAR: How widespread in American culture is the use of these types of symbols?

EM: It's part of my everyday life. I find myself taking iPhone photos whenever I see something eye-catching. It could be an American flag sticker in someone's truck, or a weathered, hand-painted sign, etc. As humans, we share similar experiences but express them in different ways.

LAR: Thinking about language, language carries its culture of origin. How does this notion play into your work?

EM: Language is very important in my work. After living on the East Coast for school, I moved back to Los Angeles and reconnected with my roots. Being away made me appreciate the culture I grew up in but took for granted. When I walk to my studio in downtown LA, I can hear all the different Spanish accents reverberating throughout the neighborhood. I started incorporating Spanish into my work directly and in the titles. Language allows me to access two head spaces, which inform the content in my work.

LAR: The formal configuration of elements in Americans Only is familiar—we see these curtains of flags in a few places in daily life; for example, the window display of an Army Navy Surplus comes to mind. You mentioned by email that you were thinking of the border wall between Mexico and the USA while planning this installation. Can you speak about this relationship?

EM: I see the flags as performing the role of the border wall. They will exist as a physical barrier that can be seen up close but only through a window. The flag stands as a symbol

LIBERAL ARTS ROXBURY

for all of possibilities and hopes, yet only a few will ever get to achieve them. The wall denies those chances to people deemed unworthy.

LAR: The imagery you employ is largely civilian, though quite militaristic at the same time. Is there some corporatization of the military images, translating them into civilian life? What is the common denominator here?

EM: If I had to choose an organization that defines the US it would be the military. We consume corporatized military imagery in large quantities (clothing, movies, politics). It represents the powerful, “don’t fuck with us” attitude that makes us think we are the number one country in the world. In my head, the army, mickey mouse, burgers, spider-man, and Realtree camo capture and embody America.

LAR: The divide created by the work—a literal split between the interior space of the galleries and the exterior space of the street—makes me think of the relationships between the viewership on either side of the work. With this in mind, who is the intended audience for this piece? Does that shift at all? What role does the divide produced and referenced by the work play in this process?

EM: I don’t think there's a specific audience. Any individual will project their own definition of the American flag onto my renditions. I’ve spoken to viewers and they all have different reactions to the work. I remember talking to a friend who jokingly said the camouflage flags would sell out where he was from (North Carolina). I think the location defines how people will read the flags but also the current political time has changed what the American flag stands for. I also think right now we’re in the midst of a defining moment: will we come together, or rupture even more?

LIBERAL ARTS ROXBURY

Erick Medel (Mexican, b. 1992) lives and works in Los Angeles, California. He graduated with a Masters of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI. His work has been exhibited across the USA, most recently at Gas Gallery, Los Angeles; and the 2020 Spring Break Art Fair, Los Angeles. He has been included in presentations at Clamp Art, New York; LVL3, Chicago; Stellar Projects, New York; and HOUSING, New York. www.erickmedel.com

This interview was conducted by email in March, 2020.