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Arts & Reviews

An artist sizes up American culture

Dave Cole's projects celebrate and wrestle with icons of national identity

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Dave Cole thinks big, then he starts tiny and works his way up. The sculptor and conceptual artist, whose last large-scale project involved knitting a giant American flag by manipulating utility poles with John Deere excavators, now plans to create "The Truck Mobile." That's "mobile" in the Alexander Calder sense. He's looking for two football fields of acreage, and he'll need several antique pickup trucks and a steel suspension device.

You can see models for "The Truck Mobile" in Cole's smart new show at Judi Rotenberg Gallery. A version with Hot Wheels-size trucks, elegantly crafted in slip-cast hollow porcelain, is delicate and sweet. It's the epitome of Cole's aesthetic: Sugar, spice, and everything nice collide with snakes, snails, and puppy dog's tails. At the same time, he celebrates and questions icons of American identity. It's brash, sly work.

For "Knit Dollar Bill Dress," Cole shredded nearly 1,000 single dollar bills and knit the strips together in the pattern of a Vera Wang gown. He boned the seams, so the gown stands empty but full-bodied, almost breathing with presence. The piece needles the way fashion commodifies the female form, yet this is not feminist art; the artist seems to enjoy provoking a lusty gaze at his work. On the masculine end of the spectrum, he has created breastplates modeled on Native American body armor. Cole has replaced beads and feathers with armaments: Bullet shells, melted lead from bullets pressed into ribbons. The result is respectful and disturbing, as Cole conjures visions of defeated Native American warriors clad in the detritus of 20th-century war.

In his "Trophy Wife" series, he mounts antlers on dress forms, wryly connecting the titular spouse with bagged prey mounted over the fireplace. Gallery staff report that each "Trophy Wife" takes its shape from a woman Cole has been involved with, so he could say, with a wink, that this is his own wall of trophies. That's why this artist's work is so potent, dark, and funny: He understands and deconstructs the many layers of meaning in fraught relationships — like those between men and women, or those between blue states and red states. But he still relishes being an All-American boy.



Clockwise from above: Dave Cole's "Knit Dollar Bill Dress" is made of strips of dollar bills knitted together in the pattern of a Vera Wang gown. A model of Cole's large-scale truck mobile.

Dave Cole: Trophies and Monuments

At: Judi Rotenberg Gallery, 130 Newbury St.,
through Sept. 30. 617-437-1518,
www.judirotenberg.com

