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## Deja Wow: Red, White and Snooze

**BY KATHLEEN VANESIAN**

According to artist Hans Haacke, all art becomes purely nostalgic after a period of ten years. Haacke's own 1991 mixed-media sculpture "Collateral," included in Phoenix Art Museum's "Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art," falls premature victim to this gloomy, but fairly accurate, pronouncement about the staying power of most art--and political art in particular. Unfortunately, this show helps to bury a number of twitching victims while they should still have a little life left in them.

Originally organized by PAM curator of contemporary art, David Rubin in 1994 for the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, "Old Glory" spans five decades of American art, haplessly lumped together solely by virtue that all of it depicts--in some way, shape or form--the American flag.

In the past 50 years or so, the stars and stripes have been abstracted, aestheticized and politicized in art and commercial uses, ad nauseam. What would we do without those red-white-and-blue beer-can insulators, sweatbands and Windbreakers? Our flag is a classic, user-friendly icon, a long-standing symbol of heart-thumping patriotism, freedom of expression and of protest, among other things; but it's a very obvious one, accessible even to the most casual viewer.

Maybe that's why Rubin's simplistic theme and the work stuffed into it seem so conceptually unchallenging. Through this most basic and easily digestible of all American icons, Rubin now has bootstrapped himself rather clumsily into a variety of First Amendment issues--principally censorship issues that swirled about some of the work on display years ago and, more recently, around the beleaguered National Endowment for the Arts (see story on page 12).

But, for the most part, all of this is old news, as moribund as the recently defeated congressional bill to constitutionally outlaw flag desecration. While potentially thought-provoking, Rubin's stale chronological presentation smacks of having been spit out by some computerized art database after being fed the entry "U.S. flag." What results is an American-flag diorama more appropriate for a historical institution like the Smithsonian than a full-fledged art museum.

Thrust into this slightly cheesy, thematic grab bag of stars and stripes, most of the art in "Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art" does not fare very well. Especially hard-hit are paintings and sculpture from the early '60s by the blue-chip likes of Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenberg, Larry Rivers and Edward Kienholz--the contemporary-art world's answer to the Olympic "Dream Team." Works shown by these historically important artists, which, in reality, have little or nothing to do with the iconographic significance of the American flag, look pretty anemic resurrected from their original contexts--particularly the Johns and Oldenberg pieces, which rank among the most lackluster these artists have ever produced. From the looks of these pieces alone, you would have to assume their creators spent the early '60s in a coma.

In all fairness, some images produced later in the '60s transcend topicality and still pack a jaw-jarring punch. Ed Paschke's flag-framed Lee Harvey Oswald in "Purple Ritual," Diane Arbus' pizza-

face teen in "Patriotic Young Man With a Flag" and Nancy Spero's "Kill Commies/Maypole" drawing, decorated with decapitated heads, continue to hold their own.

However, most work from the hip, slick and cool '80s and early '90s seems a little frayed around the edges, not unlike the flag in Robert Mapplethorpe's 1977 black-and-white photograph "American Flag." I suppose that's because what was considered scandalous 30 years ago has mellowed into the sedately scholastic; what may have been provocative even five years ago is now patently pedantic. It's all passed on to the blessed limbo of national art history.

"Old Glory" is basically a stroll down a well-worn memory lane, time travel without benefit of aircraft. It conjures up phantoms of sit-ins, love-ins, happenings, civil rights marches and antiwar demonstrations. Not to mention hip-hugger bell-bottoms, eight-track tapes, incense and the word "groovy." In short "Old Glory" has very little to do with art and a lot to do with history and chronicling political activism.

For me the most engaging parts of the exhibition happen to be educational videos of historical and political content. Case in point is the hourlong videotape of the "Symposium on Repression" at the landmark 1970 "People's Flag Show" held at New York City's Judson Memorial Church. In it yippie activist Abbie Hoffman, in his store-bought flag shirt (made, ironically, in France), spins yarns about how Roy Rogers, Dale Evans and even Phyllis Diller wore the very same flag shirt on network television without incident. Hoffman, however, had been busted in 1968 when he wore it to a meeting of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and had been electronically censored by CBS when he appeared in the shirt in a segment of The Merv Griffin Show.

And check out "America's Cultural Civil Wars," the 11-minute video produced by People for the American Way, narrated by Jill Eikenberry and Michael Tucker, lawyers in love on TV's now-defunct L.A. Law. Who could pass up the opportunity to see archconservative North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms trying unsuccessfully to sound out the word "sodomasochism" during a Senate debate? Or attorney Alan Dershowitz, after chilling footage of a 1980 Maryland book burning, informing us that My Friend Flicka is now under attack by rabid rightists because it contains the "B word" to describe a female animal?

Despite all the hullabaloo (an appropriate groovy '60s flashback, under the circumstances) alleged in the Arizona Republic and the Tempe Tribune about this show, "Old Glory" is hardly the "risk-taking project" that curator Rubin has personally labeled his show in its accompanying catalogue. That label might have been warranted if Rubin had included the homoerotic works of Mapplethorpe that created such a flap several years back, or Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ," the color photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine that caused Senator Helms to froth at the mouth. But, then again, those pieces don't have flags in them.

To the contrary, Rubin appears to have done everything in his power to eliminate any trace of risk-taking, including a "flag-free zone" for the rather puerile 1988 Dread Scott piece "What Is the Proper Way to Display the U.S. Flag?" Originally a student submission to a School of the Arts Institute of Chicago exhibition, the piece invites viewers to stand on a flag spread on the floor to write comments under a photomontage of certain flag-burning incidents. Museumgoers afraid to, uncomfortable with or revolted by walking on the flag can still share their sentiments by writing in one of several books opposite the installation.

Rubin also apparently has refused to excite public ire by providing any translation of the French slang on the show's 1992 Gran Fury flag-inspired street poster. His blow-and-go approach sucks the life out of what was once a highly confrontational performance piece. An offshoot of the radical AIDS activist group ACT-UP, Gran Fury was committed to spreading AIDS awareness in whatever highly charged way it could. Using "Je me souviens (I remember)" on the poster, a phrase on every Quebec license plate that admonishes French Canadians never to forget their cultural identity, Gran Fury links a forceful safe-sex warning to this exhortation, which, according to art historian Richard

Meyer, translates as "When fucking, use a condom" and "Don't come in anyone's mouth."

And where, oh, where, is Leon Golub's "Try Burning This One . . .," which Rubin gives considerable attention to in his catalogue? In this 1991 painting, appropriated from a biker-magazine photo, two rednecks glower ominously at the viewer. One defiantly grabs his crotch, while the other patriotically sports a flag tee shirt imprinted with the make-my-day dare, "Try burning this one . . . asshole."

Yes, everything in the exhibition is appropriately sanitized, deodorized and certified offense-free for your viewing enjoyment. And, is that self-imposed censorship I smell in the air?

The hype you may have read about "Old Glory" being controversial is just that--hype. It's a picture-perfect example of what media-theorist Douglas Rushkoff calls a "media virus," a term referring to ideas and agendas intentionally and repeatedly spewed into mediaspace in hopes of infecting an unsuspecting or uninformed public. With enough repetition, we might actually start to believe that this show is provocative and controversial. Fight the urge.

"Old Glory:

The American Flag in Contemporary Art" continues through Sunday, June 16, at Phoenix Art Museum, 1625 North Central.