

# America the Beautiful

New works by Michael Petry

*"The sublime (an aesthetic of power) rejects beauty on the grounds that it is diminutive, dismissible, not powerful enough. The political rejects beauty on the grounds that it is too powerful, a power expressed both in its ability to visit harm on objects looked at and also in its capacity to so overwhelm our attention that we cannot free our eyes from it long enough to look at injustice."*

Elaine Scarry

Petry's new installation *America the Beautiful*, fills the Sundaram Tagore Gallery with red, white and blue, interventions, all terribly beautiful. Made of hand blown glass, sheets of leather (embroidered with real pearls), and hundreds of yards of knotted rope, they snake their way into the retina and beyond. They are proudly beautiful, they boast of their beauty and seductiveness, and to what cause? They investigate themselves, their setting and the new America. They strive to reclaim an America long thought dead, asleep or forgotten where the dignity of all is respected, where beauty is bright and reflects light into dark corners.

*Monument to the Unknown Soldier: portrait of an American Patriot* features a real American flag embroidered with pearls in what appears to be a completely random or abstract pattern. Yet it is a real portrait of a gay American soldier who served in Iraq. Petry asked the veteran to provide a cum shot, which would act as the template for the embroidery, a portrait of a sexual man at arms. The soldier must remain unknown or face expulsion from an Army that was happy to see him serve, and possibly lose his life, yet not love nor make that love known. The object is extremely beautiful and can be seen as an erotic version of Jasper Johns' *Flags*. The flag used flew over the United States Capitol on April 5, 1985 at the request of the Bob Dole, United States Senator. A certificate of authenticity accompanies the work.



As in the Monument, Petry's web portrait series called *The All Americans* are also derived from cum shots sent to him by gay American's over the web. They too are rendered in pearls but on red, white or blue leather (indicating their sexual fetish). Art historically, the use of pearls in paintings has signified the wearer's virginity or purity. The colours used are based on the gay hankie code, which features in the first *Lovers* piece. There, a red and a blue hankie are embroidered with pearls, and like red and blue states, sit in opposition to each other.

Another red and blue *Lovers* piece blocks the entrance of the main gallery, it lies on the floor. The work is made of two knotted ropes inserted into opposite walls each at crotch height. The red rope mingles with the blue but is not attached, viewers can rearrange the shape of the ropes as they please and even separate them into discrete piles. Petry knotted 100 yards of rope making each into intestine shaped coils, each knot representing an orgasm, a moment in the lovers' erotic domain. Like a serpent eating its tail, or a mother devouring her children, the lovers are consumed in a passion.

*Crocodile Tears* is made up of 21 red, white, and blue empty glass vessels that look like elongated tears dipped in colour. They appear to have poured their contents out onto the gallery floor evaporating like a politicians tears. The legal drinking age in most states is 21, which contrasts to the voting age of 18. Each object is beautiful, desirable yet out of reach.



*The Axis II* is formed of 9 glass spheres, three in red, white and blue and is stretched between two of the gallery's wooden pillars suspended on steel wire. The spheres like the beads on an abacus can be moved along the wire, abstractly adding up invisible totals, making figures available where they might not be wanted. Wilde said that some know the cost of everything but the value of nothing. For him beauty was paramount, and skin deep.

*5Star* comprises five red, white and blue glass blossoms in the rough shape of a star. The work is reminiscent of the highest-ranking army general, yet the pattern for the shape of the blossoms is the sphincter of five gay American porn stars whose films have the army as its erotic premise. In 2006 real members of the US army were imprisoned for consensual same sex love, while soldiers who tortured and murdered Iraqi civilians were merely fined. The work opens itself to the viewer, yet remains five beautiful blossoms unaffected by any histories.

*Broken Promises*, features three interlocking rings of red, white and blue glass in the shape of



huge wedding rings. The wall installation's genesis is based in the ongoing cultural war about equal rights for same sex lovers and the promise in the Constitution of equality for all, yet the objects recall the minimalist work of Sol LeWitt.

*He who is without* is made of a red, a white and a blue glass stone. They can be handled with care.

*The PAs* can be seen throughout the gallery on the large back wall. Each of the 21 oval disks is screwed to the wall in three vertical lines (one red, one white and one blue). A PA is a form of genital jewellery, a Prince Albert, after its inventor, the husband of Queen Victoria. A ring is placed through the glands of the penis and is said to give greater pleasure to the partner on the receiving end. It was also used by the Prince to strap himself down to achieve a cleaner trouser line. A PA is also a Patriot Act, of which there are now three.

A cd of all the images is available or images can be send as high resolution scans.

The exhibition is free and runs from January 18 – February 4, 2007 at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery  
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