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Supersize This

By Pamela Petro '82



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THE KNITTING MACHINE BY DAVE COLE. AT THE MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, North Adams, Massachusetts.

Dave Cole took up knitting on a dare from a friend. "It was a way to stay awake in lectures at Brown - a kind of constructive fidgeting," he said from the cage of an extended cherry picker, thirty feet above the courtyard of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA), in the Berkshire town of North Adams.

Over the Fourth of July weekend this year, Cole took knitting to an unprecedented scale: he and his team, outfitted in khaki workmen's gear, knitted a twenty-foot-wide American flag with the help of two 27,000-pound John Deere excavators, each equipped with a Narragansett Electric utility pole that Cole had fashioned into an oversize knitting needle. The giant flag, made from more than a mile of acrylic felt, took shape at Mass MoCA over the course of two and a half days, as Cole leaned from his cherry picker to slip foot-long stitches with a fishing gaff from one "needle" to the other. The crowd below watched his every move, laughing when he dropped a stitch and clapping when he finished a row of red or white. One elderly man, who had operated heavy machinery for forty years, spent a full day observing Cole's work and then returned the next day with his grandson. "Now that's how you work a joystick," he told the boy.

As a visual arts concentrator at Brown, Cole quickly introduced his newfound knitting skills into his sculpture, working with unconventional materials like steel wool and Kevlar, the material in bulletproof vests. ("Lead is an incredibly sensual material to knit with," he said.) In 2001 he created a static installation that gave the illusion of two backhoes knitting with pink fiberglass insulation. Providence art impresario Bob Rizzo saw the work and issued Cole another dare: use heavy machinery to actually knit something for the city's 2002 Convergence International Arts Festival, which was held on the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks. That's when Cole borrowed some excavators and knitted his first American flag.

"The important thing is that it was satirical and absurd without being cynical," he said. Cole hopes that the obvious contradictions of *The Knitting Machine* - the contrast between domestic and industrial, the combining of traditional female and male occupations - are just launching points for further speculation. Interpretations run as loose and free as his stitches. Cole is delighted that one viewer might see his flag, made as it is by heavy equipment, as a commentary on the heavy-handedness of U.S. foreign policy while another interprets it as a patriotic gesture on the Fourth of July.

"It was a privilege to have been asked here this weekend," he said, smiling and waving to onlookers. "And you know what? It's fun too. There's always an element of boys playing with toys."

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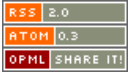
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