



INNOVATION IN TECHNIQUE AWARD

Aaron Fein

Brooklyn, New York, US

AT a moment in which digital technology has probably done more to separate and polarize America along ideological lines, I have tried, as an artist and architect, to deploy digital and machine embroidery to reverse this trend. Over the course of many years, I have developed digital techniques that foster conceptual ambiguity, elide sharp ideological distinctions and seek to encourage the coexistence of otherwise irreconcilable polarities.

I first turned to textiles shortly after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, as a practical solution to the emotional question of what it meant that so many red, white and blue American flag bumper stickers—mounted as symbols of permanence and perseverance—were slowly and inexorably fading in color to white over the months following the attack.

Learning to sew and embroider, I attempted, over a full decade, to try and answer this vexing question about national identity, permanence and the possibilities for peace. The result was the monumental *White Flags* project, which consisted of all 193 United Nations member states' flags rendered without color. The massed flags, aided by shifting light and motion, revealed an entire world of individual national symbols that could both celebrate difference, yet merge together into an undifferentiated whole.

Throughout my years of working on *White Flags*, I not only gained a proficiency in the medium of digital/machine embroidery, but I also came to appreciate just how accessible the medium of sewing actually was to the average viewer. Needlework is ancient, creative, collective



I learned that a single thread color could reveal a world of shaded values that varied not only in relation to one another, but also in relation to the viewer's changing vantage point.

and practical, thus, so familiar to everyday experience. I watched time and again as viewers seemed to enter into my embroidered works, both viscerally and conceptually, with much less hesitation than they might enter works rendered in more traditional fine art media.

After the completion and installation of *White Flags*, I was even more eager to integrate my new facility with digital/machine embroidery with my formally trained architectural sensibilities. I wanted to simultaneously create and communicate ideas about space. To achieve these ends, I gravitated toward a more formal geometric vocabulary, as well as more powerful software and industrial machinery. My particular fascination with, and investigations into, the complex geometry of the hooped-shaped *Torus* led to a private commission for another monumentally sized embroidered work titled *Milky Way* (2015).

Milky Way was the proving ground by which I would realize and refine my unique approach to embroidery. Commissioned to create this stitched work in a predominantly white palette, I discovered the vast range of tones achievable through the granular manipulation of stitch angles alone. I learned that a

single thread color could reveal a world of shaded values that varied not only in relation to one another, but also in relation to the viewer's changing vantage point.

I consider *Milky Way* to be the project in which my interdisciplinary approach to art and design finally crystallized. In this single medium I discovered I could draw, collage, paint and even sculpt three-dimensional architectural experiences in fully realized ways.

But just as this new technique was becoming familiar, I was forced to reckon with the transformation of national discourse in the months leading up to, and after, the 2016 presidential election. As I began responding artistically to the conflict and polarization in the conversations around race, religion and nationality, I found myself quickly drawn back to the symbol of the American flag.

Worry Flags may appear, at first glance, as deceptively quaint Americana, but upon closer interaction, these vibrant renditions of American flags, cropped and framed by common bamboo embroidery hoops, begin to reveal a disturbing mix of sensitive and even controversial symbols, many of which have recently erupted into the country's consciousness including, but not limited to, new friction

Left page: **Aaron Fein *White Flags*** 2011, rayon thread, cotton duck, machine embroidery, appliqué, traveling installation. Venue: Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York.

Right page: **Aaron Fein *Worry Flag: U.S.S.A.*** (three views) 2017, rayon thread, linen, bamboo embroidery hoop, machine embroidered, 14" diameter.



A sideways approach through which viewers may enter with comfort—eased in by the familiarity of the flag and the domestic, tactile echoes of fabric and thread.

over the Muslim crescent, the Star of David, the hammer and sickle and the swastika.

The point of this exploration was, of course, not to endorse each symbol, but to hint at the subtle, and not so subtle, interrelations and conversations between such signifiers, at this moment, in our country. These works were a visual attempt to grasp at symbolic straws—using art to try to bridge the gap between the America we thought we knew and this new era in which embedded in the familiar, we find threats and fears.

I acknowledge the intense power of the fraught symbols with which I am working, but to shy away from them, or conversations about them, for any reason does a disservice to the open and honest communication so necessary at this particular moment in our society. What I hope to offer with these symbolic works about identity and conflict is a sideways approach through which viewers may enter with comfort—eased in by the familiarity of the flag and the domestic, tactile echoes of fabric and thread. My wish is this may allow them to discover and reconceptualize the overlooked, unforeseen and even uncomfortable truths about the world we all now inhabit.

—Aaron Fein has exhibited nationally and internationally, earning awards both at home and abroad. Recently re-settled in New York City from Charlottesville, Virginia, he is working on a number of private commissions. In his spare time, he takes to the city streets to fly his White Flags, and share direct human contact with his fellow citizens in these difficult times. aaronfein.com

Aaron Fein Worry Flag: War & Peace 2017, rayon thread, linen, bamboo embroidery hoop, machine embroidered, 54" x 18". Left page, top: three different views. Bottom: detail.

