# American Mortal

**By Anna Brzyski**

Every nation is an abstraction defined as much by particular geography and population, as by shared history and culture, individual sacrifices, collective traumas, iconic landscapes, and enduring symbols. For Americans, a nation of immigrants, the country has always been a work in progress—not necessarily perfect but perfectible, uniquely optimistic about its place in the world and its future. However, as the questions of who is and can be American, what does it mean to be patriotic, and what are our core values have become the mainstay of recent political discourse that optimism has been visibly strained. Too often, those offering an answer have reflexively pointed to the flag and the fallen while appealing to our fears, anxiety and desire to turn inward, to ignore the terrible news of events happening elsewhere, to build walls to keep the danger—real or imagined—at bay.

In the show *American Mortal*, the artists Becky Alley and Melissa Vandenberg address our current political landscape shaped by the legacy of the most recent wars by engaging in insightful meditations on the meanings of the flags and the fallen—of collective identity and individual sacrifice. Both artists, in very different ways, work to humanize the abstractions that have informed our politics in order to confront their meanings and broader resonances. Becky Alley's meditative pieces provide metaphoric embodiments for the abstract numbers associated with recent conflicts: number of soldiers who lost their lives, number of displaced refugees, number of civilians killed. Melissa Vandenberg's exuberant constructions navigate through humor and absurd juxtapositions tensions implicit in patriotic symbolism.

The magnitude of sacrifice and suffering reported and debated daily through competing television channels and online sources creates a numbing effect that engenders both apathy and anxiety. Similarly, the recent reporting on the refugee crisis in Europe has conjured images of a human deluge, unstoppable and frightening, fundamentally different, other, and therefore unwelcomed. What often is lost in the daily grind of images and reports, used by politicians to advance their own agendas, is the reality of the human beings on the ground, people just like us—their stories, lives, loves, births and deaths—the sublime tragedy of their existence and endurance in the face of unspeakable suffering. Alley's piece *Murmurations: Battle of Fallujah* counters those frightening images of the refugees from war zones of the Middle East with a poetic translation that brings to mind migrating birds or schooling fish who seek safety in great numbers. In a striking piece *Burn,* 112,000 partially burned matches evoke 112,000 civilian casualties since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The resulting tectonic landscape of suffering is made more powerful as a metaphor though the lingering smell of burned sulfur, which conjures destruction not just of human flesh, but of the country—its burned and bombed houses, shops, mosques. In *Fallen*, American fallen soldiers who lost their lives in Iraq appear as fallen leaves kept from dropping to the floor by the domestic device of a clothesline and clothes pins. In *Unmended*, the red yarn threaded through 320 needles reminds us of the ultimate sacrifice of the coalition soldiers who joined American forces in Iraq.

In all these works, repetitive labor of the artist—her contemplative, quiet, repetitive process of inserting pins, threading needles, collecting and pinning leaves, burning and stacking matches—

is an attempt to come to terms for herself and for us with the onslaught of abstract numbers that represent death and tragedy. In one piece, Alley shares the process of making and therefore of coming to terms with these traumas with others. *Epitaphs for Edward*, which provides a historic tally of all conflicts—declared and undeclared—since 1776 in which American soldiers lost their lives, involved a crew of volunteers of both genders and all levels of skill who embroidered the panels that constitute the piece. The tools of women's craft, needle and thread, point to the link between sacrifice of the men—here represented by those whose first name was Edward, the name of Alley's son —and the pain of their anonymous loved ones left behind, represented by the artist and her collaborators.

Melissa Vandenberg uses those same techniques and materials traditionally associated with women's work for a very different effect. If Alley's pieces calls for intellectual and contemplative engagement that activates both the aesthetic and empathic awareness of the viewer, Vandenberg's are addressed to the gut. They provokes a visceral response, embracing satire and the absurd, drawing on popular culture, patriotic iconography, and figurative associations. Just as the sheer beauty of Alley's work makes her commentary on death and displacement endurable, the humor of Vandenberg's renders her biting commentary both compelling and moving. Her portable, flaccid flag *Monument,* which not-so-subtly undercuts the rhetoric of permanence and importance assisted with obelisks erected to commemorate great men, becomes a meditation on the mortality of national ideals. *Ladybow,* which cleverly combines phallic verticality with feminine horizontality and figuration, erases conventional boundaries of gender to question the authority of power. This becomes more obvious when the piece is compared with an earlier work form 2015, *Mary Karen,* which prefigures the iconography of *Ladybow,* but without its subversive potential. In *Braided Rapunzel,* flag remnants recycled into the braids turn into ropes that evoke simultaneously dark imagery of lynching mobs and feminine ambivalence about vulnerability and wanting to be saved.

That same ambivalence is present in *Snake Handler*, the most iconic piece in the show, which brings to mind Appalachian snake handling and Benjamin Franklin's *Join or Die* image. While the body of the snake made from old fashioned lady's white gloves, a necessary Sunday accessory for any proper southern lady, gestures to the former invoking the imagery of the rural South, the miniature liberty bell attached to the tail of the rattler unmistakably points to the North and the founding fathers. North and South, male and female, black and white, powerful and disenfranchised—these seemingly natural dichotomies have been part and parcel of our national imagination. Disturbingly, they have been brought back into the center of our political discourse with renewed vigor this election season. Yet, here in Vandenberg's piece, they do not menace. Refigured as a cartoonish and not particularly threatening snake they have no power to inspire fear.  And that's a good thing, a hopeful sign that perhaps we ought to be optimistic after all and look to art and artists to show us the way out of our momentary crisis of confidence.

**About the Essayist**

Anna Brzyski is a Professor of Art History and Visual Studies at University of Kentucky. She teaches courses in the 18 th and 19 th century art, contemporary art theory, and visual studies. She has published broadly on a wide range of subjects from Polish 19 th century art to contemporary art and new media. Her work has been supported by the Whiting, Luce, IREX, Erste and Terra foundations and she is a recipient of the Fulbright and Fulbright-Hays Fellowships. She is the editor of Partisan Canons (Duke University Press 2007) and her work has appeared in Art Criticism, Centropa, 19 th Century Art Worldwide, RES, n-Media, Art Margins and a number of anthologies.