

AMERICA DECONSTRUCTED

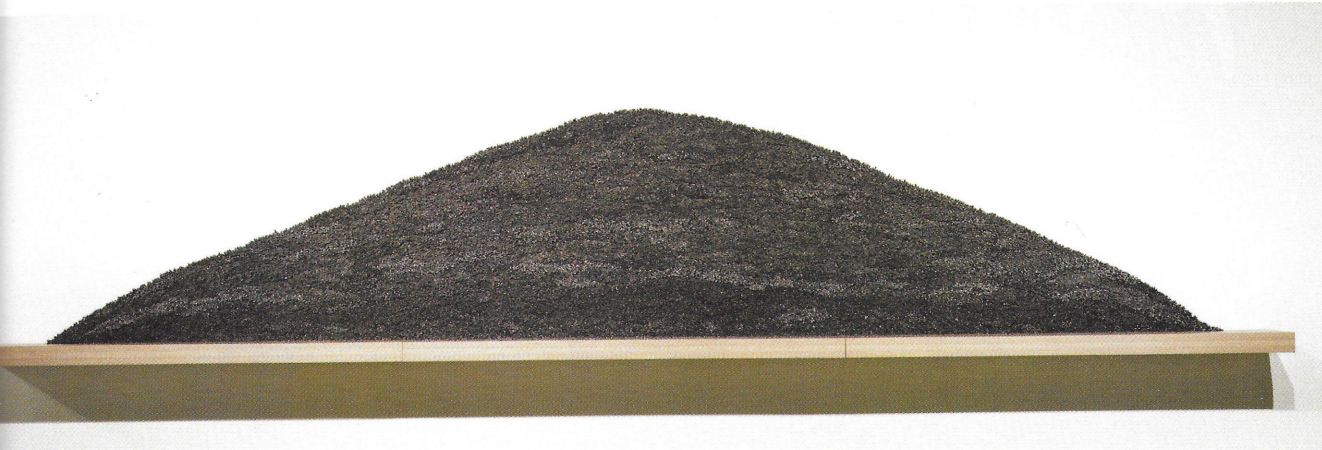
KENTUCKY ARTISTS INITIATE CONVERSATION

REVIEW

**AMERICAN MORTAL:
WORKS BY BECKY
ALLEY AND MELISSA
VANDENBERG**

**LAMONT GALLERY
PHILLIPS EXETER
ACADEMY**

**11 TAN LANE
EXETER, NEW
HAMPSHIRE
SEPTEMBER 3
THROUGH
OCTOBER 19**



When I was younger – a true farmer's daughter from South Dakota – I absorbed the implied social lesson: "Don't discuss money, religion or politics at the dining room table." These days, people don't seem to understand this social norm we all once learned.

Coming from a homogenous small-town-USA environment, religion was never a touchy subject because everyone believed basically the same thing. I assumed everyone believed what I did. In our town, out in the plains of the Midwest, we'd say the Pledge of Allegiance parroting our teachers' "one nation under God." So why shouldn't we talk about religion? Your views are your views, and everyone has a right to believe in what they want. Some religions are so paradoxical that wars have started over them.

Recently people can't seem to stop talking about politics. This never ends well. I personally avoid talking about politics, even with my own family, because it's extremely polarizing and leads to arguments, conflict and silent resentment. It's as simple as this: not everyone has the same opinion as you

and you're not likely to change their mind, so keep it to yourself. Discussing your opinion in public may come off as offensive and rude. Just avoid the hostility by removing politics from every conversation.

Unless you're artists Becky Alley and Melissa Vandenberg. Based at the University of Kentucky, both choose to relish the discussions or maybe, frankly, don't care. I'd venture to say they're betting they can influence your opinions by more intellectual and subtle methods. (And frankly, they do care!)

"What is art about if not to initiate conversation about emotional connection, and bring beauty to sadness?" asks interim director Wes Lafountain about Alley's and Vandenberg's "American Mortal" exhibition that will be on view from September 3 through October 19 at the Lamont Gallery at Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, New Hampshire. So whatever side of the fence you fall on, I implore you to respect other's opinions, and maybe, just maybe, be touched and influenced by this show. I was.

TOP: Becky Alley, *Burn*, 2016 (ongoing), 160,000 matches.

BOTTOM: Becky Alley, *Murmurations*, 2016 (ongoing), 120,000 pins in linen.



More than willing to step into potentially controversial subjects – but all the while provoking conversation that stimulates growth – Alley and Vandenberg inspire our thoughts on politics, inviting us to explore and examine our beliefs, opinions and their consequences.

These two artists have decided to smash paradigms and do it with what some might call contemporary art; I prefer to it as poignant art. They both have numerous, thought-provoking works at this exhibition, and I'll explore a few.

Becky Alley's methodical, process-driven works memorialize the extreme number of civilian lives lost – and families displaced – by recent wars. Often using visual metaphors, Alley creates abstractions of reality: the number of soldiers who lost their lives, the number of displaced refugees, the number of civilians killed. In stunning examples such as "Burn," 160,000 burned matches commemorate civilians killed in Iraq since 2003. The work, spanning over 16 feet, hits you in the gut, begging you to set politics aside and consider the people involved and families impacted.

"Murmurations: Battle of Fallujah 2016" by Alley is a series of 24 approximately 10-inch square linen panels of 120,000 pins pressed through the gray linen into the foamcore backing. You can envision the flocking behavior of starlings as they form and disperse in fluid formation. But, what this is symbolizing is the ongoing project of counting fleeing war refugees. Currently there are approximately 65 million people displaced by war, making this piece impossible to ever complete.

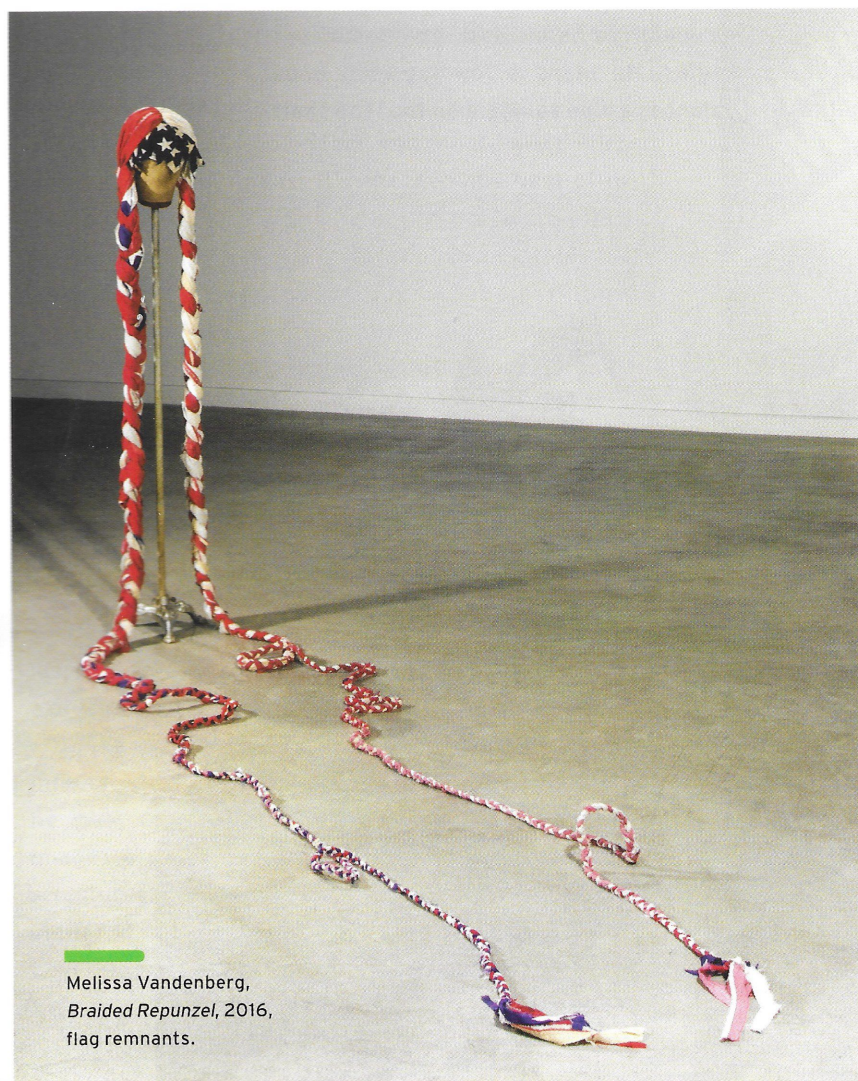
Melissa Vandenberg goes further – and very "in your face." Her work evokes a more visceral reaction by using the American flag sometimes and embraces

satire and the absurd, drawing on popular culture, patriotic icons and figurative associations. A sculptured work, "Braided Repunzel" uses flag remnants recycled into braids that turn into rope; according to a comment by Anna Brzyski, a professor of art history where both artists work who wrote the introduction to the exhibition catalog, "...the piece evokes simultaneously dark imagery of lynching mobs and feminine ambivalence about vulnerability and wanting to be saved."

A startling work of Vandenberg's, "Monument" is a soft sculpture also made from deconstructed flags. It's an obelisk that drips with elements of masculinity and femininity. Masculine in that it's associated with militarism and patriotic service and yet also the femininity of textile work. Within flag culture, women's roles have historically been as makers, using needle and thread (ala Betsy Ross), thereby Vandenberg renders her monument visibly soft while complicating the piece with the masculinity associated with the obelisk and the militaristic culture it represents.

This is a thought-provoking exhibition that challenges political assumptions. It's worth the intellectual growth it may cultivate ... So, let's let art sit around the dining table – and speak its mind.

| Linda Chestney



Melissa Vandenberg,
Braided Repunzel, 2016,
flag remnants.



Melissa Vandenberg,
Monument, 2016, US
flags, polyester, wood,
nylon and hardware.