

## People of Colour

A flag is a piece of material, stuck to a wall, hoisted on a flag-pole. From a scientific standpoint, a flag, any flag, is nothing, just a scrap of cloth. In this sense, then, flags are *silly*. To care about flags is to expose oneself as vulnerable to a certain symbolic dominance. To pledge allegiance to a flag, any flag, unless done under duress, out of a cultural habit, is a strange move in a world shimmering, exploding with floating signifiers. What differentiates a McDonalds sign from the Stars and Stripes? Why not kneel outside a Dunkin' Donuts instead? What is capitalism's flag - all of the banners flapping outside consumer huts strewn across the world, perhaps?

Dread Scott's 1988 installation 'What Is The Proper Way to Display a US Flag?' sets the bar high for flag art. In this piece, visitors must decide whether to step on an American flag on the floor in order to answer the question in a ledger-book that sits on a shelf above it. Toying with desecration, and highly controversial - President Bush Senior declared the flag 'disgraceful' and the entire US Congress denounced the work, voting to in the Senate 97-0 to outlaw displaying the US flag on the floor or the ground - Scott's work reveals the murky potential offence that a flag always ominously signals, even if stepping on a flag, or even burning one, on another level, is physically indistinguishable from setting fire to a large dishcloth. But the feelings!

This was a summer of flags. Britain was over-run by rainbows. Formerly the Pride flag, celebrating gays, lesbians and bisexuals, the rainbow has lately been commandeered by the National Health Service as a happy, positive symbol of what might come after the Pandemic, or perhaps more realistically, a desperate attempt in the present to keep people happy in the face of fear, loneliness and economic desolation. Every street in the city has a rainbow. Children have drawn or painted their own, ragged versions and parents have put them in their windows. There is something tyrannous about this rainbow flag. It seems to say, there is no nature left, no natural rainbows. All we have are these desultory fake rainbows with their too-bright colours. There is only the city, and waves of illness, and lockdowns, and you have to pretend you are enjoying it and that *we are all in this together*.

A forced flag is a menacing object. What if your flag is not my flag? What if I want nothing to do with your beliefs? Does nature need flags? I don't think so. Flags are human, horribly so. They are always strangely evocative, even if we refuse, in our cynicism, to be moved by them. The respect and reverence of others for flags can seem archaic, primitive...and symbols aren't real, a flag is not a country. And yet people take great stock by them, we read everything into the flags that someone chooses to display as a reflection of their being, their belonging. We all detest or are afraid of certain flags, we are touched by others. They menace us, haunt us, even as fewer places seem stable enough to even display them...

What, in this sense, are flags on the internet? Traditional flags are massive: our virtual lives are shrunken, creating all the more need for people to posit their identity for fear of falling into the void. Flags have become emojis, tiny rectangular blocks next to names or pseudonyms. If we shrink the flag, do we diminish its power or expand it? *People of Colour* at Mercy Pictures engages in a semiotic provocation both at the level of scale and at the level of meaning. If you put all the flags together – or if not all the flags, enough flags that the very idea of 'flag' itself begins to shudder under the weight of multiple confusing impressions – do they cancel each other out? Repeating a familiar word makes it start to sound uncanny, meaningless. All these small sized flags, sized somewhere between online symbol and landscape painting: perhaps an incitement, a red flag. Identity is over: a flag is a flag is a flag.

- Nina Power