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## Arts & Entertainment

### Art Review: New exhibit reflects on U.S. flag and what it stands for

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By Mary Thomas, Post-Gazette Art Critic

As the saying goes, timing is everything. You can add "context" to that.

Consider, for example -- for textbook case example -- the exhibition that opened this week at the Three Rivers Arts Festival Gallery, Downtown.

When "To The Flag: Taking Liberties" was in the planning stages, the World Trade Center towers still stood in lower Manhattan.

Things have changed.

Some things.

So an exhibition with a theme that in the '80s may have been neutral and in the '60s querulous shifts temperament yet again. Conversely, the object of focus -- the U.S. flag -- has remained virtually the same for more than 200 years.

Besides representing something abstract, symbols often have the power to stir emotions, and the American flag has become a symbol of many things, some positive and some negative, to a vast range of people around the globe. I needn't elaborate on the role the flag has played since the September terrorist attacks; sufficient to note that it's become ascendant in the public



"Untitled (American Flag #513)" by Edward Mapplethorpe is part of a series of photographs he took in 1994 that was inspired by a collection of older flags left to him by his brother, Robert.

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consciousness.

The 19 works in the exhibition reflect this ambiguity of feeling about the flag and all that it stands for, but the dominant tone is one of respect: Weather-worn, fragmented, reinterpreted -- in the end, it's still there, as are the idealistic goals it ultimately represents.

All but one of the artworks in the exhibition were made before Sept. 11 (between 1948 and 2000), but the reading of the intent of some of them has shifted because of the events of that day.

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**"The Flag" is at 707 Penn Ave., across from the Benedum, through March 31. Gallery hours are noon to 5 p.m. Mondays through Wednesdays and noon to 7:30 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays. Admission is free; ring the street buzzer if the gallery's locked. For information, call 412-281-8723.**

When invited to guest curate an exhibition at the gallery, Kimberly Marrero of the Suzanne Randolph Fine Arts gallery in New York City originally conceived a solo show of the photographs of Edward Mapplethorpe. When she visited his studio to select works, she saw a series of images of the flag and was taken by their scintillating aesthetic quality: "You rarely see the flag so abstracted and so beautiful."

Adding to the allure was their inspiration. Edward's brother, the famed and late Robert Mapplethorpe, "had coveted a bunch of old flags, which he left to

Edward when he passed on. He had a patriotic streak. Edward fell madly in love with them and started to photograph them, as an object of beauty and also in remembrance of his brother.

"Then Sept. 11 happened," she continues, and she began to rethink the show.

While the focus is still on Edward's flags -- six lushly sensitive photographs that occupy a mysterious space between solidity and ephemeral -- nine other artists were added. One of these is Robert, represented by a photograph of a flag that's tattered but is flying firmly and has a backlit glow, and, more surprisingly, a cluster of shag carpet-covered red, white and blue "Stars" from 1983, "when he was doing assemblages."

Marrero had arranged for David Kramer's 1998 "The Center of the Known Universe," a light sculpture that comprises a 9-by-5-foot metal outline of the continental United States accented with red and white bulbs, to be included in the exhibition. But she released him from the show when an explosion devastated his Brooklyn studio three weeks ago. All of his work was destroyed except this piece, which stood in the center of the ashes, with broken bulbs but otherwise in perfect condition. Kramer felt "it had to be in the

exhibition," though, so he refit it for display. Marrero considers it a Phoenix rising symbol.

Other works mix humor and critique, such as Sam Messer's "Enough," a painting of a frazzled Uncle Sam before a large flag. He "looks like he's been through the wringer," Marrero says, adding that the work speaks directly to our times, although it was conceived with different motivation in 1995.

Similarly given new interpretation is William Stone's "Participatory Democracy," which engages the visitor in "flag waving," a loaded phrase that's particularly pertinent now. Another Stone work is a tribute to Jasper Johns, perhaps our heretofore most notable contemporary painter of flag images.

The most moving work is Brooklyn artist Steve Gerberich's mixed media assemblage "Amer-o-matic," which was made as an homage to the rescue workers who died at the Trade Center site, some of whom he knew. The large, cabinet-like piece incorporates a collection of Americana, firefighter paraphernalia and debris gathered at Ground Zero, and it has the folky shrine-like aspect of the spontaneous monuments that have arisen in Manhattan, at the Pentagon and near Somerset. Push a button and objects rotate, a flag waves and the sounds of emergency dispatches can be heard.

Other artists included are Andy Warhol, photographer and member of Warhol's Factory Edward Wallowitch, ceramist Ilona Granet and Donald Lipski.

Even if you think you've assimilated your feelings about the September events, a walk through this exhibition may trigger responses that haven't yet surfaced through the intellect.

At its best, art presents new and unique ways of seeing and understanding, and this show is right for the times. I suspect we'll be seeing more like it.

### **Techno isolation**

At 2 p.m. today, the curators of a new exhibition at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts -- "Stepping Back, Moving Forward" -- will discuss their ideas about the way new technology is shaping the future, influencing contemporary art and encouraging isolation. They are independent curators L. Halsey Brown, an installation artist who teaches at The New School University, and William Stover, a staff member of Independent Curators International. For information, call 412-361-0873.

