

## Blowin' in the Wind: Ballroom Marfa's "unFlagging"

'unFlagging' is an experiment in unlearning — an opportunity to reimagine what a flag can represent, and an installation made for the age of isolation.



Installation view, Pia Camil, "AIR OUT YOUR DIRTY LAUNDRY," 2020 Courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa. Photo by Mackenzie Goodman.

By **Barbara Purcell** - December 18, 2020



"We stole countries with the cunning use of flags. Just sail around the world and stick a flag in," the British comedian Eddie Izzard once remarked. "unFlagging," Ballroom Marfa's current outdoor exhibition, seems to be in on the joke.

Eight leading contemporary artists have been commissioned for the project, each creating a flag accompanied by a sound activation. The [exhibition is on rotation every two weeks](#) in downtown Marfa until January 21, 2021. (No ticket required, the art can be viewed from the street.)

"unFlagging" kicked off on October 2 with Chilean poet and artist Cecilia Vicuña's "Ver Dad," and will conclude with work by Brooklyn-based writer/editor and artist Kameelah Janan Rasheed. Other artists include Jeffrey Gibson, Byron Kim, Hank Willis Thomas, Pia Camil, Naama Tsabar, and Lisa Alvarado, whose "Thalweg Flag" is currently on view.



*Installation view, Lisa Alvarado, "Thalweg Flag," 2020. Courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa. Photo by Mackenzie Goodman*

For those who are wondering, thalwegs are lines connecting the lowest points in a valley or river — a continually shifting pathway defined by nature rather than a nation.

Alvarado's flag has been paired with [sound from the experimental music ensemble Natural Information Society](#); a small speaker affixed to a street pole just outside the courtyard sonically trickles water (and features Alvarado on harmonium). The water at first sounds like a pleasant enough stream before it begins dripping with the echoey acoustics of a sewer system.

The [San Antonio-born Alvarado](#) has created a flag which features a black serpentine design to illustrate the Rio Grande (or Rio Bravo, depending on which side) along the U.S.-Mexico Border. According to Ballroom Marfa's online description, "'Thalweg Flag' demarcates an intervening space for healing physical, psychological, and spiritual borders between people."

Its distinct yellow is hard to miss against the headstrong blue West Texas sky, meant to signify the color of wristbands placed on detained immigrants and families separated at the border.

Ballroom Marfa's high courtyard walls serve to reinforce the reality of borders and limits: direct access to the exhibition is only permitted Thursday through Saturday. Yet, by virtue of its name, "unFlagging" is an experiment in unlearning. An arty opportunity to reimagine what a flag can represent.

Byron Kim's "Sky Blue Flag," which was on display in late October, features an indigo-dyed linen undulating against its matching background, seeming to suggest the sky does not recognize sovereignty. Kim's flag is this soothing chambray patch of blue against an infinite blue, like a visual antonym for ethnonationalism.



*Installation view, Byron Kim, "Sky Blue Flag," 2020. Courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa. Photo by Mackenzie Goodman*

Pia Camil's "Air Out Your Dirty Laundry" in the second half of November featured a clothesline drooping with duds donated by local Marfans. Camil wanted to celebrate the "sweat and secrets" hidden in everyday life by having them shine in the sun. A recording of each local explaining why they were donating their used clothing accompanied the artist's installation.

In a way, the colorful horizontal display resembles a strand of Tibetan prayer flags, traditionally hung in the Himalayas to bless the mountains. As the wind carries prayers into the atmosphere, it is believed these flags bring peace to all. (In "Air Out Your Dirty Laundry," could a pair of tighty-whities be a sign of truce?)

Jeffrey Gibson's "one becomes the other" consists of two stars trying to touch, waving as one. The [Choctaw-Cherokee painter](#) is perhaps poking at the Lone Star flag which proudly symbolizes Texas' former independence. But his eight-point star design is also found in Native American quilting. Bright pinks and blues from afar appear as purple — a royal rarity in any flag — and a modern, more inclusive take on such insignia.



Jeffrey Gibson, "one becomes the other," 2020. Courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa. Photo by Mackenzie Goodman

If you walk across the street from Ballroom Marfa, to the local gas station, you'll be afforded a less neck-craning view of "unFlagging." But you'll miss out on the sonic drip coming from Alvarado's speaker. And if you stand next to the courtyard wall, you're more likely to feel left out of the show — unless you're there on a day it's actually open. This is an installation made for the age of isolation.

Do flags serve the same purpose in a global pandemic, when much of the world is operating like a Tuesday in Marfa? (Hint: very little is happening on a Tuesday in Marfa.)

If flags are a way to stake claim across the globe, as Eddie Izzard suggested in his stand-up, do they lose their luster when the entire planet is affected by the same catastrophe?

"unFlagging" seems to be asking this very question. The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind.

*"unFlagging" continues through Jan. 21, 2020. The Ballroom Marfa courtyard is open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays (closed Dec. 25 and Jan. 1). [ballroom.org](http://ballroom.org)*

