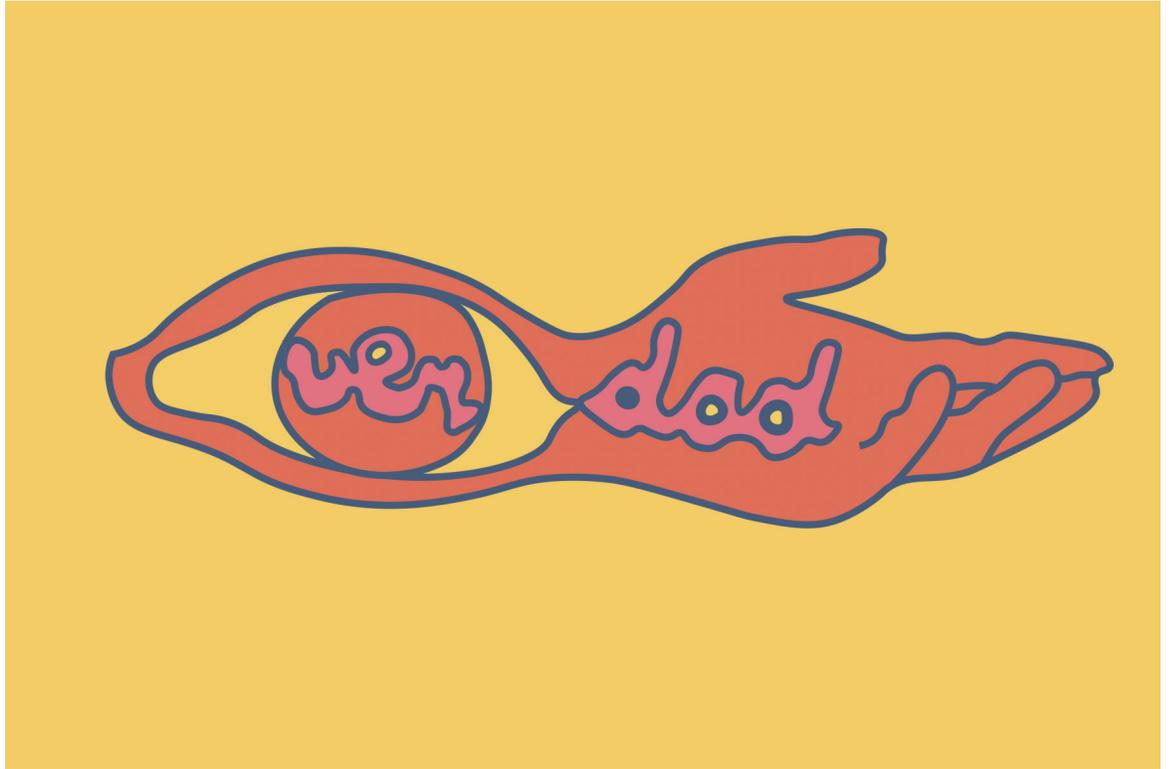


Ballroom's 'unFlagging' exhibit to explore the symbols of flags

By Stephen Paulsen – September 30, 2020



Cecilia Vicuña
Rendering of *Ver Dad*,
1974/2020
Courtesy the artist.

MARFA — This week, for the first time since the coronavirus pandemic, Ballroom Marfa is trying its hand at an outdoor and socially distant exhibit.

The outdoor exhibition, entitled “unFlagging,” will explore the symbols and rituals behind flags, including how “we learn to raise them, lower them, fold them, sing to them and respect them,” Ballroom stated in an online post announcing the event. unFlagging opens Friday, October 2, and will run into January.

The genesis for the project started over the summer. In June, as protests over the killing of George Floyd and other Black Americans spread across the nation, Ball-

room raised a banner over its courtyard with a simple message: “Black lives matter.” At the time, Ballroom said it raised the banner in solidarity with the protesters, and to commemorate Juneteenth, the day in 1865 when many black slaves in Texas learned they were free.

That project was well-received, and it got Ballroom thinking about other ways it could use its courtyard and/or flags to safely display art during the coronavirus pandemic, Sarah Melendez, programs director at Ballroom, said in an interview this week. They ultimately settled on “unFlagging.”

Still, Melendez hesitates to call the exhibition “an opening” — a term that carries

connotations of people gathering to view art.

“We’re not technically saying we’re open,” she says. “The indoor space is closed.” And as for the courtyard where unFlagging will debut, “the gate will be open, or it won’t be.”

“We’re not really advertising,” Melendez adds of the event. Instead, she says that “if people walk by and hear something and feel intrigued to come into the [backyard] space, they’re welcome to.”

The exhibit will feature eight artists — Lisa Alvarado, Pia Camil, Jeffrey Gibson, Byron Kim, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Hank Willis Thomas, Naama Tsabar and Cecilia Vicuña — each of whom will present a flag for two weeks.

In some cases, Melendez said, the timing of the flags was specially chosen — though that wasn’t always the case. For example, Hank Willis Thomas, the artist behind the “For Freedoms” project, will unveil his flag on Election Day. Kameelah Janan Rasheed, a Black Muslim artist, will display her flag in time for Martin Luther King Day.

The flags will be accompanied by a “sound-based work,” Ballroom said in its announcement, and artists will try to deconstruct some of the questions around flags. Questions like: “How is meaning constructed, produced, and perpetuated” by flags? And “can we invent new ways to make symbols and meanings?”

To prepare for the exhibit, Ballroom provided the artists with technical speci-

fications (like the fact their flag pole is 30 feet tall) as well as research materials on the history and context of flags. Melendez, the program director, found herself particularly interested in the way flags sometimes convey not just sentiments, but specific messages — for instance, on the high seas.

“Ships used flags for communication,” she explains. There was “a black flag for pirates” or “a yellow flag to signify infectious disease” — as in “our boat is contaminated; don’t come anywhere near it.”

“I thought that was so interesting,” Melendez added. Two artists, she noted, have incorporated yellow into their flags, though she stressed she wasn’t sure if they intended the color as a specific reference to coronavirus.

This won’t just be Ballroom’s first coronavirus-era exhibition; it’ll also be the first exhibition involving Daisy Nam, the group’s new curator. Nam, who previously served as the assistant director at Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University, joined Ballroom in August.

In an interview this week, Nam noted she hadn’t yet worked in Marfa during non-pandemic times. Describing the “unFlagging” project as a “socially distant art-viewing situation,” she said she hoped it would offer residents a way to get out of their homes and enjoy art while still remaining safe.

“It’s a good format for people to just have some art and be able to see something different,” Nam said. “During the pandemic — I don’t know about anyone else

— but I’m getting tired of seeing art on my screen.”

Organizing an art exhibit during coronavirus posed special challenges, Nam said.

“In normal times, I would do studio visits in-person,” she said. Artists could come for a site visit, and “there’d be slightly more in-person moments where we could work things out in person.” But as the pandemic continues, Nam and other organizers have instead done much of their planning on Zoom.

Still, Nam says some aspects of putting on a show in Marfa are familiar to her. For example, there’s the focus of local art institutions like Ballroom on doing site-specific art over traveling exhibits, which show the same artworks in “quote-unquote neutral spaces.”

After all, she said, the Carpenter Center was designed by Charles-Édouard Jean-

neret, often known as “Le Corbusier,” an eccentric 20th century Swiss-French architect who often designed brutalist buildings with sharp angles and unique features. That meant artists and curators at Carpenter also had to tailor their projects to the space.

“The space is so weird,” Nam said of the Carpenter Center. “There are so many windows, it’s all concrete — and there are no walls.” As a result, she said, “artists have to think through [their projects] and come up something very specific” — just as is often the case in Marfa.