ALMINE RECH

Vaughn Spann
(All) Americans

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Whose Home?

A curious thing about this country's national anthem "The Star-Spangled Banner," is that in its first stanza (which is usually the only one sung when publicly performed) it poses questions. It asks the listener, "Can you see (by the dawn's early light)?" these stars and stripes, putatively a beacon for those who wish to be free of tyranny. It asks whether we can affirm that it still does "wave (o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave)."

Though a Black and Indigenous man — Crispus Attucks — was among the first to die for the American revolutionary cause that impelled the writing of Francis Scott Key's anthemic poem, currently a White, Christian nationalist revanchist movement led by the executive branch of the federal government has sought to make non-White immigrants incidental to the story of this nation's creation and subsequent development into a super power. For people who look like Attucks, can the flag beckon to a welcoming place?

Vaughn Spann explains he sought to make flag paintings "grounded in my understanding of home." Being African American this understanding is fraught. His forbears are not native to this land. And yet, in his visits to the continent of Africa that is his ancestral abode, Spann says he found that "People are much more tribally attached." There he was still viewed as different, not of that place, in other words, not quite at home.

With this exhibition Spann implicitly poses the question what kind of home does the presence of the flag herald. And might the home's character be altered with an alteration of its flag? Spann argues, "As a Black American the flag is always jarring because of those afforded agency and protection under it, and for us who are often persecuted by contrast ...." Well, we can certainly see the flag, but it is not necessarily for us a symbol of hope.

Working through these ideas, Spann has created several versions here. In a tradition of artists remaking the nation's calling card — here you may think of David Hammonds, Dread Scott, Faith Ringgold — Spann seeks to make the flag a banner more explicit in its aims. In one of the show's most compelling works, *America (In White),* the top half of the painting is comprised of the typical US flag with its corner of 50 white stars on a blue background interrupting an area of alternating white and red stripes. But below this is an enlarged field that include several orderly rows of Spann's mix of terry cloth, polymer paint, sand and resin molded into white bundles with flecks of red here and there. It is a manifestly a flag founded on the absence of other colors besides white (and occasional splotches of a passionate red).

Spann claims that he aims to "recharge the symbols, give them new significance." Yes, with this we are given a clearer beacon. This is not a flag that waves though. This weighty work on wood panel confronts us like a roadside banner warning that some of us will find scant shelter here.

— Seph Rodney, PhD, Freelance arts writer, editor, and curator