

sculpture

April 2013

Sculpture Magazine NEW YORK

Dave Cole
DODGEgallery

—Jan Garden Castro

On first seeing Dave Cole's recent exhibition, I was struck by the animatronic and craft features in its main attraction, *The Music Box*, a 13-ton asphalt compactor reconstructed into a working music box that plays "The Star-Spangled Banner." The bumper is crafted from cherry wood, and, on closer inspection, some of the machine's other parts have been meticulously reproduced to permit its dismantling and functioning as an art object. Another labor-intensive work consisted of a hand-sewn American flag, made of lead yet detailed with the wrinkles and stitches of cloth. Cole's flags vary in size from monumental to small, but they all use the government-issue scale template. Nearby, a Singer sewing machine seemed to be searching the Internet for the key to its operating system, its needle printing a coded message on a spool of ticker tape. Cole's work deploys highly charged—and transformed—symbols.

On second viewing, what stood out was Cole's deep commitment to metaphors that, for him, embody Langston Hughes's refrain for underserved populations: "I, too, sing America." Cole seems to contrast industrial might, Fortune 500 companies, and American icons with various vulnerable symbols, from babies to veterans. He sculpts wooden baby rattles into "three generations" of hand grenades and turns a



Dave Cole, *Song-Books of The War*, 2012. Mixed media, wheelchair, and 20,000 buffalo nickels, 49.75 x 26 x 43 in.



Dave Cole, *The Music Box*, 2012. Caterpillar CS-553 Vibratory Roller-Compactor, cherry wood, spring steel, and U.S. national anthem, 11 x 19 x 8 ft.

beat-up, broken rattan wheelchair into a resting place for a mound of 20,000 buffalo nickels that add up to his own weight. Of course, the depicted Indians and buffalos (like nickels themselves) have drastically declined due to American policies. Cole is also equating his body weight/human life with money that circulated between World War I and World War II—two of the bloodiest wars of all time. The wheelchair suggests that the body has been ravaged. *The Music Box* has two aural/poetry metaphors: the 1814 Francis Scott Key lyrics about the flag raised beside the "rockets' red glare" and a Siegfried Sassoon poem suggesting that each generation favors *its* war. Cole's work seems to ask us to rethink patriotism in relation to human life.

This was also a show for people who like to tinker with—and drive—big machines. When invited to climb into the cab of the compactor, I experienced an adrenalin surge from being so high up. This reminded me that giant machines built to destroy need willing, trained operators. Patriotism, war, and heavy machinery are ongoing obsessions for Cole. Before his lead flag series, he made flags from recovered bullets and bullet fragments (2009) and from toy soldiers painted red, white, and blue (2006). In 2005, he "knitted" a 30-by-20-foot acrylic felt flag at MASS MoCA, using aluminum utility pole "needles" attached to John Deere-machine "arms." *The Music Box*, which was commissioned by the Cleveland Institute of Art, received the 2009 deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum Rappaport Prize.