

Randall Edwards

Tim Clifford: The Archeology of Fear

NO TRUST sets emblazoned on a flag divided into two rectangles: one blood red, the other cool azure, each word painted in the color of the opposite background. The stark contrast quickly induces retinal fatigue, forcing the capital letters to seem removed from their backgrounds and unable to coexist – an indicting metaphor of the divide between red and blue America. However, *No Trust (Flag Design)* [2010] is more than a sociopolitical commentary or visual experiment. It has deeper roots, eruditely alluding to Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*, a late-antebellum-era satire of deceit on the Mississippi River. (Plate 1).

Such methodology is emblematic of Tim Clifford's exacting practice: he mines the American psyche, studiously constructing an anthropological vernacular of distrust and violence. *The Threat Assessment* series [since 2013], for example, reimagines carnival shooting galleries as matte black murals with austere white targets. The individual titles, such as *The Ideal Classroom* [2014] (taken from news coverage of the mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut), transform visual abstractions of frontier gun culture into harrowing juxtapositions of freedom and death.

Further investigating the aesthetic mechanisms of gun culture, *Target Panic* [2008–2012] identifies an astonishing intersection between firearms and abstract painting, between violence and design. For this series, Clifford gathered one hundred targets used for shooting practice and copied them as delicate gouache drawings. The meticulously hand-drawn works recall colorful Suprematist compositions, Agnes Martin's faint gridded lines, or Gabriel Orozco's geometric permutations of circles. Excavating found images, however, Clifford's works are not abstractions, but simulacra, vulnerable representations of images created only to be violently ruptured.

Clifford quite literally reversed the artistic process of excavation in *The Neighborhood I Grew Up in Buried Underground* [1999]. Here, the artist dug a one-foot trench and buried a miniature schema of his childhood cul-de-sac in an attempt to escape the traumas of youthful anxiety and symbolically return the landscape to its uninhabited state. Clifford, who grew up in Newtown, later responded to the massacre of school-children there with *Our All American Town* [2015] – a startling print of targets imposed on a photograph of two boys bearing the eponymous banner at a parade. Unfathomable mass carnage, like that perpetrated on children very much like these boys, suggests that any American can too easily be added to the rollcall of needless death.

Clifford's most recent work borrows solemn historical imagery to evoke the grief accompanied by loss. *A Good Death* [2015], the title drawn from Drew Gilpin Faust's *A Republic of Suffering*, depicts a willow tree commonly found etched onto 19th century New England gravestones, suggesting that society confers value on the manner of one's death, not the merits of one's life. (Plate 2). The cumulative result of Clifford's oeuvre is a trenchant conceptual embodiment of the visceral fear inherent to the American condition. Positioning the past as contemporary subject matter, he traces a genealogy of societal distrust. Ultimately, the work places us not only as the shooter – panicked targets cleanly in our sights – but on the opposing side of a yawning cultural chasm, where fear is so potent that tragedy is not enough.

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(Plate 1)



No Trust (flag study), 2008
Gouache on paper
14 x 20 3/8 inches

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Tim Clifford: The Archeology of Fear
(Plate 2)



A Good Death, 2015
Charcoal on paper mounted on panel
78 x 48 inches