

# New exhibit explores what the American flag symbolizes amid political polarization

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The American flag is one of the world's most recognizable symbols, but the responses it provokes are anything but uniform. A new museum exhibit in Arkansas explores how such a universal symbol can send so many different messages. Ali Rogin recently paid a visit for our arts and culture series, CANVAS.

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### William Brangham:

The American flag is one of the most recognizable symbols in the world.

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### Ali Rogan:

It flies over the halls of justice, it's used to mark a solemn sacrifice, and it's wrapped around shoulders in celebration. It's present at the proudest and the darkest moments in the nation's history. The flag represents America, but it can't represent all the experiences of those who claim it as their own.

That's the idea behind the exhibit *Flagged for Discussion* at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas.

Larissa Randall, Curator, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art: Every object here reflects the artist's personal relationship or connection to the flag.

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### Ali Rogan:

Curator Larissa Randall came up with the idea for the exhibit while perusing items in the museum's permanent collection. There were so many depictions of the American flag, but each was so different, like this Norman Rockwell portrait of Rosie the Riveter quite literally eating Hitler's lunch, or this wood carving by Leroy Almon making clear that the transatlantic slave trade also took place under the flag's auspices.

Or *Ward* by George Tooker, in which the flag provides little comfort to ailing patients.

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### Larissa Randall:

I was struck by how artists from across time, across walks of life, of various backgrounds all use the flag to, like, comment on issues that are important to them.

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**Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, Artist:**

This is a flag Mexico and the U.S. as one, but it's bigger than that. It's, can we get along?

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**Ali Rogan:**

For artists Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, the flag is both message and medium. Underwood was born in Sacramento, California. Her mother was third-generation Mexican American. And her father was part of the Bracero Program, which allowed Mexican seasonal workers to come to the United States during both World Wars.

Her piece at Crystal Bridges is called Home of the Brave. It combines the American and Mexican flags, evoking the strong ties between the two countries, but also the deep divides.

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**Consuelo Jimenez Underwood:**

I feel that the threads can join, not just fabric, but people. And that's where I came in. I wanted to do something about the division between our countries, Mexico and U.S.

For me, that line is very arbitrary.

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**Ali Rogan:**

Like many children of migrants at the time, Underwood grew up picking crops with her family, taxing her small body. But with the help of her parents, she nurtured her spirit and mind.

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**Consuelo Jimenez Underwood:**

I learned how to appreciate the little that I had from my dad. And it was the hottest picking tomatoes in Sacramento Valley in 110 degrees. It was hard.

And he would sing. And everybody would listen, because he had a beautiful voice. The other magic that happened in those fields in those early, early years were the book vans that came to the fields for us kids that would miss school the first two months and the last two months of the school year.

And I made a promise to myself. Because I'm getting behind. I swear I will not read fiction. I'm only going to read biography, science, real stuff, so that I can make up for the knowledge that I'm losing.

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**Ali Rogan:**

America allowed children like Underwood to labor alongside adults, a practice that continues illegally today.

But as Underwood sees it, America also allowed her to thrive.

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**Consuelo Jimenez Underwood:**

I lived under the U.S. flag. And I knew, if I got an education, I could move up the social, economic. So, Consuelo, don't cry. You will be the first of 11 of 12 to get that high school education.

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**Ali Rogan:**

She finds inspiration in the methods of the indigenous Huichol people of Mexico from whom she is descended. Her flag rests on a backdrop of intricate indigenous designs.

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**Consuelo Jimenez Underwood:**

Underneath is a really important history that, don't forget, it's the shoulders that we stand on.

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**Ali Rogan:**

Her flag features raw materials like plastic and barbed wires. Safety pins hold the two flags' loose threads together.

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**Consuelo Jimenez Underwood:**

This flag is in disarray because it's not perfect, but it's beautiful, because the land that it waves over is wonderful.

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**Ali Rogan:**

What does it mean to you to have this work in conversation with the other pieces in this exhibit?

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**Consuelo Jimenez Underwood:**

It really is wonderful. I feel like Crystal Bridges is embodying the best of these artworks that make you jump, go, oh, my God, I never seen something like that.

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**Larissa Randall:**

I would see this project as successful if someone left thinking about the flag in a different way than they walked in.

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**Ali Rogan:**

That's the exhibit's other common thread, each pieces' piece's ability to provoke deeper thought.

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**Martin Guerra-West, Holiday Island, Arkansas:**

It makes me proud. It makes me also thoughtful of our history and how far we've come in expanding our civil rights.

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**Jim Chamberlain, Phoenix, Arizona:**

As my cap shows, I was in the service in the Army. So the flag to me is the flag, freedom, because that's what I went in to fight for.

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**Tor'e Alford, Wichita, Kansas:**

It's kind of twisted now. I feel like, what's the flag? How free are we, really, when you really think about it.

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**Larissa Randall:**

Some people might look at the U.S. flag and see unity or fear or harmony or freedom. And whatever people see, I think is valid, but also is worth investigating, whose freedom are we talking about and how — as we move forward as a country, what do we want this to sort of represent for us?

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**Ali Rogan:**

Flagged for Discussion doesn't answer those questions, but it starts the conversation.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Ali Rogan in Bentonville, Arkansas.

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*By* – **Ali Rogin**

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