

### Exhibit

## In Baltimore, Delving Into the Notion of Patriotism

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If "unpatriotic" is what you call people who don't support their country, what epithet do you throw at people who don't support the idea of patriotism? A show called "Patriot," organized by curator Cira Pascual Marquina at the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore, doesn't simply question some of the acts committed in the name of one nation or another. It questions the whole notion of love of country.

A work by South African artist Siemon Allen comes at the subject by presenting some of the facts of the matter. His piece consists of a wall-filling grid of vintage cards, like the kind that used to come with bubble gum. The ones that he's collected were designed to rouse support for America's major military projects, from World

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A still from the 1998 film "Zapatista," one of several documentaries in the Contemporary Museum's "Patriot" exhibit, which questions whether the world should be carved into units of "us" and "them."

War II through Vietnam to Afghanistan's Operation Enduring Freedom.

Some cards were created to speak to the children of the 1940s, teaching them how to hate the Japanese and love their men in uniform — and to prepare for war at home, if it should ever come.

A set from the Korean War includes a card captioned "Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade Against Communism."

Cards from this country's more recent adventures, in Iraq in 1991 and in Afghanistan, are more straightforward, as though military might speaks for itself and no longer needs the overt pleading of propaganda. They simply present the marvels of American military hardware and assume that children will revel in them. The tank becomes a symbol of what's great about the nation and demands respect for its own sake.

Of course, none of this is official government propaganda. The cards are produced to make money for private companies. They are cogs in a larger cultural machine that promotes a nation's missions and assumes that citizens will want to get on board. Cards like these don't tout the specific projects they portray. They suggest that rooting for the home team is a normal, necessary fact of civic life.

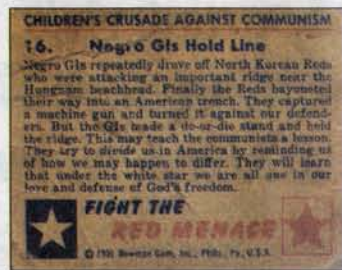
Various documentaries playing on video monitors are even more direct. One made by the Big Noise collective in 1998 traces the early history of the Zapatista movement in Mexico, presenting it as part of a "global autonomist movement" that pits "transnational" solidarities among the oppressed against their nation-state oppressors. (It doesn't seem to acknowledge that most autonomist



CONTEMPORARY MUSEUM



Left and below, Siemon Allen's collection of cards supporting American military endeavors. Above, from Amar Kanwar's film about displays on the India-Pakistan border.



movements have had at least the tacit goal of building their own nation-states, often with ethnic underpinnings.)

Another documentary, shot in 1976 by Catalan filmmaker Pere Portabella, looks back at Francisco Franco's Spain and forward to the democracy dawning after the dictator's death. It explores the strong ties between fascism and nationalism and hints at the possibility that a post-fascist democracy might also want to be post-patriotic.

A video called "A Season Outside" by Indian artist Amar Kanwar veers away from standard documentary forms. It presents footage of the militarized border between India and Pakistan. On both sides of the di-

viding line, soldiers changing guard do absurd displays, goose-stepping and double-stomping and generally preening in their strange dress uniforms. They and their ceremonies can hardly be told apart, yet they represent two nations willing to risk nuclear war over their differences.

These and other works in "Patriot" question the idea that every corner of the world must be cut up into an "us" and "them."

It's nice to see such issues — not just potentially unpatriotic, but even worse, anti-patriotic — addressed in a high-profile public space such as an art gallery. It's also disheartening to realize how marginal they are to mainstream thought and culture, if that's

the kind of space where they feel most at home.

Sometimes it seems that contemporary art is allowed to address only our taboos — whether in the bull-whip pictures of Robert Mapplethorpe, the racial nightmares of Kara Walker or the anti-patriotism of "Patriot" — because we've set it up to be basically powerless. When we come up against challenging ideas that make us uncomfortable, we can put them aside by declaring them the stuff of art. We're all taught that art is wacky and unsystematic, which means that the messages it sends don't have to be taken fully to heart. Once ideas become artfied, that is, their wacky vagueness gets us off the

hook for dealing with them head-on. As art, they become officially marginal, with special institutions called museums saving place for them on the sidelines. I can imagine a viewer walking through "Patriot" and seeing it as an amusing collection of perplexing objects and sights and sounds, with political themes, maybe, but little true political leverage.

When a bunch of artists work through the questions posed by nationalism and patriotism, you want to thank them for their heavy lifting. But imagine if a special section of a newspaper, or an episode of "60 Minutes," were addressing those issues instead. Then we'd know that our society was truly prepared to deal with them.

**Patriot** is at the Contemporary Museum, 100 West Centre St., Baltimore, through June 11. Call 410-783-5722 or visit [www.contemporary.org](http://www.contemporary.org). Admission is free.