

UNCHARTED TERRITORY: ASHLEY HUNT'S "A WORLD MAP IN WHICH WE SEE . . . "
DEMANDS YOUR SCRUTINY, BUT THEN REWARDS IT.

## Without Borders

THE CONTEMPORARY'S NEW SHOW OF POLITICAL ART FEELS LIKE A REVOLUTIONARY MOVE BY J. BOWERS

## PATRIOT

At the Contemporary Museum through June II

## THE YAWNING OPEN SPACE OF THE

Contemporary Museum isn't exactly known for embracing a populist, DIY style, but *Patriot*, a new group exhibit examining the resurgence of nationalism in the United States and beyond, feels downright revolutionary.

Featuring works by nine artists and two collectives, Patriot is much more interactive and experimental than past Contemporary offerings, transforming the museum's gallery space into a noisy crash of lofty ideas. More of an intellectual exercise than an aesthetic one, Patriot forces visitors to digest a massive amount of impassioned, well-researched, and philosophically dense theory and criticism, and does so in high style, with films, installations, and two take-home newsprint pamphlets created specifically for the show. The overall experience is a little bit like going to a political rally—but one where ideas are articulated through well-chosen words and images instead of cardboard signs and shouted slogans.

All of the artists participating in *Patriot* attack the concept of nationalism from different angles, but they're all working on a high conceptual level. For instance, obsessed

with the connections he perceived between the growth of the U.S. prison system and the country's rising unemployment rates, Los Angeles-based installation artist Ashley Hunt organized his thoughts into a Deleuzian diagram, a brightly colored computer-generated map of words, shapes, and abstract thoughts that he then painted to make "A World Map in Which We See..." One of the few pieces in Patriot that is as visually engaging as it is mentally stimulating, Hunt's text-heavy map examines the concept of statelessness, comparing prisoners to refugees, and viewing the prison environment as a warehouse for surplus labor. Through bold

between people, ideologies, and homelands. By creating a pointless, futile game, Geyer makes a simple statement about the nebulous nature of nationalism. In collaboration with Sharon Hayes, Geyer contributes her wispy line figures to "In Times Like These, Only Criminals Remain Silent," a mass-produced, please-take-one series of five posters that berate viewers with questions about religion, public opinion, and journalism, among other things.

Patriot's other souvenir is a pamphlet called "Act Patriot Act!" produced by 16 Beaver Group, a New York-based collective of artists and critics. Using cut-andpaste zine style, the pamphlet includes poetry, scripts for satirical skits, and fake interviews. Like everything else in Patriot, "Act Patriot Act!" is a dense read, so you'll need to spend some quality time with it. Deserving more immediate attention, the show's three film offerings examine the effects of intense nationalism in other countries. With "A Season Outside," projected in one of the Contemporary's strange alcoves, Indian filmmaker Amar Kanwar examines the turbulent Hindu-Muslim relations and carnivalesque pageantry in Kashmir. Catalan Pere Portabella's spare, haunting 1976 film "Informe General" draws connections between patriotism and fascism through interviews with exiles who returned to Spain after the death of dictator Francisco Franco. And the Big Noise collective's documentary "Zapatista" provides a rare firsthand look at the Mexican revolutionary struggle.

The most accessible work in Patriot by far, South African artist Siemon Allen's "Cards" painstakingly mounts thousands of American war-related trading cards on the back wall of the gallery. World War II, Vietnam, Desert Shield, Desert Storm, and Operation Enduring Freedom are all represented, providing a museum-quality survey of U.S. military propaganda through images such as "#516 Rescue Men in Asbestos," and "#517 The Answer to Pearl Harbor," a flaming vision of combat tanks. More assembly than orig-

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blobs, lines, and science-textbook flow charts, Hunt explains how privilege directly affects the legal rights set forth in the Constitution, reducing them to theoretical constructs. It's heavy stuff, to be sure, but Hunt's simple, direct way of juxtaposing words (one bubble reads, "inclusion/privilege," another, "exclusion/subjection") commands attention and inspires contemplation.

Equally ambitious but not as overwhelming, German artist Andrea Geyer's "Substratum (Part 1)" invites visitors to take part in an impossible version of the card game Memory, attempting to pair vague outlines of people with unrecognizable landscapes, cribbed from diorama displays in New York's Museum of Natural History. Two slide projectors click through quotes from the Koran, the Bible, and other religious texts, all examining the connections inal art, "Cards" nevertheless raises important questions about how the U.S. markets and spins its war efforts, turning propaganda into child-friendly, collectible commodities, and presenting personalities like Condoleezza Rice as superheroes.

Though the text-heavy nature of the works presented can be somewhat overwhelming, and some pieces (Hunt's in particular) demand more attention than others, Patriot is a heady and heavy experience—a well-thought-out, elegantly presented, and ultra-timely look at the deeper philosophies and often troubling, exclusionary ideas behind the dime-store magnets that American "patriots" are slapping on their cars these days. It's art that's well worth reading. ★

The Contemporary Museum, IOO W. Centre St., (410) 783-5738, www.contemporary.org.