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Nari Ward's 'Liberty and Orders' at Lehmann Maupin

By Kathleen Massara

Nari Ward is an artist concerned with how materials can give an object adding meaning. In his piece, "We the People," Ward uses old shoelaces to make the text on the gallery wall, weaving in new meaning to the phrase through this arrangement of downtrodden forms. Last year, the Jamaica-born artist became a U.S. citizen; through this process, he experienced anxiety toward and frustration with the gatekeepers of citizenship as he moved closer to becoming an American. This ultimately led him to create "Liberty and Orders," his second exhibition at Lehmann Maupin in New York; "Liberty and Orders" shows us the fraught relationship between freedom and control. We asked the artist a few questions about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness via e-mail; his responses are below.

HuffPost Arts: How do you begin the process of collecting material for your installation?

I usually see something, which has been neglected or so common that their meaning is neutralized. Sometimes the questions I wish to ask of the viewer will dictate what materials are collected.

HuffPost Arts: Why did you go through the process of naturalization?

I had procrastinated the process for over twenty years and was in no real rush; however, after September 11 and the passage of the Patriot Act I felt anxious about the power of U.S. authorities to make decisions which would affect my future. As a non-citizen I would have less leverage to challenge any type of judgments.

HuffPost Arts: How do you think anxiety shapes us as Americans?

It makes us vigilante and more casual about giving power over to individuals we believe have our well being in mind. It also makes us more suspicious of others.

HuffPost Arts: What freedoms do we have and what have we given up to maintain this sense of "freedom"?

This word freedom means a lot of things to many people, for me it means having a right to pursue my passions, dreams, and even doubts as long as it is done with respect. We cannot afford to give up ground when it comes to questions and struggles with our political and legal authorities.

HuffPost Arts: What has been your impression of Occupy Wall Street?

It seems like a very important way to voice concerns about the future of our democracy.

HuffPost Arts: What artist or work of art has influenced you lately?

I am very interested in artists who teach others to be cultural workers. Mural projects, community projects or non-profits like Active Citizen Project founded by Linda Goode Bryant are managed by artist who are making their work and also trying to develop creative leaders; this is what inspires me.

"Liberty and Orders" is on view at Lehmann Maupin in New York until April 21, 2012.