

FLAGS



ALEXANDER SETON



Front cover:
As of Today, detail view 2011
Queensland marble and halyard
10 x 25 x 26cm

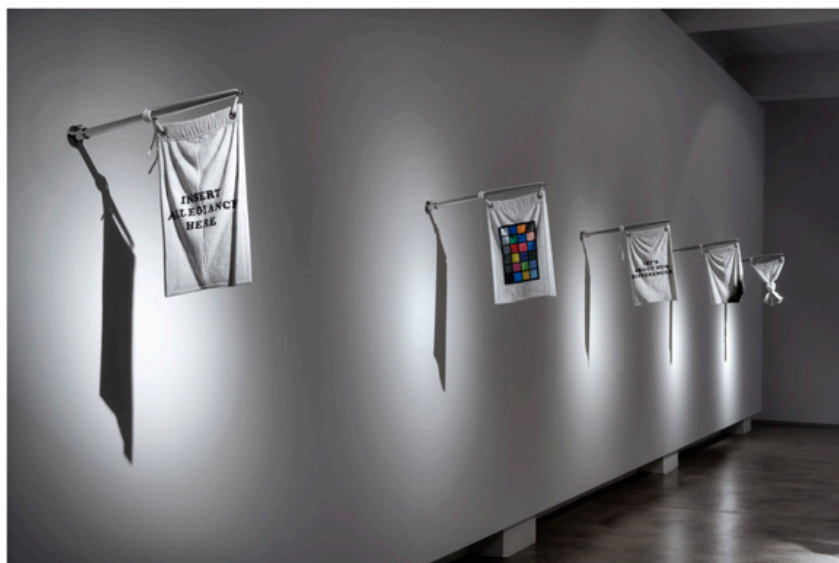
FLAGS

SCULPTURE BY ALEXANDER SETON



Installation view

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Installation view

WHITE SURRENDER

Over the last few years, Alexander Seton has been working with subjects and materials loaded with notions of empire and nationhood: in particular the material of marble and the image of the flag. Marble – and stone – relates to the monumental and the building of the state. It may signal the past through the immortalisation of an important historical landmark or figurehead. Marble is the material employed to articulate the form of power, empires and nations. It is also the material of classical sculpture.

In 2011 Seton began making a body of work based upon flags. Mostly in white, or near-white marble, and sculpted to provide the illusion of folding and fabric at first sight. Their sculpted language, with its illusion of folds, and the opaque coldness of stone is familiar. As objects they are instantly recognisable as representations of flags. They communicate like flags: they announce (I am here, you are here) and they mark (this is mine).

Seton's initial interest in flags emerged from his own understanding of the complicated territory in which he lives, Australia, a geography physically located between Asia and the West, whose modern history, institutional and legal frameworks are based upon English models, and whose Aboriginal, European-settler and migrant histories often compete. Working through these various interfacing histories and discourses, Seton's flags seek to remind us of the possibility for conflict, and the normalising function of all forms of civic language. As individuals, his work instructs us to do the things which flags never request of us, and that is to be ourselves, to place oneself inside the context, to be the context itself. The *Hanging Flag Series* (2011), requests us to insert our grievance, insert our loyalty, insert our allegiance, or to be absurd (*Colour Rendition Chart*) or to smile (*Lucky Me*). These flags, with their brightly coloured additions, their subtle binary instruction, have the power to unsettle us and to make us think about our own relations, in effect, to surrender to a world of complexity and competing ideology.

Advance Australia, *Flag Stack* and even *Banana Republic* directly reflect the politics and modern history of Australia. The collision of the colonial and that which follows it; the drive for the global and its transformation of the local; our social transformation through technology and its impact on our ability for compassionate

communication. How we arrive at a place, through migration and travel, and what we displace, is of constant awareness, especially here in Australia, where the formation of nation is predicated on the violence of Aboriginal displacement, and where migration is often spoken of as occurring in waves. Yet Seton's sculptures surrender to other readings that resonate in almost all places, where societies undergo transformation and histories are tested. Perhaps it is the whiteness of the marble – a consequence of the cutting, sanding, blasting and polishing of the material. Under Seton's hand the cold, textured marble, might ultimately be a white space, not of the erased, but a white space of expansion.

Where flags usually operate as a signal to authority (this family, this nation), Seton's flags seek to raise awareness that power too, is prone to instability. He unsettles us, demands us to say something, to think something, to cringe, or to laugh at a situation. Not to mock at its sentiment, but to suggest that its authority could not encompass in totality. The question of speech, then: what should be said, who speaks for whom, is a question of authority. By placing us in the frame, by asking us to be human and absurd, Seton makes us aware of what happens when the power to speak is so uncategorisable, so unrepresentable, so laughable or so expanded? How effective is the language of a civil culture in encapsulating a broader system of representation? Who is represented?

Flags too, could be about loneliness, vulnerability, or about total surrender. For example, the white flag of surrender is a symbol recognisable under international law and the Geneva Convention. In *Brick Pile Monument Series* (2011), Seton has created a set of white flags that are reminiscent of a childish, comic representation of surrender. Instead of a white flag tied to a makeshift flagpole, Seton has carved a singlet, a goonskin (or cask wine bladder) and an empty cement bag from marble. One almost expects a pair of old-lady knickers tied to a stick, being waved by a kid in dress-ups, or even better an animated, comic book character, lurking behind the pile of marble bricks. The work, for all of its irreverence, is highly technical, its components are made from marble. Here the artist can not only be seen to be undercutting the reverence deserved for the tradition of marble sculpture, but also asks us to consider, in our contemporary world, what would our own terms of surrender be? What do we hold dear? What do we believe in?



Installation view

The body of work, *As of Today*, which makes up the series *Monument to an Ongoing Tragedy* (2011 - ongoing), is a memorial of sorts and highlights aspects of how the artist has transformed the empirical language of effigy and stone carving into the deeply personal. The tradition, which informs the language of public monuments, is transformed into a deeply private and highly political act. Carved from Queensland marble, which has a pink, fleshy quality, this work is a series of folded flags, sitting simply and solemnly in formation on the floor. These flags, folded in a ceremonial fashion, memorialise every Australian soldier who has died in combat in the current war in Afghanistan, and a new flag is created every time a soldier is killed. Deeply personal and a private protest to the human waste of war, through this work, Seton transforms the public function of the memorial and the effigy, into the internal, private protest.

Seton's objects are usually recognisable but not always immediately as we expect them - there is constant tension between material, its symbolic value and the ultimate form which it takes. In talking about his work, he remarks that 'there is conflict in what we inherit', and that his work is ultimately about a chance to redefine what is inherited. He uses technical sculpting terms like to 'undercut', to describe his desire to provide alternate ways to see the familiar and to alter and transform their significance. Seton's work is marked by a thoroughly conceptual process, incorporating both the tradition of marble sculpture and the exigencies of the modern world. He opens up a space which surrenders to ambiguity and transforms the already known and understood.

- Aaron Seeto, 2012

Aaron Seeto is Director of 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, Australia

MONUMENT TO AN ONGOING TRAGEDY



As of Today, detail view 2011
Queensland marble and halyard
10 x 25 x 26cm



As of Today 2011
Queensland marble and halyard
Dimensions variable



Six More 2011
Queensland marble and halyard
Dimensions variable

AS OF TODAY:

ANDREW RUSSELL, 33
DAVID PEARCE, 41
MATTHEW LOCKE, 33
LUKE WORSLEY, 26
JASON MARKS, 27
SEAN MCCARTHY, 25
MICHAEL FUSSELL, 25
GREGORY MICHAEL SHER, 30
MATHEW HOPKINS, 21
BRETT TILL, 31
BENJAMIN RANAUDO, 22
JACOB MOERLAND, 21
DARREN SMITH, 25
SCOTT PALMER, 27
TIMOTHY APLIN, 38
BENJAMIN CHUCK, 27
NATHAN BEWES, 23
JASON BROWN, 29
GRANT KIRBY, 35
THOMAS DALE, 21
JARED MACKINNEY, 28
RICHARD ATKINSON, 22
JAMIE LARCOMBE, 21

SIX MORE:

BRETT WOOD, 32
ANDREW JONES, 25
MARCUS SEAN CASE, 27
ROWAN ROBINSON, 23
TODD LANGLEY, 35
MATTHEW LAMBERT, 26

THREE MORE:

BRYCE DUFFY, 26
ASHLEY BIRT, 22
LUKE GAVIN, 27



THE HANGING FLAG SERIES

No Surrender 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard, eyelets, and watercolor
55 x 75 x 10cm



Welcome / Unwelcome 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard, eyelets, and watercolor
55 x 75 x 10cm



Insert Loyalty Here 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard, eyelets, and watercolor
55 x 75 x 10cm



Insert Grievance Here 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard, eyelets, and watercolor
55 x 75 x 10cm



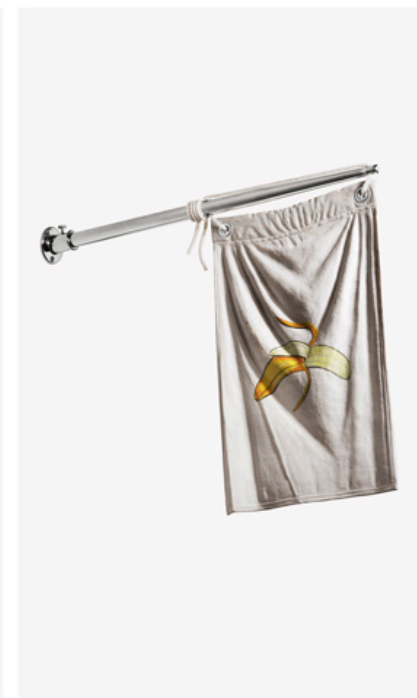
Handle With Care 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard, eyelets, and watercolor
55 x 75 x 10cm



Lucky Me! 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard, eyelets, and watercolor
55 x 75 x 10cm



Inflatable Monarchy 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard, eyelets, and watercolor
55 x 75 x 10cm



Banana Republic 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard, eyelets, and watercolor
55 x 75 x 10cm



I Don't Feel Very Aussie 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard, eyelets, and watercolor
55 x 75 x 10cm



Colour Rendition Chart 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard, eyelets, and watercolor
55 x 75 x 10cm



A Better Sequence 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard, eyelets, and watercolor
55 x 75 x 10cm



Insert Allegiance / Grievance Here 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard, eyelets, and watercolor
55 x 75 x 10cm



Gordian Knot 2011
Bianco marble, stainless steel, halyard and eyelets
55 x 75 x 15cm



Double Up 2011
Bianco marble, eyelets, stainless steel and halyard
55 x 75 x 75cm



Double Up, installation view



THE BRICK PILE MONUMENT SERIES

Installation view



Blood Sweat and Tears 2011
 Bianco and Queensland Pearl marble, steel and lighting
 220 x 120 x 120cm





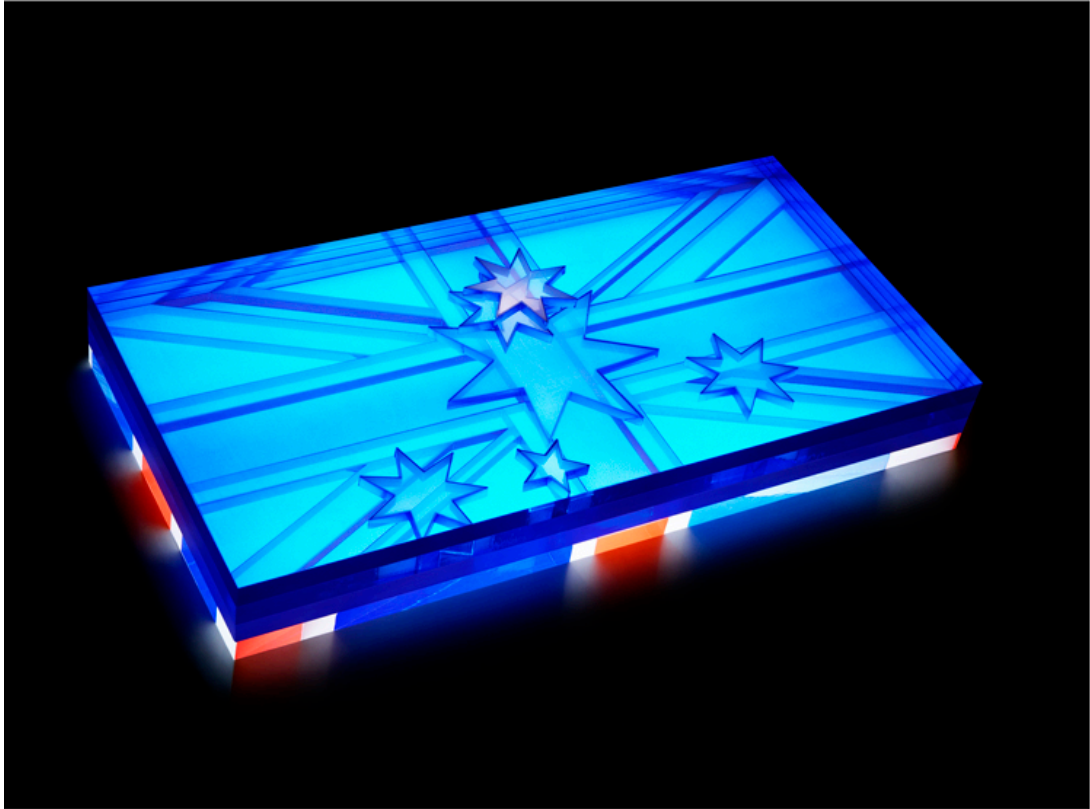
Home and Hosed 2011
 Bianco and Queensland Pearl marble, steel, rubber valve and lighting
 220 x 120 x 120cm





Bricks and Mortar 2011
 Bianco and Queensland Pearl marble, steel and lighting
 220 x 120 x 120cm





AN AUSTRALIAN REPUBLIC?

Flag Stack 2011
Tinted acrylic and lighting
8 x 36 x 68cm



Advance Australia 2011
Polyester canvas
90 x 180cm



Modular Flag 2011
Coloured acrylic
Dimensions variable

An Australian Republic?

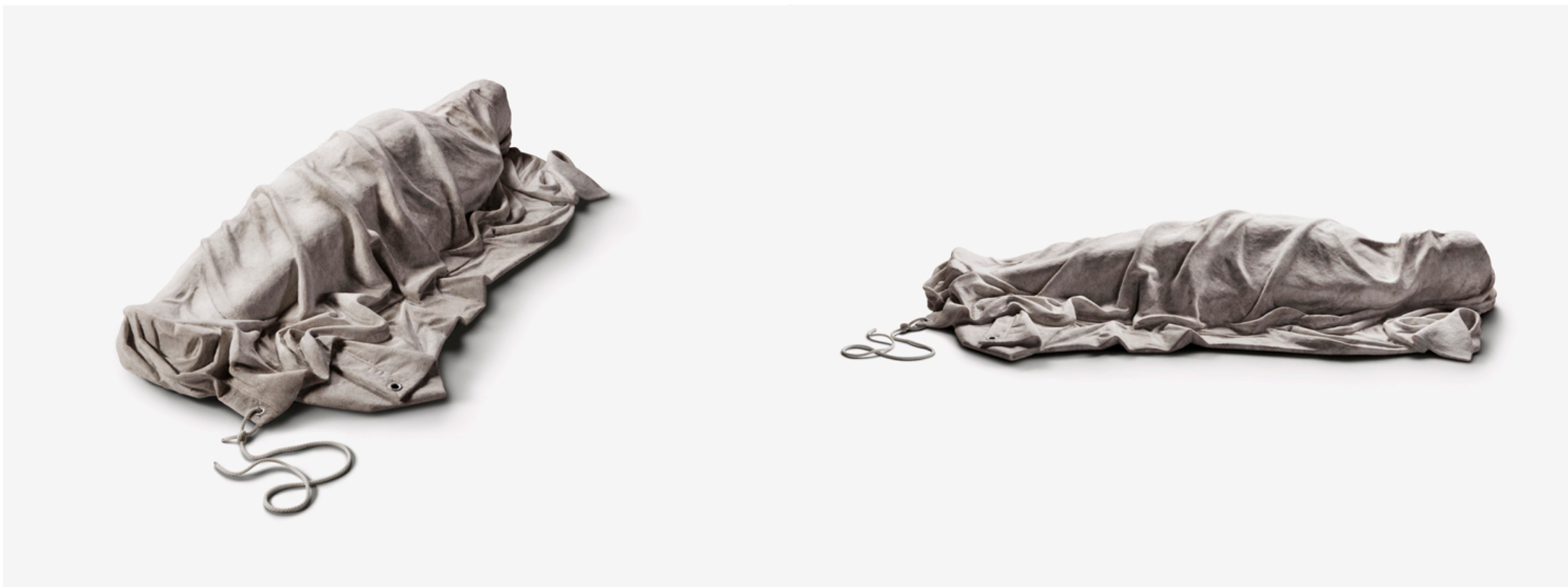


A Statement by Bob Hawke, former prime minister of Australia: 2011
Digital stills from 8 min video loop

MY CONCERNS WILL OUTLIVE YOURS



My Concerns Will Outlive Yours 2011
Wombeyan marble, eyelets and halyard
28 x 155 x 75cm



My Concerns Will Outlive Yours 2011
Wombeyan marble, eyelets and halyard
28 x 155 x 75cm

FLAG / JAN MURPHY GALLERY, BRISBANE 22 MAY ~ 11TH JUNE 2011

Welcome to my latest show *Flag*. That simple fragile piece of fabric represents so much of how we choose to see ourselves. It becomes a projection of so much of our desires, traditions, loyalties and grievances. Weighed down with such expectation and possibility, this symbol is an explosive cocktail. Politically the game is to claim authority in its name, on a personal level a flag can represent the values or goals of the individual. To take then this loaded cloth, and to cut it from marble in various iterations is to attempt to crystallise particular expressions of patriotism and nationhood, and hopefully some of the problematic relationship that every thinking individual has with ideas of civic duty, loyalty and dissent. Marble here in these works is not only a conceptual highlight, but also a metaphor for our current ongoing concerns - that they are concerns shared with not only a recent past, but with generations.

Artistically the loaded history of marble, with its lineage of empires and monuments, and effigies of individuals and the ideas they represent, is perfectly fitting here to engage with the contrast between the static symbol and we the living who will engage, define and redefine the notions which a flag represents. Every generation has an opportunity to recast the light in which it sees itself, and the symbols it chooses to represent it. The only cloth flag in the exhibition is an Australian flag missing one essential element, the Union Jack. This is a direct call to address the Republican debate in the near future, impertinently titled *Advance Australia*. There comes a day when the individual stands up and declares 'I am an adult' - as to with a nation. The complication being that it requires defining what that is and taking responsibility for it, warts and all.

A very different theme is explored in *As of Today*. This is a sculptural monument to the current body count of Australian soldiers killed in armed conflict in the war in Afghanistan (Operation Slipper) of the last decade. Twenty-three flags, folded in Australian ceremonial fashion, with halyards tied around the centre, each carved from Australian marble. The soft pink color of the stone evoking the 'ultimate sacrifice' of human flesh. The anonymous nature of the individual flags highlighting the service and sacrifice that is asked in the name of the Australian nation: it being all too easy to forget each as individuals, as spouses, as friends, as parents. This is what is being asked in the name of our flag, today.

My Concerns Will Outlive Yours looks at the very nature of this heritage. The traditional shroud format of the effigy - a non-descript flag pulled across the figure of a young boy directly evokes the sacrificial effigies of monuments of history. The obsessions of continuing generations requiring the next to subjugate their lives to an inherited cause. The tragedy is when it is regardless of relevance or volition - the tainted cup of history and tradition.

The *Hanging Flag* series of works illustrates the manifold projections that are the nature of a flag. From the demands of the 'Insert Loyalty/Grievance Here' texts to the more grappling at trying to fit in of 'I Don't Feel Very Australian'. Conforming to being a top bloke, or a mate shouldn't overrule your judgement. Last off in the show is a short-recorded statement by former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke about the question of an Australian Republic. Whatever your thoughts upon the issue, do take the time to listen and consider why it is that a nation that is growing at such a rapid pace, should not reassess the terms and manner by which it represents itself.

- Alexander Seton, 2011

FLAGS / SULLIVAN + STRUMPF FINE ART SYDNEY 1 ~ 9 NOVEMBER 2011

The current show *Flags* is a follow up exhibition to my show *Flag* earlier this year (May 2011 at Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane, Australia). *Flags* continues my examination of that fragile piece of cloth, the Flag. Whether draped, folded or hanging, these emblematic cloths are in turns divisive, uniting and subject to heated debate. The idea of nationhood is constantly evolving; always in flux, never static, and subject to redefinition by we, the living. The various iterations of this loaded cloth cut from marble represent an attempt to crystallise particular expressions of our patriotism, nationhood, and the problematic relationship that every thinking individual has with ideas of civic duty, loyalty and dissent. Marble here is not only a conceptual highlight; it stands for the ongoing concerns at play in the works - concerns shared not only with our recent past, but with countless generations past also.

For this show I have created a series of more unconventional flags based around the dwindling practice of planting a 'flag' to signify the completion of construction. This practice stems from an old European tradition of erecting a tree branch on the highest peak of a completed building. In my *Brick Pile Monument Series*, the Australian evolution of this tradition is manifested in random objects, such as a workman's singlet or concrete bag, which become flags, jutting out from piles of marble bricks. *Flags* serves to remind us that every flag tells a story in its erection, a kind of narrative piling around its base, simultaneously physical, human, ideological, and historical. These flags are insubordinate; they stand simultaneously for freedom and revolution, tradition and new beginnings. At their core, all flags represent a simple human desire to share an idea, a dream or an ideology with someone else.

In May of 2011, I presented a work titled *As of Today*. This was a sculptural monument to the then-current body count of Australian soldiers killed in armed conflict in the war in Afghanistan of the last decade (Operation Slipper). Twenty-three flags, folded in Australian ceremonial fashion with halyards tied around the centre were carved from Australian marble, its soft pink colour evoking the 'ultimate sacrifice' of human flesh. The anonymity of the individual flags served to highlight the service and sacrifice given in the name of the Australian nation; it is all too easy to forget each new figure in the death toll is an individual, a spouse, a friend, or a parent. This is the reality of what is being asked in the name of

our flag, today. The work was installed early on the 23rd of May 2011, and had not yet opened to the public when another Australian soldier was killed in Afghanistan. Not even 24 hours on display and the work was already outdated. The current work *Six More* builds on this initial show, representing the now-six additional casualties since the 22nd of May 2011.

The *Hanging Flag* series of works illustrates the manifold projections contained in a flag. From the demands of the 'Insert Allegiance/Grievance Here' text, to references to the flag-waving nationalism in *A Better Sequence* (with the text 'Let's Argue Our Differences, Then Head to the Beach'), the several iterations of hanging flags stand for various concerns around nationhood, patriotism and political tensions. In another work two flags knot together in a seemingly poetic union, performing a role contrary to their usual function as symbols of unique identity or difference. Finally there is *The Gordian Knot*, a single flag knotted in its middle; a flag of political stalemate, frustration, and the challenge of a solution.

Moving away from the signature marble that composes most of the show, two perspex works present deconstructed Australian flags. The first is interactive, so that the viewer is able to remix the constituent parts of the Australian flag; the other is a translucent stack of the various elements of the flag that claim to represent our nation - the Union Jack, Southern Cross and Commonwealth Star are each highlighted, floating in translucent blue sheets. The works invite the viewer to consider these elements as fluid, in contrast to the seemingly static nature of our national emblems, their meaning and their history.

- Alexander Seton, 2011



Work in progress at the artist's studio

The artist would like to thank:

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Sarah Barker, James Curtis and Per Ericson

Mum & Dad

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