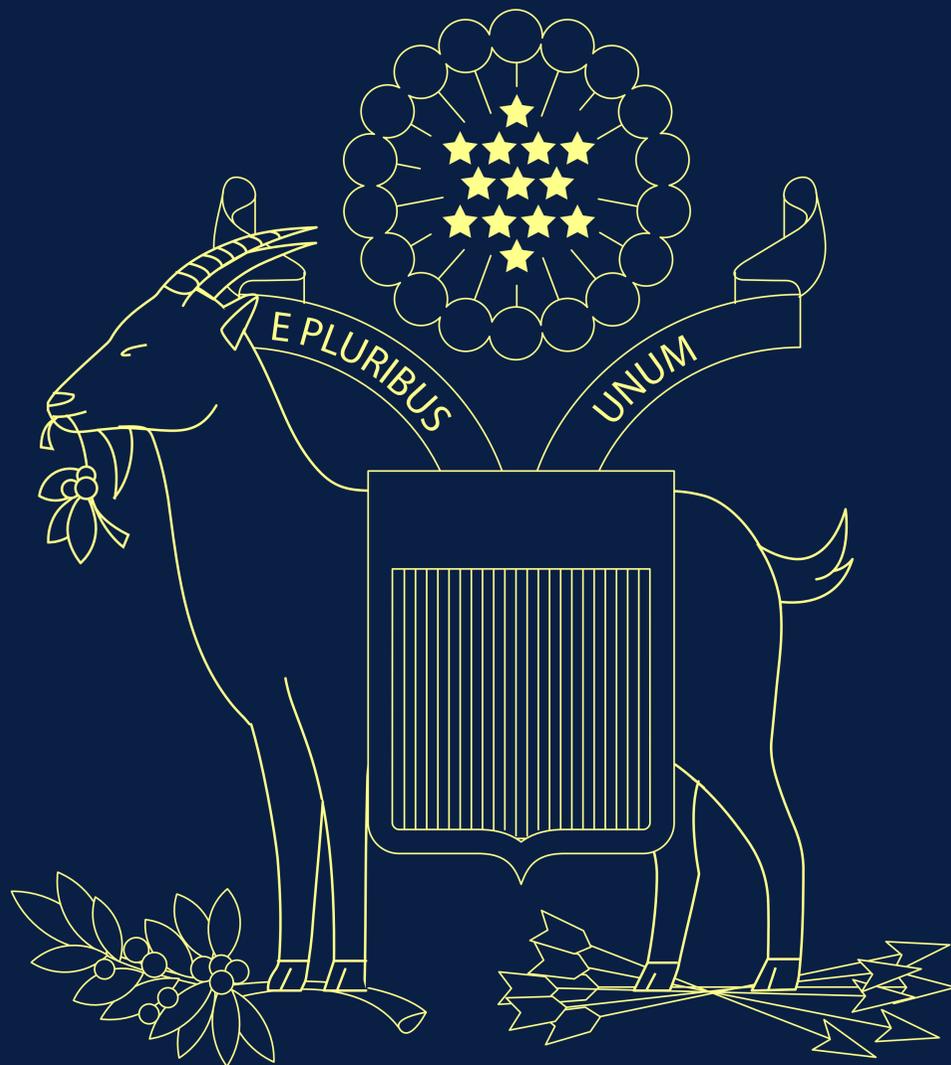


# NARI WARD



*Home of  
the Brave*



VILCEK  
FOUNDATION

MAY 31, 2022 –  
FEBRUARY 3, 2023

# NARI WARD: HOME OF THE BRAVE

ESSAY BY  
ERICA MOIAH JAMES

The last line of “The Star-Spangled Banner” declares that America is “the land of the free and *the home of the brave.*” There are no qualifying words referencing race, sex, gender, nationality, religion, health, history, or color. Without another word, the

statement declares that America is an inclusive place, a home for people who share a commitment to the ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and are brave enough to protect these ideals from threat. These words are the fulcrum for this exhibition.

The sculptures that comprise this show invite a broad, complex consideration of migrant experiences. They invite audiences to consider the vast space of possibility one envisions when being guided to these shores, and the entropy that may ensue when the limits of that promise are revealed upon arrival. They register the difficult decision millions make each year to leave behind what is known and dear to enter the unknown—crossing oceans, seas, rivers, deserts, and continents—armed with the hope of new beginnings in extraordinary acts of courage. Their determination signals a strength of will that remains foundational to the *idea* of America.

In these sculptures, Nari Ward, a native of Jamaica, multiplies double entendre often found in Caribbean lyrical music forms, delaying the quick read, resisting the ossification of the work into a single story or meaning. The art encourages its audience to grapple with the promise and the pain of America from the perspective of its huddled masses. It illuminates the mythos that draws people to this country while conceptually juxtaposing the realities of living in it. In the process it encourages audiences to hold the nation accountable to what it imagines itself to be, not as performative critique but as a critical act of love.





*Lazarus*, 2019  
Shoelaces  
108 x 100 x 2.5 in.  
VF2021.04.01

# LAZARUS

The Statue of Liberty was originally intended to celebrate the abolition of slavery in America. As the time to raise money for the project extended further and further away from the year of emancipation, 1863, the *raison d'être* for the statue changed. Those committed to the project found that it was a lot easier to raise money by aligning the sculpture with a vision that saw America as a land of liberty, a nation that welcomed immigrants, rather than emancipation. There is some irony here: A statue originally intended to celebrate one form of liberation was reinterpreted to publicly declare an American ideal that, many believed at the time, did not include the emancipated.

The words etched into the base of the statue are drawn from the poem *The New Colossus* by Emma Lazarus (1849–87). Lazarus submitted the work to the committee tasked with raising funds to pay for the statue's pedestal, through an art and literary auction.

In this work, Nari Ward monumentalizes chosen words from the pedestal and poem. He literally draws the text into the architecture of the building, which becomes an intimate metaphor for the nation. The words are rendered using shoelaces, a fastener used in fancy dress shoes on one end of the spectrum and in casual gym shoes often associated with sports and “urban street wear” on the other. Though sneakers are now seen on red carpets and in boardrooms as well, the artist's use of shoelaces adds signifying modifiers to these words for contemplation. By sketching in these words with the shoelaces, is the artist pointing to the hollowness of this statement for so many others in America who often feel that their Black, Queer, Latino, Muslim *huddled masses* are less welcome?

The words are stacked in a way that references stairsteps, a universal symbol of uplift and the pursuit of the American dream. But here the ascent is far less precise and easy. If seen as stairsteps, it suggests the possibility of climbing over the tired and huddled to rise. In this sense, is the work illuminating what is? Or is it warning of what can happen when a nation loses sight of power of the collective and the human imperative to lift as we climb? Do these professed values adopted in 1883 hold true today? If a new pedestal were to be built reflecting America's hope today, what words would you place on the base?



*Tired, G.O.A.T., 2017*  
Concrete, sand, fiberglass,  
black pigment, and rebar  
91 x 59 x 59 in.  
VF2022.01.01



*Copper II, G.O.A.T., 2017*  
Concrete, sand, fiberglass,  
red, green and white pigment,  
rebar, copper, and patina on  
washing machine drum  
104 x 30 x 10 in.  
VF2022.01.02



# TIRED, G.O.A.T. COPPER II, G.O.A.T.

Several  
years ago,

Nari Ward completed a residency in Detroit. Once the center of the American auto industry, it is a city that has been greatly impacted by the loss of manufacturing jobs in this sector over the past 40 years. In 1950 the population of Detroit was 1.89 million; 70 years later it has shrunk by more than 64%. In response, large sections of the city's abandoned buildings were demolished to stem violence, and properties were sold for as little as \$1 with the promise of redevelopment to draw people back to the city.

As a result of its decreasing population, Detroit has become a receiving city, a part of the country where new migrant refugees have been settled in recent decades by the U.S. government. Though it remains a predominantly Black city, the ethnic diversity of Black Detroit and the city more generally has expanded.

Many of its new migrants are Muslim and during his visit, Ward was struck by the impact this migrant presence had had on the city. Historically, America's tired and huddled masses were encouraged to assimilate into American culture, but in Detroit, the artist observed how many new migrants had retained aspects of their native cultures and publicly expressed them in a fascinating mash-up of worlds, adding to the experience of America. Typical "American-style" houses could be seen with large oriental rugs drying, being aired out, or as permanent fixtures on lawns. Joining the local Black population, vacant lots had been repurposed as provision grounds and edible gardens. Ward also observed many goats roaming in the city. Then one day they disappeared. He was later informed that he had arrived during Ramadan—a period of fasting for the Muslim population. The end of Ramadan, which often features a meal, also signaled the end of the goats.

No one pays much attention to goats. They are relatively small, appear to be of limited intelligence, and are somewhat forgettable creatures at first glance. But being underestimated is their superpower. Goats are curious animals, resilient, and they adapt

easily to new circumstances in order to survive. They are hard workers in the animal kingdom and can navigate the side of a mountain just as easily as flat land. Because they seem to require so little and give so much, they often serve as the family bank in herding communities throughout the world. Unfortunately, they are also a diet staple of many migratory people and live in precarity. Goats can serve as a fitting metaphor for determined, yet vulnerable, migratory people.

Cast using concrete, fiberglass, and copper—a material that changes its character according to changing conditions and is used in diasporic healing practices—both versions of this sculpture passively carry the weight of an apparatus external to its body. In *Tired*, spiky bronze rebar, reminiscent of Bernini's *Ecstasy of St Theresa* (1647–52) penetrates the goat's back. Similarly, *Copper Goat* bears an edifice of metal rebar that has been melted in such a way that it resembles stalagmites. Perhaps these forms embody the afflictions of the *tempest-tost* or materialize the burdens new Americans face in this country. The goats are mounted on pedestals very unlike the Neo-classical monolith on which the Statue of Liberty is placed. Here Ward repurposes objects associated with immigrant labor: the interior drum of a washing machine, the tire of a long-haul truck.

By elevating the goats on the pedestal, Ward invites the audience to consider the metaphorical capacity of this form and what it means to encounter and regard those in society we often choose not to see. What is striking about the sculptural work is that despite the burdens the goats are made to carry—which in real life would suggest death—in Ward's imagination they suggest transcendence, endurance, survival, materializing the adage that what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger.

# AMERICAN FLAG BANNER

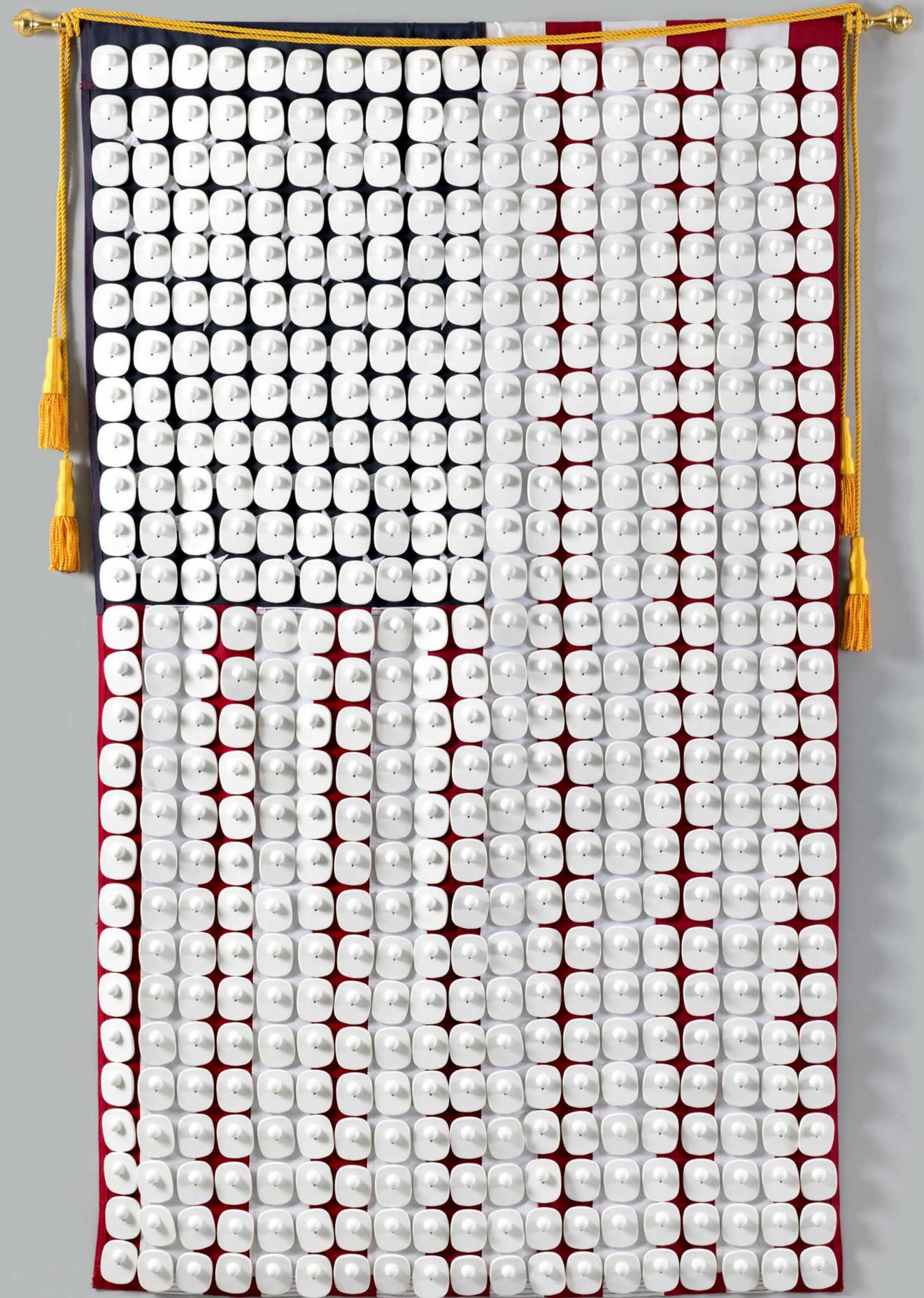
In America the racially marked migrant body is regarded with a great deal of suspicion. Though theoretically equal under American law, the lived reality of America communicates a different narrative: Difference from the perceived norm is a threat to that norm. Here Ward joins a long tradition of American artists from Jasper Johns and Faith Ringgold to David Hammons and Dread Scott grappling with the symbolic meaning of the American flag. Here he takes the flag and renders it almost invisible by completely studding it with hundreds of security tags used to prevent the theft of goods in stores.

The studding Ward uses is reminiscent of the drapeau sequin techniques used in Haitian flag art, but without the same allusion to light and hope. Instead, Ward's work cultivates questions. What is implied by obscuring the flag using these specific devices? Why does the artist choose to hang the flag across a rod that bends slightly under its weight while dressed in gold tassels? What ideas are being enshrined in this work?

In capturing the audience's gaze through this piece, Ward re-creates the conditions of the gaze many Black and Brown people are forced to endure while shopping, driving, picnicking, walking, running, watching TV, arriving home, sleeping, swimming, and birding. Too often followed in stores, too often questioned about their right to occupy space, too often forced to endure traffic stops, the very act of being under the gaze of suspicion puts into question one's right to be and belong. These encounters are often personal and direct, but by drawing in the symbol of the nation in this work, perhaps Ward is quietly asking his audience to contemplate the ways these actions multiply on state and national levels, and why the question of belonging to America lingers on.

*American Flag Banner*, 2022

American flag, hanging rod  
and tassels, EAS security tags  
60 x 36 in.  
VF2022.02.01



# GOOGLY EYES DEFENDER

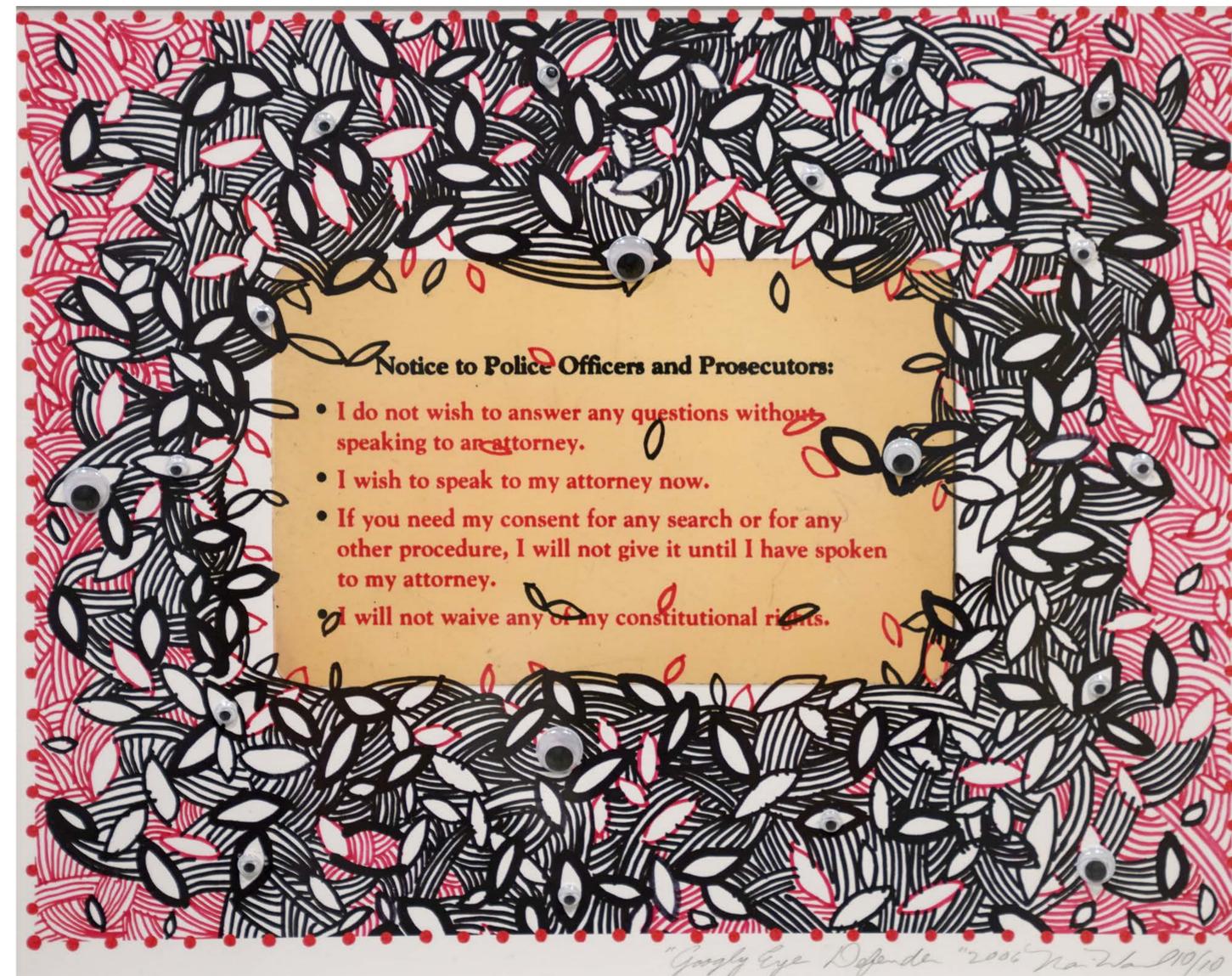
An aspect of American life that impacts us all, and one that many new Americans come to know intimately, is the gaze of the state over one's body and actions. Though more and more Americans are now expressing concerns about the loss of privacy and increasing surveillance in the age of social media, for Black and brown immigrants the observational eye and arresting hand of the state have always been felt in multiple forms through extended surveillance, unprovoked police stops, arrests, and raids. It is a phenomenon Ward has grappled with over the years in various works such as *T.P. Reign Bow*, 2012, which features a blue platform used by American police to surveil what are often described as *high-risk* housing projects and neighborhoods where Black, brown, and immigrants reside.

*T.P. Reign Bow* as well as *Googly Eyes Defender* are part of the artist's ongoing consideration of citizenship rights in America. The art that has developed during this extensive engagement moves back and forth between the utopic hope of *We the People* and the sobering and nuanced realities of *Home of the Brave*.

One unequally distributed right of American citizenship that concerns Ward is the right to presumed innocence and—with it—the right to receive state protection. *Googly Eyes* is a deceptively simple and playful take on the violence of excessive state surveillance often visited on Black and brown Americans and the need to constantly defend against it. It consists of key aspects of the Miranda Rights, bullet-pointed for quick reading and comprehension, surrounded by a swarming Art Deco-style wall pattern enhanced by applied 3-D googly eyes. It is composed in a manner reminiscent of treacly "Home Sweet Home" framed needlepoints popular in the American home of the 1950s. The reference is pointed and intended to complicate the notion of "home" as it also questions who has a right to its "sweetness."

*GED Prints (Googly Eyes Defender)*, 2006  
Archival ink jet print, googly eyes  
20 x 23 x 1.5 in. framed. Edition 10/10  
Courtesy of the artist

*Googly Eyes* is based on the business cards Ward's brother, a public defender, distributed to his clients to help them navigate inevitable encounters with police. There have been several recent cases in the news where immigrants have had encounters with police that ended in death, such as Botham Jean, a St. Lucian accountant who was seated in his apartment during an unprovoked raid, and more recently Patrick Lyoya, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who had come to America in the hope of a better life. Ward's seemingly playful intervention illuminates the borders of state protection and the place of surveilled populations like Jean and Lyoya outside of these borders.



# CHRYSALIS

Living as an immigrant in America, one quickly becomes aware of the way one is read or seen, and the things that mark one's difference. Sometimes it is an accent, one's look, clothing, or mannerisms. One is also aware of the expectation (born out of an anxiety that to do otherwise would express divided loyalties) that immigrants will eventually subdue distinguishing aspects of themselves to integrate more seamlessly into American life and culture.

However, as Ward observed in Detroit, more recent immigrants are challenging the traditional assumption of integration that to be American means having to give up or cede aspects of oneself, or attachments that tied you to one's country of birth. *Chrysalis*, 2010 points to a different possibility. Ward has described this work as an "American flag chrysalis" made of foam and paper bags positioned in front of a found mirror. The viewer is positioned in relation to the work in such a way that they are able to see themselves in the mirror's reflection. Even as the audience views the early-stage development of this imaginary butterfly flag, its mirrored aspects pull them into the work to participate in a conceptual act of becoming.

A chrysalis is the protected nutrient bag that a caterpillar retreats to, to stimulate the final transformation (as growth) stage that sees it reemerge as a butterfly or moth. Here, the "pupa" material is the metaphoric American flag itself. Through the work, Ward appears to side with the position of more recent emigres who refuse to choose or repress aspects of their past as new Americans. Instead, like the work, they merge past and present to fulfill, or at least move closer to, the hope of the liberated future enshrined in the promise of America.

*Chrysalis*, 2010

Mirror, rope, foam, brown paper bag  
60 x 28 x 17 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin,  
New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London



# TUMBLEHOOD

The tumbleweed is common in desert environments and gets

its name from the way it randomly travels along, or literally tumbles, according to the direction wind gusts carry them. Though made up of the dead plant versions of several species of flora, from time to time other items become caught in its web, either traveling with it or weighing it down, forestalling further movement.

Nari Ward's aesthetic redux of this form in *Tumblehood* creates dense layers of meaning that are unstable and deliberately unfaithful to a single idea. *Tumblehood* consists of shoes and shoelaces that appear to have been formed into a large sphere through the process of tumbling. The resulting 3-dimensional work sits atop flat, interlocking circles with differing surfaces simultaneously reminiscent of the surrealist environments of Magritte and the abstract work of Jennie Jones. The work is an invitation to its audience to imagine.

*Tumblehood's* narrative instability begins with its title, which first suggests an environment—a postcard-American suburban neighborhood, or a blighted neighborhood often referred to as *the 'hood*. As referenced in *We the People*, the shoes and shoelaces that comprise the work have also been historically associated with urban, Black and *sneakerhead* cultures. This registers in this work, but what becomes possible if we go further? What if we give ourselves the freedom to imagine other ideas that are conceptually activated by this work? What else becomes possible when one extends the signification of the materials, form, and the placement of the work—3-D orb on a 2-D circular surface—and the artist's pointed play between that which has been flattened, in relation to that which has been fleshed out and allowed complexity? What if we think of the shoes and laces as symbols for people, systems, assumptions, ideologies, and false information too many have become entangled with? What if we think of the tumbleweed's movement as being akin to forces that push migrants into motion and the implications of that in the form? What if we think of the form as symbolic of a group having been weighed down to such a degree that free travel and adaption, the natural characteristics of tumbleweed, become impossible? What if we think environmentally, where the orb becomes akin to the earth being choked by one of the primary signifiers of American consumerism—the sneaker, or the shoe? If we allowed it, the piece would continually tumble into new meanings.

When *Tumblehood* was exhibited in Los Angeles at the Jeffery Deitch gallery in 2021, the movement artist Jessica Emmanuel performed with the work, taking it out of its seemingly fixed position and forcing it to move by pushing, pulling, and rolling it throughout the space. In observing her actions, I was reminded of the ways those of us who arrive in America from other shores are a culmination of all the worlds and experiences we inhabit—all the forces that pushed, pulled, and imperiled us along our journey here. Even after becoming aware of the imperfect promise of America, I have come to believe that the breadth of insight immigrants possess is a gift to this country, and that art like Ward's is a part of that gift, a gift which may in time become a part of America's salvation.

*Tumblehood*, 2015  
Shoelaces, shoe tips,  
advertising vinyl  
31 x 31 x 31 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

