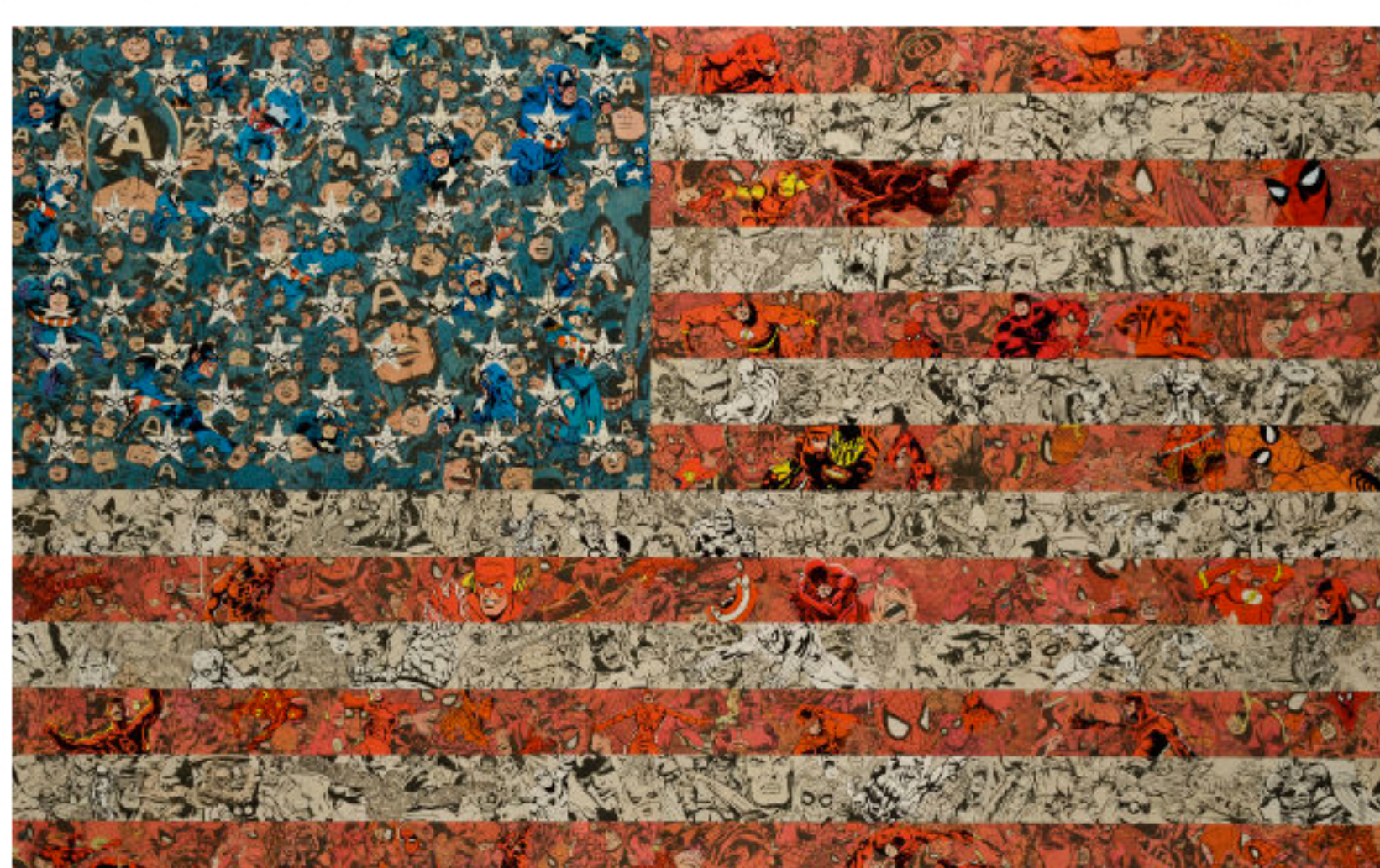




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## New Book and Exhibition Commemorate Artist Ben Turnbull

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Patriots, 2011 by Ben Turnbull

by Samantha Tse, ARTINFO UK  
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At first glance, the bold colours and the sheer size of artist **Ben Turnbull's** work might be overwhelming. It's easy to feel inadequate when standing in front of Turnbull's shiny seven-foot sculpture of Captain America holding the head of a slain Saddam Hussein, or when being confronted with an image of an American firefighter constructed meticulously with vintage comic books to challenge the notion of what makes a superhero.

His distinctive aesthetics of incorporating American toys, bright colours, and overt references to American popular culture harks back to the Pop era of Warhol and Lichtenstein.

But while Turnbull's art is large in size and bright in color, its subtleties are minute and infinite. Americana serves as the artist's muse, and Turnbull's work is a platform for his commentary on the country's social and political ideologies. His satirical wit is highlighted through a series of manipulated objects that undertake issues around war, heroism, and patriotism.

His work in the last decade is being celebrated in a retrospective at the **Lancaster Institute for Contemporary Arts**. "**Ben Turnbull: Truth, Justice and the American Way**" will bring together the artist's work and to celebrate the exhibition a book of the same name has been launched.

**ARTINFO UK** set out to meet Turnbull at Little House, an arm off of the Soho House family to chat about his work, the exhibition, and America.

For an artist whose work is so deeply entwined with Americana, one might expect a cowboy to strut out and give us a good old handshake.

Turnbull showed up wearing a plain midnight blue Western-styled shirt, with pearlised snap buttons, dark straight cut jeans, and what appeared to be a pair of handsomely rugged American riding boots. His rockabilly quiff was subtle and the only thing that betrayed his British roots was his South London drawl.

"I actually asked Lancaster many times why did you pick me to do this show and he [Richard Smith, curator of the exhibition] said that he never thought he would ever actually do a show based on these sort of political angles and basically everything that I'm doing really because he thought that he would probably always have this sort of arty element going on, which is completely the opposite, the antithesis of what I do," said Turnbull.

"I'm completely the other end of the spectrum. Everything is made beautifully but unless there's an actual point behind it, unless there's a story to tell..."

Turnbull trails off but his work always tells a story, some more personal while others have an overt message.

One of his more recent works was a series of collages he created to commemorate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11. Turnbull took his collection of pre-1990 Marvel comics and cut out icons of the genre and pasted them together to pay homage to the blue-collar workers that served the city in its most desperate times. Portraits of firefighters and police officers were created using the Marvel comic cut outs and juxtaposed childhood heroic figures found in comic books with the real life heroes who protect us everyday.

For Turnbull, his art is a series of ideas and executions. When he has an idea, he just goes for it full throttle. He knows exactly what it will look like and how big it will be, right down to the millimeter.

"I don't have that make-it-up-as-you-go-along approach, everything is very clinical and [I know what] the actual idea will be like. Today I had another idea that's really simple it generally stems from some sort of pop reference from the media or it could even be a song – but then it will have a link to something factual that's actually gone down," explained Turnbull. "I don't make it up as I go along. I'm so clinical about what I do. But obviously it does make a difference if you're sitting there and you have these crazy 50s comic books and toys all over. You have super villains, superheroes, collectable items, big toys, small toys, its obviously going to have a rub off in your subconscious."

Prior to becoming a full-time artist, Turnbull worked in the movie industry working with sets and did some freelance set design for London Fashion Week. He cut his teeth working on sets for shows like "Pride and Prejudice" and the "28 Days" films, but always balanced art on the side, which he kept entirely separate from his day job.

"I've always made stuff, always. But obviously making stuff in your own time is completely different, and also it's personal. You don't spend three months working on an intricate collage or even an intricate carving or whatever it is if you don't have some kind of personal feelings about it either. So it's completely chalk and cheese and I never used to combine the two," explained Turnbull.

These days, Turnbull builds his larger pieces in a workshop in Richmond and uses the living room in his flat that he's lived in for a decade for smaller projects. He confessed to having loads of comics scattered around the space and doesn't know how his partner, photographer, Merry Brownfield, puts up with it.

While he is no longer working on movie sets, his love of the medium has stayed with him. In fact, he reckons it accounts for his fascination with America and still heavily influences his work.

"If I'm absolutely honest I would say it's [his love for America] got to have something to do with movies. I've worked in movies, obviously not American movies, but the movies I did work on had an element of trying-to-copy-Hollywood," said Turnbull. "The fact that I thanked Indian Jones in my book is huge."

"Going back to the America thing, it's a combination of an absolute love of the place for a start – I'm never happier than when I'm there. Give me a burger and a pint of Brooklyn."

During his annual pilgrimage to the Stateside, Turnbull often goes treasure hunting for elements to incorporate into his work. He collects toys, mainly the cult items that are scarce in the UK, for his work and his personal collection.

"I pick up stuff all the time. I got the Captain America shield from Pocahontas, I picked up all those neon badges from some toyshop in the Lower East Side. They're just toys but I knew instantly what I would do with them."

His next trip to the US is planned for December where he, along other artist such as Takashi Murakami, in a collective show celebrating monsters and heroes in contemporary art. This will be Turnbull's first time in Utah and admittedly, we can't wait to see what new raw materials this trip will bring and how that will ultimately translate in his work.

"**Ben Turnbull: Truth, Justice and the American Way**", until **November 24<sup>th</sup>** at the **Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts**, the accompanying book is available now

For more images of Turnbull's work, [click on the slideshow](#).

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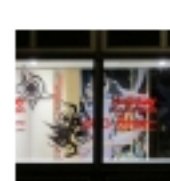
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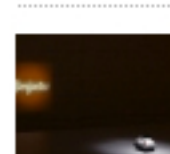
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