

Adam's Epic of America
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Accepted: May 2020



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Date: 05 / 14 / 2020

“Adams’s Epic of America”

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Submitted to the faculty of Herron School of Art and Design
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art
Herron School of Art and Design
Indiana University
May, 2020

The simple belief that hard work is what creates success in America has stemmed from the 1930s literary work “Epic of America” by James Truslow Adams. Since the birth of the American Dream, it became a fetishized façade that covered its structured socioeconomic discrimination. The American Dream is an unachievable societal structure, that resides in the past, present, and future. Issues of racism, financial discrimination, and the use of objects to demean groups in the 1930s can still be seen in today’s American society and culture. Using found objects with a recognizable use and association with American Culture, I create work that explores this fetishized façade of the American Dream and how it is structurally socioeconomic discrimination.

“...that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” -James Truslow Adams¹

This American Dream James Truslow Adams wrote is one void of reality. He has laid the façade that will be used and manipulated portraying America as a land of equal opportunity, where you can achieve anything through hard work. You can have it all if you work for it and if you don’t then it is because you are inferior to the American hegemony. Adams’ American Dream presents America as a location without limitations, a place without law or structure. Without these structures and limits America becomes only part of North America and no longer takes on the life

¹ Adams, James. “The Epic of America.” *The Epic of America*, by James Truslow Adams, Little Brown, 1931, pp. 404–405.

as America, “Home of the brave/ Land of the free”, America would not be America without these properties. The physical location alone does not denote meaning to America, no different than an object is seen in a location but possesses meaning through relation to other things. The removal of the object or the things in relation thus removes understanding of the object. Applying this relational understanding I remove found objects that hold a recognizable use in American Culture from their location of origin. These items maintain a familiarity, they are not always personal for me but can be personal for others. Not every object can resonate with everyone, I often have a selection based on objects of My Mother’s and My Grandfather’s time. These are generations that have created the world we live in today and are the same that will deny the structures they have helped to support. The objects are of the past but the subject of them is not, it is a subject of all times, therefore hindering it timeless. These subjects that echo through time is that of universal discrimination. Universal discrimination is then broken down into smaller groups of discrimination based on socioeconomic, race, and regional origin. These each have objects and subjects that are universal throughout time and can link multiple groups together.

They are objects and subjects that are infinitely expansive and cannot be understood with a simple equation “ $2+2=4$ ”. The combination of object and subject does not always have to be a mathematical formula of equal parts to create a sum of X, I find that the combinations often are nonlinear and make some skips and jumps to get you to the core. It is in these somewhat illogical combinations that I allow the viewer to make their own opinion on the subject. This work is what composes The American Dream and its fixation on achieving hegemony in American Culture and society.

“**Hegemony**, the dominance of one group over another, often supported by legitimating norms and ideas.”²

The American Dream today is far from what James Truslow Adams wrote in 1931 and is the opposite of what we understand as the American Dream. The American Dream is about motor cars, high wages, and possessions that are reliant upon discrimination. During this time that James Truslow Adams wrote “Epic of America”, My grandfather arrived in America with his 11 siblings, his mother and father, and his grandmother from Italy. It is my great grandfather and grandfather who struggled to find work because of their birthplace. Were they ever told they weren’t hired because they were Italian? It became clear that their idea of moving to America was not as James Truslow stated, “be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”³ These circumstances of their birth were what they were recognized by and pushed them to make decisions based on structured discrimination. My family lied about names and hid their accents when getting a job. These jobs were ones of hard labor, long hours, and low wages. These stories passed down are ones that are the truth of the American Dream, it is structured on the backs of others for the benefit of America. This has continued as a foundation of Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, economic status, and religion.

The blatant discrimination is one that is understood based on experience or easily denied due to Otherness. Otherness is not just a physical distance between groups and individuals but also

² Rosamond, Ben. “Hegemony.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 17 May 2016, www.britannica.com/topic/hegemony.

³ Adams, James. “The Epic of America.” *The Epic of America*, by James Truslow Adams, Little Brown, 1931, pp. 404–405.

distance based on money, power, education, and jobs. The Other being the one that has or has not allowed people to point to the have-nots and rationalize their have-not-ness as being a direct result of something the other did. Rarely is the Other seen as a result of something the haves have done. The divide of haves and have-nots are one of the greatest distinctions in the conversation of the American Dream, it is the American Dream that creates the haves from the have-nots, not America. This belief was reinforced most notably by Mitch Daniels's GOP response of 2012.

*"As Republicans our first concern is for those waiting tonight to begin or resume the climb up life's ladder. We do not accept that ours will ever be a nation of haves and have nots; we must always be a nation of haves and soon to haves."*⁴

Soon-to-haves are the never-will-haves, this makes America the culprit of the have-nots and removes the belief that the Other is lacking in work ethic, money, or education. America creates have-nots relying on a hegemony such as millions of dollars, white-collar jobs, and being successful in America. Hegemony creates a need for being within a certain area of society, if you are outside you do everything possible to become within it, reaching for the elusive American Dream that will remain outside your reach no matter what you do. The constant need for hegemony lack's rationalization, the only reason I have concluded is that people do not question the dominant cultural inscriptions. These include speaking English, falling under the protestant umbrella of religions, being white, working a white-collar job. The dominant cultural inscriptions, however, are not based on facts but in culturally constructed beliefs of what is the right thing.

⁴ "As Delivered: Indiana Gov. Daniels' Republican Response to SOTU." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 25 Jan. 2012, www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/as-prepared-for-delivery-indiana-gov-daniels-republican-response-to-sotu.

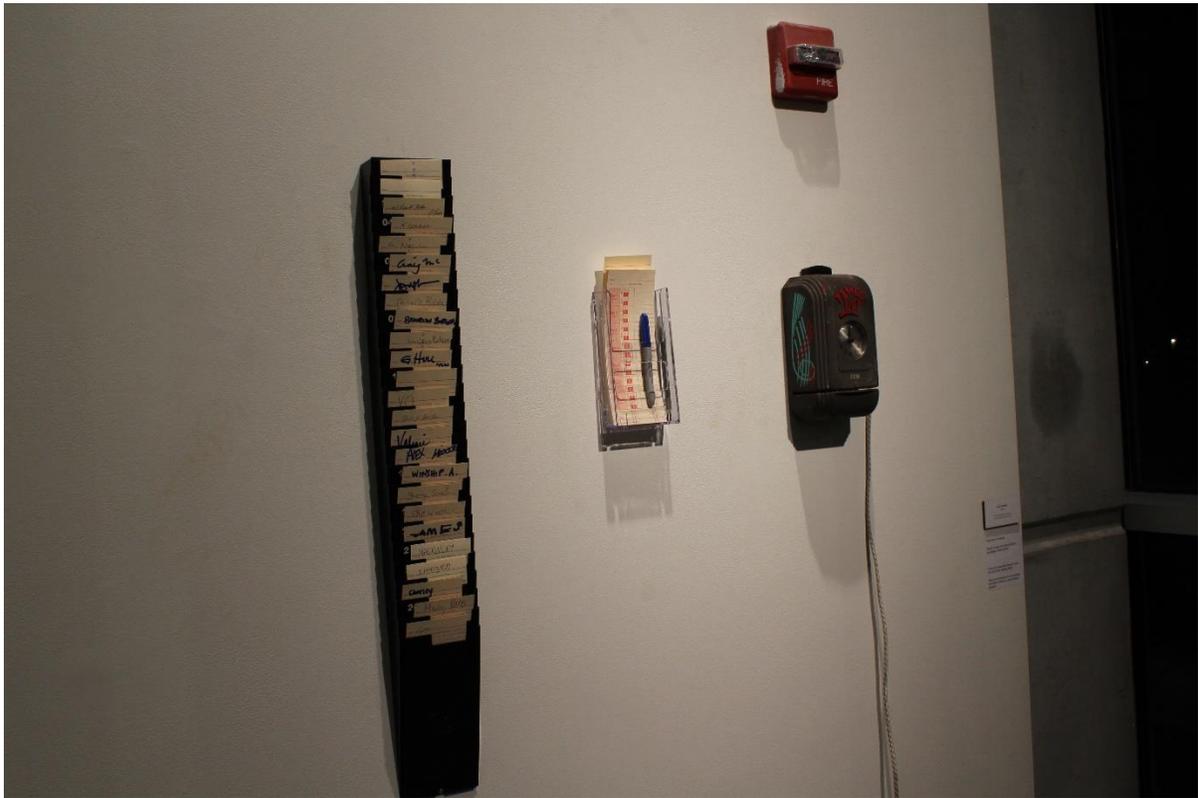
“The Mass media, including movies, television, magazines, and books, tend to use accepted representations and standard professional practices drawn from cultural values, stereotypes, and social rituals that predominate in the United States today. Media language, symbol, and practices are the result of years of social interaction and meaning making.”⁵

The counter to these dominant meanings is feared by the American Culture and dissolves the American Dream because the American Dream is supported by acting on hegemony. It is commonly noticed in simple social interactions when an individual abstains from consuming alcohol, religion, or a white color job. One explains why they abstain from consuming alcohol while the other is never in question. Why don't you believe in God is asked, but countless believers are asked why they believe in God? It is okay to work in a cubicle, yet we call people that work a blue-collar job as uneducated, dumb, or lazy. This bias towards one versus the other is found throughout American Culture and is rooted in the belief of the American Dream. If the inverse is not equal to its opposite then one is not equal to the other, it promotes an imbalance in what is right. A belief that white-collar is dominant while the blue-collar subordinate has pushed many individuals to seek higher education and live their life in debt, working a white-collar job that even with a higher wage fails to pay their loans and all other expenses. Counter to this, blue-collar work is seen as a group of uneducated individuals, it is lower-paying, and anyone can do it. The facts are that there is a large gap in the needs of blue-collar work and needs workers. The American Culture does not teach students that blue-collar is an option, they promote the furthering of education and thus white-collar. Structured promotion of white-collar gives value to those through social currency gained through being a part of what is perceived as better. The perception of work

⁵ “Power through Consent.” *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*, by Lee Artz and Bren Ortega. Murphy, Sage Publications, 2000, p. 28.

as a social currency places value on an individual and their action. Two people do the same action, but they place a different value on it.

“Work” uses a time punch clock from 1952 that is sporting seafoam green and red pinstripes on the sides. On the left of it hangs a black slotted holder with a stack of unpunched timecards. Next to that is a 30 slotted card holder that is where the viewer once they have worked places their timecard in a slot. The viewer begins with taking the timecard and proceeds to punch in to start viewing the piece and then punch out when they finish. Once they are punched out, they place the card in the slotted holder.



It questions the value of our time and why we believe it, it makes you think how the moments make up the cents, the minutes make up the nickels, the hours make up the dollars, your paycheck for your life. Time, compensation, and your life. My “work” does not care about what your job values your time as, it doesn’t care about your age, or if you drive a sports car. Every viewer punches in at the same time clock, with the same timecard, and receives the same time with the piece. “Work” does not care if you spend 30 minutes or 15 seconds, you will be punched in and out at the same time. You become the fold during the time that you work at “Work”. It will give you a sense of value while you punch in and begin to view the 50s-time clock, you will see the clock's hands do not move, the motor runs with a slow hum. The minute is notated with a clicking of gears, your time is counted, you are made aware of it, you begin to think of your time. You insert the timecard and push on the top and you have punched out. The time is the same and the clock has dissolved your value, it does not record what you have done or what time you have given, it negates your value of time. Through the recognition of time, it voids time itself as an absurd idea that does not account for what you do. An almost romantic idea of time with a sharp stab of reality. Do you feel worth your idea of yourself? Do I feel worth what you have spent for me? The questions continue just as the time passes and the work stays with you as a small pocket watch ticking but hands not passing. The sensation of time being obsolete in the use of recording of someone’s life brings to the forefront the necessity of how we can begin to fairly compensate someone’s time for the work they do. It begins to question why we can ever determine someone’s value if everyone is compensated the same across every form of work. If a doctor and welder are paid equal would people finally be making a free choice to pursue their life, or would universities continue to fill and place individuals into debt that they drowned in? At what point was the last time you made a decision that was for yourself not based on money?



This hierarchy of work being valuable is one that can be denied by many if they choose to deny. The use of the banjo as an object to devalue groups or individuals is one that is hard to deny and has been used throughout American History. An instrument that was started as a native instrument of Africa was brought over to the Americas with the transportation of slaves. During the early 1830s Minstrel shows were theatrical productions of blackface performers that sang and danced while using the banjo. These shows continued into the 1960s and were performed in high schools and theaters. In this period the banjo was thrust onto another group to label them as uneducated, untalented, inbred, and undeveloped. This group is the hillbillies, it is most famous in popular culture in the film *Deliverance*. The scene opens to a group of city men entering a mountainous region of the Appalachian Mountains, they arrive at a gas station and are faced with the locals or the others. The locals are of toothless rough men who are hard to understand yet they understand

each other perfectly, upon the porch sits a local boy with a banjo. A city man asks if he can keep up while playing his guitar and this becomes the infamous dueling banjo⁶ scene of one playing after one another until the boy can't. During this duel of instruments, another city man comments:

“Talk about genetic deficiencies.”

“Isn't that pitiful.”⁷

It is not just a film but a statement about a group, a group that the American Culture has dubbed as less and gave them the banjo because the banjo is what a lesser person plays. The people are termed as hillbilly, and to this day this term has stuck to a great portion of the American people who do not live within the dominant culture. This targeting of a group outside the dominant culture is not new and is seen earlier with the banjo and African Americans in Minstrel shows.

“Minstrel show, also called minstrelsy, an American theatrical form, popular from the early 19th to the early 20th century, that was founded on the comic enactment of racial stereotypes. The tradition reached its zenith between 1850 and 1870. Although the form gradually disappeared from the professional theatres and became purely a vehicle for amateurs, its influence endured—in vaudeville, radio, and television as well as in the motion-picture and world-music industries of the 20th and 21st centuries.”⁸

⁶ Weissberg, Eric, and Steve Mandell. *Feuding Banjos*.

⁷ Boorman, John, director. *Deliverance*. Warner Bros., 1972.

⁸ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. “Minstrel Show.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 16 Jan. 2019, www.britannica.com/art/minstrel-show.

It was mocked starting with blackface performers in Minstrel shows and is continued to be mocked as a lesser instrument, it is seen in the price of a banjo being far less than a guitar, the connotations around being a banjo player. The banjo began as a 4-string instrument and progressed to 5-string. This invention of the 5th string was claimed by a white man a good number of years after an African American Slave had been documented playing a 5-string banjo and was the first recorded. Refusing the acknowledgment of this 5th string inventor is another reinforcement of how success can only be attributed to the American Culture through the belief of the American Dream. “Cottoned Eyed” explores the manipulation of the banjo as an object of discrimination and how it historically has been presented and ways in which musicians responded to these American beliefs. It is a compilation of musical songs that reference the banjo, have the banjo playing, and reference issues of racism and events when the banjo was used in popular culture to create a divide in groups. These events in popular culture are the Minstrel shows, films such as *Deliverance*, and TV sitcoms such as *The Beverly Hillbillies*. This compilation is paired with a vehicle that has birth in blue-collar work and has shifted over time to become a vehicle that is priced out for the white-collar market. The pickup truck is a vehicle designed to be used for hauling and moving items in a flatbed or standard bed behind a cab where the driver sits. In 2016 *Car and Driver* published a report on the pickup in America and stated,



“Once the most basic of basic transportation, embraced only by farmers and tradespeople, pickups today are often as likely to be loaded up with options as cargo, and they have become the personal transportation of millions of individuals and families—many of whom never burden their trucks with more than a few bags of groceries or a bicycle or two. America’s love affair with the pickup has blossomed to the point where the bestselling vehicle in the U.S. is the Ford pickup, and it’s been that way for 35 years.”⁹

⁹ Travers, Jim. “An Illustrated History of the Pickup Truck.” *Car and Driver*, Car and Driver, 7 Mar. 2019, www.caranddriver.com/features/g15379238/an-illustrated-history-of-the-pickup-truck/.

The pickup became a part of the American Culture while its function slowly disappeared, while the banjo has not been a part of it and thus remains an instrument of lesser prestige. The price of a banjo is less than a guitar, yet the price of pickup trucks has only increased as they have been used more and more off farms. The conditional value is again reinforced by the origins of the nonwhite-collar, and the non-institutionally educated. The compilation of songs and sounds is played from the radio of a 1965 c10 pickup that I had purchased from an Indiana farm and soon after turned into a hot rod. The tradition of hot rodding is one based on using the unwanted vehicles of the culture's unwanted or unpopular vehicles and fabricating them to be functional and one-off vehicles. The vehicles maintain their original paints and dents and everything it has experienced in its time since production. The windows are only rolled down a little leaving just a slight 2-inch gap that allows the music to be heard through.





The viewer cannot sit in the vehicle and limits the access and the knowledge that is being heard. It aims to remove the traditional power that is the art that is informed by an art education. The truck has custom seats that lean back into the recess that once housed a leaking gas tank. The seats are red and cream with red stitching running the seams of the cream material. The Cream visually flows into the large steering wheel indicating the manual steering box and the force needed to turn the wheel unassisted by mechanical advantages of modern vehicles. From the large steering wheel, the long shifter sits higher than the top of the steering wheel, it's a reach to the top of the brass shifter knob that is polished to a mirror. Each change is made by my hand for myself without the thought of another, or of who may drive the vehicle. The practice of building a kustom car or hot rod is one that flourishes without the need for being a part of the greater beliefs found in the American Dream. The continued creation of these vehicles is for the individual, not for fame or

fortune or being a part of American Hegemony. It's a tradition like that of the Banjo; the participation of a practice not accepted by the dominant culture is fueled by individual beliefs of what is valued. The work is informed by Hot Rod Kulture, the history of the banjo, and every traditional skill that is needed in building a hot rod, playing the banjo, or singing the blues.

The current state of The American Dream is one that is not achievable through your life, but it is one you are born with. You cannot just work hard and achieve the American Dream because it is your hard work that allows another to live the Dream on the back of others. The structure of the American Culture has supported the socioeconomic discrimination that is the lifeline for hegemony in America. I do not believe in the American Dream and thus my work is only set out to expose it using found objects with a distinguished use in American society. The exposure of the truth allows for an equal understanding among different groups of people. The life of the truck, time clock, and banjo are products of the American Dream, the way people have bought into hegemony and how it goes unchanged. My work is about everyday objects, it is reminiscent of workplaces that you may have hated, its memories are held by families who have owned the item or the location I found them hold their memory. Presenting work that are true objects of the American culture, the everyday life, allow for a wide range of interest and span generational gaps. It creates a mutual ground for conversation of how we were one way and have become another while we continue to support the American Dream and how some are living outside of the hegemonic life that most Americans live for. I believe in my work as Adam's believed in his book, a potential of inspiration for an unbiased, free place that anyone can achieve what makes them happy.

