

Red Flags Are Flying at Rockefeller Center

Andy Goldsworthy's installation seeks to signal anti-imperialism at a notoriously capitalist site.



Louis Bury September 12, 2020



Andy Goldsworthy, "Proposal drawing for Red Flags" (2019) (all images © Andy Goldsworthy, courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York)

As part of Frieze Sculpture at Rockefeller Center, the renowned British artist [Andy Goldsworthy](#) **has installed 109 cotton flags**, each rubbed with earth taken from one of the 50 US states, around the center's iconic Lower Plaza. Though the artwork is called *Red Flags* (2020), most of its monochromatic flags are different shades of desaturated orange, with some outliers, such as mustard yellow, pale rose, and maroon. The cumulative visual effect of the flag rows is akin to the color variations in Byron Kim's landmark portraits of human skin pigmentation,

“Synecdoche” (1993). It’s a welcome change of pace from the stately array of national flags that ordinarily fly around the plaza.

Though the flags’ dusty hues and lack of iconography create a tranquil, down-to-earth mood, *Red Flags* also conveys a sense of alarm. The color orange, used for traffic cones and biohazard signs, can come across as cautionary. The idiomatic meaning of the term “red flag” — a warning or danger sign — is even more portentous. And the flags themselves waver between evoking optimism and pessimism. When the wind blows through them, they recall the fluttering orange pageantry of Christo’s and Jeanne-Claude’s crowd-pleasing 2005 Central Park installation *The Gates*; however, when the air calms, Goldsworthy’s flags droop and sag in a way that’s at odds with the vibrancy of the color scheme. The jaunty pop standards piped into the plaza’s speakers — Bill Withers’s “Lovely Day”; The Talking Heads’s “This Must Be The Place” — feel discordantly upbeat during the flags’ more languid moments.



Andy Goldsworthy with “Red Flags” (2020) (in progress)

In late-summer New York City, months into the pandemic, this strange mix of moods — equal parts calm and concerned — feels more apt than Goldsworthy could have envisioned when he conceived the work in 2019. *Red Flags* was intended as an anti-imperialist eco-parable, in which the symbolism of a notorious civic site has been détourned with a chthonic twist. The plain, silty flags — each as modest and self-assured as a logo-less baseball cap — work beautifully in this

regard, registering subtle discontent with the territorial land claims on which countries and states are predicated. Similar to how Byron Kim's grids of abstracted skin color create a powerful gestalt of the superficial similarities and differences between people, Goldsworthy's flag rows pigmented with soil acknowledge regional geographic differences while also suggesting their bedrock family resemblances.

But it's the unintended pandemic context that makes *Red Flags* feel less an augur of faraway ecological discord than a marker of sociopolitical discord in the here and now. The strangest, most alarming part of my visit to the installation was Rockefeller Center's palpable emptiness. It was a glorious weekday afternoon, during a normal business day, and yet there were no office workers scuttling about on their lunch break, no throngs of tourists clogging up the concourse. Even my bike route along Fifth Avenue felt disconcertingly safe, vacant, just me and the buses enjoying lanes and lanes of space. The cars and the tourists and the office workers and the proud national flags will eventually return to the neighborhood, and *Red Flags* will eventually fly elsewhere. For the moment, though, Goldsworthy has given us a moving, subdued reminder that things are not quite right in this land.

[Andy Goldsworthy: Red Flags](#) *continues at Frieze Sculpture at Rockefeller Center (45 Rockefeller Plaza, Midtown East, Manhattan) through October 2.*