

**PRESSBOOK**

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## Tattered And Gorgeous: Go See The Flags Hanging In Federal Hall Before They Are Taken Down On Friday

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© Guillaume Ziccarelli, Courtesy Galerie Perrotin. *The installation of A Living Thing at Federal Hall.*

When I spoke to the artist Mel Ziegler on the phone on Tuesday, he confessed that he was exhausted from a long day spent in the sun on his tractor. He was in Texas. I was in New York, where the only spot of warmth in an otherwise cold, dreary day was my visit to *A Living Thing: Flag Exchange*, an exhibition of 50 tattered flags collected by Ziegler from 2011 – 2016. Curated by Hesse McGraw, it is on view at the Federal Hall National Monument through Friday, November 10. Hanging from the domed ceiling of the historic structure, which was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the spot where George Washington took the oath of office as the first President of the United States, the tattered flags looked like precious ancient tapestries.

Ziegler started the project as an exercise in social exchange. It was 2011, and although politics were fraught, the question of what it means to be an American had not reached the fever pitch of today's dialogue. The intention was to travel to all 50 states, and in each state, find a tattered flag. Ziegler would approach the owner of said flag, and offer to exchange it for a brand new one.

People's reactions to the proposition, Ziegler found, were widely varied. "You had people who were very happy, and people who were skeptical, and people who were embarrassed, and people who were rather indignant because they were embarrassed," he told me. "All I could tell them was that I wasn't exactly sure how I would hang them, but that having the exchange was part of the artwork."

The logistics of the exchange were more complicated than they seem on the surface. There are three standard sizes for the flag. They come in three fabrics — nylon, polyester and cotton. When he replaced a tattered flag, Ziegler tried to match the original's size and material exactly. As a result, he traveled with suitcases full of flags in multiples so that as he made his way through states, he was always prepared for whatever exchange was necessary.

"I was always afraid to ask," Ziegler said. "It was never easy, and sometimes took some convincing."

He was often surprised by who was willing to make the exchange. In Oregon, for example, the staff at a Quality Inn refused to let him take the flag because they said it was a legal liability — they didn't want to be responsible if the got hurt in the process. Meanwhile, an asphalt plant in the same state let him climb a 90-foot-high tower. "They put me in safety gear and a hard hat," he laughed.

In the end, he collected flags from all 50 states, as he intended. The collection has since been shown across the country, at the Tang Museum in Saratoga Springs (2016), and the San Francisco Art Institute in San Francisco (2017), among other locations.

Although Ziegler imagined that the flags be hung alphabetically, by the name of state, in the Federal Hall, they are hung by size. The larger flags, collected in North Carolina, Oregon, Hawaii, Utah, Ohio and Arkansas, are hung on the outer edges, while the smallest flags,

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collected in Iowa, Maryland, Nebraska and Massachusetts, hang in the center. This is to allow people to gather within the center of the installation for talks and programs.

I asked Ziegler if anyone with whom he exchanged a flag had gone to see the installation in the Federal Hall, and he replied that he didn't know. He was careful not to collect names and addresses. "I was reluctant to take advantage or even find out the stories," he told me. The point is not to tell the stories of Americans through the flags they collect, but instead, to be confronted with the symbol that unites us all as a nation. Tattered, but even still, absolutely gorgeous.