

Colby Stephens

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Colby Stephens' work intends to situate an analysis of the Federal Reserve and U.S. economic policy into the larger context of contemporary American politics. To do this, Stephens engages a process called the stratification of information which takes complex issues and stratifies the information into accessible layers. Reminiscent of the manner by which visible geological strata make complex landscapes understandable and navigable, Stephens' artwork subsequently has many complex and nuanced conceptual layers that allow viewers to engage with it on a variety of levels: From strictly visual/formal perspectives to more conceptual/referential interpretations. To give viewers a point of departure for such engagement, he frequently employs allegorical narratives. Such narratives promote effective interaction with artwork because, in contrast to blanket-statements which require individuals to conform to rigid truths, allegories allow for specific truths to permeate the unique lives of individuals. In addition to these allegories, conceptual content is imbued into his work through the intentional selection of materials, art processes, and titles. Despite the strong political content of Stephens' work, his intention is not to tell viewers what to think. Instead, Stephens is determined to reframe discussions about traditionally divisive political issues for the purpose of encouraging a more idealized democratic discourse.

## *American Pantheon* (2014)

Stephens' largest body of work to date situates a critique of Federal Reserve policies amidst the large discourse of American politics today. This project's narrative is told through an allegorical myth which draws heavily from traditional Greek mythology to delineate often overlooked connections between the Federal Reserve and political parties, news media, and institutions for national security. The artworks and the narrative serve to mutually inform each other. As complex and nuanced as the systems Stephens' critiques, his work tells a rich story beginning with the politically tumultuous introduction of central banking ideas to the U.S. through the Federal Reserve's



*Iapex* (L) and *Icarus* (R)  
Veneer, Federal Reserve Notes, Wood  
Donkey: 7.5'H x 7.5'W x 7'D; Elephant: 7.5'H x 13'W x 13'D  
2014



*American Pantheon* || Letterpress, handmade book || 2014

response to the 2008 economic crisis. In particular, the work addresses issues related to the changing value of currency, debt-based methods of funding the government, divisive rhetoric which promotes political entrenchment, the role of the news media, and the relationship between the intent of the 2nd Amendment and the current U.S. military drone policy.



*Hermes*

Veneer. Movement/noise is a direct translation of the voices of live newscasters on opposing news radio outlets.  
2' x 2' x 2', each

politicians as a means to layering in the tragic history of divisive rhetoric. On the left in both of these images is Hamilton, and on the right is Burr. This reference to the infamous Hamilton-Burr duel from the 19th century functions both to provide an historical perspective of the legacy of divisive rhetoric, and as an uncomfortable foreshadowing of the tragic consequences of the use of such rhetoric. With this reference, Stephens encourages himself and his viewers to be thoughtful with the rhetoric used to engage political discussions.

*American Pantheon* is told largely as a conversation between Apollo and Hermes. Apollo is the god of information and truth, whereas his brother Hermes is the god of trickery and misinformation. Hermes, as the messenger god, is ironically the traditional god of the news media. For this sculpture, Stephens employs Hermes' traditional icon, the rooster, to bring attention to the divisive political rhetoric that is so prevalent in American media and society today.

Together, these two roosters compose Stephens' singular *Hermes*. Through a series of electrical equipment, the voices of news casters on opposing live news radio networks are translated into violent clucking and shaking reminiscent of a cockfight.

Stephens named these roosters after famous American





*Daedalus Fashioning His Wings*

Air pump, motor. Speed determined by a live feed of the changing price of gold.  
2' x 2' x 5'

*Daedalus Fashioning His Wings* draws from the Daedalus-Icarus story wherein Daedalus and his children *Icarus* and *Iapyx* are hired to build a labyrinth to protect a castle. Allegorically speaking, Daedalus is a figure for the chairperson of the Federal Reserve, Icarus and Iapyx for the two political parties, the labyrinth for the economy, and the castle for the principles of central banking.

Unfortunately, they construct the labyrinth so complex that they cannot find their way out, so they construct wings with which to fly out of their predicament. Made from the same material as the labyrinth, currency, the wings are fragile and unreliable. The question of their fate is open to the viewer to decide based upon his or her political positions.

To develop layers of content, this sculpture is driven by a motor whose speed is determined by a live feed of the change in the price of gold from the stock market. With gold as one (imperfect) means of following the change in the value of currency, this sculpture functions as a visualization of the changing value of currency as a result of Quantitative Easing; Daedalus' method of fashioning his wings.

The air pump huffs, puffs, and moans all day long in its labor. But it accomplishes nothing, a parallel outcome to the Federal Reserve's Quantitative Easing policy.

The *American Pantheon* narrative intentionally lacks a conclusion. Stephens asserts that while the myth has many qualities of a tragedy, such as this map of Greece which functions as a suggested ending, it also has the potential to conclude as a story of heroism. The trouble with freedom is that it requires immense responsibility, personal initiative, and public engagement if it is to survive as a way of life. Americans get to write the conclusion to the *American Pantheon*, and to that end Stephens intends to promote thoughtful civic engagement with his work.



*America Taking Her Place Among the Titans* || Federal Reserve Notes on canvas || 7' x 6.5'



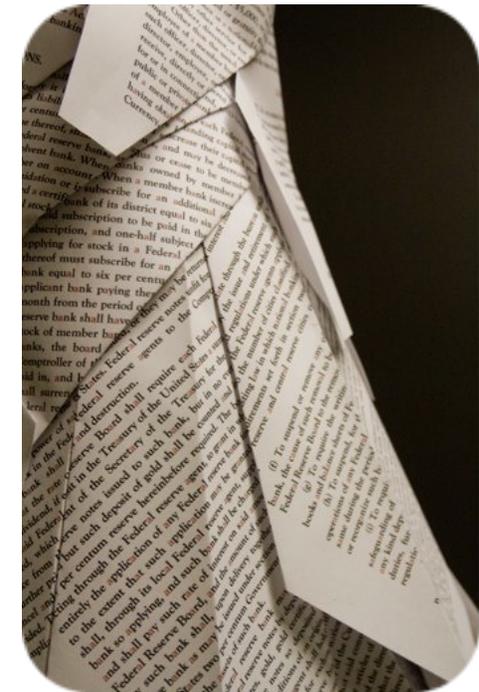
*A Gown for Lady Liberty*  
 Federal Reserve Act of 1913  
 7' tall, dimensions variable as a site-responsive sculpture  
 2012

is *A Gown For Lady Liberty*, which is constructed from the Federal Reserve Act of 1913. Throughout the whole document, every letter “A” and “a” have been printed in scarlet red as a reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. As such, the dress suggests the adulteration of American liberties as a result of America’s central bank. The remaining works articulate how this is so, referring to issues like fiat currency, the intentional secrecy of banking policies, non-market-based manipulation of the Federal Funds Rate, inflation, the boom-bust cycle, currency creation, and mechanisms of funding war.

## *Normalcy, Not Nostrums* (2012)

*Normalcy, Not Nostrums* is a body of work that considers and critiques the Federal Reserve’s response to the 2008 financial crisis in the context of its 100 year history as the central planner for the American economy. In particular, it looks at those Fed policies which Stephens would define as nostrums (useless medications sold under false pretense) administered to an ailing economy.

The centerpiece of this body of work





*Pay No Attention (The Chairman's Confession)*  
Digital video inside a reconstructed cinema marquee  
3.5' x 4.5'  
2012

*Pay No Attention (The Chairman's Confession)* is easily read as homage to L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The book, which differs significantly from the screenplay, can be read as an allegory for the late 19th century recession in the United States. In such a reading, Dorothy is swept up into a tornado of economic turmoil, and after landing in a new world she has to work her way through various adventures which allegorically refer to suggested solutions to the recession.

One such adventure begins when she encounters the Emerald City. Strangely, the Emerald City is not actually green. Instead, everybody who enters the city must wear glasses with green lenses which are locked onto their heads with a key held by the gatekeeper. Upon Dorothy's discovery that the Wizard is a sham, the Wizard first declares "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!" But when he realizes that there is no hope of continuing his charade, he laments: "My people have worn green glasses for so long that most of them think it really is an emerald city."

As an allegory, this refers to the 1890s proposition to return to the Greenback currency printed by Lincoln to fund the Civil War. This was a fiat currency. It was not backed by anything that might limit its production, and its overproduction devastated the American economy. The illusion of the emerald color, then, speaks to the illusion of currency as a thing of value, when in fact it has no value at all.

Calling upon this narrative to critique America's current use of fiat currency, Stephens' video piece depicts the Wizard, an allegorical figure for the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, declaring his lament. Every two minutes the Chairman says, "My people have worn green glasses for so long that most of them think it really is an emerald city."

The early 20th century saw the advent of the two most centrally planned economies in history: The United States with the Federal Reserve and seemingly at the opposite end of the spectrum was the Soviet experiment with communism. Interested in Constructivist aesthetics, Stephens looked to Soviet posters as a means to informing his understanding of the relationship between these economic revolutions. The result is a series of woodcut prints that appropriate the compositions of existing Soviet posters, which are modified to refer to contemporary American economic issues.

For example, the original composition by Mikhajlovich referenced in the image to the right was titled *(I) Believe (We Will) Celebrate the Hundredth Anniversary*. It features an industrial worker and a farmer shaking hands confirming that the Soviet revolution would bring about economic stability, and a lifestyle of adequate provision. Nearly one hundred years later, and released just two months shy of the Federal Reserve's centennial, *(I) Believe (We Will) Regret the Centennial* considers how the Soviet experiment with communism lead to extraordinary wealth inequality before it failed miserably, and the Federal Reserve's record of boom-bust cycles has lead to a similarly inequitable distribution of wealth.



*(I) Believe (We Will) Regret the Centennial*  
Woodcut prints referencing Mikhajlovich  
2' x 1.5'



Other prints in this body of work address connect the Federal Reserve to political and military conflicts, constitutional provisions for currency production, and the secrecy of central bank principles.

*Endless Money Forms the Sinews of War*  
Woodcut prints referencing El Lissitzky  
2' x 1.5'

The breadth of the conceptual information in this body of work reveals patterns of history repeating itself with the Federal Reserve's role in creating economic turmoil, and its subsequent response to these circumstances. To that end, this body of work is well situated in a contemporary discussion about economic policy as the Federal Reserve and the federal government indicate that the problem is nearly solved.



## Colby Stephens CV

### Education:

- 2014 Master of Fine Arts. University of Nevada.  
Reno, NV
- 2011 Bachelor of Fine Arts. Southern Oregon  
University. Ashland, OR

### Solo Exhibitions:

- 2014 *American Pantheon*. Galleries South. Reno, NV
- 2013 *Nevada Horizon Lines*. Performance at Camp  
WeChMe. Reno, NV
- 2012 *Normalcy, Not Nostrums*. Sierra Arts Gallery.  
Reno, NV
- 2011 *Positive/Negative*. Retzlaff Gallery. Ashland, OR.
- 2010 *Deconstruction*. Retzlaff Gallery. Ashland, OR.  
*Those are My Ideas*. Boise Cascade Gallery.  
Ashland, OR.

### Group Exhibitions:

- 2014 *UNR/MFA*. Haldan Gallery, South Lake Tahoe, CA.
- 2013 *UNR Juried Show*. Reno, NV  
*Flight: MFA Art Exhibition*. Reno, NV
- 2012 *UNR Student Juried Show*. Reno, NV.  
*Cross Section*. Front Door Gallery. Reno, NV  
*FICTILIS Astoria*. The Lab. San Francisco, CA.
- 2011 *Don't*. Hannon Library Gallery. Ashland, OR.  
*Artifacts*. Meyer Memorial Gallery. Ashland, OR.

*Schnieder Merit Award Artists*. Boise Cascade  
Gallery. Ashland, OR.

- 2010 *Ice and Light*. Beyond Borders. Bellingham, WA.  
*Containers of Consumption 1 thru 3*. Blackfish  
Gallery. Portland, OR.  
*Don't*. Art Chairs Gallery. Ashland, OR.
- 2009 *Student Show*. SU Gallery. Ashland, OR.  
*Seeds & Sparks*. SPE NW Conference. Seattle, WA

### Selected Collections:

- 2014 *American Pantheon* book. Nevada Museum of  
Art, Reno, NV  
*American Pantheon* book. University of Nevada  
Special Collections, Reno, NV
- 2009 *Chemical Forms*. Southern Oregon University  
Chemistry Dpt. Ashland, OR.

### Press:

- 2014 Russell, Terri. "UNR Art Display Designed for  
Masters Degree." KOLO 8 News, Reno. 29  
Apr. 2014  
Rogers, Griffin. "Masters Students Display Art at  
College." Tahoe Daily Tribune. 16 Jan. 2014
- 2013 Siwajian, Allyson. "Art in a Hard Place." Desert  
Companion. May 2013. 66-69.

Press, Continued:

- 2011 Aldous, Viki. "A Light Inside Melting Ice." Mail Tribune 15 Jan. 2011  
Aldous, Viki. "Positive/Negative." Ashland Daily Tidings. 15 Jan. 2011  
2009 Thomas, Teresa. "Art Moves Outdoors at SOU." Mail Tribune. 23 Oct. 2009

Writings Published:

- 2013 "On the Rights of the Boston Bomber." Reno Gazette Journal. 29 Apr. 2013  
2012 "On Rhetoric." Reno Gazette Journal. 8 Dec. 2012

Guest Lectures

- 2014 *Nevada Horizon Lines*, Open Action Workshop with the M12 Collective  
2013 *Art and Politics in Modernism*, UNR Art History 261 visiting lecturer.

Awards:

- 2013 UNR Artist Award  
2012 Reno Gazette Journal Silver Pen Award  
2011 Schneider Merit Award in Art  
2010 Nominated for ISC Outstanding Student Achievement Award  
Leon Mulling Award.  
SOU Representative at Blackfish Gallery  
Beyond Borders Honorable Mention

Related Experience:

- 2014 Adjunct Faculty, Professor of Sculpture, LTCC, Fall  
2012 Visual Foundations Instructor UNR (through 2014)  
CCAI Artist in Education (through present)  
2011 Hannon Library Special Collections Photographer  
2010 Assisted Mike Rathbun's Schneider Museum Installation.  
2008 Foundry Worker, Precision Castparts Corporation.

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