



Donna Ruff, *Senate*, 2019, burned paper, 10 1/2 × 8".
From the series "The Federalist Papers Undone," 2019–.

Donna Ruff

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STREET PROJECT

America's founding fathers have been invoked with increasing frequency in recent political debates. In particular, their Federalist Papers—a collection of eighty-five essays that Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison penned in the late 1780s to encourage the ratification of the US Constitution—have been cited by both the right and the left to support wildly divergent readings of the Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights. The eminent statesmen have also played a prominent role in popular culture (in the form of *Hamilton*, the musical) as well as in the recent impeachment, a process described in the early

In her series "The Federalist Papers Undone," 2019–, Donna Ruff remakes passages from the essays, laser-cutting the text into modestly scaled sheets of paper in an archaic font (every *s* looks like an *f*, for example, as they did in the eighteenth century). Ruff became interested in this source material after the US Supreme Court delivered its *Citizens United* decision in 2010. Influenced in part by the tenth Federalist essay, the ruling allows big money to have an outsize influence on elections. In Ruff's small but potent pieces, smoke stains surround the burned edges of the letters, suggesting that the words themselves are on fire: a reminder, perhaps, of the rebellion the words originally embodied—or of the trouble that their lack of clarity has caused. Some fragments of text overlap, making the content almost illegible.

Other phrases jump out: MEN ARE AMBITIOUS, VINDICTIVE, AND RAPACIOUS (*Its Own Importance*, 2019) and WHERE ELSE, THAN IN THE SENATE, COULD HAVE BEEN FOUND A TRIBUNAL SUFFICIENTLY DIGNIFIED, OR SUFFICIENTLY INDEPENDENT? (*Senate*, 2019).

Ruff, who lives and works in Miami, has also made an ongoing series of provocative pieces about recent waves of immigration, an omnipresent issue but one of particular importance to the residents of a city that has a significant immigrant population. On large rectangles of felt, Ruff has printed photographs of Mexican and Central American migrant children and their parents, many of which she found in the online Honduran edition of *La Prensa* (The Press). After editing the images in Photoshop and printing them on the fabric, Ruff laser-cut the felt, carefully shaping and piercing the pictures to draw attention to the brutality of both the migrants' experience and the carceral settings in which they are placed. The backs of the pieces, spray-painted red, cast eerie pink shadows on the wall.

The artist's intention is to create historical artifacts, works that might somehow escape the amnesia of the news cycle and keep abuses visible in ways that prohibit rapid judgment or dismissal. In *Chainlink*, 2019, her manipulations of the image are so extensive that the picture almost seems to be unraveling, like an attractively messy pile of rope. The diamond pattern of the fence that covers the composition is almost, but not quite, subsumed into the chaos. The realization that a single toddler is peering through the links—his face the only thing left whole—comes as something of a shock.

As in "The Federalist Papers Undone," Ruff's treatment of her material emphasizes both our distance from these things—whether in time or space—and our possible complacency, or even complicity. Shifting in and out of legibility, both bodies of work require slow, thoughtful examinations foreign to the experience of modern media, and of much contemporary art. Once we take the time to look at each piece closely, its content becomes more inescapable, if not necessarily more interpretable.

—*Maria Porges*