

ARTFORUM

Adam Helms

MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY

Despite the increasing visibility of young artists engaged with the deleterious side of contemporary American culture—whether parsing subcultural responses to it or directly expressing political grievances with it—relatively few of them engage deeply with specific moments in this country's history. Contemporary artistic accounts can make it seem as if the upheavals of the 1960s were a Big Bang, before which nothing here existed: no hardscrabble Puritanism, no founding-father solidarity, no Transcendentalism, no "patriotic gore," no international projection of power through the first half of the last century, to cite just a few chapters from the American annals to which artists rarely look for inspiration. Contemporary artists' tendency to avoid this history may partly explain why recent exhibitions like "The Uncertain States of America" and "USA Today" have seemed much more "contemporary" than specifically "American."

This exhibition, Adam Helms's New York solo debut, looks a tentative step toward redressing this problem. It gathered together but did not intermingle two of his preoccupations: the visual iconography of guerrilla insurrection and the symbolism of the American West's vast open spaces. One first encountered a series of nine double-sided silk-screen portraits on vellum, each depicting a silvery gray figure masked by a pool of black ink vaguely resembling a balaclava or hood. Details of dress, and the works' titles, located these enigmatic, faintly sinister figures in various times and places: Grozny, the Chechen capital and recent site of much anti-Russian paramilitary activity; the Santa Fe trail; Zarqa, Jordan. One is a Confederate soldier photographed by Mathew Brady in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1865.

Helms's uniform translation of these images, while perhaps highlighting loose formal parallels in the ways the rebels presented themselves (or were depicted postmortem), glosses over significant differences in their aims and methods. It is an omission that seems too startling to be accidental, yet there is no acknowledgment of it in the work. Helms seems to neglect the all-important kicker of Jasper Johns's famous dictum: "Take an object. Do something with it. Do something else with it." At a moment when terms like "counterinsurgency" and "asymmetrical warfare" are bandied about in the news media, an artist must