

Art In America : 'ADAM HELMS', by Yaelle Amir, February 3rd, 2011

ADAM HELMS



The central piece in "Without Name," Adam Helms's second solo show at Marianne Boesky, which included drawings and a sculpture (all 2010), took as its point of

departure Gerhard Richter's *48 Portraits* (1971–72)—paintings that reproduce encyclopedia photographs of iconic figures of Western science and the humanities. The young New York artist adopted Richter's format to continue his own exploration of renegade militia culture. *Untitled (48 Portraits, 2010)* comprises 48 charcoal drawings, each approximately 27 by 21 inches, which lined the three long walls of the gallery's main space. Each sheet portrays the head of an anonymous person, most of them fully or partially masked by balaclavas, long beards, sunglasses or, in one case, a white pointed hood.

Based on photos of varying quality that the artist found online, the drawings range from blank silhouettes to fairly detailed depictions. There is a general impression of menace, even without press materials that indicate that the subjects are mostly "insurgents, militia, guerrillas and subversives." Although, according to the gallery, there are a few police officers among the 48, the viewer cannot tell them apart, and by not differentiating among officials and rebels, Helms suggests an equivalence. He is also concerned with the limitations of portraiture. Speaking in an interview about his own portraits (though not specifically about the 48), Richter asserted, in *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews 1962–1993*, that "likeness to the models is . . . entirely useless." Helms, through his obscured faces, evinces a similar interest in how representations can be descriptive and yet reveal little or nothing about the persons depicted.

The front gallery featured three 5-by-3-foot charcoal drawings that the artist created by first digitally layering elements of various found images, including flags and heraldry, so that the original components are unrecognizable, and then reproducing the results by hand. Mostly symmetrical, the drawings enclose Rorschachlike abstractions—dark forms that evoke an animal skull or a long beard—within geometric shapes recalling badges or shields. The artist seems primarily attracted to the muddying of crisp, totemic imagery.

Along with these drawings, Helms displayed *Earthworks/The Ecstatic Experience*, an 8-foot-tall, freestanding two-sided lightbox that contains, on one side, transparencies of found photos of skeletons, antique cavalry hats and empty landscapes. In interviews, the artist has expressed an interest in America's imperial westward push, and in that light these images recall seized land and a price paid in blood. On the other side, around a central image of a black-clad commando, Helms has arranged photographs of men's faces wearing rapturous expressions, alongside geometric illustrations and drawings of animal-man hybrids evocative of cult iconography. Again, Helms suggestively links the official use of force with lawless violence, and patriotism with zealotry.

Photo: Adam Helms: Earthworks/The Ecstatic Experience, 2010, transparencies on Plexiglas and mixed mediums, 98 1/2 by 73 by 24 inches; at Marianne Boesky.