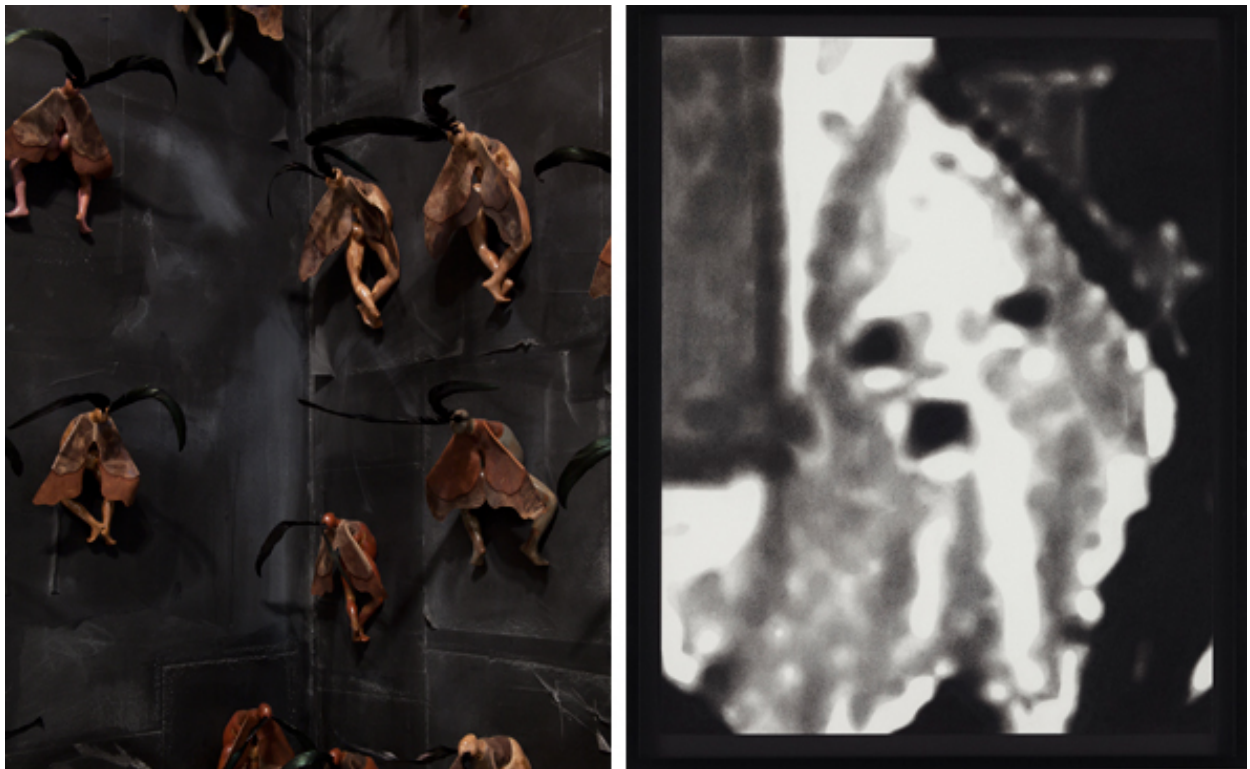


NY Times Magazine : 'Artifacts, Moths and Mercenaries', by Linda Yablonsky, November 4th, 2010

Artifacts | Moths and Mercenaries



Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, left, and Marianne Boesky Gallery
Wangechi Mutu's "Moth Girls" at Barbara Gladstone, left, and a detail of "Untitled (48 Portraits, 2010)," by Adam Helms at Marianne Boesky Gallery.

Funny how no coincidence ever really seems accidental. Certainly the gods must be smiling at whatever has put new shows by Wangechi Mutu and Adam Helms in back-to-back Chelsea galleries. Their unexpected juxtaposition creates a parallel universe that is both beautiful and chilling.

At first glance, Mutu's fetishistic take on women's bodies as repositories of violence and desire appears the polar opposite of Helms's drawings of anonymous terrorists and revolutionaries. But they have more in common than just the wall between them.

The egad factor runs pretty high in both shows. At the **Barbara Gladstone Gallery**, the Kenyan-born Mutu festoons the female figures in her opulent collages with glittery agglomerations of beads set off by cutouts from fashion and porn magazines. Like Mystique from “X-Men,” they are sexy, scaly and scary for the liberating charge they give to her archetypal African women and the clash of Western and non-Western values embedded within them.

Something of the same is true of the male archetypes in the suite of 48 charcoal drawings that Helms made for “Without Name,” his show at the **Marianne Boesky Gallery**. Though masked, bearded, hooded and veiled, they exude a Che Guevara-like charisma that makes their real-life missions all the more frightening.

Helms, 36, fashioned the drawings after Gerhard Richter’s “48 Portraits,” black-and-white paintings of significant male thinkers of the 20th century – men like Einstein, Kafka, Freud and Ghandi. Helms has kept a reproduction in his studio since 1994, when he started noticing photographs of I.R.A., Khmer Rouge, Chechen and other rebels in daily newspapers, and became both fascinated by their appearance and horrified by what they were doing. He made inky drawings based on those pictures. Then came the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. “Looks like the world has caught up with your work,” a friend told him.

To make the pictures at Boesky, Helms enlarged thumbnail photos from the Internet to the size of the Richter portraits, printed out the now-bitmapped images and started drawing in heavy charcoal. “I wanted them to have weight as objects,” he says, “to get the black parts as velvety black as could be.” They’re dark, all right, in more ways than one, making the lighter parts, where the paper shows through, luminous and ghostly.

Details of their features sink into the darker parts and bleach out in the lighter ones, making the portraits seem otherworldly and the threat they pose even more real. A bearded man, seen in agonized profile, looks dead but isn’t. A burning pair of eyes is all that is visible in another man’s head. From across the room, a man who appears to be wearing the helmet of a medieval knight turns out to be swathed in a kaffiyeh typical of Hamas. The spectral white hood emerging from the next portrait suggests the Klu Klux Klan but

actually represents the Shining Path movement of Peru. And the exuberant smile on one of the few bared faces suggests that killing can be fun.

Together the portraits form a picture of the world we live in now, and there isn't a thinker among them. But they add up to a powerful assembly of political forces whose images were calculated to incite the public, and Helms burrows into their depths for a glimmer of humanity beneath their brutal facade.

On corresponding walls next door at Gladstone, Mutu has hung another index of human behavior that looks gorgeous and is terribly disturbing. It is "Moth Girls," an installation of dozens of ceramic figurines with leather wings, feather antennae and bare female legs positioned closed, crossed and apart, as if they were exercising at a ballet barre or wrestling with invisible lovers. Pinned to blackened papers in four repeating rows, they surround viewers like the butterflies of a mad collector showing off her prize catch.

The whole thing is so crazy and compelling that I wondered if Mutu actually had such a collection. No, she said at her opening. Moths infested her apartment and were driving her nuts at the time she was making the show. "They eat everything!" she said, still sounding upset. "And they're almost impossible to get rid of." So she did the next best thing and turned her frustration into art. Which is far more fun than going to war and, at least in these two shows, totally killing.