

The New York Observer: 'Autumn's Real Ghouls: Adam Helms and Mika Rottenberg Bring Out the Undead', by Will Heinrich, November 2nd, 2010

THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

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By Will Heinrich
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On Halloween weekend, while children dressed as ghouls and vampires haunted apartment complexes and pizzerias, two artists in Chelsea confronted more real and frightening visions of the undead: Adam Helms, at Marianne Boesky Gallery, with careful black-and-white renderings of the shapeless male terrors at the corner of our collective eye; and Mika Rottenberg, at Mary Boone, with a video excavation of the zombielike perpetual motion machine that drives our postindustrial, post-feminist, globalized service economy.

The anchor of Mr. Helms' show is a response to Gerhard Richter's 48 Portraits. In place of Mr. Richter's iconic and easily identified famous dead white men, drawn from encyclopedia photos, Mr. Helms draws an unnamed, unstable, threatening single male, turning slowly from right to left around three gallery walls. (The portraits are all of different men, strictly speaking, but they all personify the same mutable fear.) He wears what we try not to call "Muslim garb," a ski mask, a bandana, a keffiyeh over his nose and mouth, bruises and, in one case, what could be a fighter pilot's helmet. Under the ski mask could be a soldier, an insurgent, a terrorist or a man about to rob a liquor store; in one portrait, he reads from a communique that could also be a name card for a mug shot.

But the faces are, more often, only just barely faces. They're oozing black blots that have been depersonalized by terrorism, torture, paranoia, the rigors of war—Or Rottenberg's Squeeze else by pixelation and the Internet. (Charcoal drawings of computer distortion send an uncertain message: If bloodless digital abstraction has an organic basis, does that make it better or worse? Are we more afraid of zombies or of robots?) Fear has a way of spreading, and the forces we assign to deal with the fear quickly become fearsome themselves.

The Vitruvian narco-commando at the center of Earthworks/The Ecstatic Experience, an 8-foot-tall photo assemblage light box, is probably a soldier, but also probably on the take. Above him floats an ecstatic male face, black and white, eyes shut; beneath him, a gangland mural of the Virgin. Is the drug lord the father of the authoritarian reaction, or is it the other way around? On the box's other side, postcards of Yellowstone, empty tents, disassembled skeletons and a baying wolf fill out the context in which this seedy modern Passion takes place. A deeply peaked black hat brings to mind the cruciform hooded prisoner at Abu Ghraib.

THE HEIRS OF Mr. Richter's icons, meanwhile, on Saturday night at Mary Boone crushed themselves into a small black room to watch Ms. Rottenberg's Squeeze, a 20-minute looping fantasia about five Latina laborers who take a break from harvesting lettuce to stretch out on the ground and stick their arms into holes, on the other side of which five Asian manicurists, sitting in a row under five dewy asses sticking out of the wall, spritz and massage the laborers' brown arms and hands while an overly tanned white woman eating a white bread sandwich turns a portable heater off and on. In the middle of the wall, a tongue wriggles its way out of a white, rubbery orifice, possibly made of the same sticky and sexual but lifelessly disembodied fluid being harvested from rubber trees by women on a Southeast Asian plantation, who also take their turn stretching out on the ground to stick their five arms into five identical holes to be manicured and

massaged. Men with unseen faces process the sap into long jiggling sheets that look like animal fat waiting to be eaten or human fat just waiting to be slimmed away. An obese black woman in a black outfit sits on a Lazy Susan in a tiny, Christmas-light-star-spangled black room, meditating—she may be powering the whole operation by telekinesis—and the woman with the sandwich turns an air conditioner off and on before being squeezed between two plywood presses and scraping glittering, computer-animated red powder from her face to be made into foundation makeup. The tins of makeup, along with the heads of lettuce and the brownish-orange, tripe-like sheets finally produced on the rubber plantation, are gathered into a different orifice of the shifting, underground, plywood machine, where they are pounded and chopped and moved and transported and finally compressed into a single cube of garbage, which Ms. Rottenberg, according to a manifest on the wall, sent off to Grand Cayman Island for perpetual storage.

That final gesture, to me, expresses too much confidence in the foresight of whoever it is wielding the plywood harvesting machine and commanding those men in black masks. A few fathoms of Caribbean water won't be enough to protect their booty when the whole machine finally collapses.