

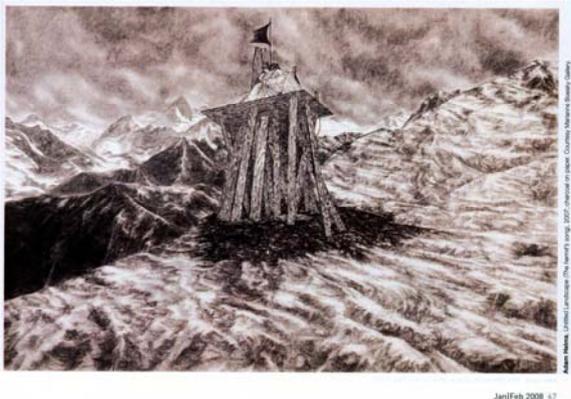


ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

Christine Hou on Adam Helms

The American West is a time and place long lost to the depths of the imagination; a history revised so many times that it exists only as a blur of Hollywood icons. Adam Helms strategically marks his territory on this legendary front, waiting for the moment for his fictional militia—the New Frontier Army (NFA)— to make its next move.

Helms documents the NFA with ramshackle sculptures and a series of works on paper, meticulous drawings that display each member in full military attire—equipped with a coat of arms, badges with both fictional and imaginary icons, and even shoddy wooden “sniper’s nests”—he fully realizes every necessity for the army. Their heads are masked in furry helmets that double as horned buffalo heads, a disguise for entering into the American wilderness. Posed in the style of classic portraiture, Helms outlines his realistically-rendered figures with unrefined edges before having them disappear into a white background, suggesting that history, at times, is a blank slate—continuously appropriated for one’s own use.



Helms’s Untitled Portrait series draws from a store of signature terrorist icons—black images of hoods, masks, and balaclavas—and silk screens them onto found black-and-white pictures of individuals from both historical and contemporary political conflicts. Faces become obliterated and identity falls into an anonymous wayside. Like the fully masked NFA members, Helms’s Untitled Portraits obscures identity as a means to blur the boundary between the past and the present. His images recall stories of American Civil War heroes and Western bandits, guerilla warfare and members of Al Qaeda, a history of identities amalgamated to form a series of archetypes, all while asking: What is

the new frontier and who stands on it?

While notions of the American West serve as landmarks of historical establishment, Helms’ work suggests that they also mirror contemporary notions of colonization and the war against terrorism. “I think of myself as an ethnographer. I survey and document iconography, posturing, and symbols of radical political groups and subcultures...I am interested in the ethos of violence, the romanticization of extremist ideology, and linking issues from our political past with contemporary events,” Helms has said.

In Hinterland, Helms’s recent solo show at Marianne Boesky Gallery, his focus shifts from the NFA members to the land they inhabit. Hyper-realistic charcoal drawings of vast and barren countrysides allude to an obsession with land and its defining role in “darker periods of American history.” The destitute landscapes do not refer to a particular time or place, but their lack of signification carries a subversive undertone. These hinterlands are the landscapes most commonly associated with political power: terrorist hideouts, guerillas encroaching on enemy territory, and all too familiar notions of late 19th-century American heroism and “frontier justice.