

Worldclassboxing.org : 'Adam Helms : Untitled Portrait', by Bob Nickas, 2007

Adam Helms: Untitled Portrait



BN: Your project, *Untitled Portrait*, is actually based on two individuals distantly separated by time and space, but united in their status as rebels and, in your words, as "archetypes of both guerrilla warfare and failed ideological rebellions." We are talking about Che Guevara and the lesser-known William "Bloody Bill" Anderson. Who exactly is Anderson?

AH: "Bloody Bill" is one of the most famous of the Confederate guerrilla leaders of the Civil War. He's also famous for his brutality and took great pleasure in committing violent acts toward Union soldiers and pro-Union civilians. There aren't many images of him. The most well known are one of him posing as a guerrilla leader and the other when his body was displayed and photographed after he was killed by Union soldiers.

BN: How did you bring the two of them together in this composite portrait?

AH: What struck me when I saw these images was how, in both of them, Anderson bears a striking resemblance to Che Guevara. In the photo of Anderson when alive, the image almost looks like a mirror of the iconic image of Che.

BN: The image that has been totally trivialized by advertising and T-shirts worn by people who don't even know who he was.

AH: Exactly. And in the image of Anderson when he's dead, he looks more sinister. He almost has a grin on his face, and that reminded me of the pictures taken of Guevara after he was murdered and his body was put on display for photographers. So initially, the images I had come across of both individuals appeared similar on a visual level. When I researched Anderson, I discovered that there was active guerrilla warfare during the Civil War that employed some of the same tactics Che would later describe in his treatise *Guerrilla Warfare*. The more I read about both of them, the more I realized there were similarities-and huge differences-in their activities and methods. What interested me the most was how both fit into the category of men living as outlaws out in the woods or in the jungle. Indexing these two individuals in this way, I took the iconographic, logo-like image of Che and combined it with one I made from the image of Anderson alive, and combined them to make a new "portrait" of this archetype.

BN: What attracts you in your work to figures who live outside of the law? What do they represent to you, in the historical sense as well as in terms of the times we're living through today?

AH: I suppose I was first drawn to these types of individuals when I started reading about Chechnya, Bosnia, and some of the continuing Latin American conflicts-the Shining Path in Peru-during the '90s. I noticed similarities and connections to what I had read about Che and all the internationalist insurgencies throughout the world between the '60s and the '80s. It was these connections to what had recently passed as history and what was happening in the present that interested me. These conflicts were happening for different reasons but seemed to represent an almost cyclical way in which uprisings or rebellions against a system or order-or the dissolution of order-would continue: each with its own defined heroes, outlaws, and villains to be mythologized as such.

BN: In a sense, every struggle is merely a replay of every struggle that's come before. But what I'm wondering is how you avoid the tendency to reinforce the inescapable mythology-Che as immediately recognizable logo-or, in the case of someone like Bloody Bill, remythologizing figures who have not been "branded"?
AH: Thinking of them in historical terms. I go back to the term archetype, and classify them as such. These lawless guerrilla/rebel archetypes are the continuing romanticization of heroic individuals fighting injustice or, in the eyes of their enemies, are seen as boogeymen who seek to destroy established orders and cast the world in their own demonic light. I'm interested in these figures as they present themselves as actors in their own mythology, or how they define the contemporary periods they are involved in by opposition to, rather than inclusion within, an established society or order. They are in many ways, I suppose, the underdog with whom I identify and support.

BN: Your combining of these figures, your overlaying of one on top of another, and how this relates to psychology-to mirroring and doubling-relates to Rorschach patterns, which you've referred to in relation to these new works.

AH: I suppose I do think of them in relationship to Rorschach patterns and abstracted inkblots. My interest in making them this way comes from my previous work-the Mylar drawings of anonymous masks, balaclavas, and hoods-in which I developed a way to make images that dealt with a degree of chance and abstraction. The ink on the Mylar pools and settles in various ways that almost dictates the ultimate form of

the finished work. It's a different way of making images as opposed to the degree of control used in my graphite, gouache, and charcoal drawings.

BN: The element of chance.

AH: Yes. In this particular case, by overlaying these iconic images there's a recontextualization that occurs because the ink creates a new form of an image. The logo-like nature of the original Che image, combined with a new logo-like image of Anderson, takes on a quality in which the original context may or may not be recognizable, but it has a sense of signifying something identifiable.

BN: For me, the abstracting of these images renders the figures nearly unidentifiable, and in a sense it is the only way to reclaim and reanimate these images. This is particularly true of the ones that have a direct, symmetrical Rorschach quality. They become not merely unidentifiable but monstrous. The user-friendly, radical chic of the Che image has been rendered as something to inspire fear and dread. In your hands, Che no longer represents a product-including himself-to be sold.

AH: The symmetrical quality does perhaps reference a sense of psychology as well as something that could be interpreted as symbolic in nature. And yes, I am also interested in this in terms of what you've pointed out as Che-the-logo being trivialized to sell posters and T-shirts. In this case, a "symbol" becomes an abstraction with new allusions and references, just as perhaps the original ideologies and understanding of both Che and Anderson have been altered over time.

BN: I would be less generous: with mythologized figures, we are almost always speaking of a misunderstanding arrived at over time. When I look at the pools and stains of ink on the Mylar, I think of blood as it appears after the fact, not the way we see it in movies today: it's dark, blackened, colder in many ways. The infamous postmortem photo of Che that I have in mind is black-and-white. How unreal it would seem in color. Black-and-white has somehow a greater claim to veracity. To what degree is the limited use of color in most of your work related to the idea of history reportage, and truth?

AH: It's almost as though you're saying that the ink appears like a document rather than a depiction of an event. Beyond the act itself, beyond the ideology, beyond the reality, perhaps, is an artifact. The ink pools-indeed appearing like pools of blood or landscapes, topography-have a quality that doesn't need the extraneous frivolity or subjectivity of color. The ink on Mylar portraits is like ghosts of portraiture, and still retains everything documentary or subjective that a portrait can entail-the gaze, facial features, the recognition or familiarity of personality. A portrait in this case becomes something realistic in its implications and, at the same time, abstracted. On a one-to-one scale: death and life, black and white. It's more of a suggestion of a truth than an attempt to depict something rendered in a form to make all of this easily digestible. The black pooling ink is the most immediate and minimal way to make a portrait of a group, an ideology, the perception of a movement, or, at the very least, the way in which these "masks" can become portraits unto themselves. In most of my work, the lack of color is an attempt to remove subjective qualities and bring the work to its most essentialist elements.

BN: I'm not exactly sure why this quote just popped into my head-it obviously came to mind from what you're saying-but I would guess that most people who wear those trendy Che T-shirts don't know his most memorable quote: "The true revolutionary is

often guided by great feelings of love."

AH: I'm sure most who wear the shirt know almost nothing about him. He was expressing his feeling that communism and the world proletariat revolution was about altruism for humanity, providing for the needs of all. I suppose that's part of what interests me about his iconic image, how the history of the individual it depicts is erased and becomes a product. It's a visualization of a distortion of history—a product absorbed by the system it's meant to symbolize the destruction of.

ADAM HELMS was born in Arizona in 1974 and now lives and works in New York City. He received an MFA from Yale University in 2004 and a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design in 1997. Helms' solo exhibitions include "Rising Down," Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Sister, Los Angeles (2007). He has shown in the group exhibitions "Every Revolution is a Roll of the Dice," Ballroom Marfa, Texas (2007), "Welcome to My World," Alexandre Pollazzon Ltd, London (2007), "Dream and Trauma: Works from the Dakis Joannou Collection," Kunsthalle and Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna (2007), "Ordinary Culture: Heikes/Helms/McMillian," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2006), "Collection 2005/06," Galerie Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels, Belgium (2006), and "Greater New York 2005," PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Queens, NY (2005), among others.

A curator and critic based in New York, BOB NICKAS has organized more than sixty exhibitions since 1984. From 2004 to 2007 he was Curatorial Advisor at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York where, among numerous exhibitions, he mounted Stephen Shore: American Surfaces, Wolfgang Tillmans: Freedom From The Known, and the Lee Lozano retrospective, Drawn From Life: 1961-1971. His current exhibition, Every Revolution is a Roll of the Dice, is currently on view at the Ballroom Marfa in Marfa, Texas, and includes a wall installation by Adam Helms. A new collection of Nickas's writings and interviews from the past ten years, Theft is Vision, will be published in November by JRP/Ringier.