

ADAM HELMS by Jody Zellen

Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York NY
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For his recent "Hinterland" exhibition at Marianne Boesky, Adam Helms again strikes up his characteristic band of guerrilla fighters, militias, bandits, and lost frontiersmen. Taking it a few steps further than his usual charcoal drawings of unspecified western landscapes, which call to mind novelist Cormac McCarthy's "crumpled butcherpaper mountains [lying] in sharp shadowfold," this time Helms throws double-sided silk screens on vellum, wooden sculptures, and a taxidermied buffalo into the mix. "I think of myself as an ethnographer," Helms says. "I survey and document the 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."

Loosely drawn from the ranks of his ongoing "New Frontier Army" series of drawings, a fictional, gun-toting paramilitary group standing around in fatigues and horned buffalo face masks, and his ink-on-Mylar *Untitled (48 Portraits)* from 2006, whose hooded, ink-smudged faces could be ID photos or Homeland Security mug shots, "Hinterland" begins with a suite of blurry, black-and-white figures in visors and balaclavas, at once Civil War veterans, mutineers, Old West outlaws, and Al Qaeda. Created by screening anonymous sources on one side of the vellum and randomly chosen disguises on the other, the result is cloaked in indeclinable, "mirror-image" ambiguity, calling into question the larger historical and contemporary inflections of photo-based identification.

In the main gallery, a trio of Helms's huge charcoal mountain-scapes, meticulously drawn and suitably brooding, surrounds two freestanding wooden structures, *Undying Glare* (all work 2007), a simple hunting box with viewing slot on one side and a semi-devotional diorama of the long vanished bison on the other, and *Untitled Landscape*, a soaring, rickety edifice from some distant outpost. At first sight these drawings and sculptures seem formally unconnected, but their carefully constructed positioning reveals otherwise. Through an adroit arrangement of parts, what at first appears blocked off or minimal, like the back of the hunting box, soon offers a narrow chink to the other side of this "one-way mirror," to an at once natural peepshow and kitschy frontier votive, and beyond that, to a charcoal drawing of a forbidding alpine setting. When you're standing midway between this picture and the buffalo end of *Undying Glare*, the constant need to look back and forth to check if you have missed anything actually makes your head swim, but at least draws your attention to the absence of animal or human life in Helms's landscape reflections.

The same "glaring" omission is explored in the inscrutable vertical structure standing nearby, complete with its own mountainous drawing and a found photograph of Joseph Conrad. Possibly also related to the activity of surveillance, the ramshackle, Tatlin-esque lookout or crawlspace looks like something straight out of *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* or *Waterworld*, but clearly offers neither safety nor shelter. Appearing to be an exploded, looking-glass version of the hunting box over which it keeps silent watch, no access to the other side of this mirror is possible, even though photographic and other traces of some long-gone occupant are still visible inside the structure, all of which draws us even more insistently to the austere wall drawing behind it, whose breathtaking sweep from forest floor to cloud-swept peaks is ultimately revealed as a void fantasy. While Helms's assemblages speak to what could possibly lie behind the fallen screen of American history, it is the subliminal romanticism and subtle shadings of these drawings that gets his real message across. But whether or not our era is immune to nostalgic misrecognition, to being cast down into its own private barrio, these nine-by-six-foot masterstrokes are here to remind us otherwise.

