



FIRST TAKE

Bob Nickas on

Adam Helms

VISITING AN ARTIST'S STUDIO for the first time is a lot like going on a blind date. One of the surest points of entry is to scan the walls to see what has been tacked up—postcards, posters, newspaper clippings, art reproductions. Within seconds you might absorb enough information to at least hold your own. In the case of Adam Helms, you hit the ground running, armed with a head full of images and associations: photographs of Chechen guerrillas, Cuban revolutionaries, and guys in fatigues playing war games; stills from *Dead Man* and *The Night of the Hunter*; pictures showing the surrender of Geronimo and the majesty of the American West; a cover of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine and a portrait of Joseph Conrad; images of dead bandits that helped enforce late-nineteenth-century notions of “frontier justice”; and the famous photo of a murdered Che Guevara. Invited by curator Doryun Chong to take part in last fall’s “Ordinary Culture: Heikes/Helms/McMillian,” a show at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis that proposed a reading of culture as “a mechanism of social stabilization, or a matrix through which history is conducted, like electricity,” Helms seized the opportunity to turn his source material into a visual index. A selection of imagery from his studio walls was reconfigured into two large pieces, *An Ideal for Living and Means to the End*, both 2006, serving as keys to his major work in the exhibition. In a statement written for the show, the thirty-two-year-old New York-based artist wrote: “I think of myself as an ethnographer. 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.”

To this end, Helms created his own fictional paramilitary group, the NFA, or New Frontier Army, in 2003. Working exclusively on paper, in gouache, graphite, and ink, Helms depicts the members of the group and their coat of arms, fortifications, sniper’s nest, and training exercises in exquisitely rendered works. His exacting draftsmanship is at the service of what appears to be a ragtag army based in ramshackle structures, and the works balance fine detail with outlined, “unfinished” areas, as if to acknowledge on the level of image and execution that this is not only a fictional but also a provisional army. Many of the NFA combatants wear elaborate buffalo heads that function both as protective helmets and as masks to shield their identities. The eyes that stare out from behind them fix a steely gaze on the viewer, engaging him or her in a silent battle of

wills. The look registers suspicion, defiance, and determination. Almost always horned, the buffalo heads also link the soldiers to the animal world of the plains and prairies of the American West, a lost time and place that lives on only in myth and imagination, where it has given rise to the fantasy of the lawlessness, adventure, and taming of the Wild West we know from rewritten history and from a pale-faced Hollywood. The NFA prompts an obvious question: What is the new frontier today? And exactly who and what cause will its army serve?

Helms’s two-part visual index was mounted on parallel freestanding walls to form an architectural frame for *Untitled (48 Portraits)*, 2006, an expansive grid comprising four dozen images of hoods, masks, and balaclavas—an anonymous rogues’ gallery that readily calls to mind all-too-familiar images of terrorists, political prisoners, abductees, and their captors, both past and horribly present. Working on Mylar, an impermeable material, Helms let the ink run and pool to

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create the portraits. For an artist who has previously exerted great control over every mark in his drawings, Helms in *Untitled (48 Portraits)* introduced an element of chance into his production, as well as an aspect of abstraction that plays off his subject: the masking of anonymous, seemingly random violence. The title and dimensions of the work are based on Gerhard Richter’s *48 Portraits*, 1971–72, a patriarchal pantheon that features figures such as Einstein and Kafka alongside men who are wholly unrecognizable. For Helms and the world in which we live today, the lineage of “great men” has been replaced by a succession of faceless hooded phantoms, behind each of which are ten to take its place. With *Untitled (48 Portraits)*, Helms’s work can clearly be seen in relation to the abstract/covert conceptualism that has surfaced in recent years—in the work of artists like Gardar Eide Einarsson and Kelley Walker—representing a sly mode of political engagement that, unlike the sloganeering and accusatory art of the politically correct 1980s and ’90s, infiltrates enemy lines without a shot being fired. □

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This page: Adam Helms, *Seated NFA Commander*, 2005, graphite on paper, 14 x 9". Opposite page, left: *View of "Ordinary Culture: Heikes/ Helms/ McMillian,"* 2006, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. From left: Adam Helms, *An Ideal for Living*, 2006; Adam Helms, *Untitled (48 Portraits)*, 2006; Adam Helms, *Means to the End*, 2006. Right: Adam Helms, *An Ideal for Living*, 2006, ink-jet prints, found photograph, magazine pages, postcard, pelt, ink on Mylar, and brass ornament. Installation view, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.