

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ADAM HELMS *Uncanny Valley*

by Sara Roffino

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Adam Helms has spent much of his career exploring the performativity of violence. Using Internet-sourced depictions of militants and rebel soldiers, Helms often works in charcoal and ink to create, compile, degrade, or archive images in ways that have drawn reference to Aby Warburg and Gerhard Richter. Helms neither aestheticizes nor glorifies the violence behind insurgent movements. Rather, he pares down the masculine posturing to reveal a universal vulnerability among his subjects.



Adam Helms, "Untitled (Dante and Beatrice in Technicolor)," 2014. Gouache and aniline dye on paper, 23 panels: dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York. © Adam Helms.

For his most recent works, on view at Marianne Boesky's new Lower East Side space, Helms chose to utilize popular movies such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Dr. Strangelove* as his source material. From this, he rendered the almost life-sized final images in gouache on paper, imbuing several pieces with aniline dye to create a subtle color-block effect recurrent throughout the show. With so many references to familiar scenes, it's easy to construct narratives around the works, and, if

“Untitled (Dante and Beatrice in Technicolor)” (2014)—a 23-panel installation of portraits—is an accurate reference to the story of Dante Alighieri and Beatrice Portinari, then constructing a fiction as a means of reckoning with Helms’s works is perhaps the only means of reckoning with it.

Four of the works in *Uncanny Valley* feature depictions of solitary men—disaffected, isolated figures who are also ridiculous and absurd with phallic eggplant appendages in place of noses and ears. “Untitled (Dante and Beatrice in Technicolor),” the cornerstone of the show, dyed in hues of red, blue, green, and purple, achieves a Technicolor effect stretched along the far right wall—a mash-up of pop-culture violence couched within the medieval love story. Similar to the larger solitary portraits, the images here depict individual men with distended, phallic features. They too are sourced from pop culture movies, with the exception of one image that is from a photograph of Vietnam-era special forces troops. Like the other portraits, these men are disaffected and angry—several of them are holding guns—and many seem engaged in acts of war.

Lining the farthest edge of “Untitled (Dante and Beatrice in Technicolor)” are the only four images of a woman to appear in the exhibition: vertically installed one atop the other, they constitute the only un-dyed images in the piece and feature the young, blonde Gaylen Ross from *Dawn of the Dead*. She is distressed, her head leans back against a wall, her eyes are closed, she’s huddled under a blanket. She is Beatrice Portinari: beauty incarnate, the tragic object of Dante’s love, the subject of the sonnets of *La Vita Nuova*, and his guide through heaven in the *Divine Comedy*.

Dante fell in love—or believed he fell in love—with Beatrice almost immediately after their first meeting, but in accordance with medieval Florentine rituals of courtship, he never told her. Rather, he publicly pretended to love other women. As he wrote in *La Vita Nuova*:

When the speaker mentioned the woman’s name, I realized that he meant the woman who had been between Beatrice and me. I was amused and also comforted because this demonstrated that my secret had not become public knowledge because of my gazing. Immediately it occurred to me that I could take advantage of this inaccurate guess by making that gentle woman a screen behind which I could conceal the truth.

Dante’s performance is successful, convincing everyone, including Beatrice, that he is in love with someone else. Dante sees Beatrice only four times in total—the last opportunity they had to speak, Beatrice snubs him. She dies shortly thereafter, but Dante remains in love with her throughout his life, and she appears later as his guide through *Paradiso* in the *Divine Comedy*.

Whether or not Dante could have truly loved Beatrice without actually knowing her is, of course, unclear. It is clear, however, that the public perception of his love was of utmost importance: “What stands out so remarkably throughout *La Vita Nuova* is Dante’s own concern with what others will think of him,” writes Seth Lerer in the introduction to the 2010 edition of the book. Dante’s image

is like the images of Internet insurgents that Helms often mines for his work: integral to the story being projected.

Dante constructed a fictional love—or a fiction of his love—for the public, just as the figures in Helms's portraits depict fictions to be consumed by that same audience. Whether or not it was true that Dante was in love with Beatrice, his belief in his love served as his guide through heaven. The performance of violence—in movies, films, or in the diaristic documentation of young men fighting rebel wars that Helms's work often references—is the corollary to Dante's performance of love. The difference between the performance of violence and the performance of love, this show seems to suggest, is that the latter at least holds the possibility of not ending in ruin.