

Ordinary Culture: Heikes/Helms/McMillian

Dozens of semi-abstract drawings marked with inky imprints of ghostly masks and hoods. A rock band's "road gear" made up of casts of mundane objects. A large piece of linoleum, apparently ripped from some kitchen and reconstituted, now mimicking a painting. These are some of the works that make up the exhibition *Ordinary Culture*, which brings together three emerging artists from Minneapolis, New York, and Los Angeles. In a manner resembling that of field sociologists or anthropologists rather than lofty-minded critics, Jay Heikes, Adam Helms, and Rodney McMillian examine culture by imitating its accepted representations, dissecting its systems of signs, and finding fissures in its structures of morals and values.

In his earlier work, Heikes, who splits his time between New York and Minneapolis, plumbed various sources of popular culture—from real-life celebrities such as Sharon Tate to characters from fictional narratives to rock bands. He once sought to explore his own cultural identity as a consumer through the summoning of well-known images, characters, and narratives, but has more recently turned inward toward his own psyche and identity as an artistic creator. His current series of structural investigations of myths, jokes, and symbols constitutes, according to one writer, an "attempt to purge himself of past cultural obsessions and influences in order to create a new space for artistic freedom."

New York-based Helms considers himself something of an ethnographer, though not in any traditional sense. He is intrigued by "the ethos of violence and the romanticization of extremist ideology." Based on this abiding interest—obsession, even—the artist has been producing an ongoing series of graphite drawings that depict the New Frontier Army, a fictitious militia group that practices group living, hunting, and possibly mass mayhem. While this representation of illegal, non-state-sanctioned collective actions seems very current, it also operates as an archetype of (anti)social human behavior. What ultimately emerges is a suggestion of the darker side of society and nationhood, modernity, and perhaps civilization.

Los Angeles-based McMillian, though employing diverse mediums, subscribes to no particular style or subject: his work can materialize with equal ease into a classically painted vanitas of rotting apples or a found discarded carpet. He often installs seemingly unrelated and irreconcilable pieces in canny and provocative combinations, an approach inspired by his view of an exhibition as a sentence made up of individual words. By doing so, McMillian invites viewers to a critical examination of history, aesthetics, and the institution of taste—and what gets omitted in their establishment.

Featuring works produced for this exhibition, *Ordinary Culture* is a concerted effort to scrutinize culture—that amorphous and abstract yet all-encompassing entity—from various angles. The artists open up paths to populism and extremism, fantasy and violence, and elitism and esotericism. Their statements, made up of many dissenting voices, remind us that despite our collective ideological belief, there may be no such thing as a "common culture" that we consume and inhabit. At the same time, *Ordinary Culture* is a reminder that all creative expressions, either strange or familiar, could very well be what make culture ordinary.

Curator: Doryun Chong

An Ordinary Interview

Jay Heikes/Adam Helms/Rodney McMillian



Image:
Ordinary Culture Artists
(l to r): Jay Heikes, Adam Helms, and Rodney McMillian
Photo: Cameron Wittig

Linoleum, masks, and punchlines: the everyday materials and themes in the work on view in *Ordinary Culture: Heikes/Helms/McMillian* live up to the exhibition's title, but the interplay between elements in each work—and between works by other artists—makes this installation of new art by Jay Heikes, Adam Helms, and Rodney McMillian anything but common. In a four-way e-mail exchange, exhibition curator Doryun Chong led a discussion of the materiality and meaning of their work.

Doryun Chong: In what ways does the new work you created for *Ordinary Culture* indicate a new direction in your art?

Jay Heikes: Since I made the video *So There's This Pirate . . .* in 2005, I've been making a group of drawings based on the joke/video, the most recent of which is featured in this exhibition. By telling the same joke over and over, I've realized that its rigid structure allows me to find totally new directions every time I make the delivery—like the splats and circles that relate to art movements such as Pop Art and Expressionism. Eventually, I imagine the narrative of the joke to be totally irrelevant and the stills to exist as a kind of green screen—a forum where any abstraction of the narrative exists as a collage within it.

Adam Helms: *Untitled (48 Portraits)* began as a series of experiments in my studio as I attempted to mask some of my recent portrait drawings by covering them in Mylar and pouring ink over the heads depicted in them. The ink pooled in abstract patterns and through the drying process took on unique textural qualities, resembling those that appear in my graphite and gouache drawings. In this case, though, the drying ink took on qualities that differed every time, leaving chance and experimentation as part of this new process—almost as if the drawings were taking on personalities of their own.

I've also started working directly with the source material I compile. Using the images I download from the Internet, clippings that I catalogue, and film stills, I've been working on what I call "assemblages." As I always have hundreds of images on the walls in my studio, I've become interested in compiling groups and seeing

them as larger pieces unto themselves. I'm interested in the issues that surround the relationships these images have to each other, as well as how they function as elements of a cosmology or a larger narrative.

I've always thought of my drawings as constructions, comprised of sources from varying origins. In this way the narrative qualities inherent in my work are not directed at something specific and illustrative, but are more reflective of a relationship I have to my source material. The subject matter within the drawings has always been defined by recognition of this process. I think the interest I have in process itself is a major factor in the new directions the work is taking. I always try to let things evolve in the studio.

Rodney McMillian: I've been interested in performance work for a while now. I watch a lot of music concerts (recorded and live), and I am amazed at the energy the performers exude as well as this space where they no longer seem to exist materially—when they are caught in a sound, movement, or gesture that seems to encompass them wholly. Until recently the performance work I've done has been for video. The *Ordinary Culture* video was inspired by my performance at an opening at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. I delivered Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 "Great Society" speech on a stage in front of a podium in a suit and tie, clean-shaven à la Barack Obama. It was an amazing experience—there were cameras and video cameras, and someone actually thought it was a press conference.

I'm curious about the performative aspects of politics just as I am about musicians and performance artists—how one communicates and moves in real time and space to convey an idea, to persuade through text/body, to project the emotive (sentimentality, frustration, etc.), and how all of this is in the service of communicating an idea. This thinking is in keeping with my investigations of history—interrogating history as a fixed interpretation and using it almost like a readymade to evaluate its position from the past in relation to/contrast to/addition to its function or simply, presence in the present. I'm also interested in the gaps in histories, like the people or events not catalogued and how the catalogue is formed. This absence in the context of a "real" historical moment, as in the presence of a video of a performance of a historical speech, is like the residue of life that exists through traces left on a linoleum floor—this floor pointing to issues of class, aesthetics, architecture, and possibly location.

A third piece is a freestanding sculpture composed of approximately 50 columns wrapped in slate-gray cloth. The columns range in height from 1 to 11 feet. I see them as ruins, as bodies, as symbols. There is a plaster bust of a man in a suit, painted black and chipping, that was made in 1959. I do not know who this man was. He is a symbol of a man of a time period, of a class, of a belief system, representing power and position. He sits on the floor almost like a leader to the columns. I made this work in an organic fashion; meaning I had certain impulses—the speech, the bust, the floor—and they materialized from an act of questioning their symbolic functions. This happened like a dance.

DC: Has your new work been influenced by or does it respond to other works in the gallery? Do you see connections or affinities with the other two artists' work?

JH: Adam and Rodney's work definitely has a huge effect on what I've made: specifically Rodney's approach to the way seemingly disparate elements connect to form a sentence of irrational poetics echoing in my "roadgear," and Adam's subject matter relating to the history of heroes and villains. They both bring up the question of history's relevance or irrelevance and the trap of the present. I've heard it described as a cultural amnesia. So, with the joke drawings I'm trying to show the confusion of referencing history through a trick bag. The performance (sculptural on one side and drawings on the other) is the "making of," not the final thing. It has a lot to do with process, in which the medium mimics the content. It's a live show, really . . .

AH: I have an affinity with Rodney's work, both his citing of politics and history as interests and his use of found materials. He's bringing new meaning to what can be considered the mundane and everyday detritus of the world by recontextualizing them as

“art objects” in the spaces of museums and galleries. This elevation of the seemingly ordinary points to political notions of high art and common culture within a specific aesthetic association of objects. In my work, I’ve been thinking about the “association” of images within differing contexts and how these forms can bring new readings to history and sense of a cultural imagination.

In Jay’s joke drawings, there is a seriality that I thought of when I began making *Untitled (48 portraits)*. I think both these pieces work off each other in the space, because both contain a smaller series of elements comprising the whole. Jay also elevates elements of pop culture—jokes, magic, rock posters, commonplace entertainment—and demonstrates a sense of contradiction when attempting to examine and romanticize these commonly understood cultural themes. I’m interested in what could be considered the opposite or margins of pop culture. And like Jay, I’m interested in contradictions—in my case, they are themes of romanticization and subversion. It’s what I think about all three of us: varied in form, but similar in approach.

RM: The circulation of different pieces into one work was very much tuned in with Jay and Adam’s work in that they seem to move through images and narratives (Adam via the portraits and ideas of terrorism) and texts and the residue of performance (Jay via the joke pieces and stage). Also, I think there is something about the multitude, the repetition, and the copy that we each use as catalysts for creating and investigating slippages in meaning or questions about an idea of the original.