



# Facing Off with the New World Order

David Markus

**FACE OFF** at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

**Featured Artists:**

**Art Mob with John Ashcroft, Bradley Arthur, John White C., George Catlin, Jessica Craig-Martin, Pedro Cruz-Castro, Edward S. Curtis, Chris Doyle, James Deusing, Dan Ford, Four Walls Projects, Rico Gatson, Eric Heist, Alison Jackson, Dan Kainen, Pascal Lievre, Ellen Levy, Suzanne McClelland, Bjorn Melhus, Ron Mueck, Mark Newport, David Opdyke, Pepon Osorio, Paper Rad, Richard Ross, Sterling Ruby, Tomas Ruller, Mike Peter Smith, Yuken Teruya, Michael Waugh, Joe Wezorek**

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"Face Off" is an exhaustive group show on the exhaustive subject of post-millennial American culture and world politics. Featuring 25 local and international perspectives and provocations, the exhibit bears a strong resemblance to last year's controversial and more widely publicized Whitney show, "The American Effect". That show advantageously coincided with tensions surrounding George W. Bush's eventual decision

to wage war against Iraq. However, in a face off between the current Ronald Feldman show and the Whitney's earlier effort, the former takes the cake for temporal political impact, premiering but a few days before the November presidential elections. What is more, "Face Off" demonstrates a depth and range of cultural analysis uncommon for a show of its kind. Given the persistent bandwagoning typical of political artwork, "Face Off" is

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Needless to say, the show is highly critical of neo-conservative foreign policy, the mass media, and the feigned utopia of suburban life. But while some might consider the idea of a so-skewed political art exhibit at a SoHo gallery as irrelevant



Top: John White C., *Untitled (Dead Mariachi in Cave)*, 2004, watercolor on paper, 37 1/4 x 25 1/8 inches (F) / Left - Right: Sterling Ruby, *Transient Bed of John*, 2003, lambda print mounted on sintra, 15 1/2 x 21 1/4 inches, edition of 3 / Pedro Cruz-Castro, *My Toy Soldiers*, 2000, foam plaster, sculpy, piano mallets, 14 1/2 x 18 x 9 1/2 inches / Edward S. Curtis, *Tobadzichin-Navaho, (Close-up)*, 1904, photogravure on issue, printed 1904-1930, 17 x 14 inches / Jessica Craig-Martin, *Untitled (Cheese Platter)*, 2004, c-print, 11 x 14 inches / Richard Ross, *Untitled (Secret Service Interview Room (LA, CA))*, 2004, color photograph, 26 1/4 x 25 3/4 inches. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



choir-preaching as, say, Al Gore's recent Op-Ed in *The New York Times*, such a presumption belies the fact that the artists represented in "Face Off"—a racially and geographically diverse group—have been no less actively engaged in their political/aesthetic agendas within the respective demographic and geographic communities from which they hail. To quote the most eloquent representatives of American Hip Hop (one of the many cultural modes represented in the exhibit),

I wonder how the soldiers who are represented would react to having their image used as a pixel in the ruddy physiognomy of the very man who sent them to their unnecessary demise.

"speeches only reaches those who already know about it, this is how we go about it...." New York City may love preaching to its heady constituency, but it is seldom that the echoes are not heard worldwide. Shows like "Face Off" are how we go about it.

As a centuries-long subject of injustices perpetrated by the United States government, black America is the perfect mouthpiece for dissent in the Dick and Bush era. Puerto Rican artist Pepon Osorio's *Untitled 2003*, which takes aim at black American stereotypes along with those who are in some way responsible for their existence, provides an appropriate gateway into a group exhibit that is as critical of American attitudes at home as it is of the foreign exploits which have so fractured this country's international standing. Situated as a confrontation within the gallery's foyer, and residing within a glass museum casing—as if to retro-

spectively depict the clearly delineated demographics of 20<sup>th</sup> Century black America—are several minsterelized busts in the Sambo tradition of bug eyes, oversized lips, and brillo hairdos. The figurines have been outfitted with accessories (headphones on one, a pimp's hat and jewelry on another) corresponding to a given set of stereotypes. Each possesses a tiny mirror as if to remind the presumably white, affluent SoHo gallery goer that s/he is in some way responsible

If there is ever a moment when topicality trumps universality in art, it is here. In light of the true problems facing our world, the patriotic sentiments of our husky, KKK sympathizing Attorney General could not sound more hollow. Also facing off with Ashcroft's "Let the Eagle Soar" is a directly adjacent, and strangely prescient, early 20<sup>th</sup> century print of a Native American man holding a slain representative of our country's iconic bird above the title *Placating the Spirit of a Dead Eagle*.

Pascal Lievre, another of the exhibit's several video artists, picks up on the American public's odd ability to surge blindly forward while patching in the craters of doubt with sentimentality. *L'axe du Mal*, plays out like a musical highlight reel from one couple's American vacation. Set against the backdrop of various U.S. landmarks, two performers sing a pop duet version of President Bush's address on "The Axis of Evil," all the while staring dreamily into each others' eyes. Watching Lievre's tongue in cheek low budget vid, one questions to what extent the "feel good" intonations of popular culture have helped make possible—by simplifying issues and rewarding conformity—the Bush administration's utilization of fear tactics and social anxiety in their conservative propaganda.

A less ironic indictment the *cabinet of combat* can be seen in Joe Wezorek's *War President*, featuring a mosaic of the president's grimacing face constructed out of tiny photos of those killed since the start of the Iraq occupation. The piece simply and effectively associates George Bush with one of the least becoming results of his arrogant, preemptive policies, though I wonder how the soldiers who are represented would react to having their image used as a pixel in the ruddy physiognomy of the very man who sent them to

Left - Right: Mark Newport, *The Patriot*, 2004, (detail), hand-knit acrylic yarn, buttons with wood hanger, 79 x 23 x 6 inches / John White C., *Untitled (Why White Man)*, 2004, watercolor on paper, 37 1/4 x 25 1/8 inches (F) / Chris Doyle, *Extraordinary Perceptual Dilemmas and the Madness of Climbing*, 2004, watercolor on paper, 49 1/8 x 83 1/8 inches / Suzanne McClelland, *Well Hung*, 2004, Women's National Basketball Association jerseys, silk, velvet, safety pins, ribbon, rope, 127 x 145 inches overall / Joe Wezorek, *War President*, 2004, large format inkjet print, mosaic of President Bush comprised of 960 portraits of military service people killed in Iraq as of April 2004, Photos taken from the Washington Post website, 48 5/8 x 40 3/4 inches / Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

their unnecessary demise. One interesting result of such a composite is that the darker faces—which seem disproportionately large in number—must necessarily be used to cover the shadowy area behind the president's head. I'd like to see the same mosaic done using only members of Bush's constituency in the composite, for I imagine one would be hard pressed to properly match the shaded areas of the original photograph with dark faces.

Other notable face offs include Mark Newport's hand knit superhero outfits, a work bearing striking similarities to a piece in the aforementioned Whitney show in which American comic book heroes were depicted in their autumn years as members of a geriatric home. Here obsolescence has been replaced by mere absence in a work which reminds us that the shadow of cold war mentality—out of which many such superheroes were spawned—still lingers over contemporary foreign policy.

al repression; Kan Kainea likens the Bush regime to the Wizard of Oz; and Michael Waugh reminds us that History is constructed out of language—however tenuous and fragmentary—by depicting a German U-boat using only sentences and words from what appears to be a World War II textbook. Bradley Arthur further punctuates the distortions and apparent underlying meanings of the English language so exploited by political leaders: *Preys/Hymn* and *High/Coup* are wall mountings in which the first word of each piece is displayed

as the lead characters were made to literally swap faces (recall Nick Cage's belabored play on words: "I want to take his face...off"). The postcard released for the Ronald Feldman show—featuring John White C.'s depiction of a "Dead Mexican in Cave[s]" faceless skeletal remains—exploits the exhibit's title in a similar manner—but to better effect. The works that comprise *Face Off* suggest that much of what we are told by politicians, the media, or our disgruntled God-fearing neighbors is a masquerade—or, more literally, a

*Face Off* suggests that much of what we are told by politicians, the media, or our disgruntled God-fearing neighbors is a masquerade—or, more literally, a mask—meant to cover up doubt, rebuff criticism, neuter common sense.



Also: Paper Rad takes jabs at the New Age ("Baba vs. Baba") by noting similarities between Political and Spiritual reverence; Dan Ford contemporizes J.M.W. Turner in his depiction of a sinking oil tanker (once again the sea is filled with black); Jessica Craig-Martin contributes a series of straight-forward—though still unsettling—photographs from the Republican National Convention; Richard Ross photographs sterile spaces of social division in places of worship and government buildings; James Duesing dabbles in po-mo hallucinatory computer-generated insanity; Tomas Ruller molds a plastecine portrait of sexu-

above the projected shadow of the second. As with most of the art in this show, these works suggest meaning that cannot be gleaned by surface details.

In content and motive, the piece "Power Ts" (a series of Bush-bashing t-shirts whose proceeds from sales benefit the DNC) is the exhibit's weakest link. Let's keep the Democratic cup-shaking out on the street lest, in our base solicitude, we come to resemble our enemy. With few exceptions, the t-shirts suck anyway.

In John Woo's 1997 action flick "Face/Off," the title's double meaning was absurdly exploited

mask—meant to cover up doubt, rebuff criticism, neuter common sense.

In the last of the exhibit's several rooms, a Warhol silkscreen of Richard Nixon with the words "Vote McGovern" written across it recalls a period in American history when the country seemed equally divided by ideology. The necessity for a show like *Face Off* (as much as the events of the past four years) highlight the near total collapse of baby boomer idealism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Let us hope the love children are more steadfast in their convictions. ■