

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Daniel Joseph Martinez

LAXART

In new nonprofit gallery LAXART's inaugural show, Daniel Joseph Martinez revisited the straightforward presentation of text and image that defined his early practice, one which often addressed the subject of polarization but was itself polarizing. The artist's *I CAN'T IMAGINE EVER WANTING TO BE WHITE* badges, distributed to visitors at the 1993 Whitney Biennial, remain iconic of late-'80s/early-'90s work around the politics of racial identity. Yet while this selection of new works was characterized by a high-contrast mix of black and white, the result felt oddly indeterminate.

Words were everywhere here, painted and printed on surfaces ranging from banners to the gallery's exterior wall. Though sources are never cited, some texts are borrowed. From Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) comes *THE FULLY ENLIGHTENED EARTH RADIATES DISASTER TRIUMPHANT*, reproduced on a billboard near the gallery. From Hugo Ball we get *I CAN IMAGINE A TIME WHEN I WILL SEEK OBEDIENCE AS MUCH AS I HAVE TASTED DISOBEDIENCE*, and from Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos, *MY PURPOSE IS TO MAKE WAR AND WRITE LETTERS*, both block printed by hand on card stock.

These lines shared the show with texts of the artist's invention, generating a linguistic chaos that was nonetheless both poetic and insistent. One asks *HOW WILL WE KNOW WHEN IT'S TIME TO THROW BOMBS* while another proposes *THIS WALK WOULD TAKE PLACE AS IF ON A BATTLEFIELD IN A WAR NO ONE ELSE UNDERSTOOD WAS BEING FOUGHT*. Two photographs, *Black Power* (Black September 1968

Neither image includes the telltale figures—the athletes raising their fists in a Black Power salute, the masked gunman. The architecture is instantly recognizable, but it is only architecture.

These iconic images flanked an evocative and ominous bit of quasi-Minimalism—an eight-ton, five-inch-thick rectangular slab of asphalt surrounded by a moat of lard. Martinez made the mistake of trying to let the show's title, "How I Fell In Love With My Dirty Bomb (Opium des Volks), Flesh Eating Prosthetic (Phagocitage des protheses)" do the heavy lifting, but this work doesn't need the verbal prop. One feels the murky metaphor for empire in the strange texture of the asphalt underfoot, senses it in the commingled smell of oil and fat, and knows it in the sprawling, smothering aggressiveness of the whole.

In an adjacent space, a looped video projection offered a close-up of hands, clad in rubber monster gloves, endlessly paging back and forth through a flipbook that crudely animates a squad of riot police. The cops appear to march forward, and then in reverse, and the redundant action plays out against a sound track, borrowed from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), of Colonel Kurtz's soliloquy on killing without emotion but with moral certainty.

Apocalypse Now, Black Power, Minimalism? It was hard not to think this show a conflicted exercise in boomer nostalgia, not just in terms of its references, but also in terms of its methods. Nevertheless, Martinez managed to suggest something never delivered by Minimalism proper, which even in its momentary radicalism seemed destined to persist as a formal aesthetic rather than as an ideology, nor by so much '80s image/text and appropriation-based work, which, despite its promise of critique, so often felt either preachy or mute. The artist here delivered something more difficult, as piercing as the diamond bullet Kurtz describes, yet still muddling. Black and white and gray all over.

Daniel Joseph Martinez, *Hollow Men*, 2006. Still from a color video, 5 minutes.



—Christopher Miles