

MEN DOWN

The empty blue sky of space says, “All this comes back to me, then goes again,
and comes back again, then goes again, and I don't care, it still belongs to me.”

—Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur*

Simon Mullan's invitation to comment on his exhibition “Men Down” comes at a time when I am simultaneously 'in love' and 'in hate' with America—my homeland. The artist's spontaneous decision to both migrate and translate his existing practice from the EU to the US, more specifically Los Angeles (LA-based cultural critic & historian Norman Klein notes: “Los Angeles *is* America”), means that materials for his previously initiated *Alpha* series which incorporated arbitrarily found MA-1 bomber jackets from the EU have now been replaced with the bomber jackets of actual US soldiers. I began writing this text on no other day than *Independence Day* whilst visiting the US this summer, whereas I was again reminded that politics and perspectives change as quickly as the wind's direction pushing a lone sailboat along its course. I witness the Confederate flag being lowered; I see my fellow Americans enshrouded in stars & stripes, running through city streets under an exploding, schizophrenic display of fireworks, coupled with a passionate yet oftentimes misdirected pomp & circumstance. Once: a seemingly neutral, synthetic fabric removed from MA-1 bomber jackets from the EU; now: the MA-1 material of veteran ghosts, extinct phantoms and dearly departed warriors—where winners, losers, forfeiters and cheaters—were forced to change faces, strategies and tactics. In the end, such conflicts may lead to confusion, disappointment, unresolved anger, non-closure. And the Undead? Vessels for unwanted maladies: PTSD, paranoia, apathy, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, aggression, alienation, paralysis, ad nauseam.

These anonymous American soldiers from Mullan's latest series are conjoined by some singular mission which collectively failed them; they were duped, misled, baited. Mullan salvages remainders, recycles loss, accentuates figures now marked invisible and insignificant before their time. If art is indeed like life, then both are inherently *unfair*. An artist's conceptual directives may be futile to an art world motivated by commercialism and fame, or alternatively: an artist's drive to harness any authentic inspiration may be akin to Werner Herzog's claim: “I'm not an artist. I'm a soldier.” When observing an artwork, ask yourself: is this *all* or *nothing*? But before answering, consider Hegel (*There is nothing in heaven or on earth which does not contain in itself being and nothingness*) or Socrates (*I know that I know nothing*).

There currently exists a cluster of thinkers and creatives who are no longer able to soundly divide their artistic practice from the realm of politics (e.g., Gediminas & Nomedas Urbonas, Thierry Geoffroy a.k.a. “Colonel,” Guerrilla Girls). It is questionable to be someone who freely navigates through an idealistic world unswayed by current events, trauma or causation. Though floating can be seductive, an anchor should be within reach. In Erich Fromm's *Escape From Freedom*, the social behaviorist examines an individual's nebulous rapport with freedom—freedom *to* (positive freedom) versus freedom *from* (negative freedom) circulating forces such as authoritarianism, conformity or destruction. A contemporary artist regularly confronts this double-edged dilemma of liberty: should said artist give an audience what it wants, should said artist abandon instincts, habits or will to placate economic persuasions, should said artist shamelessly flirt with deception as a justifiable means to an end?

For these specific pieces, Mullan incorporates materials both from LAPD jackets and those worn by US soldiers once present in Vietnam, reminding us with their imperfections—bloodstains, slashes, holes—that friction between the illusory and real continues to exist. When does an idea no longer prove to be as significant as an action or event? When do thoughts leading to words fall short, and when should one fear them? Perhaps, it is premature for Mullan to access soldiers' paraphernalia / uniforms from more recent conflicts (e.g. “War on Terror”); has enough time passed for one to rummage through the remnants of a struggle where the dust has yet to settle?

Similar to the Beats who responded to the anguish of war, overt hypocrisy and widespread poverty of their times via rebellious words and anarchistic movements, Mullan cajoles the viewer to reconsider one's position so as to more precisely align raw intention with corresponding action. The proverbial literatus Jack Kerouac was no stranger to the power of nature; his poem “Sea” (i.e., the Pacific Ocean of Big Sur) confirms that in times of incongruity or despair, searchers often turn to energies outside of the Self or Ego—whatever shape, size or form—for answers, release. For those suffering shell shock in an aftermath which most cannot grasp, the ocean placates wounds and concerns. Mullan has deliberately designed this site-specific series so that these new works illuminate shades of an infinite sea and sky (or alternatively: an enveloping forest). Within these shifting hues, a universal solace and communion is unveiled—fuel to move forward (or at least: *somewhere else*). Despite criticism or ridicule. Despite recognition or reward—with the risk of landing off course.

—Jacquelyn Davis