

MAI 36 GALERIE

GLEN RUBSAMEN

Détournement

[The image] *is the reflection of a basic reality; it masks and perverts a basic reality; it masks the absence of a basic reality; it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.*

—Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1981

Détournement (literally, *diversion* or *hijacking*), is the act of turning the expressions, both visual and literary, of the capitalist system and its mediatized military culture against itself. It is the displacement of aesthetic artifacts from their original contexts to new ones, simultaneously decrypting them and thus rendering their seductions impotent. In Glen Rubsamen's *War Series* this *détournement* is directed against an increasingly intrusive and instrumentalizing technocratic culture whose function is the manufacture of consent through the manipulation of symbols. In his works Rubsamen uses the visual language and rhetoric of military recruitment culture to critique that paradigm, encouraging idiosyncratic, unintended interpretations. Rubsamen's paintings warn us to beware of an invasive military media by exposing the subtle methods of its domination. His art raises our guard as we slide toward a world where young consumers will identify more with the media products they devour than with any notion of personal morality or socio-political ethics.

In 2006 the United States Army, to better understand its own public image and the values and attitudes of a new generation of young Americans, turned to the management and marketing consultants McCann Worldgroup to invent a new recruitment concept. Within months, the Army flooded television screens, radio stations, and websites across the United States with a fresh message: "There's strong. And then there's Army strong." Directed by Samuel Bayer, the award-winning and sought-after artist known for his advertising work for Nike, Coke, and Pepsi—and dozens of music videos, including Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" (1991) and Green Day's "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" (2004)—the campaign's stylized signature commercial, "Army Strong," maintained the look of a contemporary Hollywood production. "Army Strong" synthesized earlier advertising themes and conventions, combining them with increasingly martial imagery meant to demonstrate that there was "nothing on this green earth stronger than the U.S. Army" and its soldiers. The commercial followed previous trends in portraying the Army's cultural diversity without directly declaring its real values. African Americans, Latinos, and women in a sea of soldiers' faces were meant to speak for themselves. The commercial also depicted what had become a convention for many Army ads since the 1980s: a substantial formation of advanced helicopters and tanks meant to symbolize the Army's technological mastery.

In Rubsamen's 2020 painting *Be All You Can Be* we see four soldiers, rendered in silhouette, against a grayish-blue morning sky, above them an attack helicopter hovers in an attitude of support. There is something very wrong with this artwork however, against its own will it betrays a sense of melancholy and inertia. It does not inspire heroism or teamwork, or self-sacrifice—as it should, given its strong similarity to the recruitment images of the "Army Strong" publicity campaign. The soldier's helmets are covered in wires and electronics but the soldiers themselves seem to have no identity, like their helmets they are manufactured technological products. They seem frozen in a state of inertia, waiting for some new command code to reboot their operating systems. Like the helicopter above, they hover between human and machine, cyborg and automaton. The painting's *détournement* lies in its quietness, its stillness, a calm that undermines and perverts the recruitment message. Like the stillness in Caspar David Friedrich, the age-old Romanticism of the melancholic image deactivates the sales pitch.

McCann Worldgroup identified three groups of potential recruits: 1: "Have it Nows," (youth hoping to gain "status by acquiring things and experiences,"); 2: those with "unrealized dreams," who were "interested in finding a path and reaching their goals,"; 3: "Option Seekers," or people "interested in being in charge of their own destiny." McCann Worldgroup argued all three versions of the consumer-soldier were driven by incentives and opportunities that had little to do with conscious ties to nationality or political obligations. In short, these young men and women were a "me now" generation, primarily interested in the personal and tangible benefits of military service. Money for college, travel to exotic places, access to sexy multimillion-dollar hardware (tanks, jets, and submarines) and the fantasy of becoming a warrior, like in the movies.

MAI 36 GALERIE

With *Dawn Rescue* (2020), *Phantom Below* (2020), and *Bad Actors* (2020) Rubsamen subverts these incentives of the consumer-soldier. In *Dawn Rescue*, we see a group of soldiers rappelling down ropes from a helicopter into a fog that obscures their surroundings and identities. The helicopter-mother ship seems to have a smirk on its face, as if saying, “So much for exotic travel, suckers!” In *Phantom Below*, a nuclear submarine drifts in the distance and a group of tiny sailors congregate on the ridge of its lengthy hull with no place to go and desperate for some fresh air and a view of the sky. No sexy multimillion-dollar high-tech hardware after all, but a dank, claustrophobic prison. Finally, in *Bad Actors* Rubsamen depicts the new, angular stealth fighter jets as a pair of cubist blackbirds disgorging smart bombs from their bellies, like Tic Tacs. The overall affect is so awkward as to be almost naive. With these paintings Rubsamen is culture-jamming (in the term’s truest sense), using a medium to produce an ironic commentary about itself and subvert the medium’s communication intent.

Rubsamen is a sort of counter-recruiter and belongs to a long historical tradition. Counter-recruiters in the twenty-first century have used a variety of media to disseminate such slogans as “You can’t be all that you can be if you’re dead,” “Army of None,” “There’s wrong. And then there’s Army wrong,” or “There’s dead. And then there’s Army dead” to mock the Army’s recruiting and branding. In *Dulce et Decorum Est* (2020) Rubsamen depicts a lone tank on a hillside overlooking a desolate valley with the lights of some human settlement in the distance. The tank has an absurdly long horizontal barrel, which opposes the verticality of a lone, scraggly date palm. The suggestion is that the tank could easily destroy the meager town with its long-distance weapon, like a giant swatting gnats. The painting is infused with such boredom and lassitude that it defies all ideas of purpose and worth. The title is taken from the *Odes* of the Roman poet Horace and translated from the Latin means, “It is sweet and good”; the poem continues “to die for one’s country,” and echoes of this idea are seen in requiems and memorials throughout history, even inscribed over the rear entrance to the Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. In Wilfred Owen’s poem of the same title (published posthumously in 1920), the final two lines employ the same Latin phrase, but preceded by “The old Lie.” Like Owen’s poem, Rubsamen’s painting is a perfect counter-recruiter, un-selling ideas of military honor and patriotism.

Lt. Col. Casey Wardynski first considered creating an Army-produced video game while walking through a Best Buy store with his children. Struck by the proliferation and popularity of combat and militarized video games, the deputy director of the U.S. Army Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis wondered whether the increasingly sophisticated interactive medium could assist recruiters and help advertise the Army brand. By 2009, the Army had placed video games and virtual combat at the center of its recruiting and branding strategies. That year the Army released the upgraded *America’s Army 3*, while game developer Ubisoft distributed *America’s Army: True Soldiers* for the Xbox 360 home game console. One in four U.S. males between the ages of thirteen and twenty-four have played *America’s Army*, and, with 10 million registered users—more than the entire U.S. force during World War II—*America’s Army* has built a massive online militia of virtual veterans.

The Army concluded from online surveys that 29 percent of game players are more likely to be interested in military service, suggesting that the United States Army has also prepared, trained, mobilized, and perhaps even militarized Generations X, Y, and Z. Picking up a joystick has become synonymous with a high-tech army. By playing video games, kids actively engage in bettering themselves and training violently to preserve, if not actually defend, the nation’s way of life. Drone operators in fortified bunkers thousands of miles from their targets can remotely observe and destroy with the moral impunity of a gamer. Through gaming the Army is selling violence, hegemony, and sanitized war to a youth audience that is not equipped to process the vast and troubling consequences. In Rubsamen’s painting *Drone Attack* (2020) a cloud of mosquito-like drones emerges out of the blinding sunlight of an orange sky. We presume each drone is commanded by a nerdy adolescent sitting in a cubicle halfway around the world, surrounded by empty bags of Cheetos and cans of spiked seltzer. Imagine the extreme irony when the drones open fire and real, living, breathing human beings are blown to bits. Here Rubsamen creates an image that is both comical and terrifying.

In new studies, unmanned aircraft systems operators, as these gamers are known in the military, can suffer from an extreme form of post-traumatic stress disorder known as sniper’s syndrome, where snipers suffer

MAI 36 GALERIE

emotionally from killing people at a distance. Given that the target often posed no direct threat to the sniper, a moral dissonance is created in the psyche, a moral injury. Unlike traditional PTSD, the informationally rich but remote nature of drones enables a moral conflict between virtual battlespace and normalcy, causing significant psychological and emotional harm for the operators. These operators oscillate between surveilling a target for days (and using lethal force) and going home to dinner with their wives and kids. In *Drone Attack* Rubsamen visually hacks this perverse moral dilemma with a bifurcated message of comic humor and remote, clinical murder.

In December 2019, the U.S. Congress authorized the creation of the United States Space Force, the first new military branch in almost a century was charged with conducting space warfare and space operations. Recruitment strategies for this new branch are under development on Madison Avenue and one can only wonder how they will function. What will be the slogan? How will the images create a mythology for this new program? Will they rely on a retro sci-fi aesthetic? In *Atlantis* (2020) Rubsamen addresses this question by depicting the last space shuttle launch on July 8, 2011, the final space shuttle mission after 31 years. Rubsamen depicts the shuttle on its launch pad as a sort of Gothic cathedral in the moonlight, missing are only the circling bats and gargoyles. The fantasy and iconography of space warfare goes back to 1950s sci-fi novels. The Space Force is a retro-archaic concept, it reifies placing old ideas and antiquated paranoia back into current sociopolitical dialogue. Rubsamen's *Atlantis* resembles an elaborate tombstone marking the demise, by moonlight, of a failed national experiment.

Old Man's War (2020) depicts the decaying International Space Station as it orbits Earth. The Space Station is rendered as a fragile clutter of ready-made parts randomly assembled and seemingly held together with duct tape and chewing gum. The structure's vulnerability and tenuousness defy any feelings of heroism or military bravado. Rubsamen suggests the real nature of war in space will be lonely, superficial, and mundane. Space warfare will be continually fixing leaky air hoses, disposing of human waste, and repairing broken electronics—punctuated by brief and deadly blasts of laser fire. In his science fiction short story entitled *The Chia Affect*, written in 2019 for Wiels Contemporary Art Center in Brussels, Rubsamen's protagonist Frank Kern describes space warfare: "Imagine being stuck in the coach section of a commuter jet for 2 years and you will get a small inkling of the reality of it. We hated each other's guts. Every small mannerism became annoying, the snoring, the nose picking, the nervous twitches, the way we ate, and especially the stupid jokes. We avoided each other, even eye contact was rare. Human beings are humidifiers, we spread moisture, warm, wet carbon dioxide emanates from our every orifice. Even with the purifiers going full blast the ship had become an incubator for mold and mildew. We couldn't get dry. Our daily generous applications of talcum powder were of no avail, we itched and we scratched incessantly, from athlete's foot, crotch rot, yeast and scalp infections. We were ugly and we smelled." Marketing the new Space Force will be difficult and will depend on exhuming decades-old fantasies about space exploration and twentieth-century stereotypes about astronauts and their glamorous homecomings. The *détournement* of *Old Man's War* is found in Rubsamen's ability to give his painting a sense of banality even though it depicts the edge of the Earth's atmosphere. He paints the luminosity and vastness of the earth with an abstract coldness that renders the ramshackle construction of the space station even more tenuous and absurd.

In *A User's Guide to Détournement* (1956), Guy Debord, a key Situationist theorist, and Gil Wolman, an artist, argued that *détournement* has a double purpose: on one hand, it must negate the ideological conditions of artistic production (the fact that all artworks are ultimately commodities); but on the other, it must *negate this negation* and produce something politically educative and desirable. It achieves these negations primarily in two ways: either it adds details to existing works, thus revealing a previously obscured ambiguity, or it cuts up a range of works and recombines them in new and surprising ways. The authors identify the enemy of this practice as novelty, something so new that it no longer incorporates in a significant way the aesthetics of the original propaganda; newness undermines the purpose and affect of the second negation. In *Cobra Sweep* (2020) Rubsamen plays with this idea of the negating negation by depicting a seemingly common war scenario. Four heavily armed commandos stand in a line on a ridge, flanked by a pair of palm trees and a telephone pole, above them a Black Hawk helicopter hovers at the picture's edge. The scene is instantly recognizable, seen many times before in the press or in movies like *Zero Dark Thirty* (a cinematic account of the attack on Bin Laden's compound in Pakistan), or *Black Hawk Down*, a Hollywood

MAI 36 GALERIE

blockbuster about the U.S. military's 1993 raid in Mogadishu. In this regard it satisfies Debord's first rule of *détournement*. Completely new is Rubsamen's use of green night-vision technology to render the image inside a round monocular, reminiscent of a gun's barrel. Night-vision imaging is used by recruitment publicity to suggest that technology has created the super-soldier. Seeing in the dark, formerly solely the domain of leopards and vampire bats, is now a normal act of the modern soldier. The peephole composition suggests voyeurism, the viewer is invisible to those in the picture. Rubsamen suggests a cinematic style of voyeurism that plays with film clichés like day-for-night and point-of-view camera styles. The negation of the negation is apparent in this voyeurism, but it is undermined by the newness of the ultra-high-tech mechanism that allows the image in the first place. *Cobra Sweep* becomes a painting about a triple negation, the *détournement* pushed to an even more exquisite level of complexity.

For Debord the classic image of *détournement* was Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), a postcard of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* with the addition of a mustache and goatee. It is consistent with all his rules, but perhaps too tame, too conservative. However, it is a crucial prototype on which to build, as future artists wrestle with increasingly invasive and technologically sophisticated manipulations from powerful corporations and governments, both in the real world and in the virtual space of social media and gaming. Rubsamen's most recent series suggests a method for this new stage in the evolution of the image under *détournement*. These paintings de-escalate the process, reintroducing the attributes of the Romantic image, stillness, spatial atmosphere, and melancholy; they allow an objectivity that defies the salesmanship and manipulation of the original. Rubsamen's paintings are beautiful, they are depictions of a world in transition, like dawn or dusk, when objects transcend themselves and become magical. There is hardly any other motif so strongly linked to the notion of desire as images painted at sunrise and sunset; they reflect our existential insignificance confronting the expansiveness of the world and the cycle of life. Rubsamen confounds the existing conventions of the landscape genre, applying the strict rules of atmospheric classicism in exactly the wrong ways, using shadow to create depth and luminosity to create flatness. Thus, these paintings negate the negation, an act so essential to *détournement*, making this necessary and uncomfortable evolution in our thought and perception utterly attractive and desirable. Rubsamen's new *War Series* paintings demand that the images that bombard and oppose us must be reorganized.

Birce Akalay