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Calvin Marcus: Were Good Men at CLEARING Gallery
September 9 to November 6, 2016
392 Johnson Avenue (at Morgan Avenue)
Brooklyn, 718 456-0396



Installation view, "Calvin Marcus: Were Good Men," 2016, at Clearing Gallery. Courtesy of the gallery.

Spilled Blood: Calvin Marcus at CLEARING

by Noah Dillon

There is, of course, something exciting about corpses. The fascination is often puerile in the contemporary world, centering on death's foreignness, emphasizing gore and horror, rather than, like, the ontology of permanent lifelessness. Probably a lot of people in developed nations encounter (human) death most in mediated depictions, as in violent video games, movies, TV, and the arts, such as, famously, Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War* (1810–20), John Singer Sargent's *Gassed* (1918–19), or the Chapman brothers' *Hell* (1999). Calvin Marcus's exhibition of new paintings at Clearing Gallery,

“Were Good Men,” his third solo show there, employs similar imagery, with nonchalance.

Marcus is 28 years old, working in Los Angeles, and the show suffers from some of the problems that appear common to young painters hailing from that city: here are 39 repetitious paintings; each 101 1/2 by 79 inches and called either *Dead Soldier* or *Grass* (all 2016); blandly and proudly derivative, especially of Expressionist and Abstract Expressionist imagery; and hung way too close. On uniformly ochre backgrounds, smears of green grass blades loll in flat clusters and fields. On some lay the mangled carcasses of decorated soldiers, each in a casually rendered uniform. Their tongues fall from gaping mouths. Their skin is mottled and discolored; blood seeps from bullet wounds, crushed skulls, peeling flesh.

Marcus has something of Michael Krebber’s wan touch and Sue Williams’s garish caricature. The dead’s rendering is nearly goofy: their decrepit stillness, open eyes, approach something like black comedy. Under the show’s somber title, honoring the dignity of fallen men who’ve worked to kill, their grimaces can be spooky.

Curiously, the paintings suggest, but subordinate, the realities of war and violence. The wounds are cartoonish. The caricatures are called men, but boys typically form the bulk of military personnel, and, increasingly, drones. The paintings represent conflict generally, without particular political or social ideas. Even if Marcus grimly needles platitudes about soldiers and sacrifice, the imagery nonetheless upholds the mythology of grown men dressed brilliantly, fighting bravely, and dying valiantly in combat — a display of masculinity rather than a dead kid whose body is ornamented by 60–100 pounds of gadgetry. One might wonder why most of the canvases are abstract gashes of green oil stick, or why multiple panels are not combined into a few mural-sized artworks. They’re very quiet images, both visually and ethically.

In February 2015, the death squad ISIS released a video that mimics and exceeds images of war that we encounter in all kinds of media (both fiction and non-). It shows the execution of a 26- year-old Jordanian pilot, Lt. Muath al-Kaseasbeh, whose plane

crashed in Syria. The video employs sophisticated production and a high-concept narrative structure, asserting that Jordan is a US- puppeted religious apostate, and therefore the pilot must be righteously murdered. Al-Kaseasbeh gives a coerced statement and is taken to buildings allegedly bombed by Jordanian pilots like himself. Intercut footage shows local first responders pulling civilians from a similarly demolished building. At the ruins, al- Kaseasbeh is put in a cage and burned to death, extinguished by a backhoe dumping the building's rubble on his char. The video closes with a computer-animated dossier of further targets comprising a hit list of Royal Jordanian Air Force pilots.

Apart from its artfully staged and layered signifiers, the ISIS video shows actual war, in extremis. Unlike a lot of famous Western depictions, such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), *The Things They Carried* (1990), which portray battle as a dignified, contemplative and tragic space, with men dying for causes that are both noble and questionable, the ISIS video shows, abysmally, what war is, aside from rules of conduct and myths of heroism. It is blood and death in search of political and economic advantage. Although some are very gruesome, few of Marcus's cartoonish figures ever have the horror of a figure being perceptible as an actual dead person.

It's worth noting, however, that there may be some benefit to depicting war distantly and mythologically. During the current election, Americans have been bombarded with messages that our military must be "stronger" against enemies, including vows to murder families, to use *torture* for the purpose of causing *horror*, to indiscriminately bomb civilians, to expand authoritarian controls on travel and constitutional rights, celebrations of extrajudicial executions, and other incitements to cruelty. More than assuming America in the role of global policeman, they show America claiming the executioner's mantle. It may be hypocritical or unrealistic, but declaring an interest in fantasies like restraint and justice in war, or, in this case, who wages war and how, provides us with an ethical line against we can judge — probably condemn — the implementation of power, can hold it accountable. Paintings of dead men might raise the question: Why then are wars fought by indigent kids and robots on behalf of elders?

Why are good men dead men? Why are soldiers' sacrifices repaid with banalities and substandard medical care?

It is vital, though, that such a fantasy be held against the truth, for comparison, to retain the hypocritical gap in order to maintain the taboo against violence. The multivalent clusterfuck called the War on Terror was heralded with a spectacle so viscerally grim that it has become a presiding trope for

American viewers. The image has not been supplanted, in part, because of the refusal (and sometimes inability) on the part of the government and media to show exactly what the war consists of: through the practice of embedding journalists; the Pentagon's ban on photographs of military coffins; few outlets show what it looks like in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, Pakistan; a recent statute in the Department of Defense's *Law of War Manual* gives latitude to the military to treat journalists as "unprivileged belligerents," a class similar to spies; and various media having legitimate concerns about showing snuff videos, like that of al-Kaseasbeh's murder. The contrast between the fantasy of war's glory and the reality of its indignity is, perhaps, necessary, but their gulf is filled with a river of gore.