

Abigail D. Deville's America



Empires can be administered only by those who have convinced themselves that they are indeed a superior people, which means all empires are racist. They can be run only on the basis of military superiority and elitism, and with a professional benevolence which is only another form of violence.

-Felix Greene

America's fatal legacy has always been that it is the despoiler of its own ideals. And yet this deep-seated contradiction rarely imperils the confidence with which Americans feel that the "cause of all mankind," in John F. Kennedy's words, "is the cause of America." It is precisely the wanton hyperbole of America's self-image—it's hilarious and grotesque, albeit devastatingly effective, distortion of the historical record—that engenders the desire to see it destroyed. And Hollywood has been in overdrive producing depictions that at once expose this contradiction (an America threatened by some black seed whether natural or man-made) so as to disavow it and thus successfully purge its effects (an America heroically redeemed by dispelling its nefarious internal threats). America is incessantly depicted as under threat from some imminent catastrophe (whether from within or without) and it is precisely this threat that occasions its redemption. As a result, the fantasy serves to firmly root in the American psyche the belief that the sundry failures of America to live up to its ideals are merely contingent and hardly threaten its core—a core that can always be resurrected through a heroic response to some catastrophic sequence.

The interest of Abigail D. Deville's exhibition, *Gold Mountain*, at Marginal Utility Gallery, in my view, lies in her refusal to cloak her monstrous and comic fantasy of America's imminent destruction—an America on the verge of being sucked into a black hole—in any kind of redemptive narrative. Her catastrophic vision grimly depicts an America on the brink of implosion, destitute and without the hope of resurrection. She thus forces us to consider the cost of America's maintenance of its highest ideals.

Her installation depicts America as an ailing giant, likening the Empire in decay to a super red giant imploding through its nuclear consumption: the black hole of American excess. The very ideals of America, for which the flag stands, are perched on the event horizon, their destruction secured, but eternally suspended.

The scene is presided over by a single figure—that of a black woman adorned with the heads of pigeons. This lone and singular spectator gazes into the darkness, indifferent to America's collapse. She is a figure of the oppressed and excluded—a figure whose presence spells certain doom for the ideological fantasy from which she has been excluded and for the fantastical ideal that refuses to acknowledge her presence. The fact that she now appears in an act of self-assertion imperils

the system that erected itself on the basis of her exclusion but is also a harbinger of better days. Deville's *Gold Mountain* refuses the kind of redemptive narrative that might make the ideal real for everyone and that would thus provide a justification for the ideological fantasy that espouses such ideals. Instead, it reverses the logic of redemption characteristic of the phantasmagoria of Hollywood and of political rhetoric by risking the following thesis: the collapse of the ideal is also the collapse of the logic of exclusion on which it feeds. This pigeon-crowned woman is the one who is left standing in the prosaic halo of a lampshade when the flag and all it symbolizes get sucked into the void.



It is a strange and uncanny beast of an exhibition—a black lit fantasy that strips the magic from magic mountain, leaving nothing but gold, the source of a dark and caustic radiance.

- Alexi Kukuljevic