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Art in Review

Adrian Piper, Wayne Gonzales, Eric Baudelaire, Josephine Meckseper

Elizabeth Dee
545 West 20th Street, Chelsea
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Political expression in contemporary art is tricky. Maybe that is why the focus lately has been more on the ways in which politics and public opinion are reported. This unnamed group show presents four artists whose politically inflected work is so dissimilar that the results are wonderfully discordant and refreshingly off-putting. It's a risky curatorial move that pays off.

Eric Baudelaire tackles the news media's tricks and visual clichés most immediately. His large photographic diptych, "The Dreadful Details," is a tableau of carnage, suffering and the policing presence of American occupation. The scene — with covered bodies, severed limbs, grieving onlookers and Americans with rifles drawn — could be anywhere in the Middle East, and it's impossible to read whether the soldiers caused the massacre or are responding to it.

Josephine Meckseper's five prints document demonstrations in Berlin in 2002 against the war in Afghanistan. The artist concentrates her camera on the police presence, along with burning detritus and dazed onlookers. The '60s myth of idealized demonstration is overridden by militaristic instability.

Adrian Piper's works on paper are the quietest in the room, and the most solemn and personal. In the show's context her repetition of the line "Everything will be taken away" over partly erased photographs suggests individual loss. It is an odd and poetic inclusion amid the more vehement younger artists.

Wayne Gonzales's loud Pop posters of Western leaders most clearly toe the agitprop line, as he turns President Bush, Tony Blair and Donald H. Rumsfeld into pixilated acrylic phantoms, like a news program on the fritz. But it is his installation of seven boxes and an upside-down sign reading "Finish," under a self-portrait of the artist as a young recruit, that is the most threatening. The boxes are emblazoned with a book company logo, perhaps suggesting education as the ultimate antidote. Yet the grouping disturbingly recalls the sniper's nest at the Texas School Book Depository.

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