



Untitled III, c-print, 2009, 7 x 11 in.

## CONSTELLATIONS, TRIANGLES, AND MESSY MIDDLE SPACES

Two anonymous figures stare out at the camera as a third masked figure, clad in combat fatigues, lies at their feet. One is donning a black cloak, evoking the garb of a missionary, his facial features also masked. The other is in an all-white hazmat jumpsuit, his face hidden by a protective surgical mask. The landscape behind them bleak, hazy, blank, ominous. Who are these figures, captured in Jaret Vadera's work *Untitled III* (2009)? Lurking through the mist, they mark authority, fear, and danger, their trophy lays vanquished for all to see.

Studiously composed, *Untitled III* delivers an especially captivating image, arranged as a series of shifting semiotic binaries – black/white, civilian/military, victory/defeat, master/slave, danger/safety, illness/health. The work, Vadera tells us, is based on a photograph from the 1900s of the English King-Emperor and the Prime Minister of Nepal standing over the body of a recently shot tiger. Each element in the composition invokes a myriad of associations. The Bengali tiger as a symbol for Asian exoticism as well as danger; the modernist notion of the supremacy of man over nature; the defeated soldier standing in for the slain tiger; Vadera's use of modern combat fatigues visually referencing the American Gulf wars. Thus, the work actively connects past colonial

conquests, when Britain ruled over the Indian subcontinent, with contemporary wars fought by the U.S. striving to enforce its supremacy and imperial interests in the Persian Gulf.

Vadera stands in for all three characters in the photograph. Is this an attempt on Vadera's part to step into the shoes of those past and present figures, in a quest to gain an understanding of their different points of view? Bastardizing the image, Vadera inverts the colonial gaze, reclaiming authority over the production of meaning, complicating the colonial narrative, which sought to equate Vadera's ancestors with the simpleton mind, yet threatening prowess of the wild beast.

In this and in other works by Vadera included in the artist's solo exhibition *the closer i get, the further i find* – X (2014), *ASCENDING TO OUTER SPACE TO FIND ANOTHER RACE* (2015) and *On Kings and Elephants* (2015) – he strategically juxtaposes different image making processes, layering meaning, and creating new webs of associations.

Undermining the image as object of power, Vadera shatters the act of looking and being looked at into smithereens, glistening in a sea of new possibilities. It is in the constellation of these binaries – both within the image, as well as between the image and its earlier colonial referent in *Untitled III*, or between sound and lack of sight in *On Kings and Elephants* – that Vadera collapses the often too-easily made dichotomies between self and other, colonizer and colonized, past and present, man and animal.

While referencing colonialism's reach into the contemporary present, Vadera is pre-occupied with what he regards as our "neo-human" world, where people toggle between their admiration, on the one hand, and fear, on the other, of the nature they look to subdue, and the technologies they develop to serve them. Thus, Vadera does not limit himself to only questioning the narratives and power structures communicated through images of man, body and animal, but engages with the skewed ideological underpinnings of the technologies that produce them. Re-telling the ancient story of the Four Blind Men and the Elephant, a robotic narrator reads different English translations of the famous tale in *On Kings and Elephants*. Each blind man reports his own understanding of the elephant in front of him, having each touched a different part of the animal's body. Beyond the sage moral of the complexity of perception, Vadera selects a robotic sounding voice recognition software to read the story using an "Indian" female accent. Thus, Vadera calls attention to the human processes that inform these supposedly neutral machineries – defining what makes an accent "Indian," where to place emphasis, accentuation or a pause for breath in an otherwise rather impersonal voice, or how gender shapes perceptions of authority and compassion. In this work, accent pivots from a spoken audible linguistic code and a signifier of a hybrid cultural output, as explored by media scholar Hamid Naficy, to the unspoken interred codes that dominate the technologies that amplify and spread it.

"Code-shifting" becomes a pressing necessity when one's references are not found on any canonical maps, Vadera often says. Maps, like photographs, FMRI's, or infographics, are all visual processes that organize knowledge and reinforce ideological positions. As modes of exchange and delivery change, so must the code-shifting tools in the artist's toolkit. For Vadera those include brain scans in a journey to scientifically grasp how this central organ in our body produces subjective cognition and consciousness. The new map produced by Vadera in *ASCENDING TO OUTER SPACE TO FIND ANOTHER RACE* offers alternative visual codes generating new tales of geography, place and peoples, by-passing conventional map making altogether. Using search engines, Vadera creates a composite image, alluding to an aircraft, or an underwater creature. The aggregate image is configured based on a search of each of the words in the work's title. The map is no longer a rendition of a physical place, but an amalgamation driven by word association, clearly and consciously gesturing narration and self-articulation. Yet this alternative deterritorialized representation, is then layered once more, by tracing and cataloging the server locations and specific countries where these images are stored. The catchall "X", as referred to in Vadera's work of the same title, is no longer the unknown absent to be desired, conquered, or explained. The legibility of the map owns its value to those very specific and named locales producing it rather than seeking to speak in universal truths in the name of all.

Seeing, visibility, and legibility take center stage throughout Vadera's works. Clarity comes into sharp focus only when the blurry, fragmented, visibly messy, and obstructed views are made apparent: the masked faces in *Untitled III*; a black screen, robotic sound, and a tale of blindness in *On Kings and Elephants*; an elusive "X" encasing a corrosive cracked-like surface in *X*; or a black sleek decal silhouette embodying complex data in *ASCENDING TO OUTER SPACE TO FIND ANOTHER RACE*. The object of sight is laid bare as an unreliable referent, probing viewers to look and look again through their blind spots curling and unwinding throughout the works.

Vadera is a master of multivalent constellations, meticulously forcing open the distance between things, calling into question matters as they should supposedly be, ceaselessly seeking to expose the paradoxes and other spaces opened up in between and through such juxtapositions. His work refuses to skirt around the parameters of the ubiquitous triangle of identity – self, other and context/object/technology. Rather, he invites us to dive right into the messy space in the middle, where the drama of meaning--with all its trade offs, nuance and complexity – is constantly fought, negotiated and played out.