

UWE HENNEKEN: LEGION TROUBLEE

ALMINE RECH, PARIS
24 APRIL - 7 JUNE

Légion Troublée (Troubled Legion) is the title of thirty-four-year-old German artist Uwe Henneken's first solo show at Almine Rech. A collection of gaudy paintings and bronze sculptures, the exhibition appears to be the eccentric military display of a mysterious and invisible empire in decline. The centrepiece of the show is a garish multicoloured cannon, *Mary Malaise* (2007), which is actually functional, despite its carnivalesque aspect. The videotaped demonstration of its power shows a man loading it with powder and firing it in an empty country field. On the back of the ridiculous but imposing piece of artillery is the inscription 'Imperium Schlemihlium', in reference to the unfortunate antihero of a German fairy tale called 'Peter Schlemihl's Remarkable Story' (Adelbert von Chamisso, 1814), Peter Schlemihl being a man who sells his shadow to the Devil (in exchange for a never-empty wallet). Meeting a nasty fate, Schlemihl ends up spending the rest of his lonely life wandering the world, shunned by human society and the woman he loves. 'Corona finit opus', 'the crown finishes the work', is engraved at the mouth of the cannon, a play on *finis coronat opus*, a well-known Latin proverb. Ironically, the crown can be seen as the gaudy stripes disguising the weapon of war and as a metaphor for the exhibition's grotesque military display, whose purpose remains undetermined.

The series of bronze sculptures *V.O.T.E.* (2007–8), which constitutes a large part of the exhibition, is an ensemble of grotesque, crippled and unrealistic military creatures wearing helmets, kepis or no headgear at all. All these bronze and monstrous soldiers, of whom we only see the heads and shoulders rising from wooden trunks and chests, seem to warily scrutinise the outside landscape with their button-, nut- or tube-shaped eyes (when they have eyes). All the while they cling hard to the edge of their suitcase-bunkers with their three-fingered hands. Each sculpture is installed on a pedestal, which places it at an eye-level confrontation with the viewers, who are drawn into an endless game of watching and being watched.

Large-framed paintings complete the show and inform us a little more about Henneken's foolish world. In *The Frontier People* (2008), two buffoons are sitting under a tree, one smoking a pipe, the other sucking a stick. On the highest branch of the tree hangs a rope with a slipknot, suggesting a dead-end fate for the inhabitants of Imperium Schlemihlium. *The One-Eyed Kingdom* (2008) represents the inner surface of a mask pierced with a single opening that is too narrow to reveal what lies behind. Henneken's crippled legion appears therefore as the manifestation of a confused empire that has lost its purpose – its clear sight, maybe even its emperor – just as Schlemihl lost his shadow. Finally, *Imperial 'Take Care and Control' Flag, 21st Century* (2008) imposes the Imperium Schlemihlium as an allegory for our own modern Western society, in which, according to German philosopher Oswald Spengler, the actual goal will never be reached. *Violaine Boutet de Monvel*



Mutter Vanguard, 2008, bronze, wooden chest, 162 x 54 x 96 cm, edition of 6. Courtesy Galerie Almine Rech, Brussels & Paris