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Art in America

George Herms and James Fee at Craig Krull

Michael Duncan

Copacetic collaborations require a special meshing of artistic egos, so that similarities interweave and quirks mingle. Sculptor George Herms and photographer James Fee both value the patinas of obsolescent materials. The rusted pieces of scrap metal, machine parts and weathered wood fragments that make up Herms's well-known assemblages might easily have been found in the ruined factories and abandoned ships that Fee has photographed in the last decade. Sharing a fascination with the American past, the two artists have collaborated on a series of photo-based sculptures that play off patriotic symbols such as the flag, the Statue of Liberty and MLK. *Rushmore.*

In *Other Lady*, Fee's moody, emulsion-stained black-and-white photograph of the Statue of Liberty is combined with a Herms collage featuring a pair of time-worn garden shears and a crushed bottlecap -- objects that evoke the abrasive selectivity and competitiveness on which America thrives. For *T.P.*, the artists wrapped a 9-foot-tall photogram -- a bodyprint of Herms -- around the armature of a fold-up movie screen to form a teepee-like structure. Outfitted with a sunburst-shaped crown (fashioned from an egg carton), Herms's silhouette is mottled with sepia-colored chemical stains; the figure seems like an alchemical emissary from the past.

Other works also involve darkroom collaborations. Subtle and dramatic manipulations of toners and exposures distinguish *Scorpion Clock*, a large, unique silver print which shows a full-length silhouette of Herms floating over one of his heavily textured wooden assemblages. Fee's photography becomes for Herms both a new route into the past and a means to explore the mythic, bardlike persona that he has created over the last four decades.

Fee showed, in addition, a portfolio of gloomy, evocative shots of Philadelphia's defunct Eastern State Penitentiary. Also on view were a number of his recent photographs, taken with a 19th-century camera, of architectural details, abandoned ships and national landmarks. With a tough kind of sentiment, Fee reframes tarnished remnants of America's grandeur.