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Thomas Ruff

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Zurich

Thomas Ruff's newest vein of work may cause consternation among those who have pigeonholed him as a cool-minded technician. Long famous for his spartan portraits of everyday folk, the Düsseldorf photographer has begun a series of photomontages that satirize public figures. Where his previous work embodied dispassion, the photomontages have a deliberately raucous esthetic. Two held pride of place in this show. In one, the Jesse James" Helms gang rides off in tanks after sacking a museum, while bombers finish off the job. In the other, a beaming Tony Blair head sits atop a preening, muscle-bound body with a Queen Elizabeth tattoo on its biceps, set against a background of phrases and consumer items that mock the "New Britain" mind-set.

Ruff's work calls to mind another German political photomontagist--John Heartfield. Best known for his searing anti-Nazi work, Heartfield still counts among the titans of the art form (even in an age when software such as Photoshop has made it incomparably simpler). Heartfield, though, was responding to an indisputably evil enemy, while Ruff must make do with more slippery figures like Helmut Kohl. Even his lampooning of Helms somehow seems to have too much firepower for the job.

The show's other work extended Ruff's decade-old Portraits" series. The subjects stare into the camera with a certain loss of affect. Some are beautiful, others less so. All framed in the same way, the images resemble identification photos. With their hallmarks of camera vérité--revealing the stubble and moles, split ends, and incipient pimples--they lie between the impossibly pretty and deliberately ugly images with which the advertising world currently bombards us. Glossy but not glamorous, Ruff's photos resonate in a way that his photomontages do not.

Marc Spiegler