

Art in America

Exhibition Reviews

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Dennis Adams:
Malraux's Shoes,
2012, single-channel
video, 42 minutes;
at Kent.

DENNIS ADAMS

Kent

Malraux's Shoes (2012), the centerpiece of Dennis Adams's recent solo show, is a 42-minute video in which the artist dons not just the metaphoric footwear but the grandiosity of 20th-century Renaissance man André Malraux (1901-1976). A major figure in French letters, Malraux also adventured in the Far East, fought in the Spanish Civil War, was appointed France's first minister of culture, and, after the war, established himself as an important art historian and theorist. His notion of the *musée imaginaire*, or the "museum without walls"—an expanded field of art viewing made possible by photographic reproductions—has been seen as prescient of today's digitized, global art world and as an early attempt at destabilizing the artist/curator binary. To put it mildly, Malraux left some very big shoes to fill. Indeed, much creative production of the present era retraces paths forged by the cultural pioneer during the middle of the last century—or at least that's what the Malraux portrayed in Adams's video would have us believe.

Though this beautifully executed

work remains tributary, its protagonist is a raving megalomaniac. Pacing between rows of photographs laid out on the floor—a reference to a famous image of Malraux in his study—Adams's version of the author is a man haunted by the art historical past and present. The disgust he anachronistically displays for the "jet-setting kids" of today's art world and their "bullshit sociopolitical project[s] about context" is as hilarious and warranted as his alternative proposition—"there is no context . . . the work of art is autonomous!"—is naive.

Adams's performance pushes this tension between pointed commentary and bombast to its limits; the picture we're given of the man and his legacy is both frightening and majestic. One doubts that pillaging cultural artifacts, as Malraux was once arrested for doing, can be construed as proto-postmodern appropriation, as he argues here: "Fuck Sherrie Levine! I was stealing statues in Cambodia!" However, there is no denying that Malraux not only was ahead of his time but also immersed himself in the struggles of his era to a greater degree than most writers and artists today. "Remember," Malraux screams in Adams's portrayal, as if indulging his well-documented mythomania, "I took a

fucking bullet for culture!"

The latter words (sans expletive) are also among the several phrases featured in a series of prints included in the show. These works combine text with an array of images, several of which reference the political and intellectual climate of the 1960s. Among the images are photographs of French student-movement posters and the covers of books by Abbie Hoffman, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Frantz Fanon and others.

A small room at the front of the gallery housed a second video work, *Make Down* (2005). Here Adams films himself seated before a vanity mirror as he removes a thick coat of military-green makeup from his face. The sheets of paper he uses for this task are printed with film stills from Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). The stills show, in close-up, an Algerian woman removing her traditional veil so as to blend in while carrying out a terrorist bombing in the city's French quarter—disguising herself by taking off the material that had previously covered her face. Staring at his reflection, Adams seems quizzical, as though he is contemplating whether his own unmasked face is not just another disguise.

—David Markus