

# ARTNEWS

THE WAR AT HOME

BY *Andrew Russeth* (<http://www.artnews.com/author/arusseth/>) POSTED 10/14/16 12:54 PM

---

On shows in New York: Jeffrey Joyal at David Lewis, Marianne Vitale at Invisible-Exports, Calvin Marcus at Clearing, and Watteau at the Frick

---



Installation view of 'Jeffrey Joyal: Raze the Little Feelers,' on view at David Lewis in New York through October 23.

COURTESY DAVID LEWIS

Last Friday marked the 15-year anniversary of the start of the United States–led invasion of Afghanistan, the beginning of the seemingly perpetual War on Terror, which has laid waste to blood and treasure. During this period, contemporary art has been an inconsistent witness. Important works have (<http://www.andrewkreps.com/artist/works-by-hito-steyerl/works>) engaged ([http://www.postmastersart.com/artists/steve\\_mumford/mumford.html](http://www.postmastersart.com/artists/steve_mumford/mumford.html)) the conflict

(<http://www.paglen.com/>), but they have been few and far between. The war has ground on, and art has enjoyed a commercial boom work, with cash and attention flowing predominantly to apolitical work. And so it has been both heartening and intriguing to notice, at the start of this new season in New York, that a handful of shows are looking, directly and unflinchingly, at war—its weaponry, its people, its morality.

At David Lewis (<http://davidlewisgallery.com/>), the young New Yorker Jeffrey Joyal is making an auspicious solo debut with a show called “Raze the Little Feelers,” showing World War II-era cots in a cluster at the center of the gallery. Each has a latex cover, imprinted against a tile floor, a tin ceiling, or a peculiar old coin. Some have holes and various amounts of decorative fringe. Three large light bulbs with silver tops, each adorned with a taxidermy turkey head, hang from the ceiling to the floor. The mood is eerily quiet and spectral, the scene evoking a remote and sacred campsite haunted by many generations of American mourning. The cots are waiting. The bodies, you sense, are just going to keep coming.



Installation view of ‘Marianne Vitale: Equipment,’ on view at Invisible-Exports through Sunday, October 16.

COURTESY INVISIBLE-EXPORTS

Across the street, at Invisible-Exports (<http://invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/equipment/>), soldiers are also absent from Marianne Vitale’s show, “Equipment.” Strung from the ceiling are ten wooden torpedoes that resemble bowling pins, bulging cigars, or perhaps miniature zeppelins. Each had a red nose and a unique paint job—a cow pattern, an impressive Pollock imitation, an American flag—recalling

the images that soldiers have long applied to their munitions. That act of personalizing a vehicle of death has always struck me as both darkly comic and truly creepy, but at a moment when combat is becoming increasingly depersonalized, through drones, cyber attacks, and the like, it appears somehow more honest. As pilots at computers in Nevada launch missiles from drones halfway around the world, physically (though not psychologically) removed from the violence, Vitale returns a human touch—the hand—to the action. Slyly, she is asking big questions about how the distancing effects of technology have changed not only the violence of battle, but also the ethical considerations that underpin them.



Installation view of “Calvin Marcus: Were Good Men” at Clearing in Bushwick, Brooklyn, on view through October 30, 2016.  
COURTESY CLEARING

Over in Bushwick, huge, dead soldiers are currently splayed across large canvases that line the entire Clearing gallery in a show by Calvin Marcus, the latest sharp left turn in a short career that has already seen a few of them. Marcus’s ghoulish cartoon men, depicted in quick hits of oil stick, have fallen to the ground with their eyes open and huge tongues dangling out of their mouths. Blood streams from a few of their heads, and slashes of green grass are on top and around them. (The paintings of dead soldiers are titled *Dead Soldier*. A few of just grass—it will take a very special collector to buy these—are titled just *Grass*.) Are the works offensive? Some have made that argument to me, and from a certain vantage point, it is hard to disagree—they make caricatures out of the dead—but I suspect Marcus would retort

that he is operating in the tradition of Grosz and Goya, depicting how warfare dehumanizes soldiers, yes, but also how it dehumanizes them in the mind of the people, safe at home, who thoughtlessly send them out to fight. Those people are, of course, all of us viewing these pictures in the gallery while our nation is at war. The show is titled “Were Good Men”—a clichéd lament carrying dark double meanings once you start turning it over in your mind. Marcus is making paintings that are just compelling enough to rise above being cheap jokes, but he is walking a thin and dangerous line.



Jean-Antoine Watteau, *The Portal of Valenciennes (La Porte de Valenciennes)*, ca. 1710–11, oil on canvas, 12 3/4 x 16 in. The Frick Collection.

MICHAEL BODYCOMB/FRICK COLLECTION

Finally, at the Frick Collection (<http://www.frick.org/exhibitions/watteau>), soldiers of another kind were on offer in “Watteau’s Soldiers: Scenes of Military Life in Eighteenth-Century France,” a jewel-box of an exhibition of small, intimate paintings, drawings, and prints that the Frenchman made during the War of Spanish Succession. They show no blood, no violence. Watteau’s men are mostly at rest. They sleep on the ground in crowded camps, wander idly, sit and smoke pipes. They are at rest, looking off into the distance, thinking. In an illuminating catalogue essay, the show’s curator, Aaron Wile, a fellow at the

Frick, discusses how the work captures a moment when soldiers, long seen simply as cannon fodder by rulers, are being afforded a sense of self (a notion that had swept through other realms of society in the previous century). They are waiting for orders, ready to be sent into battle, enacting the ritualized violence that the rest of us will not. Watteau portrays these men as fragile, human. They could be people we know, we suspect as we gaze on them. If circumstances were different, they could even be us. For now, they are alone together, standing on the brink.

Copyright 2016, Art Media ARTNEWS, llc. 110 Greene Street, 2nd Fl., New York, N.Y. 10012. All rights reserved.