

## Glory Land or a post-colonial legacy

Text by Michael Sutter, art historian &  
Director of the Gallery of Contemporary Art of Lucerne, Switzerland  
www.m-sutter.ch  
May 2015

*Glory Land* is the title of an intermedial cycle of work that originated during Nina Staehli's two-month research trip through seven American states and two Indian reservations in 2014. The basis for the *Glory Land* project was the FLEX travel grant from the Canton of Zug combined with a residency at the Kansas City Artists Coalition. Making stops in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Mississippi, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee, Staehli plotted her route along the Trail of Tears, a name that has come to symbolize the various routes the Native Americans were forced to take after being driven out from their tribal homelands in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Staehli covered more than three thousand miles in just four weeks, during which time she devoted herself to studying the country's historical and political development and engaging with the indigenous population. She did research at historical sites, visited ethnological museums, memorial sites and reservations, and met and interviewed Native Americans, all the while gathering footage for her new short film, *Glory Land*.

Once she arrived at the Kansas City Artists Coalition, she could finally let all the ideas and impressions that had been amassing for weeks pour out into her paper bag paintings, videos, performances and sculptures. And it is precisely Staehli's intermedial way of working that allows her to give viewers a rich helping of food for thought about a dark chapter in American history.

### paper bag paintings: A gesture between figuration and abstraction



Staehli developed the *paper bag paintings* series during her research trip in America. She took plain and printed paper bags by the stack from supermarkets - where they are offered as an alternative to plastic bags - and used them as the canvas for her images. She is not only interested in the texture and materiality of the paper bags, but also in the way that they symbolize our on-the-go consumer world. The expressive brushstroke of her gestural painting bears witness to the intense clash of colors and shapes taking place right on the bags, exploring the

boundary between abstraction and implied figuration. Now and then we recognize offshoots and growths of graphic elements that hint vaguely at bodily forms.

**Glory Land - Trail of Tears video:**

**A critical confrontation with the past**



Staehli also made her video work "Glory Land - Trail of Tears" on her research trip through America. The Trail of Tears refers to a number of historical routes taken by the Native Americans after being systematically and violently driven out of their tribal homelands and relocated across the Mississippi River.

At the beginning of the video, we are presented with three clear symbols of the land of opportunity: the omnipresent American flag waving deliberately in the wind, the freight train echoing through the landscape and the parabolic antennae tilting up to the satellites. God bless America!

The two protagonists of "Glory Land - Trail of Tears" are TearHead and Sparrow: figures with oversized head sculptures perched atop human bodies. Sparrow - made to look like a bird - is wearing a camouflage uniform and TearHead, with a mane like a buffalo, sports jeans and a light-blue shirt. While it is easy to interpret Sparrow as the militant figurehead of a generation of war fanatics, TearHead's masculine "worker's wear" alludes to the working class. Together, the protagonists go to a number of places related to the sad story of the Trail of Tears. TearHead marches across a map to figure out the route as Sparrow runs, apparently without any aim in particular, through the snow. Although in different places, they both move about in the same eerie silence at sites laden with emotions: a cemetery, a monument to the collective memory of the atrocities suffered by the Native Americans or even just an abandoned train station. In the absence of interactive communication, Sparrow and TearHead use the symbolism of the white flag and the gestures of covering his eyes to draw attention to the cruel exploits of the past. The film was shot on site in Charleston, SC, Birchwood, TN, Nashville, TN, Kansas City, MO, and Mountain Home and Winslow, AR, as the protagonists find themselves alternately in the ruins of buildings, pristine snowy landscapes, dense woods, and along train tracks. TearHead and Sparrow slowly make their way through the desolate landscapes of a country that prefers to sweep its past under the rug than confront it. Both characters carry out a silent protest until the white flag goes up in flames and TearHead starts feeling desperate in an anonymous hotel room.

TearHead and Sparrow are characters from a long-running cycle of work by Nina Staehli called *Big Heads*. Each of the Big Heads are alter egos that act as protagonists in Staehli's films, performances, writing and plays. She invents complex histories and stories for each and every one of them, and endows them with an oversized head sculpture. For the "Glory Land - Trail of Tears" video, the two Big Heads set out on a trail of collective identity loss. After being driven out of their tribal homelands, the indigenous populations of America lost all spiritual and cultural connection to their land. The silent journey taken by TearHead and Sparrow refers to these historical events, locating them in the



present as a critical confrontation with the past.

### Glory Land sculptures: A systematic enclosure of identity?



After returning to Switzerland, Staehli began producing a series of sculptures based on traditional kachina dolls, the animistic cultural objects of the Hopi people, a Pueblo Indian tribe in southwest America. Made of carved wood and adorned with colorful masks, the dolls embody the spirit, or *kachina*, that, in the Hopi's spiritual and religious beliefs, ensures fertility and ample rain for the fields. Originally made for children as a didactic tool to explain ritual dances, kachina dolls have since been degenerated into a commercial object: a souvenir for tourists. On the one hand, many natives earn a steady income from the kachinas; on the other, their trendiness waters down the indigenous culture. Today's generation of Native Americans is confronted with a systematic marginalization of their cultural values, which ultimately negates any efforts made to preserve the indigenous identity.

Staehli interprets this problem through a figurative adaptation of the kachina dolls, reducing them to minimal body forms with amputated extremities. The hands and feet have been cut off and the head shapes are identical.

This can be read as a reference to the freedom of speech, but what good is the promise of that freedom without any organs with which to speak or act? Staehli's interpretation of the traditional kachina dolls raises questions about the sociocultural perception of a minority group and its inability to speak for itself in the face of an imposed identity. Rather than carving them out of wood and painting them with bright colors, Staehli made the dolls out of clay and without any special design. Staehli creates the sculptures based on the formal principle that the head and body are identical and only the position of the arms and legs changes. Despite their simplistic style, their poses remind the viewer of the kachina dolls - only, unlike the originals, they embody the systematic enclosure of identity. The absence of any facial expression emphasizes the dolls' ambivalence - in turn a critique of the freedom of speech. By covering the sculptures with furs, Staehli explores the ritual of wearing masks and costumes and draws attention to the interchangeability of a protective cover that provides an identity. Finally, the materiality of the clay and fur together puts everything back into the context of nature.