KAHPENAKW~~U~~ Exhibition Notes

By Cyrus Saint Amand Poliakoff

Robert Buck heads west. He heads west to the Desert. He heads out west to the Desert to find bits and pieces. Robert Buck heads out west to the Desert to find bits and pieces left behind. He heads out west to the Desert to find bit and pieces left behind by others who went out west before him. He brings back these bits and pieces left behind by others who went out west to put together those traces. He brings those traces with bits of the land that they were written on. He brings those marks made in a landscape by others to re-construct what was written. These marks trace the lines others have written on the land. These traces mark the name others have given to this land. This land which others named and drew traces to delineate what was what and where was where has left behind bits and pieces. Robert Buck goes out west to collect these pieces and put them back together to find that name which drew up the land.

But in that drawing was inscribed a body. Out west, Buck finds a body in that land that others gave a name to mark out where was where and what was what. Buck takes back that body of the West to put together the pieces of the name that drew traces in the land. He has now the land and a name to put together these pieces of the West. To lay down this body under the sky.

The trouble is that something else remains beyond that name, *West*, which won’t settle into the dust with the spines of cactus and sun-bleached cans of coke. There is something left over beyond the tomb he makes out of rusted aluminum. It rests on a reflective black, high-tech polarized scanning surface to code and archive a monument of the West.

If we look long enough (or turn back after looking away), we find out that Buck set out to discover something underneath the name of the West. What stares back from ink blots or the empty sockets of a skull? It’s not us. If there is one thing we know in the desert, it’s this. With *Kahpenakw~~u~~*, Buck gives the troubling feeling that what looks at us from behind the desert sky reflection or the backlit pixels of a screen doesn’t see us at all. Our own image quickly gets ensnared in his work. We find ourselves caught in looming signifiers that by now seem heavy enough to be hollow. The flag has been dyed black so that only the stars remain – the symbol fades and the night sky of the desert appears from the fibers.

The mythology of the West comprises another history of the landscape. Buck reforms the desert alluvium into concrete to rebuild something of this mythology out of cinder blocks. Here there are traces of the primordial legend that Smithson unearthed when he ventured out west to build *Spiral Jetty* and brought back the material remnants to posit as *non-sites*. With Buck, it is bleach-stained cosmic splatters that point towards the hole in a weathered wood knot – his own origin of the universe. Buck invokes the monsters that guard the history of the desert. A minotaur built from cinder blocks and razor wire watches the entrance to some God-forsaken desert encampment, the warlord’s territory, a toxic mine, the end of the paved road.

The desert never lies. It shows you what you’ve got in plain sight. What lies on the surface of the sand reflects the night sky. Buck draws constellations with cactus thorns on denim to make patterns, charting his location against the Milkyway. The triangulation situates his figure standing in the desert looking upwards – body to stars to body to ground.

The material for Buck is the land, the sky, and what accumulates around that border. But it is also the name of the West itself that he works with. If we take language as the other material with which Buck contends, two elements take the foreground: the *father* and the *land*. A dyed flag, border control razor wire, concrete barricades, blown-out tires and shot gun shells point to questions about the *father-land*. For Buck, *Kahpenakw~~u~~* (the Comanche word for ‘west’) is a name of the father given to the land.

If Buck lays this name to rest, ashes to dust and sand to cement, we are left with an unsettling question. What rules the land in its stead? What would remain without the borders and lines that section off the sprawling desert? In *Kahpenakw~~u~~* are we off the grid? Or are we so far in it, that we’ve lost the edge of the pixel. What Buck constructs is a world where the elements with which we used to navigate the land have rusted and blackened. They now seem both beautiful and menacing. *Kahpenakw~~u~~* is The West that no longer exists for Buck, except as a site of invention, a desert workshop to handle what remains.

Written on the occasion of KAHPENAKW~~U~~, CRG Gallery, New York, January 12 – February 18, 2012