

# THE SEEN AND UNSEEN

Milton Fletcher

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Broadway Gallery recently presented *Wappen Field: Work in Progress* by sculptor Michelle Jaffé. At this evolutionary stage of its development, the installation has six suspended chrome plated steel cutaway helmets with speakers in the top of each providing sound.



Michelle Jaffé, *Wappen Field*, 2008. Photo credit: Adam Reich. Courtesy of the artist.

The empty space below each helmet implies where a body would be. Taken as a whole, the work creates an eerily suggestive, ghostly experience.

With *Wappen* (German for "coat of arms"), the installation can be viewed from two basic perspectives—seeing it as one unified sculptural piece, or instead, placing one's head into any of the snug-fitting helmets and looking out its eye slit to see a constrained vista of the surroundings and feel a bit claustrophobic. This visceral effect suggests *Wappen* as an allusion to the dizzying feeling of a narrow way of seeing the world.

Jaffé conceived *Wappen Fields* after 9/11. When she noticed how people and nations create layers of protection to hopefully survive in this world, Jaffé, who has a longstanding fascination with clothes as means of concealment, thought of armor. Her armor metaphor, however, is double-edged because, though armor can protect from harm, it can also cause unintended damage since the armor can prevent new impressions and viewpoints from penetrating to the encased entities. Taking a historical view, Jaffé pointedly observes, "There is a conflation between contemporary politics and medieval history."

The installation's soundtrack by composer Dave Hykes uses extended voice techniques and harmonic overtones, is hauntingly ageless and melancholic. It complements the installation by setting a somber, otherworldly mood. Bob Bieleck's sound design allows the music to float in, out of, and around the helmets and the installation space, creating a sense of aural movement by unseen spirits, evoking in the mind's eye the eternal denizens of Elysian Fields in Greek mythology.

When *Wappen Fields* is completed in 2010, it will have 12 helmets surrounded by a mirror-walled room and feature more elaborate aural effects, which will enhance the question of what is real and what is illusion.

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