

JEMIMA WYMAN THE POWER OF PATTERNS

In April this year, the Children's Art Centre will present the interactive exhibition 'Pattern Bandits' in collaboration with contemporary Australian artist Jemima Wyman, whose interest in the history and purpose of patterns lends itself to fun activities while also providing insights into their social significance. The artist recently spoke with Tamsin Cull.

TAMSIN CULL What were your initial thoughts about collaborating with the Gallery's Children's Art Centre on an interactive project?

JEMIMA WYMAN Some of the first ideas I had were in response to the architecture of the gallery space and how I might make it an optical experience through colouring or patterning different areas. I was thinking about how to create collective images — collective quilts, a collective canopy, or a collective voice of protest. I was also thinking about mandalas and how they represent a holistic view of the universe, becoming a patterned icon for a group. For [the 'Pattern Bandits' project] I was particularly interested in the power of a group coming together to make something happen that also visually represented that group in some way.

You draw on many diverse cultural and art historical references in your work. How did these influence the different components of the project?

I hope that the clashing of patterns in the space will open up a line of inquiry for participants, encouraging them to look at how different groups of people use patterns, and their history. For example, the keffiyeh¹ pattern is used in the space as wallpaper and as a transferable pattern for the station where children make bandannas. This

particular pattern is really bold, tessellated, and black and white. It appears to relate to Bridget Riley's 'Op Art' paintings. The keffiyeh also has a history of being worn by British soldiers as camouflage, while Yasser Arafat used it as a patriotic accessory. The list goes on: the use of the pattern as a fashion statement, and then more recently a lot of protesters have worn the keffiyeh as a mask to protect their identity, or to link themselves to particular protest movements. I hope that the optical references and links to the history of camouflage register in the installation, encouraging visitors to think about why tie-dye is next to keffiyeh patterns, which are next to camouflage, or beside a paisley pattern — there is discordancy when these are placed together, but they have each been used to unify and protect groups of people in protest, as a type of social camouflage.

How patterned fabric is used by different groups is a core interest of mine. When thinking about psychological connections with pattern, I wondered why floral patterns are usually associated with domestic interiors and

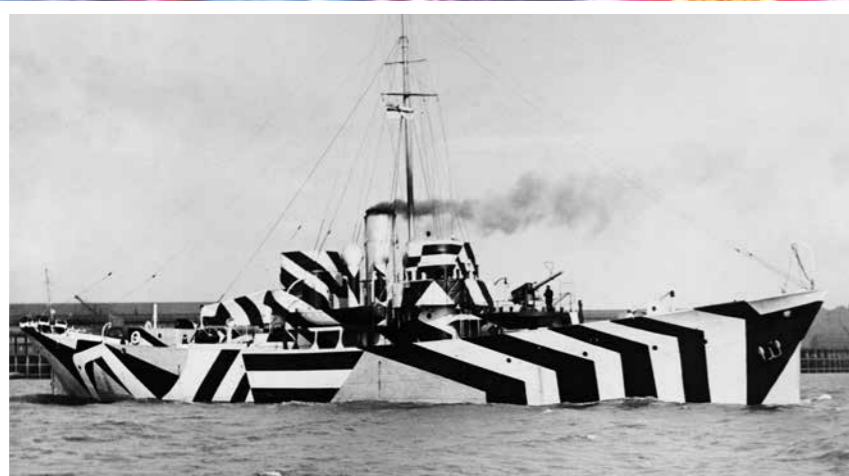
fashion rather than military camouflage. After all, floral patterns are an organic, disruptive design² that breaks up the contour of a body. And then I started to ask why camouflage isn't floral, why armies don't wear floral uniforms, and then I started to realise that there is a psychology behind certain patterns being selected or disregarded by a group.

Could you further explain some of the art historical references that influence you, and how these are expressed in 'Pattern Bandits'?

When you look at some of the first investigations into camouflage in the early 1900s, military units were enlisting artists, zoologists and magicians to help develop camouflage. There were even direct comments made by Pablo Picasso suggesting that soldiers should be wearing 'harlequin' garments because they do the same thing as camouflage.³ Many paintings were made by the cubists using the harlequin as a central subject. The harlequin is linked to camouflage through its dazzle-patterned apparel dress (which confuses the eye) as well as being a historical character who is a mischievous trickster.



ABOVE: Jemima Wyman; BELOW: A young visitor participating in an activity trial for Jemima Wyman's 'Pattern Bandits' 2014; BACKGROUND: Working 'harlequin' design (detail) for 'Pattern Bandits' 2014



At the time, there were intriguing overlaps between what was happening in the military and the art world, and also in the field of psychology. Around 1910, Gestalt psychologists were researching ideas on perception, using black-and-white diagrams that conflate the figure-background relationship (for example, the image that appears as either two faces or a vase is a classic diagram). I relate to some of Bridget Riley's work through these studies and then this line of inquiry also makes me think of 'dazzle ships'⁴ (but that's a whole conversation in itself!).

In the exhibition you have used a number of these black-and-white patterns and mixed them up. What is the intention behind the 'dazzle'?

Yes, it's like all the different patterns come together to produce an architectural 'quilt'. I hope that through the clash of the different formal strategies of each pattern — the paisley floral-ness; the blocky, net-like keffiyeh structures; the organic tie-dye; the dazzly checkers — that people will start to think about where else they have seen these patterns. Hopefully, the cacophony will prompt them to think critically of associations outside of the installation, like the animal kingdom, art history, the military and recent protest movements.

I love the idea of the different patterns collectively making up a quilt . . .

I've been making 'crazy quilts' in my own practice recently. A 'crazy quilt' is made using diversely patterned, textured and irregularly sized fabric remnants. It is thought historically that there is a link between early harlequin costumes and the first crazy quilts, both are equally dazzling and visually aggressive. The whole Children's Art Centre project has become this architectural crazy quilt, allowing diverse patterns to coexist.

You've also used tie-dye, which is not in itself a pattern but rather the distinctive result of a technique, in the exhibition. Tell us about that.

I wanted the tie-dye to be in the exhibition because of its links to 1960s counter-culture and because of its organic, psychedelic quality. I enjoy the idea of tie-dye rubbing up



against camouflage or the keffiyeh wallpaper because it has very different formal properties. Camouflage is about mimicry and matching the landscape, whereas tie-dye is a kind of dazzle pattern, used by a group to stand out together, not to blend into a background (a visual shout-out). Similarly, the patterns on individual zebras, though varying from one to the other, allow them to blend into the herd, making them appear as one massive, intimidating animal in the eyes of a lion, so that they can survive.

You often engage with your audience through performance works and inviting participation in the making of works. Was this something you were keen to incorporate in 'Pattern Bandits'?

I have a long history of working with children and I know how important it is to physically engage them to encourage learning and a quality of experience. Throughout my practice I employ strategies that encourage embodiment in people's encounters with art, regardless of whether it's a painting, video or installation. I want people to walk away feeling like they physically know something new or differently.

How has conceptualising this exhibition been different to your previous art making experience?

The main thing that I have tried to keep in mind is the multipurpose-ness of the site — I wanted to make good contemporary art that is interactive and intelligent, as well as being exciting for children. Collaborating with QAGOMA has allowed me to work on a large scale and have a greater scope. I am really grateful for what's been made possible.

Tamsin Cull is Senior Program Officer, Children's Art Centre, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art. Tamsin spoke with Jemima Wyman on 16 December 2013 and 6 January 2014.

'Pattern Bandits' is at the Children's Art Centre from 5 April to 2 November 2014. The exhibition is accompanied by an interactive publication, which will be available from the QAGOMA Store and online at australianartbooks.com.au from June 2014. To pre-order your copy, please email store@qagoma.qld.gov.au.



Endnotes

- 1 The keffiyeh is a traditional Middle Eastern headdress fashioned from a square of cotton with a distinctive woven check pattern.
- 2 A disruptive or dazzle camouflage is one in which a single thing appears to be a hodgepodge (high difference camouflage) or mishmash of unrelated components. It is found throughout the natural world and has been widely employed in human history. Roy R Behrens, 'Dazzle camouflage', <http://www.bobolinkbooks.com/Camoupeedia/DazzleCamouflage.html>, viewed 14 January 2014.
- 3 To paraphrase artist and World War Two camoufleur Roland Penrose, whose biography of Picasso (*Picasso, His Life and Work*, University of California Press, 1981) told of a conversation between the artist and Jean Cocteau about military camouflage, 'If they want to make an army invisible at a distance,' said Picasso, 'they have only to dress their men as harlequins'. Quoted in Tim Newark, 'Masters of disguise', *Financial Times*, 16 March 2007, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4364ae4c-d316-11db-829f-000b5df10621.html#axzz2qLHb04yh>, viewed 14 January 2014.
- 4 The term 'dazzle painting' was coined in 1917 by its British originator, Navy lieutenant and marine artist Norman Wilkinson, whose idea it was to apply bewildering, geometric shapes to the surfaces of ships during World War One, making it a challenge for the German U-boats to target them at a distance or gauge their speed and size. Roy R Behrens, 'Dazzle camouflage', <http://www.bobolinkbooks.com/Camoupeedia/DazzleCamouflage.html>, viewed 14 January 2014.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

National Youth Week artist workshop with Jemima Wyman
Sunday 6 April | 1.30pm | GOMA

Meet Jemima Wyman and take part in a hands-on workshop especially for teens during National Youth Week.

Free / Bookings required by 28 March (priority bookings for Members)

Please include the attendee's name, age, school name and Membership number (if applicable).

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The artist with young visitors participating in a Children's Art Centre activity trial for 'Pattern Bandits' 2014

OPPOSITE ABOVE, LEFT: British gunboat *HMS Kildangan* in dazzle camouflage, 1 Jan 1918 / Collection: Imperial War Museums / Image courtesy: Imperial War Museums/Getty Images; ABOVE, RIGHT: contextual paisley pattern design for 'Pattern Bandits' 2014 / Courtesy: The artist; BELOW: Jemima Wyman / *Free Pussy Riot Crazy Quilt* (detail) 2012 / Digital photographs sewn onto second-hand tie-dyed t-shirts / Courtesy: The artist; BACKGROUND: working pattern design for 'Pattern Bandits' 2014 / Courtesy: The artist