



Putting On: Hyper Stealth & Protective Coverings, 2008. Production still. Courtesy the artist.

JEMIMA WYMAN: INCognito

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Dress, in all its multiple and multifarious manifestations, performs various functions of which only the most obvious are practical. Dress protects us from the elements, however harsh or benign.

It also protects our bodies from exposure to the gaze of others; it provides a replacement, a substitute, for that naked body, and in so doing, it idealises the body, distorts it, and most of all, articulates meaning.

Clothing can be seen as a structured interface between a private self and its context, allowing the presentation of a public self which both reveals my inner world (through the careful consumer choices I have made, putting together a 'look') and at the same time, disguises me. In other words, dress exposes and protects me, both giving my secrets away (like all social constructs, it can be decoded and analysed), and hiding me. It functions as an armour that is at the same time defensive, aggressive, and orthopaedic. That is, it holds me together, it holds you at bay, and it holds me up.

Jemima Wyman's recent installation, *Putting On* (Steve Turner Contemporary, Los Angeles, November–December 2008) invokes the complexity of our relations to dress in different ways. A 'put on' is a deception, a trick, which can be more or less unfriendly. It is also something you do with clothes, or a mask, or even (referring to make up) a face. ('I'll put on my face and then we can go...') It suggests an identity which is hypothetical, temporary, or provisional; one puts on a costume, a

ball gown, a uniform. Yet the idea that there is an (authentic) 'inner self' that is both represented and disguised by dress becomes harder and harder to maintain as this complex self-presentation takes place. Indeed, playing out the ramifications of disguise, camouflage, figure/ground relations, and other attempts to articulate identity through dress, only serves to wobble and unsettle such romantic ideas of a stable private or public self.

In 18th century England, upper class women wore half-masks in public places like parks during the winter, purportedly to protect their delicate complexions from the ravages of the weather. However, it quickly became clear that wearing masks in public had a number of advantages, and they began to wear them no matter what the

Dick, L. Jemima Wyman: Incognito, *Eyeline*, Issue 69 p. 29-33, 2009.

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season. A mask drew attention to the woman, who acquired an air of mystery. It emphasised her eyes, the 'windows of the soul'. It allowed her a certain freedom of movement and speech; she could believe as if she were unknown, anonymous, while at the same time she was aware that to many in her social set, she was quite recognisable, despite the mask. In other words, wearing the mask was a silent request to the other to collude in the pretence that she was not recognised. A social game was played in which (for example) men and women could flirt with each other, each acting as if the woman's identity was unknown. Descriptions of these encounters, in which people discreetly pretend not to recognise a celebrity figure, remind me of scenes where one sees a celebrity in civvies (so to speak), at the supermarket, or crossing the street, and the implicit demand is to treat them as an ordinary person, while of course one continues to glance in their direction, we act in their every move. It is a game where we act as if we do not know, when we do, and this kind of interaction, 'respecting' the privacy of others, is one of the fundamental dimensions of modern urban identity.

The idea of a private self, obscured and at the same time emphasised by wearing a mask, becomes eroticised as the eyes, isolated from the face, convey an intimacy contradicted by the apparent disguise. Of course, in 18th century London there was an erotic frisson associated with the idea of upper class women freely conversing with strangers in a public park, and there may still be traces of that excitement in contemporary instances of social masquerade. I would argue that the visual function of the face to identify someone, that is, to verify that they are indeed who they claim to be, is subverted by wearing even a half-mask, which allows the eyes and lips to perform another function, to represent a body, un-named and open to sexual fantasy.

At the centre of Jemima Wyman's *Putting On*, there is a video projection, entitled *Combat Drag*. It begins with the click of a video camera opening up, a home-made dummy comes into focus in an indeterminate natural place, green grass and leaves, blank sky. The dummy wears a balaclava-type mask, with huge blank eyes embroidered on it, more stitches making a dumb mouth, and a big plaid shirt, worn backwards. A woman appears, also wearing such a mask, a tartan shirt, she stands beside the dummy as if they are pals, or partners of some kind, in their own odd uniform. Then, clearly using the video camera's LCD screen as a mirror, the woman puts the dummy's mask over her own, doubling the disguise, and the threat. Each black wool mask has a large pair of wide open eyes embroidered on it, above the actual eye holes, and sharp teeth stitched around the mouth hole. After some strenuous adjustment, which is extremely disturbing to watch, the double masks line up: two rows of staring patchwork eyes, two frightening



Both above: *Putting On: Hyper Stealth & Protective Coverings*, 2008. Installation views. Courtesy the artist.

shark-like mouths, one on top of the other, and in the middle, de-contextualised, human eyes peer out, like an animal, a natural thing uncannily alive and looking out at us. It is terrifying.

The purposes of camouflage, or 'cryptic colouration' as it is called in ecology, are multiple; typically animals and insects use camouflage to erase their boundaries, disappearing into their environment, in order to avoid predators. In other cases, they use disguise to be a better predator; for example, tigers' stripes allow them to approach their prey without being detected, and their orange and black colour functions well, given that their prey are typically colour-blind, and see their markings as blending into the surrounding undergrowth. Camouflage can also work by making the animal or insect appear more dangerous than it really is. The huge eyes on the wings of some butterflies deceive and intimidate predators. Finally, cryptic colouration can also protect certain animals and insects, simply by making them look uninteresting. Like dress, it lets them blend in, it lets them stand out.

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Putting On: Hyper Stealth & Protective Coverings, 2008. Soft sculpture and wallpaper. Courtesy the artist.

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Jemima Wyman's work uses patterned fabrics and wallpapers to blur boundaries, allowing the individual to blend in—with an environment, with a group—or in the case of *Combat Drag*, to stand out. A different kind of cryptic colouration is at work, one which blends the identities of different people into a social unit, like a military uniform might. These outfits invoke Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, or street gang culture, where simple, inexpensive and easily available items (like a bandanna, or a tartan shirt) can be re-functioned to signify an affiliation that can be a matter of life and death.

Combat Drag begins with this solitary female figure and her dummy, alone in front of her camera, and together they present a kind of home-made threat. The threat is visual; it is addressed to an unspecified other; most of all, it appears to protect the bright-eyed mystery hiding inside these layered masks. On the loose tartan shirt, worn backwards, is a kind of logo, again embroidered and patched, reminding me of the images and texts on the front of baseball caps, like a little billboard displaying the wearer's identifications. The logo for this primitive beginning of a gang, or a revolutionary movement, is the mask itself: a bunch of fabric knotted around a head, only the outlined eyes visible. The costume becomes recursive: the masked figure identifies as a masked figure.

The most powerful moment in the video is when this single figure takes the shirt and ties it around her head, in such a way that the 'logo' on the shirt she wears is doubled by the logo superimposed

on her face. Having accomplished this, two-faced, the figure stretches out her arms to either side, suddenly becoming a scarecrow, silent and blind.

When she joins forces with others, they are all masked, and they are outside the city, in a kind of green nowhere, a place where they can pose for the camera in a series of configurations, staring out inscrutably from behind their disguises. First two, and then three figures take up a series of positions, facing the camera in a kind of improvised portrait group. These poses remind me of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), cinematic instances of the outlaw tradition of self-representation, where the hero lives in hiding, on the run, yet claims a certain fame through photographic portraits and story telling. It also connects to news and documentary representations of revolutionary and resistance groups, whose political efficacy is in part determined by their access to media representation. Such documentary films will show resistance fighters, often in improvised uniforms, in a secret, un-named location, displaying their fighting techniques in order to publicise their message, their power, and their discipline.

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Terrorism has, since the 1970s, been understood as a semiotic strategy, a way in which under-represented groups can, so to speak, get their point across. More recently, the example of Subcomandante Marcos, and the EZLN, shows how the invisible international audience afforded by the internet can provide material and political support to a resistance movement in a very poor and isolated part of Mexico. The photographic posing enacted in *Combat Drag* implies both still photography (as if for a newspaper or poster) and live action, to be 'posted' on the internet for the purposes of recruitment or publicity. In both cases, the idea of self-determination in the field of representation is critical; these masked figures are not performing for a news crew or a documentary film maker. Controlling their own self-presentation is another dimension of the political struggle.

There follows a sequence of stills, blown-out black and white close-ups of masked faces, again and again showing the human eyes framed by the clear outline of the eye holes, the wet lips flushed by the mouth hole, shot in the dark with a flash, or night vision, figures huddling together, hiding behind leaves and grasses, staring. These eyes look frightened, and frightening; a voice-over whispers about a big scary snake, 'coming to get us'. There is a joke here; the snake ('it's coming, and it's really big and it's really nasty') is a giant phallic stand-in for almost anything that scares us. The voice is playful, teasing, like when you are camping at night and someone terrifies you just by putting on such a voice, a voice luxuriating in its power to terrify. The 'snake' sequence calls into question the political seriousness of this gang; are they just playing then? Is it Enid Blyton after all, the Famous Five, or some version of *Five Run Away Together* (1944), or *Five Fall into Adventure* (1950)? Yet there is another way to see this: maybe these wide-eyed figures are themselves the threat the voice is joking about, maybe that 'big scary snake... over in the bushes' is them. The fact that we cannot tell who is good and who is bad only serves to unsettle us further.

There is a short sequence where the masked figures, all in plaid shirts, in the green and pleasant setting, all kickboxing and such like moves for the camera, while jaunty music underlines their enjoyment of this outlaw life. Finally we see five figures, including a couple of men, still masked, again posing for the camera, holding up sticks, looking heroic. The Famous Five reference is even more emphatic; they really do look like kids on a storybook adventure, with their naked legs and bare feet, a river behind them. They pose for a bit and then walk away, one behind the other, vanishing into the wilderness.

The bacolic setting recalls the theme of 'lighting out for the territory', as it is called in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), a flight into nature, to escape the law. It is a trope that is repeated in numerous movies,



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All above: *Putting On: Hyper Stealth & Protective Coverings*, 2008. Video stills. Courtesy the artist.

where the outlaws and gangsters enjoy a limited time of happiness, almost a return to innocence, hiding out in the woods, before they are eventually captured or killed. I am thinking of Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948) or Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973), among others. The idea of the wilderness as always available alternative to the constraints of the bourgeois city is built into American history, where the wilderness was regarded as uncharted, and therefore available, rather than a site of indigenous civilisation. Behind this violently oblivious appropriation lies a metaphor of the garden of Eden, and the imagined possibility of a return—to todiology, to play. Even so, the play of Jemima Wyman's masked figures has an edge, a quality of aggression and humour, that is much more like real kids than myths of childhood innocence would allow.

Nevertheless, the playful figures in *Combat Drag* are also deadly serious; possibly there is a real political dimension to these masked forms, one that is never made clear, but if the logo on their shirts provides a clue, the mask itself hands their point of identification. In a way, the mask emphasises the individual lack of expression, replacing it with a cartoon scare face, huge eyes, biting mouth. Only the human eyes staring out, fixedly, and the tender human lips, convey another dimension. Repeated, with variations, the mask itself functions to make the gaze visible. Encountering these eyes, staring out from behind the masks, the intensity of their looking becomes something to take on, or take in.

At the same time, the familiarity of the costumes (balaclava, plaid shirt, fabric tied like a bandanna around the head) and the setting (unspecific pastoral) suggests that maybe there is not really an elsewhere, a neutral place outside the dominant culture, because this territory (so to speak) has already

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The face uses the body as its backdrop. Like a two dimensional image, a picture, the face is the place where the speaking subject dominates, through its use of language, continually subordinating the three dimensional body to words and speech. When Jemima Wyman obscures that face, discards that speech, we are left with the outline of a figure, or group of figures, a group of tartan shapes, silhouetted against a background.

In the past, Jemima Wyman was interested in blurring those outlines, erasing boundaries, so the audience could itself experience a melting or merging of identity into an all-encompassing environment. Indeed, *Combat Drag* was presented as a video projection in a context of digitally collaged wallpaper, depicting a psychedelic panorama of masked figures, and dummies (her 'soft sculptures') wearing the 'uniform' from the video, the plaid shirts and masks, with photographed eyes placed over the eye holes. The wallpapers are like a museum display, the swirling wallpaper and other collaged images dizzying and disorienting. Is this some kind of historical presentation we are entering, or have we fallen down the rabbit hole into an unknown revolution? In this utopian setting, the refusal of these various signifiers to pin down meaning is itself a kind of resistance.

In *Combat Drag*, Jemima Wyman explores the idea of a home-made group identity, beginning with a dressed up dummy and her friend, the single woman playing out the ramifications of a mask. Eventually a group coalesces, apparently leaderless but coherent nevertheless. When people merge in a group, they may become more of a public entity; as, for example, wearing a work uniform might designate someone as a waiter, or a military uniform might erode someone's individuality, and with it, their moral sense. Alternatively, merging into a group may make people more insistently private, holding their secrets tight. In *Combat Drag*, we cannot tell who these people are, or what they want. It is possible that their indecipherable gaze materialises the fundamental otherness of each of us, perpetually masked, in our ready-made identities that are socially constructed, patched together provisionally, and maintained at great cost. Or maybe those eyes, looking with such clarity and intensity out at us, insist on connection, as if we are all in there somewhere, frightened, frightening, and both wanting and refusing to give anything away. ■

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Top: *Putting On: Hyper Stealth & Protective Coverings*, 2008. Production still; bottom images: *Putting On: Hyper Stealth & Protective Coverings*, 2008. Video stills. Courtesy the artist.

been defined, described, and imaged, so many times. Every element so beautifully constructed in the video, invokes a set of social representations and narratives, as if there is really nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide. The threat of the masked figure is the threat of the scarecrow, the bogeyman, the guy, a silent dummy who scares the shit out of us by simply standing there staring.

Jemima Wyman's masked figures, like women wearing a burqa or chador, imply that there are two states of being, the public and the private. Because the eyes do not give up their secrets, because their silence increases the viewer's curiosity, this inaccessible inner state becomes much more intimate, and vulnerable. The power (and eroticism) of the masked figure lies in never giving anything away. The visual vocabulary of street gangs and revolution is old school, the ready-made props, balaclavas and ordinary plaid shirts re-functioned as head coverings and scare masks. Yet the radical other-ness of Jemima Wyman's masked figures holds a power that cannot be defined or dismissed. In this sense her work presents an alternate site, an elsewhere, a space of possibility, which we can consider, turning it over in our minds, like a philosophical proposition.

We find our identity in the boundaries, the outlines, where the figure distinguishes itself from its ground. Without that context, that contrast, outlines dissolve, certainties melt or crumble. On another level, the face itself detaches from the body, to constitute a kind of mask which encounters the world.

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