



JEMIMA WYMAN

**DECLARATION OF RESEMBLANCE
AND FLUID INSURGENTS**

29 AUGUST—17 OCTOBER 2009

ROBERT LEONARD: Your recent work was inspired by the Zapitistas, the Mexican peasant liberation army. What interests you about them?

JEMIMA WYMAN: They're a grass-roots army. Women fight alongside the men. As a uniform, some of them wear off-the-rack plaid work shirts, foregrounding their links to the land. The patterns double as camouflage, so the shirts function at once as a corporate uniform (a badge of identity) and as disguise. The Zapitistas also wear masks. Their leader, Sub-commander Marcos, says they wear them in order to become 'everyone'. The Zapatistas got me interested in the way clothing could mediate the relationship between the individual and their surroundings, the individual and the group (the social body). They got me thinking about camouflage, about figure/ground relationships, about how space opens into the body and the body opens out onto space, about how a body can stand out or blend in. The psychological and political experience of these things is the subject of my work.

Here, in Australia, plaid shirts are quite fashionable.

They are definitely in fashion, and being sold at Lowes, K Mart, and in second-hand stores. They are cheap, accessible, and associated with the recession. I wanted to play on the double reference: what they mean here and what they mean there. Plaid was an early form of camouflage. I wasn't just interested in it as a fashion thing, or as an aesthetic thing. I was interested in its real-world functionality—if you don't have the right camo on, you'll get killed.

In his famous article 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia',¹ Roger Caillois suggested that insect camouflage was not necessarily a ploy to escape predators, but something more psychological, perhaps a confusion or over-identification of self with surroundings. Was Caillois a reference point?

People often bring up Caillois in relation to my work, and I love that article's pataphysical sensibility, but really I was looking more to artists, including Paul McCarthy, Pipilotti Rist, and especially Yayoi Kusama. I like the way she uses pattern to articulate a sense of losing boundaries, creating a space that is simultaneously inside and outside. Certainly, I was also researching camouflage in the animal kingdom, particularly with zebras. Their camouflage is not to help them blend in with their surroundings, but with one another, so a hundred zebras looks like a single mass. Herding zebras create dazzling moire effects, which confuse apex predators like lions. Zebras have strength in numbers. I see this as a metaphor for political struggle, with broad-based liberation armies resisting oppressive governments or big business. I think of Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Their members patrol the waterways of their homeland, seeking to regain possession of their oil from the multinational corporations.

In your *Aggregate Icons*, individuals disappear into the crowd. The effect is rather trippy and psychedelic.

The *Icons* are large collages of handcut photographs. Individual figures are collaged together to create a thriving mass that suggests another body, or a face, or a portal for the viewer. I was thinking about what it is to bring multiple bodies together as one, what those bodies can do or form, politically or socially. I see the *Icons* as corporate emblems, like the pirates' Jolly Roger—a warning sign to the viewer, *for* and *of* the people.

Why do you call your clothes 'combat drag'?

The Jewish political-theorist Hannah Arendt said that Eichmann could have stopped persecuting the Jews if only he had been able to imagine himself in their bodies, in the position of the other. I'm interested in the ramifications of dressing up, of wearing another person's skin. I think of masks and pattern-fabric garments as a communal skin. Generally speaking, I see fashion as drag. With fashion, you can have another gender, race, or personality. Unlike the skin we are given, it is something we can rewrite, manipulate, and play with. Fashion is performative. Fashion is all about advancing propositions, whether they are about standing out from your environment or blending in with it.

A lot of your earlier work was about gender but in these new works we can't easily tell the participants' genders. Nevertheless, the gender questions linger. Is there still a feminist politic at work?

Definitely, one of my teachers at CalArts, Andrea Bowers, was critical of the way Matisse made the female body into something decorative, into pattern, into wallpaper. But made me think, perhaps one could do this in ways which are politically assertive. It interests me that pattern, decoration, and fabric are routinely ghettoised as non-functional, trivial, and feminine, and yet, as a key military technology, camouflage is understood as utterly male. It's aggressive and functional, but it is still fabric and pattern. So, I'm rebutting the assumption that merging with your environment is a passive and detrimental thing. I'm trying to recuperate it as a stealthy resistance strategy. I'm interested in its empowering, protective, liberating qualities.

And the masks?

Wearing masks is dehumanising, but that can be liberating or oppressive. Prisoners in Abu Ghraib are masked to make them anonymous, so they can be more easily defiled—they lose their faces and their human rights. On the other hand, the Ku Klux Klan wear masks to empower themselves so they can oppress others without consequences. My work doesn't take sides with either oppressors or oppressed, so much as explore the ambiguous nature of the mask in violence, seduction, and humour. The psychology of masks can go into a sexual place, an ultraviolent place, a humorous place, a childish place. My work goes into all these places. It's a rich field.



So is your work endorsing the Zapitistas and their struggles or is it a pisstake?

I'm not trying to illustrate a narrative or a position. I don't care to be so dryly academic. There's something perversely funny about the masked body, its physicality becomes clunky, and, when there is a mass of masked figures, the performative potential can go anywhere from an orgy to a mosh pit to a pile of corpses. I'm interested in making work where readings are constantly shifting. Sure, I refer to liberation armies to register a political intent, but I let other things happen, perhaps an intense optical effect or some sexual titillation. It resensitises the viewer to the work and creates an affective space for contemplation.

The exhibition title—*Declaration of Resemblance and Fluid Insurgents*—suggests both a political manifesto and a scientific treatise.

People in Brisbane knew my earlier, playful work, and there was a risk of being trapped by expectations. I wanted the title to sound authoritarian, not whimsical. I liked its irregular-military sounding quality. But it is still tongue-in-cheek.

The video is set in this nondescript bunker. It could be anywhere.

In the video, it's unclear what's happening. It resembles a terrorist training video or an Abu Ghraib torture document, but also do-it-yourself fringe pornography. I remember reading about someone who had been abducted and tortured. He was confined in a contextless place, his tormentors were anonymous, and why it was happening was never clear to him. So, for my video, I chose a nondescript space and had masked people. As Artaud argues in 'The Theatre of Cruelty', it's hard to be moral when there is no law regulating your actions.

The people in the video reminded someone of Teletubbies, with all their prelinguistic wheezing, moaning, and grunting. Why the baby talk?

On the one hand, their communication seems primal and infantile, a language that comes out of the body. It's like an internal monologue that folds you into their experience, so you feel you are inside their skin. On the other hand, it could just be a language you don't understand. Perhaps they are more intelligent. It could be at either end of the spectrum.

Similarly, your characters could be gimps or terrorists. Gimps are submissive neurotics while terrorists are threatening psychopaths, although sometimes it's hard to tell the difference.

Not allowing viewers a stable point of reference keeps the work open, allowing them to engage through their own fears and desires.

I was reminded of Slavoj Žižek's saying that, far from being un-American, Lyndie England was actually initiating Abu Ghriab prisoners into the obscene underbelly of American culture.

I'm not sure about the initiation aspect, but those images were so excessively reproduced they definitely played into some perversity in the psyche of America and the world at large. People wanted to see those images again and again—it was like watching a car crash. The images are very economic representations of a common desire to exert power over others (and of a common fear that such power will be exerted over oneself). The soldiers took them assuming there wouldn't be repercussions. They are like happy snaps from the dark side of war showing things the public wouldn't otherwise have imagined. They offer the outside world a glimpse of the psychology of war from the perspective of an American soldier, but one stripped of weapons, technology, and pretense. This is intimate hand-to-hand combat. Bodies in close proximity on the prison floor.

Robert Leonard is Director of the Institute of Modern Art.

1. Roger Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' (1935), in *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1987), 59-74.

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