



Jemima Wyman; *Iconography of Revolt*, City Gallery Wellington, 2018.

## Jemima Wyman's Neo-Camouflage

8 November, 2018

### Jemima Wyman talks to Lucy Jackson about two of her works in *Iconography of Revolt*.

Australian-born, LA-based artist Jemima Wyman explores the roles patterns and masks play in the visual identities of protest and resistance movements the world over. Patterns and masks have a dual nature, disguising individuals while asserting their collective identity. As Wyman explains, 'a mask is magic'. Wyman's work features in City Gallery's current show, *Iconography of Revolt*. She talks to Lucy Jackson about two of her works in the show, her sculpture *Thranging Bluff Face* (2014) and her wallpaper *Epochal Flourish* (2018).

**Lucy Jackson: You made the *Epochal Flourish* wallpaper for *Iconography of Revolt*. First, tell me about the *Propaganda Textiles*.**

Jemima Wyman: I'm interested in textile designs that communicate larger historical narratives, usually those related to conflicts or imagined collective futures. In 2014, inspired by Soviet textiles from the 1920s and 1930s, I made a series of collages. I wanted to create textile designs for our time. I exhibited them in my show *Tactical Frivolity*, at Brisbane's Milani Gallery. For my show *Conjuring Radical Openness* at the LA gallery Commonwealth and Council, in 2015, I digitised the images to make repeat patterns, and had them printed on fabric and made into a swatch book, called *Propaganda Textiles*. Then, for *Counterpowers* at Sydney's Sullivan and Strumpf, in 2017, I had the book commercially printed. Each swatch features one or more masked protesters. Contextual information (the protest's cause, country, date) is listed on the back, along with the specifics of the fabric (type, width, and swatch code). At the back of the book, the location of each of the protests is marked on a map, with an explanatory text:

A fabric for our times can be found (felt-out) in these pages! The textiles are generated from the MAS-archive, an extensive and growing collection of masked protesters that I started in 2008. The archive is housed in Los Angeles on hard-drives. It developed from witnessing various protest movements online. In an effort to be active, embodied, and empathetic in the interface with the computer screen, I started pulling, archiving, printing, and hand-cutting images of protesters wearing masks. The archive has developed in tandem with the protest culture growing globally, especially over the last few years. Since 2008 I have curated the archive in the creation of sculptures, wall works, paintings, wallpapers, collages and artist pages for print magazines. As I pull images and create various groupings, different 'collective skins' are emphasised. These imaginary collectives are united by a paisley bandana, a keffiyeh, a balaclava, or a Guy Fawkes mask, even when they have divergent ideological positions or are made up of protesters who live millions of miles apart. The members of these imaginary collectives share in the same social camouflage. This social camouflage is permissive, and facilitates collective visual resistance and the imagination of different futures beyond now. The mask creates a social imaginary space under and despite the watchful gaze of networked surveillance. This swatch book brings together protesters from 2004–14, from the cities and regions marked on the above map.

### **So, what was the appeal of Soviet textiles?**

I was interested in the impetus to map the future through optical patterns and visual narratives, resulting in practical outcomes that could be worn on the body or used in the home. The appeal was formal, aesthetic, political, and practical, all rolled into a magic carpet.

### **Why make protest into decor?**

I turn protest images into wallpaper because I'm interested in how strategies of visual resistance can be used to critique the history of art. Placing 'necessary deception' camouflage patterns within a decor context challenges the myth that pattern is decorative, feminine, and passive.

### **What do you mean by 'tactical frivolity'?**

It's an existing term. Wikipedia describes it as 'a form of public protest involving humour; often including peaceful non-compliance with authorities, carnival and whimsical antics'. It says, 'Humour has played a role in political protests at least as far back as the Classical period in ancient Greece. Yet it's only since the 1990s that the term *tactical frivolity* gained common currency for describing the use of humour in opposing perceived political injustice.' LM Bogad's book, *Tactical Performance: The Theory and Practice of Serious Play* goes into detail about theatrical tactics used in protest.

### **Does play and fantasy have a place in politics?**

Yes. My work aims to document this phenomenon.

### **Does it intend to be humorous?**

I don't feel I can control who the work's audience is or its reception. I definitely employ humorous tropes, but it depends on the viewer whether or not the work receives a laugh.

### **Do you want your audience to be able to identify the source images or find them confusing?**

I increasingly identify my sources. My large collage, *Visual Resistance (Guy Fawkes Mask, V for Vendetta, Anonymous, Occupy Movement ...)* (2012) documents protests from around the world where people wear the Guy Fawkes mask. I started making it after the Arab Spring had erupted and as the Occupy movement was gaining momentum. The Guy Fawkes mask was becoming the face of protest around the world and my work was monitoring that and trying to make sense of it. I also created an artist project for *X-TRA* magazine (Spring 2015), looking at the use of the Guy Fawkes mask in protests. With recent collages, I record every piece—every body—in the collage, by listing every source in the title—the protest occasion, the country, and the date. For my work for *The National* at Carriageworks in Sydney in (2017), there was a six-page title, because every

masked protester in the work was referenced. So, yes, now I want my audience to be able to identify the images, the protests and their references to historical movements.

### **What images did you chose for *Epochal Flourish* and why?**

The patterns that make up the zigzag bands are taken from a series of forty designs I developed for a *Propaganda Textiles* swatch book. If you read the wallpaper from bottom to top, the images are:

- Protester at Occupy New York, Zuccotti Park, 31 December 2011
- Black Bloc activist at Occupy Oakland, 26 October 2011 (this is repeated in the design)
- Two demonstrators at Operation Sea Arrrgh against the Church of Scientology, Washington DC, 14 June 2008
- Activist marching for International Sex Workers' Rights Day in Johannesburg Central Police Station, 4 March 2011
- Anti-Islam film protester in Srinagar, 18 September 2012
- Pro-LGBTIQ activist in Indonesia, 31 May 2012
- Pink Bloc protester at Gay Pride, Copacabana, 13 October 2013
- Pro-democracy supporter for the Occupy Movement, Mongkok shopping district in Hong Kong, 24 October 2014 (Spiderman).
- Protester who arrests anti-occupiers in Admiralty neighborhood, Hong Kong, 4 October 2014 (Captain America)
- University student protesting President Jean Bertrand Aristide, Port-au-Prince, 21 February 2004 (Mickey Mouse sweater).
- Anti-government protester, Caracas, 4 March 2014 (sunglasses)
- Free Pussy Riot demonstrator, Portland, 17 August 2012
- Auguste Rodin's *Thinker* spray-painted at the time of the La Marcha de las Putas, Buenos Aires, 12 August 2011

### **Why did you use the chevron as an organising principle?**

For their practicality. As a geometric device, the chevron helped me make visually cohesive wallpaper at the scale of City Gallery's walls. I needed a compositional device that would generate a larger continuous horizontal pattern that would override the micropatterns of each selected propaganda pattern. I have used the chevrons in other works too, as a nod to Bridget Riley works like *Descending* (1966).

### **How would you describe *Thronging Bluff Face*?**

It's the cape costume that I made for my performance in *Surface Tensions*. Cindy Rehm curated this evening of performances for the feminist organisation Craftswoman House, and it was held at the Institute for Labor Generosity Workers and Uniforms in Long Beach in 2014. It 'featured works that address gender through body and process-based performances that explore tactile and sensory experience, skins and surfaces, narratives expressed through materials, and the intersection of fashion and performance'. Other performers included Brian Getnick, Kate Hoffman, and Liz Nurenberg. My performance aimed to embody, rearrange, and reconfigure the 'in-between' hybrid masks of recent protests. My costume has three heads, each of which incorporates two masks, including the Anonymous Guy Fawkes mask painted black (used by Black Bloc) and the appropriated Waq'ollos mask with knitted Guy Fawkes characteristics (used by Free Pussy Riot protestors). In the performance, I would switch heads, switch masks. The performance now exists as a video document and the costume has become a sculpture. The costume can be exhibited as a quilt, a tent, or freestanding, as at City Gallery.

### **The costume is a patchwork.**

The top side is a patchwork of protest attire (masks, bandanas, scarves, T-shirts, etcetera). Items include a Pride flag bandanna and a Che Guevara t-shirt. Other pieces refer to Haight Ashbury, Subcomandante Marcos, and Anonymous (the hacktivists). There's also some UCP (official USA

military camouflage) and variously coloured keffiyehs. The underside is printed with photos of masked protesters, highlighting the use of hybrid masks at protests in the form of a visual essay.

**Eyelets appear in *Thronging Bluff Face* and in *Epochal Flourish*. Why?**

In *Thronging Bluff Face*, the eyelets are functional, so it can be transformed into a tent or hung as a quilt. In *Epochal Flourish*, they're part of a pattern, where they refer to Black Bloc's use of eyelets in their protest attire. For Black Bloc, they're practical (a means to hang tools and devices, such as pocket knives and drink bottles) but they also have a punk quality. In *Epochal Flourish*, the eyelets are presented aesthetically as a reference to practical necessity.

**Why is it a 'bluff' face?**

Because it relates to something at the heart of visual resistance and tactical frivolity: a will to deceive in order to shift an imbalanced power dynamic.

**Does feminism enter your work?**

Feminism is central. All the works developed from my MAS-archive stem from a line of feminist enquiry. When I was making performance art in the early 2000s, I asked the question: How do you make artwork about/with a body that desires to be looked at, but has equal power in that exchange? The solution was to use masks and patterned fabric so that the 'presenting' body remained anonymous. Later on, I asked another question: Where in the world's conflict zones are people wearing masks and/or patterned fabric to survive? So, all of my work comes out of an investigation into protecting bodies that might otherwise be objectified or threatened. This is just one aspect of how feminism registers in my work.

**In *Iconography of Revolt*, your work is shown alongside works by Rosemarie Trockel and Pussy Riot—it's the balaclava room! How do you see your work in relation to theirs?**

As an ongoing conversation.

Lucy Jackson is a Wellington-based critic. She writes regularly for *EyeContact*.