

Jemima Wyman: *At the Fray*

Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles

Mass mobilisation against political injustice has a long history, which has been documented as early as Ancient Rome. When humans grow tired of being oppressed and overlooked they join forces and rise. The world's 'leaders' increasingly disproportionate use of power and violence as a method to control has resulted in mass collective dissatisfaction and a time of global protest.

Since 2008 Los Angeles-based, Australian artist Jemima Wyman has been collecting and archiving images of protests she finds on the internet. The artist stated in a recent interview that she began to pull these images, 'in an effort to be active, embodied, and empathetic in the interface with the computer screen'.¹ Known for her work with colour, costume, pattern and camouflage, Wyman's recent exhibition *At the Fray* (2018) extends her previous investigations into masked demonstrators, pattern and textiles, presenting works that explore the symbolism and collectivity of protest. Hosted by independent alternative gallery Commonwealth and Council, the exhibition draws you in with the bright colour and formal lines, and holds interest with the relationships that are formed between image, pattern and material. Displayed across two rooms of the three-room gallery, *At the Fray* adopts the images, symbols and materials of political protest to create a visual documentation of our times.

I entered the exhibition via the room to the left of the main gallery space, where a mixed media, predominantly two-dimensional work was installed. *Deepsurface Fray Rage* (Anti-Prisoner Release protest banner, Israel, August 13, 2013 (Hands), Protester at the RNC for good jobs, healthcare, affordable education, equality and peace, Florida, USA, August 27, 2012 (A's), "We Will Not Go Back" protester, New York, USA, December 17, 2014 (Bullet holes), March against corruption, Brazil, September 7, 2011 (Finger-painted cross), Women's March, Pittsburgh, USA, January 21, 2017 (Vagina Eye), Anti-government protests, Skopje, Macedonia, May 4, 2016 (Paint bombs), Protest banner against Trump immigration policies, Los Angeles, USA, June 30, 2018 (Hands on hands), May Day protester medics, Seattle, USA, May 9, 2012 (Taped cross)) (2018) occupies one entire wall. The large collage of fabric panels, images and symbols have a limited colour palette of pink, red, black, white and grey, with a myriad of painted shapes that appear to be an extension from the selected photographs. The repetitive shapes and symbols command the space, with the painted gunshot holes, hands, central core imagery, crosses and A's becoming almost abstracted in their formation. The room sheet advises that the three-dimensional torso shape that sits in front of the panels is a Zeltbahn (shelter-half), a textile that was used by a range of soldiers as shelter, weather protection, camouflage, amongst other functions. Also covered in (hot pink) symbols, the object resembles armour, something one might wear into battle.

As I move into the central space of the exhibition, I am wondering about the relationship between this



from top: Jemima Wyman, *Deepsurface Fray Rage* (Anti-Prisoner Release protest banner, Israel, August 13, 2013 (Hands), Protester at the RNC for good jobs, healthcare, affordable education, equality and peace, Florida, USA, August 27, 2012 (A's), "We Will Not Go Back" protester, New York, USA, December 17, 2014 (Bullet holes), March against corruption, Brazil, September 7, 2011 (Finger-painted cross), Women's March, Pittsburgh, USA, January 21, 2017 (Vagina Eye), Anti-government protests, Skopje, Macedonia, May 4, 2016 (Paint bombs), Protest banner against Trump immigration policies, Los Angeles, USA, June 30, 2018 (Hands on hands), May Day protester medics, Seattle, USA, May 9, 2012 (Taped cross)), 2018. Custom sewn shelter-quarter spray-painted with original metal buttons, painted-photographs, metal armature, painted moving blankets, various painted fabric. Approx. 297.2x399.4x91.4cm; *Deepsurface and Cautionary signs* (Anonymous March, Los Angeles, USA, March 15, 2008 (Stars), March against Monsanto protesters, Florida, USA, October 12, 2013 (Tie-Dye), Budget-cut protester, London, March 26, 2011 (Cat), Anti-labor Law protester, Paris, France, June 14, 2016 (Stripes), Greenpeace activists against deforestation, Tartagal, Argentina, August 31, 2004 (Jaguar spots), Occupy Wall St protester, New York, USA, October 15, 2011 (Coin)), 2018. Painted photographs, spray-painted tarp, various painted fabric. Approx. 317.5 x 640.7 x 2.5 cm; Installation view, *At the Fray*, Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles. Courtesy the artist.

military accessory and the political imagery. This space houses many works, mostly on the walls with a large sculptural object in the centre. Immediately to my left is a colourful hooded blanket. Constructed out of radiant heat blankets, and custom-printed and hand dyed fabric, *Countermeasure Cloak* (2018) contains a visual diagram of all the ways the Zeltbahn can be used. Perhaps then, the Zeltbahns could be adopted by contemporary protesters, both as costume and shelter. Is the artist implying that the world will require that many more people take to the streets for extended periods, or is she offering a textile for the occasion?

Across the space there is another large collage, predominantly yellow, black and gold that also seems to be scaled to fit the wall. The photographs and images in this work appear a little more ambiguous, with their relationship to protest primarily communicated through the title, *Deepsurface and Cautionary signs* (Anonymous March, Los Angeles, USA, March 15, 2008 (Stars), March against Monsanto protesters, Florida, USA, October 12, 2013 (Tie-Dye), Budget-cut protester, London, March 26, 2011 (Cat), Anti-labor Law protester, Paris, France, June 14, 2016 (Stripes), Greenpeace activists against deforestation, Tartagal, Argentina, August 31, 2004 (Jaguar spots), Occupy Wall St protester, New York, USA, October 15, 2011 (Coin)) (2018). The scale of this work presents the images and patterns of protest as a monument of sorts. At the bottom, left-hand corner is a small crouching black and white masked body, which leads the eye to the central sculpture produced from the same material.

The three-dimensional, curved, tent-like object is constructed out of predominantly black and white masked bodies and faces printed onto fabric. *Mass Monument* (Counterillumination) (2018), appears to reference both a shelter and a shield. The zoomed-in masked faces, in combination with the reduced colour palette, results in a fierce and somewhat confronting object. The conglomerate of bodies presents a united front, there is solidarity in their anonymity. The scale of the work implicates my body; I, as the viewer, become one of them.

The final set of works includes four brightly painted Zeltbahns, their display and arrangement resembling formalist painting. They are again painted with symbols, some of which are repeated from the collaged works, while others appear new. The original camouflage pattern of these found objects peeks out in the fold of one. It is interesting to note that camouflage was first invented for these shelter-halves, with several experimental patterns produced on these accessories long before they became the fabric for military uniforms. En masse, and in the context of the sculptural piece, they become potential cloaks, shields and/or site-specific fashion for hiding the body. I imagine them on the body, with a mask on the wearer's face. These wearable objects then become part of the conversation about masking (of the body and the face) to become anonymous in a problematic political setting.

The title of the exhibition *At the Fray* places the artist, the artworks, and the viewer amongst the demonstration, we are there, it feels, in spirit. The colour blocking, geometric shapes, and symbols in the works speak of the impact of protest, the state of the world, and the potential for costume and anonymity to aid in the safety of mass mobilisation. I like to imagine seeing these items in public spaces, doing the work against the powers that be with the wearers in the future.

Courtney Coombs**Note**

1. Jemima Wyman's *Neo-Camouflage*, 'Jemima Wyman talks to Lucy Jackson about two of her works in *Iconography of Revolt*', City Gallery Wellington, 8 November 2018. See <https://citygallery.org.nz/blog/jemima-wymans-neo-camouflage/>