JEMIMA WYMAN
THE POWER OF PATTERNS

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 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You draw on many diverse cultural and art historical references in your work.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 keffiyeh 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 design that breaks up the contour of a body. And then I started to think 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. 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.

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.
You often engage with your audience through performance works and inviting participation in the making of works. Was this something you were led 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 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 — the visual shout-out. Similarly, 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 there is a greater scope. I am really grateful for what’s been made possible.

Tamzin Cull is Senior Program Officer, Children’s Art Centre, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art. Tamzin spoke with Jemima Wyman on 16 March 2014.

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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. Register by 28 March (priority bookings for Members).

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

T: 1300 840 734 | E: teens@qagoma.qld.gov.au

Endnotes

1 The keffiyeh is a traditional Middle Eastern head-wear 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 of different camouflage 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/ Camouflage/DazzleCamouflage.html, viewed 14 January 2014.

3 To paraphrase artist and writer the two camoufleurs 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’, 28 March 2007 http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4364ae4c-d316-11db-829f-000077bcafe8.html#axzz2E56rlFH5, viewed 14 January 2014.

4 The term dazzle painting was coined in 1917 by its British originator, Nevil Barrington. Barrie 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/ Camouflage/DazzleCamouflage.html, viewed 14 January 2014.