

Breathing in dark times: The atmoactivist collages of Jemima Wyman

By Tim Riley Walsh

A miasma of red, yellow, orange, grey, white, and black emission. Plumes curl and eddy. *Haze...* (2020) is a jostling, bubbling picture plane of suffocating fume by the artist Jemima Wyman. It looks like the end of the world. At points, its dramatic atmosphere recalls the biblical pandemonium of the late 19th century English painter John Martin. In Martin's *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1822), a natural disaster wreaks havoc on the Roman city: lava erupts, plumes of volcanic ash and earth blow skyward. At first glance it appears as if we look upon a subterranean hellscape. Such is the density of the cloud that hangs in the air that the sun is obstructed. The light cast upon the ground, where human figures cluster, is an enforced dusk from the end-of-days. Martin's work was hugely popular at the time as a producer of proto-blockbusters – a kind of painterly Michael Bay. The public queued (and paid) to witness the ancient world imploding in varying ways across his finely detailed canvases.

These appetites that Martin's audiences reflected—for fantasies of our world and its environments alight or in collapse—curious as they are, continue today. Yet in recent years, these scenes of destruction, their sulphureous clouds, lightning, and flame, have crossed more firmly across some undefined threshold or tipping point. What appeared once as allegories (that we did not heed) are now increasingly realities. This world is ablaze. As viewers, we draw now from experiences of the sheer and pressing propinquity

of global warming. Immolating marsupials on roadsides haunt the mind's eye. But, beyond its unlikely congestion of images, Wyman's *Haze...* is not a largely fictive scene like Martin's. For one, they are constructed from documentary images: gleaned from the internet as part of the artist's detailed process of witnessing. In this sense, they remain connected to some notion of truth and indexicality. Something about the colours is also familiar. The orange: that hue of light from the bushfire smog that descended on Sydney in late 2019 – the smoke so pervasive it set off evacuation alarms in CBD office blocks. The red: the shade of Mallecoota lit by a sickly, sea flare iridescence. And above it all, the ominous pyrocumulus clouds of a Black Summer. Wyman's new works are collages about breathing and persisting in dark times.

Camouflet and atmoterrorism

In early 2019, trails of smoke began to enter the work of the Los Angeles and Brisbane based Wyman. Wyman's work to date has shown a consistent interest in the lineage and method of photo collage. Though it exists across varied media, the artist's practice examines specifically the aesthetics of global activism. In a potent sense, Wyman's work creates a multi-focal portrait of protest across the Earth as communicated through bodies, often en masse. They show what visually connects seemingly disparate demands for equality, justice, or retribution. And the retaliation against these actions by state agents of discipline and control. Of particular interest to Wyman's earlier practice is camouflage as a method of concealment: of action, of intention, of identity. Though it emerged originally in the early 19th century, it was not until World War I that camouflage was more fully embraced by militaries. Though at first seemingly incongruent, camouflage and smoke are not unrelated. Smoke has historically been used as a means of concealment in conflict, though unlike camouflage

it does not blend into its environment: it troubles the very atmosphere, making the invisible (air) visible. Physiologically, smoke also irritates the eyes: actively impeding the viewer's capacity to see. Appropriately, the French etymological root of camouflage—*camouflet*—translates as “whiff of smoke in the face”.

For Peter Sloterdijk attacks against or attempts at controlling the air are indicative of pertinent changes in our recent history. Sloterdijk calls this “atmoterrorism”¹, the denaturalization of the atmosphere as a means of assault on the environment that sustains our lives; as opposed to a typical attack upon a body. In the same trenches in which camouflage was more fully embraced, so too chemical warfare was born. The significance of the German chlorine gas attack on French forces on 22 April 1915 for Sloterdijk—beyond it being the first example of this new method of chemical conflict, which extended, as Anna Feigenbaum notes, to the development of ‘non-lethal’ (thus ‘acceptable’) applications of chemicals like tear gas for use in crowd control—is the fuller realisation of the necessity of the atmosphere for our existence. This holds specific relevance to the current climate crisis. As Erik Bordeleau summarises, this event from Sloterdijk's perspective “plunged the average human being-in-the-world into radical modernity where environment can no longer be taken for granted.”² Over the course of the last century, this was reasserted on a much broader scale by humanity's attritional, self-inflicted attacks against the vast living space it dwells within. A kind of slow and torturous kamikaze. As David Wallace-Wells notes, since the end of WWII we have burned around 85 percent of the Industrial Age's overall carbon debt.³ Wyman's collages combine documentation of these varied fumes: the yellowed tear gas of riot police, the black smog from activist-lit fires, the white of smoke grenades—building to create a cumulative image of the precarious world of the present.

A haze descends

Beyond smoke's capacities for concealment, disruption, destruction, lies a further one: as an indication of distress, and more positively, a demand for rescue and recognition. The arc of a flare, which Wyman's plumes echo in shape, says simply and powerfully: I am here. Though ambiguity remains a central part of Wyman's collages here—the source of these trails are purposefully excised by the artist's hand—by carefully reading the works' accompanying titles, we learn of the protest actions they have emerged from. This divorcing of the act from its effect suggests an important ambivalence to this scene: it is hard to orient or define oneself when the fog of war descends. The result, pointedly, is a vast, undefined expression of defiance. As much as these collages acknowledge the troubled and complex air we breathe in the contemporary, they still foreground the importance of resistance against ongoing oppression. Marijn Nieuwenhuis, writing in the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, Turkey in 2013, sees the struggle for public space as “increasingly taking place in the air.”⁴ Wyman's work echoes this. Though the future's visibility is poor, where a real desire for change remains, the promise of better persists too. Wyman's atmoactivist collages are a reminder of our power and our fragility. Wrest back the knife at our throat and cut the sky.

¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009)

² Erik Bordeleau, “On Sloterdijk's *Terror from the Air*: The Book of (Political Air Conditioning),” *Cultural Politics* 6 (Nov 2010): 389–391.

³ David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019), 9.

⁴ Marijn Nieuwenhuis, “Terror in the Air in Istanbul,” *Society & Space*, January 8, 2014, <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/terror-in-the-air-in-istanbul>.