

Q and A

# Jemima Wyman Psychedelic Protest



Jemima Wyman Declassified 8 2023.

From the coalfaces of revolutionary struggle to the catwalk and back, signifiers of protest and revolt circulate and evolve. Via mass media and social media, this image repertoire is expanding and mutating faster than ever. Jemima Wyman is fascinated with the role patterned fabrics and masks are playing in protests and insurrections the world over.

Wyman is from Queensland, but her project took shape in Los Angeles, where she's lived since 2004. There, her fascination with pattern in general honed in on its political applications, with dissidents using patterns and masks to both conceal their identities and to stand out, disappearing into the crowd while foregrounding the cause.

Wyman is known for her photo collages, in which masked and patterned individuals are further subsumed into overriding patterns. Recently, she expanded into images of smoke from protests, collaging them into tornados of turmoil—the gathering storm.

Wyman returns in October for her solo show *Crisis Patterns* at Artspace Mackay. It's a homecoming—she spent her formative years in Mackay. Robert Leonard talked to her about her show and how her thinking was informed by her psychedelic childhood.

**ROBERT LEONARD:** In your work, you have long explored pattern and decoration.

**JEMIMA WYMAN:** I was always interested in pattern. Early on, I thought about complex fractal patterns in terms of science and psychology, and I related the internal micro-patterns of the body with macro-patterns in the universe. I got interested in how pattern relates to the body and to our relations with the world. In my early video and performance works, I used fabric patterns to create spaces that were, at once, exotic and humorous, pleasurable and terrifying. I wanted to offer complicated psychological experiences, leaving viewers to wrestle with their feelings.

**Was there a feminist dimension to your inquiry?**

Definitely. I explored all the feminist and psychoanalytic issues about wanting to perform as a woman. I addressed the objectification of the female performing body but I also had an interest in the

pleasure of being looked at—the power dynamics of scopophilia. Yayoi Kusama was always important to me, because her dot pattern linked her body to the environment in a psychodynamic way, blending in and standing out, acknowledging the political dimensions of the pleasures of looking and being looked at, performing and embodying.

**You left for America in 2004. How did that change your work?**

In 2004 I received the Australia Council Studio, to live and work in Los Angeles; then, in 2005, the Anne and Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship, to study at CalArts. Doing my master's in the US changed the dynamic of my work. At CalArts, the emphasis was on developing a critical language around your practice. I was criticised for my performance video *Lady in Red* (2005), saying that I was just objectifying the female body. I disagreed. I think it's more complex. But, from that response, I started to think more about how a performing body could play with the gaze. I read Laura Mulvey's famous essay on the male gaze, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. It made me ask: Where are masks and patterns being used by people who want to be looked at but also have power in anonymity? That's where my interest—in real-world political situations where pattern, camouflage, and masking are used for survival and protest—emerged.

I started researching liberation armies around the world, like the Zapatistas in Mexico, with their organising principle of 'horizontalism', their irregular uniforms, and their DIY use of media. However, working with such material became problematic with the rise of ISIS. Then the global protest movements started to snowball. There was the Arab Spring; the Occupy movement in New York and Los Angeles, then people everywhere were wearing Guy Fawkes masks, and there was the Free Pussy Riot movement. It just kept going. Protestors were using masks and patterned fabric practically and symbolically, for survival and to speak to their causes, but also as a kind of social skin, a collective camouflage. In 2008 I started documenting that subterfuge of counterpower by collecting those images from the internet, and I just kept going. I call it my 'MAS-Archive'.

**Camouflage is about the individual disappearing into the group and into the world.**

Disappearing into your environment, if you get it right, or standing out, if you get it wrong. If you're prey, then your camouflage is an acknowledgement that predators can see you. My interest in camouflage is acknowledging the subjectivity of looking out from a body being looked at, and what's at play in that. Masks are a scary proposition because you don't know who's behind them. They introduce ideas of multiple personas, multiple subjectivities, and supernatural powers.

I'm interested in decoration as a visual tool for communicating political messages. Over the past thirteen years, I've made hand-cut photocollages as experiments in pattern making. I pull images from my MAS-Archive to create them. These 'ideological textiles' are expressed as fabric-swatch books and swatch installations, and as wallpapers and curtains. In the surface-design community, patterns that contain images of real things are called 'conversational', because they offer talking points, they generate conversation. My collages bring disparate historical moments into a partial yet sweeping account of global unrest. More recently, their titles list all the constituent images: protest, location, and date. The titles can go on for pages. They're thousands of words long.

**You use decorative, visually seductive formats, such as rosettes from stained-glass windows. There's a play of formal order and political disorder. Why?**

I'm putting the viewer into a complicated position, in making potentially fearful images pleasing to look at.

**You've been making smoke collages since 2018. What attracted you to smoke?**

The smoke collages are like atlases, mapping the use of smoke in protests around the world. Like camouflage, smoke is something between clothing, architecture, and atmosphere—it literally links our bodies to space. My interest in smoke started in 2018 with the Yellow Vests in France, a populist working-class protest movement prompted by the effect of fuel taxes on economic inequality. They wear hi-visibility vests. In France,



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Jemima Wyman Haze 19 ... 2023.

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everyone carries one in their car, and, when they break down, they wear them for visibility, for safety, and to signal distress. The Yellow Vests also use yellow flares. It's become a brand.

With protests, the colour of smoke relates to specific places and causes. If it's brightly coloured, it's a flare; if it's white, it's usually tear gas; if it's black, it's usually burning property—burning vehicles with Black Lives Matter protests, burning tyres in Palestine or South Africa, where they light tyres and roll them into police barricades to create a smoke screen. In Poland, protests against abortion restrictions use red and pink flares. The Women's Movement favour purple and green. Climate activists like orange. Animal-rights groups use red, because it relates to animal blood, I guess.

**Your collages seem to be predominantly about left-wing protest movements, but you str in other things. And, with the smoke collages, there's the smoke of the protestors and the smoke of the authorities, used as a deterrent.**

It's less about left and right, more about being a cartography of protest across different political ideological positions—recording and witnessing the contestation of democracy.

**Your smoke collages are seductive, with different-coloured plumes aesthetically arranged, like bouquets of flowers. You take things that could be ugly, scary, or threatening, and make them beautiful. You domesticate them.**

The smoke collages remind me of those sublime images of space from the James Webb Space Telescope, which are all gases and light. Smoke also refracts the light and becomes beautiful and poetic, but there are distressing things happening behind it. From a distance, my collages look beautiful, but they're alarming when you get up close and see the bodies inside the smoke. I've also been thinking about John Ruskin in Victorian England. He did a series of watercolours of skies, mapping weather patterns. He observed that England's skies were becoming darker with industrialisation and spoke of the 'plague wind'. It got me thinking of my smoke collages as cultural barometers of our times.

**Is your upcoming show about Mackay claiming you or you claiming Mackay?**

Perhaps both. In 1994 my high school in Mackay gave me its inaugural cultural-achievement award. They later named it after me and awarded it to others. It's been going for years now. I've met other people from my school who won it.

**You're a role model.**

It's a sweet and touching thing. It'll be nice to do the show, because, when I grew up in Mackay, there wasn't a gallery; there was nowhere to see art. The library sometimes had small travelling shows in a little room. The first time I saw contemporary art was when I was about fifteen, on a school trip to Queensland Art Gallery.

**What will be new and interesting about the show?**

In the show, I'm trying to tune into my childhood experience. I was born in Sydney, but my parents moved to Queensland, onto a property without a built structure and no electricity. By the time I was in grade four, we were in Mackay, and I stayed there with Mum until the end of high school. Then I moved to Brisbane to go to QUT. So I spent most of my childhood and adolescence in Mackay. My parents were hippies and visionaries. Though we never went to museums or saw art, my experience growing up in Mackay was psychedelic. With the Mackay show, I started to think about psychedelic regionalism.

**Explain.**

My mum was a solo parent and very creative. She was always making things and dressing in an unusual way. She took fashion magazines and decouped the kitchen—the cupboards, pantry door, everything—so our domestic space was like a living collage. She painted walls different colours. She made faux leadlights by painting on the glass doors. Velvet curtains were taken down to make clothing and clothes were made into rag mats. She would put on fashion parades and dye her hair multiple colours before you could even access hair dyes—

she used food colouring. There was this DIY dynamic between architecture, furnishings, and the body.

**And your dad?**

My dad was a builder. In the early 1980s he showed me a papier-mâché model he'd made of a three-storey pentagon house, with circular windows, circular doors, and a circular three-storey chimney. You could look up through the circular doors into the central chimney. It was based on a near-death experience that he had—it was looking up the birth canal as architecture. He later built that house in the rainforest, on the Atherton Tablelands.

**Are you making new work for Mackay?**

I'm making ten swatches for ceiling papers. Ceiling papers are like wallpaper, but for the ceiling. The swatches are more smokeskapes. Each gathers protest-smoke images from the MAS-Archive that share causes. For example, I might pull smoke just from climate-crisis or animal-rights protests. I was thinking about the smoke being all one colour for a specific movement, but they haven't quite worked in that way. I'm using the idea of the swatch to play around formally with the smoke, but they will provide conversational moments about where the smoke is from. All the sources will be listed in the titles. I guess it's also about complicating the art-history notion that patterned fabric is decorative, passive, and feminine, when it can be weaponised.

**Your show will feel like a black hole. The good people of Mackay will enter their regional gallery to experience these superdense nuggets of protest sucked in from all over the world.**

That's such a psychedelic way of thinking about it. There will be two other shows at the same time. One is my aunt, Mandy Quadrio, who's showing upstairs. The other is Kate Harding. It's her mum, a quiltmaker. We're all Indigenous female artists from the area.

**I wasn't aware of your First Nations background until recently. You are a Palawa woman, on your dad's side.**

In the past, I wasn't very vocal or public in sharing my personal information, mainly because it's a very traumatic history for my dad and his family. Then I was in the *Violent Soil* exhibition curated by Thonnie Scarce and Claire Watson at Artspace Mackay in 2019, and they asked for the artists' language groups. Because the show was about the silenced Indigenous histories and the violence that had happened, I wanted to own it. It felt important to be on the record regarding my ancestral histories, and, since then, I'm feeling somewhat okay with it.

*Jemima Wyman Crisis Patterns, Artspace Mackay, 18 October –15 December 2024.*

*Robert Leonard is Director of the Institute of Modern Art, Meanjin/Brisbane.*



Jemima Wyman, 2023. Photo: James Nash.

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