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A PRACTICE OF PROTEST AND PROTECTION: THE MASKS OF JEMIMA WYMAN

Lucy Jackson

It was just over a week into New Zealand's COVID-19 lockdown when an unlikely group of images began appearing on Instagram. The pictures documented the making and wearing of masks and, dissimilar to the clinical PPE (personal protective equipment) that dominates the imagery of this current health crisis, they were made from fabrics already featuring masks and their protester wearers. It was the work of Jemima Wyman. Although the artist acknowledges this is a difficult time globally, she also recognises that she is fortunate her artmaking can survive in isolation.

If Wyman's practice has a single motif, it is the mask. Sydney-born and based in Brisbane and Los Angeles, Wyman's work explores the ideologies of visual resistance. Whether it is in the form of sculpture, performance, textiles, wallpaper or collage, she draws on her vast archive – a collection of thousands of photographs from the last 12 years of people in protest around the world, from multiple Occupy movement demonstrations to the recent uprising in Hong Kong. Called to such images of upheaval and uncertainty, it was perhaps inevitable that the COVID-19 global outbreak would enter Wyman's remit. Almost always unidentifiable, the people in Wyman's ideological textiles are disguised by masks, costumes, pattern and camouflage. In this time of contagion and panic, Wyman's practice is resonant in both showcasing the use of masks, but also in archiving our individual and collective history of protest and pandemic for the future.

From her studio in Los Angeles, Wyman continues to work on the sixth and seventh parts of her 'Flourish' series, which looks at the methods and modes of camouflage. Her new collages investigate the visual resistance of aposematism (the use of colour and patterning by animals as a protection against predators) and its manifestation in both biology and protest. When viewed from a distance, the wearer is offered the safety of camouflage, but up close the insignia operates as a hazard sign, a warning for the future. Due to the repeat patterning, high contrast and vivid colours (usually yellow and black),

the predator learns to avoid these animals (such as snakes and wasps). Aposematism offers protesters protection as well as entry into a 'social imaginary space' of collective desire for change.

As expected, pandemic imagery has surfaced and suffused the artist's recent practice. Included in the new works are photographs of protesters wearing plague masks in last year's 'Extinction Rebellion' protests in Manchester. Although these demonstrations focused on environmental change, Wyman thinks it was prescient for protesters to choose such masks just six months before COVID-19 entered our psyches. She is currently exploring the ideological implications and visual effects of the 'Plague doctor' mask. Worn in fourteenth-century Europe by specialist pandemic doctors, it mimics the shape of a bird's face, with protruding glass eye covers and a long beak which was filled with sweet-smelling herbs to protect the wearer against airborne diseases such as the bubonic plague. This mask has emerged again as COVID-19 unfolds.¹

The images on Wyman's Instagram are not of 'Plague doctor' masks but, rather, document a more colourful and less terrifying alternative. In Los Angeles, people were strongly advised to wear masks in public; in the *New York Times* there were instructions for sewing your own. Wyman used the scraps of her material archive to make masks for her family and friends. With her four-year-old's mask, Wyman employed imagery from the Hong Kong uprising where protesters dressed as superheroes like Captain America and Spiderman. The materials were leftovers from *Propaganda Textiles* (2015–17), an artist book comprising 40 different swatch patterns of masked protesters from around the world.

It is the shifting psychology around their wearing that especially intrigues Wyman about masks. Historically, many governments have attempted to ban them – most recently in Hong Kong where authorities have sought to identify and persecute otherwise concealed 'violent' protesters. We have been told this will keep everyone safe. However, now

This is a highly detailed and symmetrical collage artwork, likely a print by Robert Rauschenberg titled 'Yellow Flower'. The composition is a complex, multi-layered mandala. At the center is a large, bright yellow flower. Radiating from this center are various elements: faces (some human, some stylized), butterflies (primarily yellow and black), and abstract patterns. The color palette is dominated by yellow, black, and white, with some hints of brown and blue. The overall effect is one of intense visual complexity and a sense of organic, yet meticulously constructed, harmony. The image is a full-page spread, with the artwork filling the entire frame.

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we are being ordered to do the opposite and wear masks, again for our protection. The facial coverings that Wyman fashions embody this contradiction. Made from fabric depicting the intentional anonymity of protesters to afford them refuge, Wyman's masks make the wearer doubly anonymous – for both their individual and collective safety.

The artist maintains that masks can be used for both protest and protection. There are also psychological implications of wearing them, signalling fear or showing threat. This is a common function of the mask, and the persona adopted while wearing one. As an item of clothing, it is also a declaration or statement. Wyman says there is already a 'swirl of fashion reportage about the mask',² which is understandable when everyone is wearing them to the supermarket.

As part of Wyman's ongoing enquiry, the mask is a crucial sign to be created and decoded in these times where normality ceases. What will the psychological effects be, when simply going outside means encountering people 'made strange' by these accessories of anonymity? When masks are used by everyone, do they present a hierarchy in their type, or by their presence? We are not to know. Perhaps in 50 years, when we look at Wyman's photographic archive, we might have a clearer idea. Will we look terrifying to our future generations' eyes?

1. See 'Coronavirus: Hellesdon plague doctor given advice by police', *bbc.com*, 4 May 2020: www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-norfolk-52533718, accessed 5 May 2020.
2. From an email interview with the author, 14 April 2020.

Jemima Wyman, studio selfie with mask, Los Angeles, 3 April 2020, from Instagram @jemimawyman

Bottom:

Jemima Wyman, studio documentation, Los Angeles, 3 April 2020, from Instagram @jemimawyman

Opposite:

Jemima Wyman, *Deepsurface* (Pro-sex industry protesters demanding 'right to work', South Korea, 11th October 2004), 2019, acrylic paint on digital photograph with cut-outs, 51 x 76cm; courtesy the artist; Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles; Milani Gallery, Brisbane; and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney and Singapore

