

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Hidden in Plain Sight: Unity, Cloaked in a Web of Camouflage

By ROBERTA SMITH

BOSTON — Like it or not, Thomas Hirschhorn's art is some of the best being made today. Cogent, urgent, pertinent and original, his work has achieved an exuberant yet fuel-efficient fusion of medium and message that builds on an array of avant-garde traditions but is more accessible, and often more fun, than many of its precedents. The artist's latest installation, which engulfs both floors of exhibition space at the Institute of Contemporary Art here, bears this out.

Mr. Hirschhorn, a Paris-based artist born in Switzerland in 1957, studied to be a graphic designer but then decided that the discipline allowed less political expression than he had expected. He switched to fine art, and some of his first exhibited works, from the late 1980's and early 90's, were wall pieces made from found materials, somewhat similar to those of the British sculptor Tony Cragg. In Mr. Hirschhorn's case, cardboard, paper and wood scraps, often with added drawing or collage, were arranged to depict the levitating space-station-like abstractions of Russian Suprematism.

In the mid-1990's, Mr. Hirschhorn began to make a name for himself by invading museums, parks and international exhibitions with sprawling, messy yet obsessively focused temporary environments. Implosions of collage and assemblage, they used mostly familiar, disposable materials - packing tape, cardboard and cheap lumber - embedded with photographs, text fragments, books, graffiti, videos and everyday objects. These obviously handmade patchworks have tended to delineate vast systems concerning everything from philosophy to global travel. The best of them change your notion of the possibilities of both art and life, a reminder that the main role of an artwork is to raise consciousness through form.

True to his particular sense of form, the current installation in Boston resembles an enormous and bizarre parade float trapped in a small building. A chattering, meandering exegesis on the subject of camouflage, it is an unrelenting obstacle course for the mind and body. Because it centers on a visual motif with built-in abstract, decorative and even figurative implications, the piece has a clarity and immediacy that Mr. Hirschhorn's environments don't always achieve.

Intrinsically geared to a post-9/11 world, the newest Hirschhorn manages to be vehemently antiwar without taking sides (how Swiss) and to provide an astounding overview of life on Earth in 2005. Its title is an implicitly imperative chant: "Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress." Through dense displays of photographs, clothing, music videos, mannequins, maps, dismembered books and quantities (quantities!) of camo tape, it demonstrates the global ubiquity of camouflage in art, fashion, sports, entertainment, toys and accessories, as well as the military and the paramilitary.

Mr. Hirschhorn's work builds on the legacies of Russian Constructivist agitprop, Dada, Fluxus and Conceptualism. He is often likened to the shamanistic Joseph Beuys and his social sculpture, albeit drained of Beuys's ego. But Mr. Hirschhorn's ancestral lineage also includes the artists Rod Grooms, Claes Oldenburg, Saul Steinberg and, of course, the great Swiss-German accumulator and encyclopedist Dieter Roth, who knew a thing or two about cardboard. Other Swiss antecedents are Peter Fischli; David Weiss, whose comic classic film of an extended chain reaction of junk, "Der Lauf Der Dinge" ("The Way Things Go"), might be described as a Hirschhorn installation in motion; and Adolf Wölfli, one of art's greatest visual obsessives. Interestingly, Mr. Hirschhorn was born and raised in Bern, where Wölfli lived most of his life in a mental hospital, building his own encompassing universe from form, color, language and even music.

In essence, "Utopia, Utopia" asks a simple question: in a time of such violence, why do so many of the world's people use garments and objects covered with abstract patterns symbolizing armed combat? As its title suggests, the show offers the giddy possibility, refuted by so many tragic events yet essentially and profoundly true, that all humans are united. We are one; our unity is absurdly manifest in a worldwide web of camouflage that infiltrates every aspect of our lives, from trivial to treacherous.

With the walls and floors of the museum covered in hand-painted camouflage linoleum and cardboard, held in place by the versatile camo tape, "Utopia, Utopia" proceeds through different massings of evidence in support of this point, and various kinds of display formats. The war museum, the punk boutique, the art fair all come to mind, as do an Army-Navy store run by a madman and the inside of Jonah's whale, especially when passageways start feeling like alimentary canals and various big forms press in like internal organs. These include two large, bomb-shaped cylinders that turn out to be copies of World War II airplane fuselages, as well as individual chunks of camouflage pattern that, liberated into three dimensions and as big as large trunks, evoke tanks, jets or landing craft.

Camouflage garments, from regulation Army uniforms to underwear, are displayed on crowded groups of store mannequins, truncated torsos and heads, along with hats, gloves and backpacks. Photographs of American soldiers in Iraq are clustered on pedestals, like family snapshots on a sidetable, as are pictures of hunters, athletes, movie stars, laborers, South American guerrillas and Sunday shoppers. Camouflage is us.

Still other surfaces display camo-patterned watches, wallets, cameras, lighters, stuffed toys, refrigerator magnets, washcloths, peace symbols, support-our-troops stickers and guns - both toy and real. Camo-tape folding screens are plastered with more images: poster-size snapshots of babies in head-to-toe camouflage, for example. Madonna, Missy Elliott and Destiny's Child appear in military regalia in music videos that play soundlessly on monitors, so you concentrate on the visuals.

Camouflage may or may not be the new black, but it is certainly the new plaid, identifying nations, tribes and clans as surely as tartan. Also mounted on screens are pages from a book detailing the camouflage used by different armies and insurgent groups; the proliferation of conflict is charted country by country, along with the proliferation of visual variations. These motifs imply untold tragedies of civil war and resistance, but their connections to art can be startling. The lavender, red and purple camouflage of a suppressed pro-democratic group in Indonesia evokes the dragon-and-cloud designs of Chinese textiles.

Other displays remind us that camouflage was developed during World War I, almost always with help from artists. The Frenchman Fernand Léger, for example, is represented here by a reproduction of a camouflage study from 1916-17. Andy Warhol's camouflage self-portraits are included, as are big flat camouflage cutout shapes strung on chains that resemble wounded Calder mobiles in captivity.

The camo tape that holds so much together here is frequently used to excess. It upholsters institutional couches and an armchair, conjuring up an unusually hip recruiting center. It doubles as sculpture material, built up into outsize lumps that project from mannequins' heads and bodies like metastasizing cancers

or big ideas straining for expression; the effect brings to mind both the migrating body parts of the Chapman brothers' mannequin-sculptures and the dresses with exaggerated sewn-in bulges, from 1997, by Commes des Garçons. Camo tape also forms mountainous carbuncles on dozens of maps and globes, suggesting newly added land masses: insurgent geology.

Language is every bit as plentiful as the camo tape, but is used as an antiadhesive that disrupts, creates fissures and opens things up. The words come from an extended and rather impenetrable essay by Marcus Steinweg, a young German philosopher whose work Mr. Hirschhorn admires. (The essay is also available in the free catalogs stacked at the exhibition's entrance.) The cut-and-pasted snippets convert Mr. Steinweg's words into the realm of concrete poetry and can have an inspirational ring. "The Place of Truth Cannot Be the Universe of Facts." "Must Make Content." "An Artist Without Borders." "Dream World." Mr. Hirschhorn also provides larger chunks of Mr. Steinweg's text spray-painted on expanses of paper in big forthright letters.

Mr. Hirschhorn's achievement rests on his ability to make political ideas and philosophical language accessible in aggressively visual and physical terms. His art is a rematerialized Conceptualism, a joining of counterculture idealism and Post-Minimal Process Art that the artists and protesters of the late 1960's and early 70's only dreamed of.

Brilliantly unpretentious, dopey and sly, "Utopia, Utopia" creates a sense of chaos, plenty and conflict commensurate with contemporary life. It then forces us to experience on its own terms, yet in a way that is notably affirmative. Mr. Hirschhorn does this by converting the investment of time, thought and labor that is part of the making and experiencing of art into an accessible, spatial blow by blow. We see what might be called "the work that went into the work" with a directness that demystifies artistic talent and celebrates the more basic skills of attention, planning and perseverance. We may or may not be persuaded by the unity his work reveals. More in the way of camouflage burkas, veils and Arab scarves might help. But Mr. Hirschhorn's example of rigor, openness, pragmatism and joyfulness is as useful as it is inspirational - in both art and life.