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Portraits of a Camoufleur

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
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ABSTRACT

BA, Studio Art, State University of New York at Cortland, May 2017

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Portraits of a Camoufleur is a body of photographic work which features military veterans who have transitioned back and forth between the military and civilian world. The photographic sculptures serve as portraits created by stacking collected archive photographs together inside shadowbox frames. The photographs have also had camouflage patterns physically cut out of them which reveal more of the underlying images and experiences the veterans have provided. The work serves as a window into military experiences, attempting to close the gap that exists between military and civilian culture.

Portraits of a Camoufleur

When I enlisted into the military, my recruiter described the boot camp experience to me before I shipped out. He said, “they break you down so that they can build you up into a Marine.” What he was alluding to was that through mental and physical conditioning those who volunteer into military service relearn everything they know. Their identity, habits, and personal value system are reconstructed so that they can survive in extreme situations. In my thesis work titled *Portraits of a Camoufleur*, I explore this idea of breaking a person into pieces and reassembling them into something new. If joining the military requires a radical breakdown of self, then it stands to reason that when returning to the civilian world, the process would need to be reversed or repeated in order to successfully transition. My subjects are veterans, each of whom went through this boot camp process. For this artwork, I have created a process to break down portraits of the veterans, which were taken during their time in service and reassemble them to construct a portrait of the person who has transitioned out of the military.

This work is achieved by collecting personal archival photographs from service members and then manipulating those photos by laser cutting modern military camouflage patterns out of the images and layering these pieces back together. The act of layering creates a new portrait, which is pieced together from photographs that appear to be mundane but are significant to the veteran who provided them. Camouflage was chosen as the pattern to be laser cut into the images for a number of reasons, including how it is designed to break up the outline of the body.

However, the same pattern that once gave these veterans a sense of safety no longer benefits them once they have transitioned out of the military. My artwork explores the gap between civilian and military culture and examines veterans who find themselves unmistakably situated between the two.

Each portrait is 16 inches wide by 20 inches tall and approximately two inches thick. In the gallery, they stand isolated on individual pedestals at head height. This is a reference to sculptural busts. The portraits stand freely on top of the pedestals at eye level, confronting the viewer, and are framed within a shadow box. The shadow box is a direct reference to those traditionally given to service members during retirement. They often contain the medals and awards a service member earns, symbolizing specific experiences. Within the frame of my artwork, there are multiple layers of photographs, which have been cut apart and separated by glass, allowing the lower subsequent layers to be seen. While the lower layers are personal archive photographs, the top layer is a portrait in profile of the veteran.

In this top layer, the head and hair have been physically cut out, framing the seemingly chaotic forms of the photos underneath. Profiles specifically are readily identifiable; we can discern apparent gender, age, and identity from a simple outline of the face. I refer to the top layer of this collage as the shell or the mask. George Santayana describes images as shells, “no less integral parts of nature than are the substances they cover, but better addressed to the eye and more open to observation.”¹ This profile is the real camouflage of a veteran, it is the mask they wear in public that is as Santayana describes, “better addressed to the eye.” However, in

1. *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* (New York: Scribner's, 1922), pp. 131-32.

order to really see the story, to understand the veteran, and cross this gap, we need to look past this shell.

The title of this body of work, *Portraits of a Camoufleur*, is a description of how the work should be understood. This work is fundamentally a series of portraits. The Tate Museum defines a portrait as “a representation of a particular person.”² Using this definition, my artwork represents people who have relied on the art of camouflage to survive physically and socially in the most extreme environment, war. A person who employs or is skilled in the art of camouflage is called a *Camoufleur*. The particular people I am representing in this body of work are all veterans, they have all worn the camouflage uniform, making them Camoufleurs by definition. Each portrait is titled after the veterans last name. In the civilian world, people are informally identified with their first name and formally with a combination of their first and last name or a prefix and last name. In the military, your last name is literally printed on the front of your uniform so that you are easily identified. Everyone including your peers refers to you by your last name. Last names become one of the few identifiers a person has that survives the process of breaking down and rebuilding.

When I connect with a new veteran and explain the project to them, I ask them to give me copies of their photographs from time in service and for the stories behind these snapshots. Some photographs are taken during graduation ceremonies or at the end of a backbreaking training exercise. Others show parts of a deployment, proof of their own existence after a close encounter with death, or just a happy memory with friends in the cafeteria. Each of these snapshots commemorates a significant personal experience of the veteran, which has shaped them into the

2. Tate. "Portrait – Art Term." Tate. Accessed January 27, 2019. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/portrait>.

person they are today. After receiving the images and their stories, I chose the photographs that I worked with based on aesthetic factors, the significance of the moment, the quality of the original image, and the dominant color visible in the photograph.

In the portrait titled *Jackson*, the shell layer is a profile portrait of a man with wavy hair and a short beard. The head has been physically cut out of the photograph leaving a hole in the shape of his profile. Visible inside that hole are the laser cut photographs that I collected from him. These images are layered between sheets of glass, as unfinished puzzles laying on top of one another. Most visible is a photograph that originally showed a group of service members dressed in full woodland camouflage and bulletproof vests. The Marines are posing for a group photo somewhere in the middle of the woods with a military working dog. Now, because the original image has been cut up, it looks like a jigsaw puzzle of tree branches and shrubbery with a few tired and dirty faces poking through the foreground. Below this layer, we only see fragments of images. A glass of beer, a hand, part of a smile, flowers, and a graphic t-shirt are some of the details which peer between the holes cut through each successive layer. Each of the photos becomes less and less clear as you stare into the lower layers of the artwork. While viewing this artwork, the viewer is given a slight sense of voyeurism as if looking into the head or memories of someone they do not know. The top layer, the cut-out profile, is not even looking back. This is the deceptive part of the camouflage. As the viewer continues to look, they are met with their reflection in the glass. Behind the glass are faces and eyes looking back, parts of the photos that were not removed, confronting but giving permission to the viewer. The photographs were taken with the understanding of being seen, as evidence for those who were not there to witness these experiences.

Less than half of one percent of the American population makes up the all-volunteer military force that exists today.³ The Government Accounting Office published a report stating that in 1992 the attrition rate within the first 12 months for enlisted service members was between 29 and 39 percent, even as the military branches have continued to increase the mental and physical standards for those recruited.⁴ This high standard is necessary because training to go to war is demanding, both mentally and physically by its nature. It requires service members to make decisions that benefit the group before themselves. This is arguably the most striking difference between modern American society and its military. It is also the reason that the “breaking down to build back up” is necessary when transitioning between the two. In his book *Tribe*, Sebastian Junger points out that adversity, like that experienced by service members, “often leads people to depend more on one another...”⁵ Junger is a journalist who was embedded within an American infantry unit operating in Korengal Valley, Afghanistan. Junger argues this interdependency is what makes service members miss war and come to resent civilian life once they have transitioned out of the military. American civilian culture is distinct from the military because it values individual identity and accomplishment over the community. It is why my recruiter had described the process as he did. Being willing to sacrifice yourself for the good of the community requires a foundational shift in ideology, moral values, and identity. To be built in the “military way” requires a radical breakdown of everything you know.

3. Demographics of the U.S. Military." Council on Foreign Relations. April 24, 2018. Accessed January 19, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/article/demographics-us-military>.

4. Gebicke, Mark E. *MILITARY ATTRITION DOD Needs to Better Analyze Reasons for Separation and Improve Recruiting Systems*. Testimony. United States General Accounting Office, Department of Defense. Washington, D.C.: Government Publishing Office.

5. Junger, Sebastian. *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*. New York, NY: Twelve, an imprint of Grand Central Publishing, 2016.

This contrast of “we vs me” is not experienced solely by the military. This mentality is cultivated in cultures where there is a deep interdependency on one another for survival. National Geographic Photographer Kiliiii Yuyan observed this same phenomenon in a community that lives on St. Lawrence Island, which is located between Alaska and Russia. The island culture is very family oriented, but it is a very impoverished place for many of the inhabitants. Yuyan describes families that do not have enough mattresses for people to sleep on. During the Q&A session after his *Wish You Were Here* artist talk at the George Eastman Museum on October 11th, 2018, Yuyan was asked whether the children in the village leave if given the opportunity. Yuyan responded by recounting stories of kids who left the island to go to school on the mainland but would just as often return to their village because the mainland culture seemed selfish and unappealing in contrast to their interdependent island community.⁶

When cutting the images, I chose to use camouflage patterns for several reasons. Camouflage is the paradoxical child of art and war, it must be seen to appear invisible. Military camouflage protects the service member by disrupting the silhouette of a body with contrasting highlights and shadows.⁷ This tactic is known as “dazzle” and was first adopted by militaries when it hired artists to camouflage military forces. Lucien-Victor Guirand, a pastel painter who led the French Camouflage Department in World War One once said: “In order to deform totally the aspect of an object, I had to employ the means that cubists use to represent it.”⁸ The other, less obvious function of these camouflage uniforms is that they are akin to a sports team’s jersey.

6. Yuyan, Kiliiii. “On the Sea Ice, We Wear White.” Artist Talk from The George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY, October 11, 2018

7. Behrens, Roy R. *Art & Camouflage: Concealment and Deception in Nature, Art, and War*. Cedar Falls, IA: North American Review, University of Northern Iowa, 1981.

8. "Lucien-Victor Guirand De Scévola on Curiator." Curiator. Accessed February 20, 2019. <https://curiator.com/art/lucien-victor-guirand-de-scevola>.

Each country has created its own distinct camouflage patterns. Service members take pride in their uniforms; it becomes a part of their identity and it establishes a sense of community between those who wear the uniform.

A pair of artists who work with the idea of camouflage is Ian Howard and Xing Junqin, both former service members of the United States and China respectively. In *Just in Case* the artists collaborated to create a series of work which pairs 202 stock images with a uniquely painted camouflage pattern for each sovereign nation around the world. In *Camouflage Cultures*, Ian Howard argues that camouflage is used to deceive but can also be used to attract attention.⁹ Veterans who transition back into civilian life have created a new uniform that is recognizable to veterans—clothing issued from the military, posture, even where a person sits in a room hints at their experiences.

When transitioning out of military life, veterans often travel across state lines or move back home to a place where their old social networks have either left completely or they have learned to get along without them. The camouflage uniform and the community a veteran relied on for survival is no longer present. Veterans are then forced to adapt, breaking themselves down once again, fracturing their identity and values to adjust back into modern society. In the webcomic *Terminal Lance*, Maximilian Uriarte draws how a veteran stereotypically dresses in public. The panel, titled *Anatomy of a Veteran*, pictures an illustration with labels of a bearded man wearing a neutral colored baseball cap, Oakley sunglasses, cargo pants, and a neutral

9. Elias, Ann, ed. *Camouflage cultures: Beyond the art of disappearance*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2014. Accessed January 27, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

colored shirt.¹⁰ These clothes act as a “new” camouflage and can reveal, subtly or overtly, veteran status in the civilian world. This I argue, stems from a longing for this community.

Portrait photography ultimately connects people, the photographer acting as an intermediary between the outsiders and insiders. In her essay, *Inside/Out* Abigail Solomon-Godeau discusses the critique of the insider and outsider perspectives that a photographer can claim.¹¹ I would argue that the veterans featured in *Portraits of a Camoufleur*, myself included, are each an insider and outsider. By featuring these veterans, they are also invited into the white wall gallery space. My hope is that the work serves as a starting point of conversation between veterans and civilians. I would argue this face to face is the only way to bridge the gap between these cultures.

Communicating military experiences can be notoriously difficult for many veterans, however, *Portraits of a Camoufleur* offers a connection by peeling back the shell and giving those not privy to military culture a window in. *Portraits of a Camoufleur* has helped me connect with other veterans and create a community of friends I can rely on. The artwork uses camouflage, an artistic niche of warfare, to reveal and reconstruct a portrait of those who find themselves putting the pieces back together after their service has ended.

10. Uriarte, Maximilian. "Terminal Lance." Comic strip. Terminallance.com. September 5, 2014. Accessed January 20, 2019. <https://terminallance.com/2014/09/05/terminal-lance-343-anatomy-of-a-veteran/>.

11. Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Inside/Out." In *Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document*, 49-61. Vol. 1. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1994.

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Portraits of a Camoufleur, Installation View, April 2019



Portraits of a Camoufleur, Installation View, April 2019



Portraits of a Camoufleur, Installation View, April 2019



Portraits of a Camoufleur, Installation View, April 2019



O'Connor, Installation View, April 2019



Jackson, Installation View, April 2019



Nickels, Installation View, April 2019



Salinas, Installation View, April 2019



Guinto, Installation View, April 2019