

Six Words about Helen Mirra, or the Six Basic Factors of Camouflage

by Julia Bryan-Wilson

Camouflage, from the French *to blind* or *to veil*: in zoological terms it is the means by which a living body assumes a likeness to inanimate objects. Long recognized as a mechanism of defense for insects and animals, it was first applied in a battlefield context in 1915 and rapidly became a military sub-specialty marked by its successful marriage of art and science. During World War I, artists like Arshile Gorky, Franz Marc, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy worked in army camouflage units. According to the 1920 manual *Strategic Camouflage*, there are six fundamental components of camouflage: form, position, movement, texture, shadow, and color.¹ These are also excellent words to describe the work of Helen Mirra.

1. Form.

Mirra makes sculptures, wall works, music, texts, films, and videos, and the quiet and studied touch of her hand is evident in every media she inhabits. She views all her artistic activity as part of one project that is continuous with her dedication to living ethically. Her limited palette of natural colors—greys, greens, browns, and blues—reflects her broad interest in questions of ecology. Much of her work refers to a voyage (and, often, a journey's environmental impact): the wanderer's contemplative amble, the railroad's deforesting incision, the ship's headlong plunge.

Cloth is one of Mirra's signature materials, and she often relies on geometry to give it structure. Yet her fabric triangles, bands, and rectangles are not the systematic shapes of minimalism; rather, they allude to sky, horizon, and landscape. In the *Sleepers* series from 1999-2000, the work of weaving wool acts as an analog for the labor of building the railways (sleeper is a nickname for railroad ties). Here the sleepers are laid gently to bed under the thick soft weight of hand-loomed cloth. Woven to scale, both Mirra's work and the railroad cover space in precisely measured intervals. Sleepers are also the train cars where passengers can lay down and rest. Mirra's *Sleepers*, while motionless, are also active, as they rhythmically pulse with each elevation where the cloth rises up over the wood underneath. This recalls the paradox of the sleeper car: we are moving rapidly but also completely still, dreaming in our chambers as the train streaks through the night.

2. Position.

Mirra's sculpture is often floor-bound. "Sidewalk Cover" (1999) consists of large cotton-dyed green squares sewed together in one 60-foot-long strip. It is not meant to literally cover a sidewalk or be walked on, but is placed on the gallery floor parallel to the sidewalk outside like a decoy that is soft instead of hard, grass-green instead of industrial grey. For *sidewalk film frames*

¹ Solomon J. Solomon, *Strategic Camouflage* (London: John Murray, 1920).

(1998), she painted individual sidewalk squares outside her friends' houses in Chicago. "Attempting to camouflage that bit of cement" by using green paint,² Mirra's modest subterfuge transforms the often disregarded urban floor into a space of possibility. The repetitive and regularized squares of sidewalk act as metaphors for film frames, and as we walk over them we "watch" the movie spool out from under our feet.

In Michael Fried's infamous account of minimalism, he describes the unnerving sensation of sculptures laying in wait for him in the gallery. "The experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly—for example, in somewhat darkened rooms—can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting."³ There is a sense of ambush, of unexpected confrontation, in part because of the work's refusal to be elevated on a pedestal. Mirra's low-lying works have little in common with Fried's overblown account of lurking sculptures, not least because her use of the floor is so *grounded*. She utilizes it as the foundation for her sculpture without aggrandizing it, as if to say that the floor, after all, is just another wall.

3. Movement.

Measurements and maps are crucial to Mirra, and her work often acts as an index of traces of her own motion. For example, in *65 Instants* (2003), planks of wood from reclaimed shipping palettes were hand-hewn to measure the length of her forearm and the width of her hand. Making one a day for 65 days, the planks become an archive, a record of duration and bodily work. Mirra's art also requires that viewers move. Her wall pieces of text on cotton banding can wrap around the full length of a room. The banding is the same width as 16 millimeter film, and, like the sidewalk pieces, as viewers walk along reading the text they become mobile lookers rather than stationary audience members. (Mirra's interest in the history of the railroads is connected to her fascination with the history of film. Recall the legendary conjunction of these technologies in 1895 when the Lumiere brothers showed "Arrival of a Train at the Station." This short film was so alarmingly lifelike that audiences ran screaming from the theater.)

4. Texture.

Three pairs of words, each starting with a B or an H, are typed on meter-long narrow cotton banding and hung at eye level. The words, drawn from the nautical vocabulary of seafaring, together create abbreviated love poems. ("B" is for a former lover, "H" is for Helen.) The words, closely associated, are bound by their intertwining meanings, such as "bower" and "heavy": the bower is the ship's heaviest anchor. In their richness and their brevity, the coupled phrases take on the incantatory power of a spell. There is a feel, a texture, to the text: black typewriter ink bleeds into the grain of rough cloth.

5. Shadow.

Mirra's works are informed by acutely thoughtful conceptual frameworks, and she draws from a vast array of sources: authors like Herman Melville, Paul Celan, and W.G. Sebald, for example, as well as Buddhism, literary criticism, and cartography. Some influences shadow her entire

² Mirra, "footnotes," in *Sky-Wreck*, exhibition catalogue (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 2001), n.p.

³ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (June 1967): 16

production, such as the writings of German crystallographer Friedrich Froebel, who developed the kindergarten system. To make the extraordinarily complex *Sky-Wreck* (2001), a 1:333 scale model of 1/11th of the dome of the sky rendered in 110 triangles of blue cloth, she looked to mathematics, physics, philosophy, and poetry. The poster for *Sky-Wreck* included citations of many of these sources, but often she lets her research exist as an oblique, ghostly presence.

6. Color.

Mirra wears clothing that, like the stuff of her art, is made only of natural fibers and pigments: faded denims, almond beige, and olive drab. Also known as army green,⁴ this shade is a particular favorite of Mirra's despite its hijacking into military garb. It is in many respects an anti-modernist color—Mondrian, for instance, would not touch it. Against a city like Chicago, with its stark Mies buildings and the imperative to wear black, Mirra's muted green stands out like a sapling growing in a crack in the asphalt. Her *elm dropcover* (2002), made of army blankets, both signals militarism and returns olive green back to its mossy beginnings. Referring to the destruction of the American elm tree, the *elm dropcover* is a large floor work in which military wool is recycled into a patchwork reminiscent of leaves, treetops, and the striations of bark.

Mirra's works often pivots on an economy of imitation: they are sky-like, train-like, ship-like. But this is not fraudulent mimicry: her art distills things, reworking them through the methodical procedures of craft (i.e. weaving, sewing, woodworking) until they ring true. (Another word for deception is craftiness.) While it is more about respectful adaptation than stealth, sometimes her work is guarded and protective. What here is being obscured or concealed? What threats or losses are being written? Camouflage can mean blinding and veiling, but for Mirra it is revelation and clarity. Her art brings us closer to that which is often overlooked, and in doing so transforms both her source materials and the viewer. We change in its presence, "as a lover, or a chameleon/Grows like what it looks upon" (*Prometheus Unbound*, Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1820).

⁴ The names of commercial camouflage patterns have evolved over the years from the simplicity of the early Evergreen and Snow to the funkier 1960s-era Vertical Lizard. Recently, with the growth of camouflage's popularity in civilian fashion, companies have trademarked patterns with more conceptual names like Predator and Bottomland.