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TORONTO ONTARIO M6J 2H2 CANADA 416 554 4112



Canadian, born 1961

Parade, 2000

MDF, enamel paint
21 pieces: 100 x 7.5 cm each (61 x 3.0 in.)
Courtesy of the artist
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ANITRA HAMILTON

Anitra Hamilton, like a number of younger artists, forges complex cultural critiques by exploiting the formal qualities of colour field painting – its bold colour, strong graphic quality and pattern-like structure – while subverting its original goal of creating experiences that are primarily visual and sensory. Viewing these expanses of colour is no longer seen as an end onto itself, rather the act of looking becomes a powerful phenomenological metaphor for the seductive deception working across the cultural and political landscape. Many contemporary artists who reference this movement in fact use the very criticism lodged against it – that it is no more than corporate decoration or visual Muzak – as a key ingredient in their attempts to heighten consciousness.

The viewer is initially drawn to the hypnotic bands of primary colours in Hamilton's *Parade*. A composition of such uniform and expansive design is powerful, reassuring and celebratory, but these are not random stripes, not just a reference to past hard edge paintings. The work is an abstraction of military ribbons, not one expansive canvas, but twenty-one elongated pieces drawn from decorations used on uniforms from around the world. Ribbons are

seductive – even the military uses trickery of colour – alluring and beautiful. So is the talk of confronting one's enemies and outside threats with force, of being the hero. The military's colourful discourse and pageantry create a glossy façade for what is an institution of violence.

Hamilton's work often builds on giving form to a veneer of civility by using lavish materials on an array of military symbols. She has covered bombs with eggshells to capture what she calls, "the paradox of good and evil inherent in all humans." The impulse to create and to destroy, while contradictory, comes from what curator John Massier called the same "no-holds-barred, bare-knuckled creative impulse that can cut in either direction...[toward] abstract painting [or] nuclear annihilation."¹ Colour is one such device used in the service of both.

CLAIRE SCHNEIDER

1. John Massier, "The Bad and the Beautiful," in *Free Sample* (Halifax: Museum of Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, 2005), 47.