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cmagazine

Anitra Hamilton: Retrospective on Parade

by Earl Miller

Art Gallery of York University, Toronto

Outside the gallery proper, on the far side of the AGYU'S reception room, sits Anitra Hamilton's *Bomb Ride* (2004). For a dollar, gallery visitors can play on this altered shopping mall ride, originally designed to provide an entertaining but bumpy simulated airplane trip for shoppers' bored children. Hamilton has replaced the airplane with a bomb casing.

Bomb Ride's dual resemblance to a child's toy and the bomb the maniacal Major Kong rides in the film *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) is highlighted by two student-aged gallery-goers: a young, neo-hippie man riding on it, and a young woman, presumably his girlfriend, rolling her eyes in dramatized embarrassment. The young man personifies the undeniably masculine need to show off--even if the audience is small and reluctant--and to fetishize toys, rendering him impervious both to how ridiculous he looks and, more pertinently here, to how he has unconsciously bought into the war game.

Indeed, Hamilton seduces viewers into enjoying violence by packaging it the same way mass culture does: as games and celebrations. As she does throughout this retrospective, in *Bomb Ride* Hamilton shows herself to be a skilled ironist, using the strategy of deflating what seems at first to be pleasurable or beautiful, tricking viewers into facing the dark, violent underside of some forms of play and, in other works, of ritual and nationalist celebrations.

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Batter Up (2007) is also situated in the reception area. Hamilton invites viewers to wear a baseball cap bearing an embroidered image of the Irish flag. An accompanying text notes that while baseball is not a popular sport in Ireland, the country is the world's third-leading purchaser of baseball bats. Kneecapping, Hamilton reminds us, the excruciatingly painful striking of a victim in the kneecaps, typically with a baseball bat, is very popular.

Clearly, this piece is risky in its potential stereotyping of the Irish as violent--or worse, as terrorists, the bogeymen "Reds" of the 21st century. Admittedly, I am initially offended by Batter Up, and, accordingly, I do not want to wear the hat. But I change my mind about the piece once I've see the rest of Hamilton's show.

Hamilton's practice regularly involves co-opting other people's cultures, an approach that vigorously revives the cultural appropriation debate that reached a crescendo art world-wise nearly two decades ago. Take for example Who's Gonna Tell Jesus There's No Santa Claus (1998), the first piece I encounter inside the gallery, in which intricate, colourful pysanky (Ukrainian Easter egg designs) cover eggshells, which in turn cover a bomb casing. The broken eggshells, the artist argues visually, convey her deconstruction--her breaking down--of nationalism and related cultural symbols. Seeing a prominent symbol of yet another country deconstructed, I begin to realize that Hamilton links war to nationalism in general, rather than to a specific nation.

Consider also Untitled: Purple Heart T-Shirt (2000), where a popular slogan for souvenir T-shirts is changed to read, "I lost both legs in Nam and all I got was this lousy medal" and printed on a purple T-shirt with an image of a Purple Heart medal on it. This piece is not likely to be seen by most contemporary art viewers in Canada as a stereotypical portrayal of the United States as militaristic. Rather, most will read it as a legitimate critique given the history of the United States--an unfortunate chapter of which Hamilton addresses--and its current policy of initiating regime change. By this point, I am entirely convinced that Hamilton's critique of Ireland is fair.

Best illustrating Hamilton's egalitarianism, however, is Wall Parade (2007)--a remake of her early piece, Parade (2000), now in the collection of the Albright-Knox Gallery--which by appearance is a striped, neo-Molinari hard-edged abstraction, a Lifesavers-candy-coloured assortment of vertical stripes covering a 16.5-by-6-metre wall of the gallery. Viewers soon discover that these eye-pleasing stripes, with their vibrant, almost pulsating colours, are actually the colours of military ribbons from across the world. Having just enjoyed these cheerful stripes largely for their separation from anything unpleasant, discovering their war ties is, to use a well-worn yet appropriate idiom, a real downer. Or so it seems.

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Adorno's well-known decree that one cannot in good conscience write poetry after Auschwitz does not meet concurrence here, despite the overriding anti-war message. *Wall Parade*, in particular, is not bereft of aesthetics--of colour-field poetry. And given the massive scale of the work, this aesthetic quotient is direct, if not sublime. Nevertheless, Hamilton is adept at deflating such aesthetics, at using romantic irony to reveal the bitter truth beneath the candy coating.

Not only does Hamilton deflate the sublime, she also deflates the spectacle, albeit by implication. *Sympathy* (1997), comprises five bomb-shaped, oversized bereavement cards ranging from 12.7 by 53.3 cm to 17.8 by 55.9 cm, with text lifted from actual sympathy cards, reading, for instance, "sincere condolences" and "sharing your sorrow during this difficult time." These bomb cards suggest how militarism does not regret loss as much as it worships heroism; it does not stress grieving as much as it celebrates sacrifice with pageantry.

While pondering how small oppositional gestures like those of *Sympathy* can jar viewers into questioning cultural rituals too often overlooked as benign traditions, I hear the ambient sounds of the St. Patrick's Day parade coming and going. It's *Audio Parade: Field Recording #1* (2007), simply a recording of that parade made this year in Toronto that you can listen to in a specially built and otherwise empty room, complete with a door.

The parade has been rained on, and I'm glad.