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FINDING "CAMP X" : *Contemporary Considerations of an Enigma*

To note (these) ironies is to engage yourself in the grave purpose at hand and take some responsibility for helping to think it through

Irony is dead! Long live irony!

David Beers from Salon.com, Sep 25, 2001



Irony, since September 11, 2001, is the second victim of war after truth. It is also the essential method of Anitra Hamilton's work that considers our perceptions of power and militarism. From the standpoint of past creative practice, this Toronto artist's technique could be characterized as "woman's work" – the tedious, time consuming creation of objects of comfort, were it not for her chosen subject matter. This has included among other things, bombs – bombs smoothly covered in egg shells carefully selected for their natural colours and the closeness of these to the earthy tint and shades of camouflage.

Hamilton's motif is the colours and character of the records of war and the heroic tracings, but her artistic strategy is incongruity.

The tools of war are unique and defy practical use at war's end. When



Anitra Hamilton *Untitled* 1994



Anitra Hamilton *Parade* 2000

Gary Greenwood. *Finding "Camp X":
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 catalogue, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2002

F I N D I N G “ C A M P X ” :

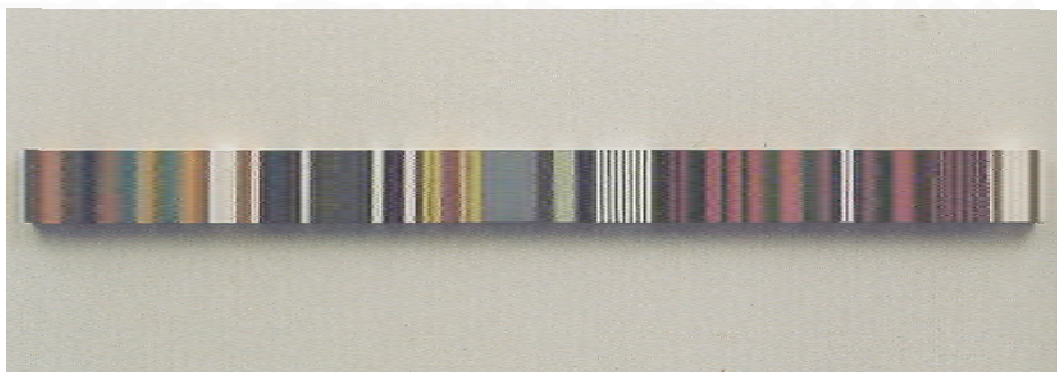
Contemporary Considerations of an Enigma

reintroduced to a peacetime society, their meaning is obscured and lost. Just consider how bronze cannons from the 17th century that had been used to devastate colonial communities now decorate our government buildings. Camouflage became ubiquitous in the urban environment since achieving dubious fame as the costume for the Desert Storm theatre of war in Iraq. We remember communities with warplanes on a pedestal like a child's model airplane on steroids. Whether an attempt to steer a peacetime population towards a higher regard for these artifacts or simply societal appropriation for appropriation's sake, they fail on both counts. War and its horror are unique in their profound terror and no artifact can present the essence of this. The gentle shock brought about through Hamilton's use of contradictory materials provokes the viewer to re-consider the source.



Reconnaissance, one of two wall-mounted works by Hamilton, is a representation of a non-specified geographic area as it might be seen in an aerial surveillance photograph. In wartime, the reconnaissance photograph is a tool for finding and destroying an enemy. The colours and the contours are used to locate the foe and when closely scrutinized, the photographs can reveal the enemy and his weapons bringing about their death and destruction.

Hamilton's landscape is created using painted segments of eggshells carefully assembled into a mosaic of square and rectangular shapes producing a pattern like farmers' fields seen from an aircraft. In *Reconnaissance*, Hamilton uses colour and contour as aesthetic elements. The eggshell mosaic adds texture and complexity to the larger geometry of the composition and to the meaning of the work. Yet the need of the viewer to look closely to appreciate the use of the egg, itself a symbol of the origin of human life, parallels the act of examining the reconnaissance photograph, an aid to killing humans. Through this contradiction, Hamilton plays with the aesthetic distance that would normally have been used to differentiate her work psychologically from reality. In *Reconnaissance*, the viewer is wrenched between the aesthetic and its earthly foundation.



Anitra Hamilton *Barcode* 1997

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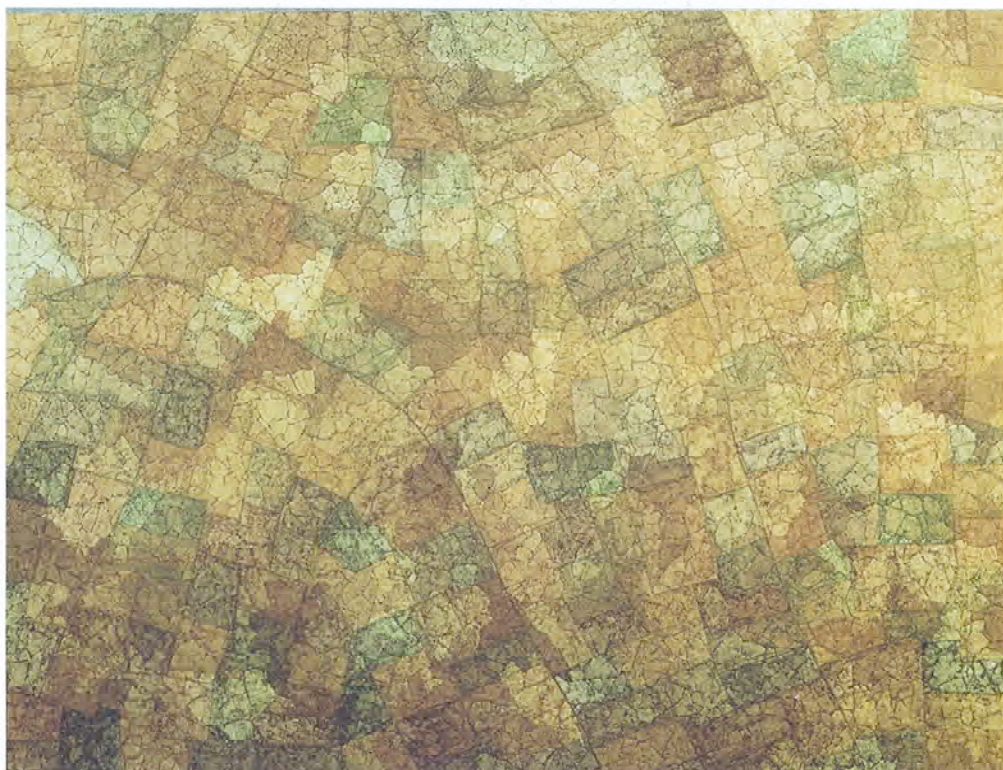
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In an untitled piece made from four small aerial bombs laid on the floor in a cruciform, Hamilton depicts military camouflage by using applied eggshells chosen for the natural colour of the types of eggs used from quail and duck to two types of pheasant eggs.

In *Parade*, a painting involving long vertical uniform stripes, there are two contradictory meanings. One, from an art historical context, relates to the colour field painting experiments of the 1960s wherein artists explored the pure resonant qualities of colour applied to canvas. However, the stripes in *Parade* have a more poignant reading when seen with the knowledge and experience of a soldier of World War II since in this simple painting, the colours are elaborations on the thin strips of ribbon worn to signify medals won in combat.

Because of the nature of the materials and colours used in Hamilton's work, we experience a sense of joy and even comfort. By freely playing with the transition from deadly utilitarian objects to mythologized social decoration, Hamilton creates telling examples of how subterfuge works, allaying fear with myth. Death and its accoutrements become aesthetic and wither in the face of directed irony.



Anitra Hamilton *Reconnaissance* 1999

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