

MATEO MATÉ
PAISAJES UNIFORMADOS



UNIFORMED LANDSCAPES

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“Taken by themselves and freed from their bellicose function, traditional camouflage designs on soldier’s uniforms are extraordinarily beautiful, abstract-naturalist compositions, which evoke a wide variety of styles in painting, from Art Brut to Déco,” declared designers Mendini and Rasulo in the nineties. Mateo Maté’s *Paisajes uniformados* (Uniformed Landscapes) attest to this. Maté uses the camouflage patterns of armies all over the world as a copious palette for recreating landscapes by European Realist or Impressionist painters like Carlos de Haes, Joaquín Sorolla, Henry H. Parker, Adelsteen Normann, H. Bolton Jones and John F. Kensett. Each of the paintings in the series shows labelled samples of the patterns in them. A first look shows us that the artist’s series interprets views of the Norwegian fjords by the Norwegian painter; the Spanish-Belgian artist’s steep summits; the American painter’s quiet afternoons and the Spaniard’s loose brushstrokes and vibrant colours, in the camouflage of Disruptive Pattern Material. The original patterning of the artists’ handwork is substituted by camouflage over the entire surface of the canvas; correspondingly, there may not be a single centimetre of the Earth’s sur-

face unsubjected to military control. Camouflage becomes an ideal register for gauging what the apparently antagonistic areas of art and the military have borrowed from and exchanged with each other.

It is no coincidence that we find artists from the early twentieth century avant gardes at the origins of contemporary military camouflage. Certain Fauve, Cubist, abstract or Vorticist painters put their skills in forgery, deception and invisibility to the service of war. Dalí had no doubt about his comrades in arms’ contributions to the confluence between art and warfare: Cubism has worked effectively in the battlefields, he sentenced, referring to the Great War. Meanwhile, Franz Marc, camouflage technician for the German Army, mentioned in his letters from the trenches that he would be curious to see what effect the Kandinskys would have from 2,000 metres high. Marc was referring here to the use of abstract painting by members (he and Kandinsky) of the Blaue Reiter as a camouflage weapon to disguise against the enemy’s aerial viewpoint, Marc was referring here to how

his own and other members (Kandinsky) of the Blaue Reiter's' works were turned into a camouflage weapon to thwart the enemy's aerial perspective, and expressing his own stupefaction at the unexpected mutation of abstract art into a war weapon in the landscape. He was right, too: were the abstract artists not, after all, searching for a pure, autonomous form of painting, unbound to practical considerations, distanced from mimesis and realism? This is not the only paradox we encounter in the confluence between modern art and camouflage. However, if abstract painters are the inventors of camouflage, it is without doubt an act of poetic justice to restore to art what was seized from it by warfare, as Mateo Maté is doing with the *Paisajes uniformados*.

As I was saying, camouflage is a veritable minefield with confusion and paradoxes at every turn, whether we see it through art or through other areas, politics in particular. Maté's series reveals and make use of this with singular precision. The fact that nineteenth century landscape paintings can transform apparently seamlessly into fragments of military uniforms says a great deal, not only about the quality of painting, but also about the imposition of a uniform, militarized manner of seeing and being in the world.

On the one hand, these landscapes manifest the ambiguous relationship between abstraction and representation that exists in both art and camouflage. Maté's landscapes clearly display the nature of painting as a two-dimensional surface covered with colours in a certain order: pure abstraction, we might say. This is nevertheless denied by the fact that the synthesis of these coloured patches creates a figurative, "naturalistic" result, as it represents the elements

of landscape: lakes, bushes, mountains and skies; and, as if this were not enough, we are also led further into the manifold layers of camouflage: among the shrubbery of some of the landscapes are hidden other "realist" motives: army uniforms with their insignia and medals, sleeves, collars, pockets and all. This creates a collision between abstraction and representation which, in the end, is what DPM essentially aims for: mimicry, confusion between figure and background, an implementation of strategies and visual trickery which is also a questioning of the true nature of the art of painting. We find that painting and camouflage are, and maybe always have been, the same type of visual trickery, made by professional weavers of lies or shall we call it fiction; fiction that takes us back to reality.

Camouflage is a polysemic signifier which may even hold opposing meanings, or meanings that convention tends to oppose: abstraction and realism, but also war and peace, artifice and nature, the functional and the altruistic, pragmatism and aesthetics. To journey through these uniformed landscapes is to enter a reflection on painting, a lucid analysis and a paradoxical reaction against the legion of camouflage techniques that constitute the "hidden agenda" of contemporary societies of the spectacle, with their expert fraudulence, their masks, concealment, control and surveillance. We are led to discover the extent to which our gaze has been taken over by a militarized gaze, which sees a battlefield in every place and camouflage in every colour. This is something we often find in Maté's aesthetics; it habitually detects the types of apparatus that guarantee our perpetual surveillance and denounces the effects of a rhetoric of violence disguised as concern for our safety. Camouflage

designs, he reminds us, are also the loyal bearers of colonial history, of conquests and imperialism, of the advance of a militarized order *urbi et orbi*.

The artist's pointed irony does not conceal the fact that war, violence, death or military procedures are seamlessly embedded even in supposedly wealthy, sheltered, comfortable domestic interiors, onto which the force of pleonastic "domestic nationalism" is imposed. Violence has been assimilated to the point that any social gaze, however inoffensive it appears to be, is a militarized one.

The participle of "uniformize" in the title of the series alludes to militarization, but also refers to the dictionary meaning of the verb, to "make uniform," and, in Spanish, "to clothe individuals in a community in the same way." Clothing brands extend uniformity through marketing discourse which orders the use of attitudes, accessories or looks, while they attempt to blow smoke at us with so-called "freedom of choice" or the multiple possibilities of personalising products that are only sold once our own desires have been expropriated to make way for prefabricated ones. *Paisajes uniformados* is therefore also an allusion to homogenization, normalisation and generalised docility, our compliance with the social and political order that ensures the imposition of this with different types of symbolic violence, the more diffuse the more effective. "With the total militarization of all of our borders, which is instituted under the excuse of security, we are all being prepared for a general deployment. We don't know when or where the conflict will begin, but we have to be ready," claims Maté. In this atmosphere of tension, it should not surprise us to see camouflage clothing so commonly worn in public.

Foucault considered there to be only two models through which to consider power relations: the model of law, and the bellicose or strategic model of force relations. Maté's *Paisajes uniformados* incline towards the latter. In order to be effective, continues Foucault, resistance must be as power is as inventive, mobile and productive, as able to conceal itself, and as skilful in deception as its enemy. A military definition holds that camouflage, in a strict sense, is "information designed to manipulate the behaviour of others, inducing them to accept a false or distorted presentation of their physical, social or political environment." To bear witness to the fact that our experience of reality is filtered through the sieve of deception (the technical term for camouflage in warfare) is in itself an effective form of rebellion against the imposition of the *doxa*.