

Seeing Through the Camo

by Charlie Schultz

EVE OF DESTRUCTION

Blackston

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Camouflage is where visual art approaches complete deception. The idea is to blend seamlessly into the background, to be physically present yet invisible, undetected. At first glance Pia Dehne's luscious oil paintings look like hyper real abstractions, pause, and there's a turtle, a frog, and a hunter taking aim with a bow called "Infinity."

Eve of Destruction is a painterly consideration of the sub-context of camouflage: imitation, mimicry. Dehne's process is reproducing photographs, an essentially mimetic mode of making art—to copy and enhance. Her subject, camouflage, is depicted in a variety of images that suggest fundamental survival (a frog and a turtle), pleasure hunting (sport hunters), and war tactics (battleships). It's a threatening tone, dialed in by the title, which references a protest-pop song from the mid sixties sung by Barry McGuire.

(It should be noted that many people mistake the McGuire hit for a Dylan tune, and the reason is because it was written to sound like a Dylan tune. It is an imitative song, aptly reused.)

Camouflage and art have an unstable history mainly because deception and truth are often considered at odds. In nature, sport, and war there is far less conflict. Dehne's hyper realized, "Frog" and "Turtle"—exuberantly myopic with blurred out backgrounds and extremely high-def foregrounds—are naturally camouflaged. The sport hunters, approaching psychedelic palate-wise, are willfully outfitted. The battleship, a bit like a Richter, is purposely painted. The truth is that visual deception can be a natural, enjoyable, and practical phenomenon.

Dehne's battleships reference an artist from the forties who could be considered the antithesis of B. McGuire. His name was Norman Wilkinson. He created a camouflage for battleships known as "razzle-dazzle." The idea wasn't to hide the ships, per se, but to distort their appearance in such a way that it would be difficult to tell how big the ships were and which direction they were facing. It was coy form of warfare, but it was ultimately scrapped.

At the heart of the question of deception and art is one of seeing and believing, trusting in one's eyes, an old battleground for painters of realism. Dehne's work at once reaffirms the function of the mimetic artist, reproducing an illusion of reality, and simultaneously situates itself within a broader context of artists, amphibians, and sportsman who display the same mimetic inclination.

Image: Boar Hunter, 2010, Oil on canvas. Courtesy Blackston Gallery.

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