

From Tactical to Practical

Erin Donnelly, in www.anamnese.pt

While terror, disaster, and fear have dictated the politics of New York City's recent "security environment," Catarina Leitão's site-specific project *Survival Systems* presented at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City examines psychological perspectives deeply rooted in our experience of the outdoors. Situated under a grove of trees offering shade dappled in sunlight, a sign campaign promotes such commercial products as the *Bliss Portable Hammock*, *Fold A Bowl* and *Flee Smoke Mask*. Each can be deployed to meet any personal whim for escape, safety, or comfort in nature. The sharp juxtaposition of the language of advertising with the natural landscape is a critical component of the work as it relates to the public site, itself, actually landfill reclaimed almost 20 years ago from an illegal dumpsite adjacent to the East River.

Inspired by military and hunting trade magazines as well as online and mail order catalogs, each item is represented by an illustration, descriptive text, and price. Organic and synthetic forms are combined in each image to suggest use, as in the *Dartboards for Beginners and Advanced Players*, a tuft of foliage sprouts from the bull's eye and a rifle with scope is profiled below the target. Greens, blues and browns used throughout Leitão's installation echo the colors of nature but the reduced palette also implies the strategies of product marketing and brand identity. The advertising promises an ideal campsite and the modular logic of *Survival Systems* appeals to the consumer impulse to collect all ten components to use as a group or individually.

Leitão's intervention effectively situates the most common public experience of the 21st century, our behavior in the marketplace, within the most elemental setting, the land. A look at the uses of camouflage within the work reveals how nature has been tailored for our use. For example, flora's variety is reduced to the narrow choices of camouflage patterns of "mossy oak breakup or mossy oak shadowgrass" in the description of the *Deluxe Stool*. Fall and spring sets of foliage offer different fashions for the seasons but "breaking up your outline is the secret to success" is the main selling point of the *3-D Leaves* kit. Beyond the formal qualities of camouflage, mimicry, simulation, and imitation form an important conceptual layer of *Survival Systems*. When viewers ask where the items can be purchased or if the space is rented for profit, the contours of the work's conceit begin to integrate seamlessly with our expectations of the real.

Calling attention to the questionable fulfillment of desire, the curious items featured in *Survival Systems* address the parallel attainability of an "authentic" experience of the natural within the urban environment. The consumer products refer to the body and the senses but patently hold the world at arm's length, as in the description: "these lightweight powerful binoculars will bring objects and game up close and personal and yet show plenty of background." Curator Leonor Nazaré has discussed the consumption of nature in relation to a reduction of scale with the emergence of household objects, shopping bags, and backpacks in Leitão's earlier sculptural installations. In *Survival Systems*, the

accessories become surrogates for the viewer's position in the landscape. Leitão's past work proposed that unseen cultural forces tame nature; however, this project outside the gallery context underscores the role of the viewer. Designed for individual use, these reticent objects suggest loneliness, introspection, and isolation and *Survival Systems* as a whole offers critical commentary on the shortcomings of the public realm.

Survival Systems can be read as an interesting art historical hybrid. The visual frontality of the advertisements draws on Pop iconography of the 1960s while the open-air setting engages with the legacy of 1970s Earthworks. Co-existent in form, these references unfold to create an historical narrative that describes how the rise of consumption is commensurate with the annexation of nature. Updating these social ideas, Leitão's technique of downloading, sampling, and recycling available cultural products reveals how the information age has influenced artistic practice, a theory discussed by critic Nicholas Bourriaud in his recent essay *Postproduction*. While the landscape has become just another stop in our destination culture, *Survival Systems* explores the intersection of the "experience economy" and the natural environment and highlights our anxiety about inhabiting richly textured yet unpredictable places.

—Erin Donnelly, May 30, 2004

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