

No Limits

Twenty years ago, Calvin, the comic-strip hero, is taking a car trip with his parents. While they're crossing a stone bridge, he reads a sign—Load Limit 10 Tons—and asks his dad how such limits are determined.

"They drive bigger and bigger trucks over the bridge until it breaks," he responds, bright-eyed. "Then they weigh the last truck and rebuild the bridge."

In the work of Jonathan Terranova, those engineers are running our militarized America, from desks at Lockheed Martin and the Department of Defense. Whether through personal indifference or widespread collusion beyond the law, Terranova suggests, our unelected leaders follow an idiot's logic to its reasonable end. While petrified power structures stave off total collapse, deficit-spending and bureaucratic legerdemain hide scenes of bottomless waste. Accountability dissolves.

Terranova's latest exhibition, *Infiltration of Opulent Militarism*, takes the form of the catalog you're holding. (The pseudo-military-speak title, with its surplus of syllables, is spot-on, both hollow and lavish.) This piece wants to double as a retail catalog, selling fantasies about a lifestyle just as the government does about its conflicts. It's no revelation that war, as a lucrative enterprise, approaches the terms of a boondoggle. But Terranova's images and their presentation feel novel, and their black humor cuts down on cliché.

Through extensive Photoshopping, these watches, yachts, and tanks come in a bespoke style that merges today's globally-approved fashions—hip-hop and New England preppy. Terranova happily cribs from the military's menacing and mundane presence in American life. Two decorated Hummers exemplify, as Hummers always will, glorified and illogical wastefulness: that final truck, tempting collapse. In banal, anonymous scenes culled from stock photographs, Terranova uses a heavy hand. Whether it's intentional or not is hard to tell. Polemic and parody are fighting for top rank here.

The artist drapes soldiers' caskets, machine guns, runway models and fine interiors in paraphrases of the florid, trustworthy design found on American banknotes. By recreating cash's web-like tracery (it's an anti-counterfeit measure), Terranova seems to ask who the real counterfeiters are. There's no single answer. On one page, money is the world's best camouflage. On another, it's a fashion constant.

Thanks to some astute photo-editing, Terranova's catalog sells goods both chintzy—that Hummer casts no shadow—and realistic. The watch and yacht are especially attractive, just like the lifestyle they advertise. But there's not enough of the claptrap that surrounds authentic retailers' efforts, which hold plenty more ad copy and images of the target demographic than Terranova includes. Why not show who pays for all this stuff? It could be military contractors, or anyone reading the catalog, or taxpayers, who must foot the bill for this prison cell or that military funeral. Such themes—the pseudo-retail ambiguity of funding a war, America's queasy-making hucksterism amid wasted lives—could have been deepened through such details.

America's national rhetoric surrounding military conflict tends to exclude nuance in favor of sharp polarization. In the past decade, the "with us or against us" tone has only grown. So it seems fitting to examine Infiltration of Opulent Militarism through two opposing, hypothetical views. These arguments, though reductive, could believably have been made by public figures at any recent point.

Terranova's work seems to share more with the first view, in which bureaucratic mis-management and civil credulousness he highlights are eternal, rather than acute, forces. That is, little about Terranova's indictment has changed since Barack Obama took office and Robert Gates announced an overhaul in the D.O.D. budget. (He removed funding for a line of fighter jets and called for a shift in the ethos of departmental spending.) Here, this work is wholly up to date.

A rebuttal to that view: military spending is more in line with Terranova's apparent personal values than at any time in the past eight years; voters, like kennel dogs, are finally learning why not to trust the military's tactics, if not necessarily how to escape their long reach; so-called smart diplomacy will, over time, obviate needless military engagements. Even the Hummer brand is dead, for now. Here, this work is outdated.

This pervasive and unsubtle reasoning fails to account for the variability and intractability of America's bureaucracy and of the American public's perception. Though both approaches apply to this work, both miss the point. Yes, war and its funding have grown decentralized and blameless, stifling meaningful reform. And yes, this catalog is at least a year behind the tenor of these post-Bush, supposedly pragmatic times. In the end, one need only consider the enormous, possibly limitless legacy of the Military Industrial Complex before ever asserting that what Terranova has made is outdated.

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