

Artist's Statement

The Camouflaged Woman

"Women will continue to be seen as an afterthought: acceptable but less preferable, tolerated but never fully welcome."

The Camouflaged Woman is a data-inspired, textile art piece. It draws attention to the recognised invisibility of female military personnel and female military veterans. Using contrasting elements and materials, this work combines exquisite haute couture materials with Government issued, hard-wearing UK Armed Forces uniforms and other militaria. The hand embroidery is designed to be aesthetically beautiful yet undistinguishable and intriguing, inviting the audience to look closer both visually and metaphorically.

This hand embroidered piece is specifically designed to explore preconceived opinions, to provoke, and even rebuke the audience for their views of women who serve, and who have served, in the UK Armed Forces. It challenges preconceived ideas that soldiers, sailors and air personnel are male and white, with Military Veterans stereotypically being seen as male, white and old. Taking inspiration from her experiences of having her own military service downplayed in comparison to that of her male colleagues, Kim has designed this piece to reflect and reinforce the feeling of invisibility that female serving personnel and female veterans experience.

The embroidery designs use Government data, statistics and lived experience to explore ideas of the vast disparity between male and female Service Personnel. It brings light to many areas of unrecognised inequalities such as lack of gender diversity within senior officer ranks (revealing a glass ceiling) and numbers of serving mothers to serving fathers, as well as highlighting the expectations on those serving. The embroidery takes advantage of the concept of camouflage to highlight that Servicewomen are often hidden in comparison to Servicemen.

The couture embroidery elements used, juxtapose against the strong, hostile appearance of the uniform. Meanwhile, the colour palette and patterns have been dictated by the Multi Terrain Pattern of the fabric, continuing the theme of invisibility whilst echoing the strict restrictions that Service Personnel accept in their professional, private and family lives. It was important for the artist to retain the functionality of the garment. The audience is presented with a garment that remains as operationally effective as when it was last worn. Therefore, the garment was embroidered as it stood; it was not deconstructed for ease of adornment!

At first glance, this piece is a standard issue, uniform shirt, the cut of which reinforces the assumption that the wearer is male. As the audience draws closer, they have their preconceptions of modern day Service Personnel challenged by the linear 'women' embroidery on the sleeves, and size differences between the pink and blue threaded, embellished rank circles. Retaining the functionality of the garment illustrates that female Service Personnel reduce the functionality of the Armed Forces only in the mind of an audience who don't challenge what they expect to see.

Mary Ann Sieghart, *The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do About It* (United Kingdom: Penguin Random House UK, 2022) 55-60.