

# Patterns of Power

**John Westmark**

by Lesli Robertson

**The work of Austin, Texas-based artist John Westmark pursues the intersection of material and gender in his newest series *Double Bind*.**

Large-scale figurative works of female subjects are created through the combination of paper sewing patterns and paint, garnering a variety of reactions from viewers who are often surprised by the gender of the artist.

Male artists working with materials long associated with women's work is not new to art. Over the past decade, artists such as Mark Newport have increasingly worked with textile-based media and processes to tackle issues dealing with gender. Many have paired these materials with overtly masculine themes, subject matter, or handling. Westmark, however, is unconcerned with forcing feminine materials into masculine roles. The "gender signature" of his work becomes deliberately ambiguous through a conscious balance of paint to paper and careful application of delicate pattern pieces to each canvas.

While creating work for his MFA exhibition at the University of Florida, Westmark moved from self-proclaimed painting purist to mixed-media artist. This shift occurred while his wife Carrie was in labor with their second child. Looking down at the pattern pieces for garments she was working on, he noticed a distinct similarity to schematics and flight mechanisms for model planes he built as a child. This awakened a new perspective on his paintings. His fledgling *Flight Series* focuses on mimicking aircraft diagrams in direct combination with the pattern pieces, drawing connections between the construction of garments and the engineering of aircraft.

Westmark began to consider the influence his work might have on his two young daughters as they grew into adolescence. Trying to understand how to raise and empower them in our current society, he describes his world as being "rocked" when he made the conscious choice to turn his focus from self-interest to their interest. This shift opened a new translation of the pattern pieces to reflect their relationship to clothing as identity, ideas of domesticity, and the roles of women. The *Double Bind* series began to take shape as Westmark studied the history of

women's rights and various movements of feminism, focusing on eras defined by the strengths of women struggling for equality.

In his artist statement, Westmark writes "[I] present the female figure as an agent of revolt in the form of resolute warriors or stoic martyrs... . The denial of a specific identity suggests an ambiguity of viewpoint, an anonymous 'every-woman,' not invisible but fractious." By creating strong, faceless, female figures that reference this history through clothing, Westmark's intent is to present these figures not as single characters, but as representations of the many women who were a part of defining new gender roles. His work challenges viewers to form their own narrative, while simultaneously encouraging them to reconsider their assumptions about the material, content, and gender of the artist.

Formally, Westmark's works are masterful in their use of such a delicate and fugitive material. He has collected hundreds of patterns from Vogue, Burda, McCall's, Simplicity, and others throughout the years. The variety of pattern makers and years produced provide subtleties in color and translucence that allow him to achieve different results as he layers and integrates the media. Through his process of underpainting each composition, he blocks out the area of the figure, at times adding shifting tones of color that show through the paper.

Westmark creates an interesting play between the present and the past by using garment patterns from the last several decades to create imagery of historical clothing. This interaction underlies his formal approach to materials, allowing for interpretations that go beyond the painted subject matter.

The painted linework in *Shush* mimics the geometry and graphic designs present on the pattern pieces, formally bridging the two materials. Our only reference to a specific place and time is the style of garment and the patterned tile floor. The figure is depicted in a vulnerable pose, bent at the waist, yet she demonstrates her power through the gesture of a finger pressed to the lips, suggesting that she is aware of the situation and is in complete control.



JOHN WESTMARK *Hold the Line* 60" x 72", 2010-2011.

All works are made with acrylic paint, ink, and paper sewing patterns on canvas, painting, collage. All photos by the artist.

The single matriarch gives way to an army in *Hold the Line*. The movement of running figures is achieved by the careful folding and layering of the paper as one would construct a garment with cloth. The painted surface differentiates the women while creating a sense of depth within the composition. The subtlety of the struggle is replaced with an active assault, complete with weapons, flags, and flying bonnet strings.

Throughout the *Double Bind* series, the pattern paper accentuates each turn of the figures portrayed sitting, bending, running, and falling. The assembly instructions printed on each pattern become a tool for Westmark to visually describe this movement in more detail. Each piece of paper is thoughtfully chosen to allow the lines, text, and symbols to emphasize the figure while obscuring the face to a greater degree. Through his experimentation with pattern paper,

Westmark strives to validate its potential as more than a superficial instructional material.

Westmark is an avid researcher, navigating his way through a long history of political activism. Each work in *Double Bind* references this research to some degree, citing an archive of books and manifestos from *Girls to the Front: The Riot Grrrl Story* by Sara Marcus to *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir. By adding his own text and iconography to the pattern pieces, Westmark seamlessly integrates excerpts from these feminist writings with existing directions. Examples of the text from *Hold the Line* include "Cut1 – seam line – sew here for a strong seam that resists masculine values" and "Seam line for regarding the current state of affairs as something not fixed."

Despite their ambiguity, these texts add strength to the action the figure is taking, at times directly referencing her struggle. In *She Crab*, small black scissors are strategically placed



JOHN WESTMARK *Shush* 41" x 46", 2010.

over the mouth of the figure while a four-pointed arrow can be seen on the neck; these symbols juxtapose to infer a narrative of the woman as the center of her family yet bound by her role. Westmark adds to the idea of constraint with additional text, "Gather for lining against hard and bitter work" and "Continued pattern of economic privilege and access (center 1.5cm)." Rather than convey a story about the past, these excerpts seem to draw connections to the present and ongoing struggles of women.

With all of the works in *Double Bind*, Westmark approaches his gender-codified content as one who thoughtfully reads, understands, and presents the information without forcing a specific feminist agenda. In the recent piece *Monarchy*, he moves beyond depicting women in the midst of a struggle or battle. A butterfly is seen at the top of the composition, with a pyramid of women supporting each other to reach for this symbol of growth and freedom. Wrapping the entire composition are long curving arrows

that press the women upward. In the background, a bank of dark storm clouds lightens to a clear and beautiful sky as they move closer to their goal.

The play on words in the title *Monarchy* gives the best sense of Westmark's view of the women he depicts throughout this series— independent and sovereign. His intent is to create powerful expressions of feminine strength and courage that inspire the women in his life, and all viewers of his work, to create their own stories of empowerment.

John Westmark's website is [www.johnwestmark.com](http://www.johnwestmark.com). His solo show will be on view this summer at Manifest Gallery in Cincinnati, OH (August 16–September 13, 2013), [www.manifestgallery.org](http://www.manifestgallery.org).

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JOHN WESTMARK *Monarchy* 72" x 60", 2013.