



TRISH TILLMAN

Remains (to be Seen)
March 30–June 3, 2018



FOREWORD

The Visual Arts Center of Richmond is pleased to present "Remains (to be seen)" by artist Trish Tillman. The solo exhibition features work created entirely while in residence at the studios of the Visual Arts Center. Based in Brooklyn, Tillman was able to use a three-month residency in Richmond to explore the boundaries of her materials and push conceptual ideas in her work.

The exhibitions presented in our True F. Luck Gallery focus on the different ways contemporary artists are innovating the materials and processes we teach in our 16 professional classroom-studios. With this in mind, it was an incredible pleasure to invite Tillman to take full advantage of these resources and to work alongside our faculty of teaching artists to evolve the process and narrative of her already accomplished body of work.

During a period of up to 20 weeks, Quirk+VisArts resident artists have unlimited access to the full range of studios in VisArts' facility, with housing and a private workspace provided by our partner, Quirk Hotel and Gallery. The program provides artists at any career stage with the time, space, equipment and funding to innovate and expand their creative boundaries, allowing artists to develop one or more original works for their exhibitions, to respond creatively to the site of our gallery and to engage in meaningful conversation with the artistic community in Richmond.

We extend our gratitude to Altria Group and the Allan and Margot Blank Foundation for their generous support of our exhibition programming. Related educational programming is supported by grants from The Windgate Charitable Foundation, The Community Foundation, Wells Fargo, Dominion Foundation, The Leonore G. Tawney Foundation, and The Fan District Association. We also thank the Virginia Commission for the Arts and CultureWorks & The Arts and Cultural Funding Consortium: City of Richmond, Hanover County and Henrico County for ongoing support of our programming and operations. Thank you to Melissa Messina for a thoughtful essay that brings greater understanding to the rich and complex themes in Tillman's work. I also extend sincere appreciation to the immensely talented and generous teachers and staff who shared their time and talent and helped Tillman realize this beautifully crafted exhibition: Barbara Atkinson, David Bohnhoff, Haleh Pedram, Tesni Stephen, Tyler Stoll and Sophie Treppendahl.

Stefanie Fedor
Executive Director
Visual Arts Center of Richmond

Cover: *Double Down*, 2018, vinyl, hardware, tassels, wood, foam, 63" x 40" x 2"

Back: *Across the Bar I* (detail), 2018, wood, formica, 82" x 38" x 6 1/2"

Inside front: *Spare Room* (detail), 2018, vinyl, fabric, hardware, wood, foam, 56" x 28" x 3"

Inside back: *Dipped In Time* (detail), 2018, vinyl, hand-me-down towels, hardware, tassels, wood, foam, 47 1/2" x 47 1/2" x 1"



"We are forlorn like children, and experienced like old men..."

- Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*¹

"The girls couldn't block out these things and they didn't want to; they wanted to stay acutely aware of the war against them so they could fight back."

- Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*²

If Trish Tillman's "Remains (to be Seen)" were a novel, the two main characters might be a young girl and her war hero grandfather, and the plot might coalesce around a dramatic loss of innocence. As a book, however, the black letters on white paper would pale in comparison to the vivid color and rich surfaces of Tillman's abstracted sculptural forms. "Remains (to be Seen)" is instead

a cohesive, if elusive, exhibition of stunningly executed two- and three-dimensional pieces made during the artist's three-month residency at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond. It is an exhibition that speaks great volumes about her skilled, poetic use of materials – primarily fabric, wood and metal – as enigmatic conveyers of meaning and covert emitters of emotion.

Works in the show, both singularly and in loaded combination, are playful and provocative. Upon first entering the gallery, the brightly designed pieces evoke feelings of delight. The viewer initially becomes the proverbial kid in the candy store, but ever so slowly and masterfully, as with most coming of age stories, disturbing undertones begin to surface. Trauma, be it from childhood violence or that of military battle, is not only suggested but brilliantly compared. In Tillman's narrative, the adolescent girl and the war hero are each hardened in their own way by their personal experience of war. The artist's choice and manipulation of material, form and ornamented detail, is quickly reinterpreted as metaphorical coping strategy. In its controlled precision,

the work of Trish Tillman, as the exhibition title suggests, expertly reveals the secret struggle, the walking wounded in us all, so that it may be bravely confronted.

Throughout the exhibition, Tillman's play on gender roles, alluded to with anthropomorphically suggestive forms, hyper-specific color choices and ornamentation, creates an enticing tension. The feminine emits in tropes – floral patterns, saccharine pink curves and evocative slits; the masculine is hard-edged, studded, chained and patriotically tattooed. A piece such as *Spare Room*, for example, is a curvaceous, almost dress-like form that is shapely but awkward, much like an adolescent body. Made of pastel vinyl and pretty toile, the belted buckle

¹ Erich Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1928), 123.

² Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 93.

Installation, *Remains (to be Seen)*, Visual Arts Center of Richmond.



hangs chastely over a metal drawer pull. In contrast, the nearby *Bayonet* is reminiscent of the sheath of a weapon or tool. Its black vinyl and gold tip is outfitted with a utilitarian and decorative silver chain. In these design-oriented ways, pieces often demonstrate a gendered dichotomy and what the artist describes as a “commemoration of personality.”³ In Tillman’s abstraction, sexual connotations are not coy or denied, though they appear starkly defined in some works and intentionally merged in others. Overall, she nods to individual sexual discovery ranging from “the confident to the confused.”⁴ *Bitchin’ Betty*, for example, with its rounded shape and strategically placed candy dish, suggests the female form and also resembles an armored shield. It is as tough and protective in its presence as it is open and giving, like a reluctant offering.

The medallions, shields and emblems found in many of Tillman’s forms, such as *Standard Issue* and *Reissue*, connote talismans, comfort objects to help salve internal struggle. Again in these works, Tillman borrows from a masculine and feminine decorative lexicon, but also interestingly combines the regalia of the militaristic and the religious. Hung slightly higher than eye level, one looks up at these pieces with a respectful or worshipful gaze. Serving to “ground the work,” horn-like forms point downward in *Standard Issue* but are instead upwardly reaching in *Reissue*.⁵ Their fleur-de-lis shapes and camouflage color palettes can also be interpreted as the crests of an armed force or a sovereign’s insignia. With these works, both types of association offer us an object of defense, a kind of universal amulet sought for protection in a dangerous unknown.

The artist’s reverence for iconography, emblematic materiality and pristine execution transfers itself into a reading of the sacred in the work. In no piece is this more prominently felt than *Midnight Drifter*, a winged form that hangs in a distanced solitude, as if a symbolic dove or starling pictured in a place of worship. *Midnight Drifter*’s placement adjacent to the wood sculptures, *Across the Bar I & II*, whose Gothic forms read as confessionals, further creates a feeling of the religious or the ceremonial in the gallery. The two structures call to mind the architecture of the church

³ Conversation with the artist, April 2018.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

Bayonet, 2018, vinyl, hardware, wood, 42” x 17” x 1.5”



Bitchin’ Betty, vinyl, vegan leather, fabric, glass, wood, 52” x 42” x 3”



but are rendered non-functional in that they jut out from the wall without confinement, negating any privacy a confessional might offer. Their hot pink color calls attention to itself and furthers their absurdity. Tillman seems to be challenging the very notion of shame and absolution. Whom do we obey? How might a perpetrator absolve himself or herself? Why must a victim? The nearby *Dipped in Time*, with its glowing white presence and ceremonially tasseled ornamentation, seems an alter to the goddess of all things fragile, bearing witness to these very questions. Its finger-like protrusions, wrapped at the tips in vintage floral tea towels, absorb the messy answers.

If the collective works in this gallery suggest a space of sanctification, then the main gallery can be viewed as one in which redemption is sought.

Anchored by the piece, *Double Foxhole*, which is a headboard or chaise-like curvilinear tufted wooden sculpture, the space feels as libidinous and angst-ridden as the air in a teen's bedroom. If in these works the connotation of furniture is meant to serve as a "foundation for home," as the artist describes, then it is one in which personal safety is seemingly at risk.⁶ There is no escape in the hide-and-seek type of game that *Double Foxhole* provokes. It is not tall enough for modesty. There is no comfortable place for respite. To move around the piece is to discover rather than conceal. Dripping tassels on one side feel vulnerable, like delicate tears, particularly in stark contrast to the implied toughness of the eagle-covered fabric on the verso. The play on hard and soft, the secure and the exposed, can also be found in works such as *Mall*



Regalia I and its pair, *Mall Regalia II*, in the adjacent gallery. As in much of Tillman's past work, these pieces demonstrate her use of rock 'n' roll, punk and goth aesthetics to convey a chosen "protective armor" for one's performative persona.⁷ The iconography of heavy metal may be seen as a kind of testament to the phrase "proving your mettle." These winged forms read like badges of honor for rebellious risk-taking, or perhaps a type of storage for the collecting of ominous trophies. As in *Double Foxhole* we again find the eagle tattoo screen-printed fabric that Tillman created at VisArts for the exhibition. The textile, a sampling of various stereotypical depictions of this patriotic image, denotes the branding of machismo we ascribe to portray honor, loyalty, heroism, belonging and sometimes even silence. But the devil is in the details.

In *Mall Regalia II* the word "freedom" patterned in the screen-printed fabric is covered up, overlaid by rainbow-colored vinyl strips. Tillman seems to call into metaphorical question what we define as victory. Perhaps unlike war, growing up is most successfully accomplished when the victorious is defined not as a conqueror, but an escapee.

The concepts of bravery carry over to Tillman's *Chest Candy* series that



Top left: *Across the Bar I*, 2018, wood, formica, 82" x 38" x 6 1/2"

Top right: *Across the Bar II*, 2018, wood, formica, 57 1/2" x 38 1/2" x 6 1/2"

⁶ Ibid

Double Foxhole, 2018, screen printed denim, tassels, hardware, wood, foam, 69" x 48" x 18"

Mall Regalia I, 2018, screen printed denim, vinyl, hardware, wood, foam, 43" x 33" x 1"

⁷ Ibid



expertly juxtapose the innocent aesthetics of youth with the solemn decorations of war. In many ways, the exhibition is inspired by Tillman's connection to the Richmond area, where some members of her family were raised after World War II. For the exhibition, she considered the contrast between her paternal grandfather, a celebrated war hero from the region, and her maternal grandfather who returned from battle troubled and scarred. The artist reflects, through the created work, on "how people reveal themselves through their actions and through their non-actions, and the mysteries we find and never find in the relationship to the self, others and

objects."⁸ The *Chest Candy* series imagines the ribbons of military uniform in larger-than-life scale and in confectionary colors and gum-like forms. Smartly executed as if through the lens of a child, the series challenges what we value, what we honor and what we hide. Ultimately, they read together in a rhythm like Morse code as a message of valor hung in celebratory grand position over the gallery.

The no less evocative third gallery space in "Remains (to be Seen)" feels akin to the basement bar, the downstairs den where the clandestine can occur. The Viking-horned padded wall sculpture, *One Last Drink*, feels

like the insignia for such a place. Its modular shapes are made of wrapped vinyl and upholstery fabric in an acidic palette reminiscent of late modernism. They align in formation around a Formica and chrome shelf on which rests an enticing chalice. The piece highlights Tillman's interest in design and furniture and her ability to locate a feeling of familiarity and domestic association in materials of the homes, restaurants and bars she frequents.⁹ Like *Bitchin' Betty*, this piece seems both a defensive shield and a provocative proposition. In each piece, the dish and the cup feel like an offering. These pink salvaged glass antiques suggest something feminine, perhaps the central core

of womanhood to be coveted or protected. In *One Last Drink*, however, the glass is not securely embedded into the work, but rather propped up precariously on a shelf, to be picked up and held or carelessly knocked over.

The largest work in the show, *Captain's Lounge*, anchors the room and serves as a focal point in the exhibition. The form, made of eight bespoke cushions hung by rope from various points in the ceiling, recalls a childhood game—the making of a fort or a puppet-like doll. The domestic nature of the fabrics – dish towels, couch upholstery, ribbon and satin – nod to homemaking but here, once again, the comforts of home are disrupted. With

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid





the cushions hung, their intended offering of comfort is instead strung-up and exposed. The childlike sense of delight in seeing the grand scale and interesting design elements in the work can turn to more disturbing feelings as the angelic form in this manipulated configuration becomes apparent. The overwhelming size of the piece creates, however, an undeniable sense of wonder, and in this way can also be seen as a crowning testament to the catharsis of play and creativity.

Throughout the exhibition, Tillman's work vacillates between the wonderment and "simpler times"

of childhood and the harsh realities of growing up.¹⁰ She presents these works from the precipice of reflection, a place of looking back in order to cope with life-changing moments and determining how best to move forward productively. Her work probes and sometimes blurs the demarcations of youth and adulthood. It also confronts the gendered stereotypes that influence our culture. Hers are expressions of a developing personality and sexuality, with some works exuding abounding confidence and others touchingly revealing the more private, and realistic, moments of confusion and vulnerability. *Hot Mustang*, for

One Last Drink, 2018, vinyl, hardware, fabric, wood, foam, glass, 57" x 47" x 8 1/2"

¹⁰ Ibid



Captain's Lounge, 2018, screen printed fabric, upholstery fabric, hand-me-down towels, hardware, rope, tassels, foam, 140" x 68" x 6"

example, embodies all of the unease of adolescent sexual awakening. Its shape mixes the rock 'n' roll libido of a lightning rod with the tenuity of a cartoon thought bubble. It exudes prowess despite its inexperience. The luxuriousness of its decorative black fabric is tinged with the bravado of gold crocodile skin and metal studs. The soft, minty green and turquoise vinyl, a trim of aloof fringe, and a child's bubblegum-colored belt, however, undermine its pretense of maturity.



Conversely, *Tits Up* seems a more tortured view of adult femininity. Wrapped in a bed sheet and tied in a bow with rope, its ornamentation conveys anger, or perhaps more nuanced frustrations of melancholy and vulnerability. When considered together with a work such as *Bitchin' Betty*, whose title refers to the nickname pilots have given to the voice of aircraft warning systems, Tillman seems to be commenting on the negative connotations often associated with feminine attributes. "Tits up," after all, is a flip colloquialism referring to a soldier found dead. The hyper-masculine is asserted to master feelings, to poke fun or belittle. These works touch on the confounding ways in which we attempt to emasculate and/or oversexualize our response in attempt to assert power over a situation for which we have no control. In these pieces, Tillman employs this strategy,

albeit in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, to send out a kind of "Mayday" distress signal for womankind.

The sleek and meticulous appearance of Tillman's work is not championing a superficial veneer but rather a stylized armor in which one can face life's traumas and the ever-oncoming world. It calls attention to the various ways style and persona can serve as protective cover. And whether feminized, masculinized or androgynous, Tillman's surrogates always present as fierce. In this way, *Double Down* serves as the mascot and focal point for the show. It is a signature of Trish Tillman's work – a vaguely anthropomorphic form that reads simultaneously as ancient, futuristic and unabashedly rebellious. It is sleek and rough, hardcore and soft-edged, glamorous in its minimalism. It is classic and brand new. Wrapped in vinyl, studded in metal and dripping with tassels,

it is the very embodiment of rock 'n' roll. Its presence, reinforced by its title, is almost confrontational. The long tassels that shimmer in ombre, morphing from gold to burnt orange to fuchsia, are those from a mortarboard, signifying a metaphorical readiness to graduate. It marks the exhibition's overarching

message of defiant confidence. It is not just unwilling to be brought down or overlooked but, like Tillman, will take the world by storm.

– Melissa Messina



WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Across the Bar I, 2018
wood, formica
82" x 38" x 6 ½"

Across the Bar II, 2018
wood, formica
57 ½" x 38 ½" x 6 ½"

Bayonet, 2018
vinyl, hardware, wood, foam
42" x 17" x 1 ½"

Bitchin' Betty, 2018
vinyl, vegan leather, fabric,
glass, wood, foam
52" x 42" x 3"

Captain's Lounge, 2018
screen printed fabric,
upholstery fabric, hand-me-
down towels, hardware, rope,
tassels, foam
140" x 68" x 6"

Chest Candy, 2018
vinyl, hardware, wood, foam
dimensions vary

Dipped in Time, 2018
vinyl, hand-me-down towels,
hardware, tassels, wood,
foam
47 ½" x 47 ½" x 1"

Double Down, 2018
vinyl, hardware, tassels,
wood, foam
63" x 40" x 2"

Double Foxhole, 2018
screen printed denim, tassels,
hardware, wood, foam
69" x 48" x 18"

Hot Mustang, 2018
vinyl, fabric, tassels,
hardware, wood, foam
48" x 15" x 1 ½ "

Mall Regalia I, 2018
screen printed denim, vinyl,
hardware, wood, foam
43" x 33" x 1"

Mall Regalia II, 2018
vinyl, screen printed denim,
hardware, tassels, wood,
foam
75" x 39 ½" x 3"

Midnight Drifter, 2018
screen printed denim, vinyl,
hardware, wood, foam
45 ½" x 19" x 1 ½"

One Last Drink, 2018
vinyl, hardware, fabric, wood,
foam
57" x 47" x 8 ½"

Reissue, 2018
vinyl, screen printed fabric,
hardware, wood, foam
39" x 20" x 1"

Spare Room, 2018
vinyl, fabric, hardware, wood,
foam
56" x 28" x 3"

Standard Issue, 2018
vinyl, screen printed fabric,
hardware, wood, foam
32" x 20" x 1"

Tits Up, 2018
screen printed fabric, vinyl,
hardware, rope, hand-me-
down sheets, wood, foam
47" x 26" x 6"

BIOGRAPHY



Trish Tillman is a visual artist who grew up in Washington, D.C. and now lives in New York City. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from James Madison University in Virginia, and studied at the University of Wolverhampton in the United Kingdom before pursuing her Master of Fine Arts from the School of Visual Arts in New York. She is a recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation 2009 MFA Grant and has participated in programs through the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities and the Baltimore Office of Promotions and Arts. She was an Untitled Art Fair Miami Beach Fellow at The Fountainhead Residency in 2015, and had a solo booth at NADA NY with Asya Geisberg Gallery in 2016.

Tillman is also a writer and an educator, and has been a professor and lecturer at Monmouth University, George Washington University, Rutgers University and the University of Maryland. She has been on panels with ArtTable, Buffalo State College and Pyramid Atlantic. Selected exhibitions include Regina Rex, N.Y.C.; Emerson Dorsch Gallery, Miami, Fla.; HILDE, Los Angeles, Calif.; Present Company, N.Y.C.; Slag Gallery, N.Y.C.; Nudashank, Baltimore, Md.; and Civilian Art Projects, Washington, D.C. Tillman is represented by Asya Geisberg Gallery in New York.

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