

YOU SEE THE OUTFIT?

A Thesis

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of Cornell University

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Master of Fine Arts

By

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**APPROVAL OF WRITTEN STATEMENT**

Name of candidate: \_\_\_\_\_  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis statement addresses the impact of garment production and consumption on the landscape, both physical and mental/emotional. Through textile-adjacent prints and collages, Alexis White visualizes the relationship between outfit and environment.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Alexis White was born in Elmira, New York in 1992. In 2013, she earned a Bachelor's Degree from the State University of New York at New Paltz.

The collection of material assembled over many years of scrutinizing the emotional and physical landscape of my home in upstate New York is the starting point for making. I regard the components of my collages as had, rather than found, material. While the term “found object” in art-making calls to mind the beautiful randomness of life, the material that I use is made up of objects that I regard as meaningful landmarks of a manufactured landscape, a record of the unique time and place that I live in. In short, these are objects that I have a personal history with and that have accumulated in my studio as a result of an intense involvement with my surrounding environment. The content and material of my artwork has been heavily influenced by my career experience in apparel design. Working in the garment industry, which is abusive and destructive by nature, prompted me to think about consumer agency and the degree of choice that we all have as private citizens when we interact with the fashion industry through purchasing and wearing clothes and viewing advertisements. This is the reason that I first started working with plastic bags. The landscape of the city I worked in, a major symbol of a consumer-driven economy, was composed of two types of debris: print advertising reminding us of our duty to buy things and plastic shopping bags thanking us for our service.

Relief printing from the plastic bags produced an image reminiscent of the polluted landscape. In collages such as *Costume (Disruptive Coloration)*, the printed image oscillates between outfit and environment, referencing the impact of garment production on our physical landscape, as well as the erosion of the mental landscape of both the consumers (everyday buyers) and producers (garment workers) of plasticized textile waste. The title—disruptive coloration—is a type of camouflage used by some animals which relies on standing out rather than blending in. Instead of enabling them to disappear into the background, the ostentatious patterning of zebras and tigers makes them hyper-visible, but in a way that is confusing to the

eye. For me, this biological form of camouflage resonated with the Surrealist definition of camouflage as a uniquely human defense against the oppressive gaze of colonial domination. Black art in America deploys disruptive coloration to engage with, rather than avoid, the gaze of the dominant culture. The inspiration that I draw from hip hop movements, especially Southern rap, overlaps with my practical dedication to the collage form. Hip hop is made of had, rather than found, material. Like the plastic bags and printed ads blowing down the sidewalk, the scraps of commercialized and monetized music that came before it were radically stitched together by pioneering hip hop artists. The many movements in music and art that are collectively labeled “hip hop” are a prime example of how the negative presence of commodity in our lives, paralleled and enabled by the ubiquity of plastic material, is (partly) neutralized by the action of collage. Plastic is now a natural occurrence in our landscape and it will be indefinitely. As such, it is subject to processes that other cast-offs or waste of natural events inevitably go through—collage. There are types of collage that are considered the course of nature: once trees shed their leaves in the fall time, they are recovered by the earth to be used as a protective covering throughout the winter. Once the snow melts, its moisture is likewise recycled into a water source for new plant life. And the sticks and moss that flake off of trees like dry skin are collaged by birds into nests, and so on. Collage itself can be a process of indigenization—or re-indigenization. Things that are taken from a given landscape, whether physical or mental (in terms of hip hop, earlier forms of Black music that were watered-down and monetized by corporations) are returned to that landscape, enabled by the hands of an artist.

Here is another component to the Surrealist definition of camouflage—it represents the possibility of collaboration between landscape and people. I regard the collages I make as a conversation in looks between me and my surroundings. Plastic assemblages, and the relief

prints made from them, are a result of intense involvement with the plasticized environment; a reaction to the experience of watching a hometown transform into a receptacle for the effluvia of shopping centers, and the consequent degradation of the unique regional landscape and cultural life. In the narrow country roads of my hometown, lined by houses and farms, highly visible and brightly colored plastic bags seem just as abundant as leaves and sticks. Collages made entirely of the material that I collect from running down these roads, such as *Thank You* and *In the Road*, interpret the feeling of being surrounded by plastic, even in a rural landscape. By exploring the surface of the plastic sheet, I address its adjacency to its ancestors, paper and cloth. Like those ancient fibrous materials that industrial plastic is rapidly replacing, these collages are translucent; dependent on light, it is possible sometimes to see through them to the supporting frame and wall. The plastic membrane, while it looks transparent and permeable, is actually airtight. The beautiful presence of this suffocating material is a physical referent for the impassable mental boundaries created by plastic—we are at once wallowing, reveling, and choking in the role of citizen-consumer.



Alexis White  
*Plastic imprint*, 2018. Collagraph on watercolor paper, 13" x 10".



Alexis White  
*Costume (Disruptive Coloration) 2*, 2019. Collagraph and collage on handmade paper, 10" x 8".



Alexis White  
*Thank You*, 2019. Collage with plastic and paper on wooden board, each panel 10" x 10".



Alexis White  
*Frail Bitch Issue*, 2019. Collagraph on handmade paper, 10" x 8".



Alexis White  
*Frail Bitch Issue 2*, 2019. Collagraph on handmade paper, 34" x 22".



Alexis White  
*In the Courtyard*, 2020. Collage with plastic on wooden frame, 48" x 36".



Alexis White  
*Costume (Disruptive Coloration) 1*, 2019. Collagraph and collage on handmade paper, 10" x 8".



Alexis White  
*In the Road*, 2019. Collage with plastic and steel frame, 48" x 36" x 6".