

Orange Alert: Fashion and Frivolity in the Age of Terror

by Charissa N. Terranova, PhD

Three large hunks of a crashed airplane fuselage litter the broad open warehouse space of the new Dallas Contemporary. Lifeboats list along side. A loop of short videos plays on large monitors interspersed among the fragments of a symbolic airplane crash. So many moving-image follies of the artist interacting Chris Burden-like with colorful plastic pool floaties, the video clips cut the seriousness of the crash site with an elixir of absurdist humor. The technicolor plastic of the inflatables in the videos syncopates with a row of stylish life vests in pink industrial-grade plastic hanging along the concrete brick wall. One man's deadliness is LA artist James Gilbert's satirical idyll on fashion, frivolity and the technocracy of safety in the age of terror.

They are the components of a surrealist landscape in three dimensions made from mechanical debris and psychological uncertainty: a symbolic *mise-en-scène* of the nation's worst nightmare, a plane crash, made fanciful and fun by the technical finesse of this talented sculpture-couturier. While the lifeboat and life vest commonly corroborate urgency, in this context they strike a tone of play à la mode. Carefully hand sewn, the life vests on the wall seem hung on display in a clothing boutique. Their light-hearted high fashion strikes out against any potential gruesomeness, transforming the crash site into a sexual fetish. The violent mayhem of the crash becomes the stuff of desire, lascivious scopophilia and workaday rubbernecking. Creating a grown-up's playground from the shards of an accident, Gilbert the artist has become the J.G. Ballard of the plane crash. Replacing the word "car" with "plane," the following quote from Ballard helps assimilate Gilbert's installation:

A car [plane] crash harnesses elements of eroticism, aggression, desire, speed, drama, kinesthetic factors, the stylizing of motion, consumer goods, status -- all these in one event. I myself see the car [plane] crash as a tremendous sexual event really: a liberation of human and machine libido (if there is such a thing).

In creating fetish form out of what so often feel like a State-driven hysterics of safety, Gilbert sends a message about the repressed role of desire in the theatrics of paranoia to which the airport has become host.

In past bodies of work, Gilbert has used transparent white plastic in the form of adeptly handmade high-fashion clothing and faceless drawings to interrogate the transformation of identity in an age where privacy has been all but completely eroded by reality TV, Internet social networking sites, and the 24-hour news cycle. Gilbert filters similar themes through a different set of object-relations, namely the airplane and its manifold infrastructural accouterments. The erosion of privacy in this instance comes down not from the centerless world of the corporate mass media, but from American Homeland Security. In the realm of the

orange alert, the citizen becomes traveler-drone who, though denied momentarily of her full rights of mobility and expression (she can neither leave her bag unattended nor quip about carrying a bomb in her bra), feels in other ways the fullness of her emotional mentation. She is still a desiring being, and necessarily so. Loathing the diagnostics of traveling that includes x-ray machines and minor strip-searching, she is nonetheless an active participant putting forth a frenetic desire that is the counterweight to fear in what has become the dialectical psychosis attendant to global travel. She is conditioned to fear, welcomes and adapts to it in order to get quickly through to her plane.

In a maze of fractured parts – a cracked open cockpit here, a tiny video monitor flickering in a wall crevice there – Gilbert delves into the psychological moorings of our national preoccupation with security. He challenges the fear mongering so seemingly necessary to safe global passage with the sharp wit and delectable form of a candy-colored jungle gym of plane-wreck detritus.