

## MELISSA WEST

*The Elephant in the Room*, 2012  
Monoprint with inkjet transfer,  
linoleum block figures, 12 x 12 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## PHILIP SWANSTROM SHAW

### In the Last Days of Our Future War

**T**he voice that was hired to signal to us has made a mistake. It is 1:43 p.m. and we have been delayed and the voice that was hired has made the mistake of telling us, *Your plane has arrived*. The voice is telling us that this plane will eventually be ours, but *it must first unload* its current people. All of these passengers, and their belongings, or at least some of their belongings, will pour past us *as fast as possible*. And their other belongings, that were entrusted elsewhere, will attempt to follow them.

But our group has already been too late for too long. For those of us that the hired voice is now addressing, it will never be fast enough, this rushing by of others with their belongings. And now this mistake that the voice they hired has made makes our group anxiously erect. And now we will all stand. And now we will all just have to wait some more.

Standing and waiting, we try our best to not look at one another. We pretend to look out the wall of glass toward that plane that will eventually be ours. I look around at the others who are trying hard to not look at one another, or at me.

From where I stand, I can see a soldier stuck in the middle of the formless group that the hired voice wants to *form into a line* but will never be a line. The soldier's place in our group, which will never resolve itself into a line, is just a few paces from where I am standing. This soldier is wearing a camouflage meant to hide him in places that bear no resemblance to this field. For this soldier to blend in here, he would have to be wearing a golf shirt regaled with indistinct plumage, or tight sweatpants with a celebrity moniker emblazoned across his ass, or some similar regrettable affair. Unfamiliar with the wartime dress codes, I ask myself: *Do the soldiers get to choose what they wear when traveling among civilians?*

Our soldier's camouflaged uniform looks digitally rendered, an eight-bit pixel pattern of dry colors, the colors of settled earth and of the dust of hells that like to move. His uniform looks meant to hide him in those hells that have been, and are still, others' homes. When I first started noticing these uniforms, I thought to myself: *These newfangled camos look cheap*. I thought to myself: *They've decided to stop paying the fabric artists*. The artists who used to craft amorphous shapes to nudge against the seas of other shapes that worked hard to not be distinct shapes.



*I am remembering  
how my father told  
me the same stories  
of his war, over and  
over, for years on end.  
From where I stand  
I am remembering  
that I had come to  
trust the stories could  
all be heard again.*

These nonshapes were olive and brown and green in old wars. And I am now thinking: *My father's war.*

Now, a woman, her common camouflage highly effective, is descending from what may have been any corner of this airport. She is moving with an intention that I might mistake for a mother catching up to a son. Only I don't mistake her. From where I stand I can see that her fingers are long; I can see how she is making the index and middle fingers of her left hand rigid as she approaches our soldier from behind. She is now extending her left arm to reach high above her, and she is using those long stiff fingers to rat-a-tat-tat on our soldier's shoulder. From where I stand I can see how her right arm is tucked behind her and how her right hand is balled into a fist-like container.

From where I stand I am remembering my father talking of his wartime dress codes but I can no longer remember all the specifics. I am remembering all the times when I didn't believe I'd have to remember all of my father's details. Not even a single one. I am remembering how my father told me the same stories of his war, over and over,

for years on end. From where I stand I am remembering that I had come to trust the stories could all be heard again. I remember hoping that I would know when it was the last time to hear a certain story. And in somehow knowing, I would be able to think to myself, in that moment: *Pay attention. This is the last time.* And: *Later on you'll want to get all of this right.*

From where I stand I can now see how our soldier is turning to face our woman. I can see how it is only his head that moves slowly to see behind himself. I can see how she now pulls her left hand behind her back to join with her right. I can see how she now performs a feint that moves her body around his broadest side. I can see how she now stands squarely in front of him. And how she waits. And I can see how she is not looking up at the place where his face will eventually be when his neck has slowly brought our soldier's face around to catch up with her. And I can see how our woman is now looking down at our soldier's hands.

From where I stand I try to remember some of the identifiers of my father's wartime dress codes. He talked about different ceremonial uniforms and both *service dress blues*, and *service dress whites* in his stories. I am now remembering how my father was the one for details.

From where I stand watching our woman wait for our soldier, I am thinking: *They must have hired a computer.* Again: *They've decided to stop paying the fabric artists.* And now I am thinking: *His neck will never be in a hurry for the likes of her.* And I think: *He has been trained to not startle in places like this with the movements they designed to be quick.* That: *He is trained to reserve that swiftness for places that all of us here hope we never have to go, thanks to his going there for us.*

At this airport I've seen half a dozen variations of uniform in just under an hour. All of these differences are now reminding me of my father's choices. From where I stand I know I have forgotten other categories of uniform from my father's war. For example, from where I am now standing I want to think he said *fatigues*. But I know I never actually heard him say the word *fatigues*. Hollywood taught me that word. And I am now thinking how: *We're left to learn these details from our fathers, our brothers, our sisters, or our internet.* I am thinking how: *I must be wrong about these new uniforms, just digitally scrambled patterns, being the result of cost-reducing measures.* That: *They must*

*have something to do with scrambling the computer-aided enhanced-vision technology that is common and accessible to everyone, our enemies included.* I am thinking: *The kind of technology we have in our phones and the computers we now keep in our pockets.* That: *These uniforms have to guard against a positive lock, a specific siting of a soldier's coordinates.* And I am thinking: *Please don't have data measuring the efficacy of the fashion plan.* Even though I know they must.

From where I stand I can see how, as our soldier's face is returning to face our woman, the features of her face are beginning to flinch against an imagined strike. But from where I stand I can see how her body does not cower. And I am thinking: *She is a mother.* But I know: *Not his.* And I am thinking: *For her there have been other lines. Lines at grocery stores, at movies, at the mall, at a clinic, but now mostly at airports. Because this is where she sees the most uniforms, standing still for her in lines that aren't lines.* From where I now stand I can see how she lets her defenses down just long enough to grab his right wrist with her left hand. I can see how the fisted container of her right hand opens to place a wad of bills into his right palm. And I think she thinks: *His palm that I have forced to open.* And I also think: *A palm that he has let her force open.* And aloud, as she turns to depart before even the two small words have come all the way out, she says: *"Have this."* But from where I stand I can see that their hands are locked. I can see how our soldier is keeping her hand. And from where I stand I can hear how he begins and ends his refusal with two of his own small words: *"No, ma'am."* And I think: *This has happened to our soldier before.* And I am asking myself: *Is this something else they train them for?*

From where I stand I can hear our mother's grunt, the only noise she has made outside of: *"Have this."* From where I stand I am now watching our soldier lean into her attempted retreat. And I ask myself: *Will they have trained him to know how far to go?* And I know: *She carries these little wads of bills on her person, in predetermined amounts allowing for more ease in the moment, wherever she goes: a grocery store, a movie, the mall, a clinic, but now mostly airports.* And I think: *She has never had a contingency plan.* And I see how she is now left to only look, to give her lost eyes to his in exchange for her hand. And now I can see her hand tear free, or how he has let her tear it free. And

*From where I stand  
I remember how my  
father had once told  
me that his war was  
the best time of his life.  
But from where I am  
now standing I am also  
remembering how most  
of the stories he told  
me were stories about  
being on leave rather  
than being at war.*

I see how, now that she knows her dollars will remain with him, she can so easily disappear among all of us who have pretended to be looking out the window at a plane we were told by a hired voice *is here* but not yet ours. And I know: *She has personal reasons.* And that: *Reasons are always personal.*

From where I stand I remember how my father had once told me that his war was *the best time* of his life. But from where I am now standing I am also remembering how most of the stories he told me were stories about being on leave rather than being at war. The way he told me his stories I had come to believe that his uniform had to be different each time he went on leave. Even though there is only one type of uniform worn on leave, I was under the impression that his uniform had to depend on whether his leave was for family, or for drinking and sex, or for when

he was finally coming home for good. From where I now stand I can see that all of us who have been watching our soldier, but pretending we haven't, can see our soldier shaking his head with tiny careful movements as he raises his right hand to deposit the wad of uncounted dollars in the chest pocket of his digitally rendered camouflage uniform. And from where I am now standing I think: *His uniform looks like one of action, not the kind selected for the beginning of a leaving.*

And now the mistaken voice they hired is announcing that the plane is now *almost* ours. And now the people who had the plane before us are coming down a tunnel. And now, outside, the men in uniforms of a corporate country are tossing those people's belongings onto trailers that will transport them to conveyors that will allow those belongings that belong to those people coming down the tunnel to either follow them onto more planes or go to the place where they hope to be reunited. And soon it will be our turn.

And from where I am standing, I am now watching our soldier work the tobacco that has been in his lip. I am noticing how our soldier, with nowhere to spit, just sucks off the juices and swallows. That our soldier is working to extract the most out of what is left before he leaves the remains in a proper receptacle. And I am thinking: *This is another protocol he could have been trained for, maybe in courses called Civilian Transportation Etiquette.*

And from where I am standing, I am now watching my soldier work his pocket computer before that too will have to go. And I ask myself: *What words should come from those thumbs?*

**Philip Swanstrom Shaw** designs, writes, and directs communications on behalf of organizations working to advance education, health, equity, and the literary arts. He visually documents his writing process at [www.aRoughDraft.com](http://www.aRoughDraft.com)

MELISSA WEST

*Look!, 2011*  
Monoprint with linoleum block figures, 6 x 4 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST