

Masculine Decoys

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In 1919, there was a sex scandal in Newport, Rhode Island involving men from the Navy. Ervin Arnold, a naval machinist, discovered that local civilian homosexuals regularly made contact with one another and with Navy personnel. These men were having secret parties that involved sexual activity, liquor, cocaine and cross-dressing. Arnold launched an investigation seeking to purge the Navy of fairies and vice. He selected a private team of ... field agents. Groomed for their youth and beauty, Arnold sent his young men into the Newport wilds. They were tasked with rooting out the fairies: each was to approach suspicious individuals and, if consent was given, allow said individual to display their homosexuality.

It worked. Arnold court-martialed 15 sailors based on his agents' freely-voiced testimony. Keep in mind – these agents weren't gay, there were just following orders, acting as *masculine decoys* to entrap men into sex. Although these decoys engaged in sexual activity with other Navy men their actions were not deemed homosexual, as they didn't assume a female role in the investigation. So – what constitutes being gay? How do you know a fairy when you see one? What codes of communication are exchanged to seduce other sailors to engage in sex?

My work in progress, *Masculine Decoys*, consists of portraits of Navy sailors silkscreened with decorative floral patterns. These patterns act as a form of camouflage, concealing the decoys with a lattice of navy blue flowers. The silkscreens also incorporate designs from naval signal flags and pennants, an alphanumeric code that was used to create unique visual communications. Even in the days of radio and satellite communication the U.S., Navy relied on alphanumeric signal flags and pennants for visual signaling; these signal flags allowed vessels to communicate while maintaining radio silence.

This expanding series of silkscreens asks the viewer to examine portraits of men and determine what codes or visual signals are being communicated. Are these men fairies or decoys? Can we assume to know someone's sexuality based on appearance or body language? The job isn't easy. Even Arnold, a seasoned veteran, could only narrow it down to 90%. For training, consider how an institution produces a person. Recall how the namer defines the named. Remember, the judicial system of this country was founded on the belief that all men are innocent until proven gay.

My subjects acquire new identities, but hold onto a trace of their formal lives. My images grapple with the interplay between subject and context. Like the various communities of men mustered and stationed far from home in the Great War, I have exiled my subjects. As the Newport Scandal revealed, however, you cannot exile an identity.