

# *THE VISIBLE INVISIBLE:* **A RUFFLED LOOK AT UNITED STATES HISTORY**

by Ariel Zaccheo

**K**nown colloquially as “green-screen,” chroma key compositing is a “technical term in video and television for placing a person or an object against a uniform background, onto which any given situation can subsequently be (realistically) superimposed.” Using post-production technology, this uniform “green-screen” background can be replaced, overlaid or projected onto. Oddly, the intensity of chroma key green is necessary in order to render superimpositions with the proper density of information. The color’s visibility is paradoxically necessary in order for it to remain invisible. **Stephanie Syjuco’s** most recent project, tentatively titled *The Visible Invisible*, foregrounds this vivid shade within the rubric of historical garments. Fashioning iconic American dresses out of chroma key fabric, the artist examines how our historical narrative has rendered certain populations invisible, both literally and metaphorically.

Syjuco’s work frequently merges physical objects with the unfixed quality of the digital, uncovering relationships between the two worlds. Focusing on the “insistent physicality of the digital world” within the realm of the political, the artist examines global flows of capital, hierarchies of power, and activism through playful and complex imagery and pattern. While much of Syjuco’s projects have focused on the outward gaze of the United States toward foreign “others,” her two most recent projects have turned inward, examining what it means to be an American.

In *CITIZENS*, 2017 (exhibited at **Ryan Lee Gallery** in New York), the artist began her exploration with chroma key and transparency, continuing her thread of image distortion in the internet era. In one section, Syjuco blanketed an entire gallery wall in the gray-and-white checked transparency background

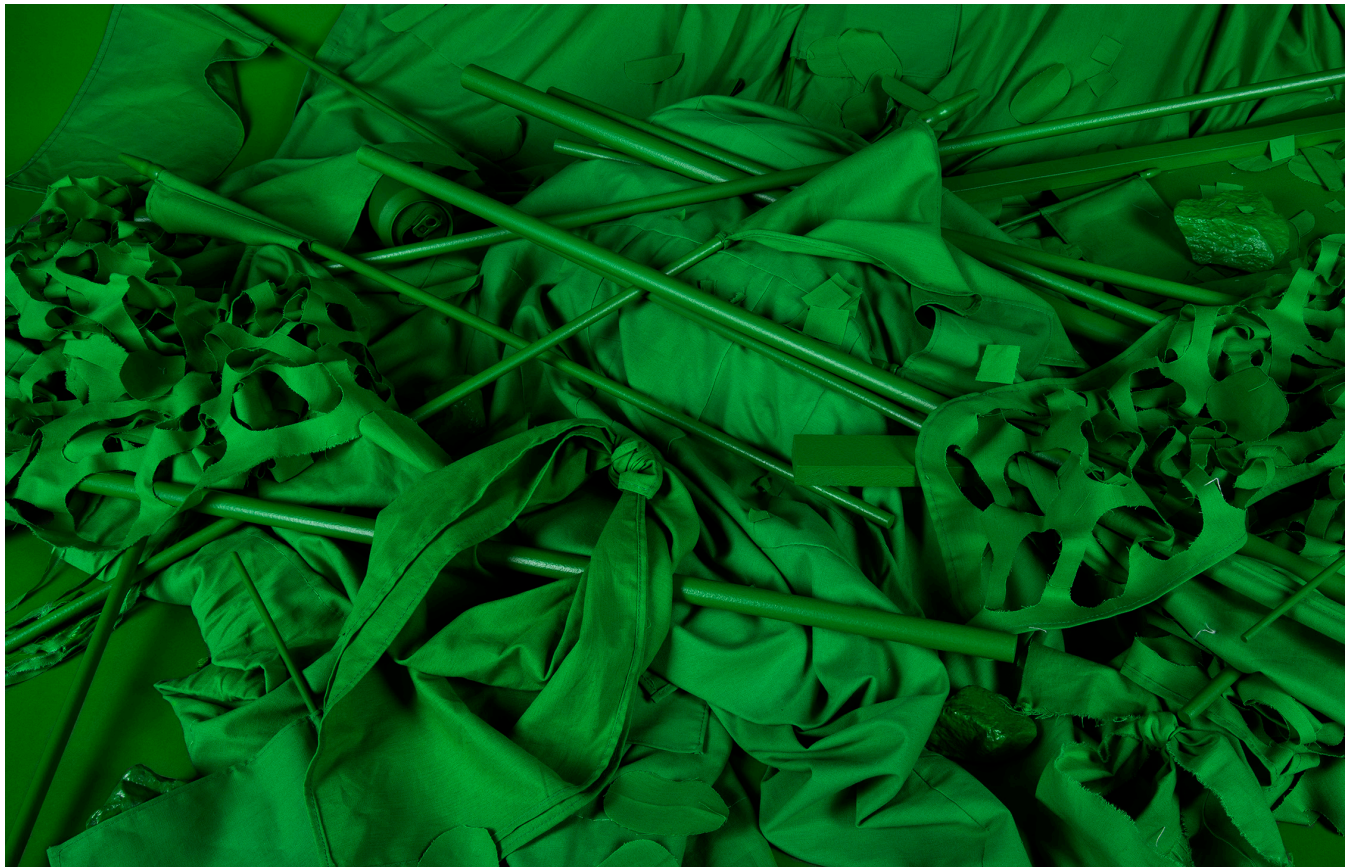
recognizable by users of Photoshop. In another, lush archival-pigment photographic prints featured flags, sticks, barriers, and other detritus from the 2016 election protests at **UC Berkeley**, all rendered entirely in chroma key green. Both the pattern and the monochromatic technique render visibility and invisibility in digital visual culture.

*The Visible Invisible*, debuts as part of a larger exhibition at the **Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum** in November 2018. Syjuco continues to expose the subjectivity of historiography by applying the lens of (in)

Left page: **Stephanie Syjuco Chromakey Aftermath 2 (Flags, Sticks, and Barriers)** 2017. Courtesy of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York. © Stephanie Syjuco.

Top: **Stephanie Syjuco Chromakey** (in-progress) 2017, garments that approximate iconic moments in American history. Left to right: Western prairie, American Colonial Revolution, and Puritan pilgrim. Photo by the artist.

Bottom: **Stephanie Syjuco Chromakey Aftermath 1 (Flags, Sticks, and Barriers)** 2017. Courtesy of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York. © Stephanie Syjuco.





©2018 Surface Design Association, Inc. All rights reserved.  
Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited.

visibility to fashion, labor, and the female form. American history is not always positive and rarely linear, and the strains of our past are woven into each of Syjuco's garments. Consisting of four dresses emblematic of important periods in United States history, the dresses are constructed almost entirely from chroma key cotton muslin.

*The Visible Invisible* currently consists of four historic adult dresses and one child's growth-gown, symbolizing iconic moments in American history: a pilgrim dress denoting early settlers, a 1776-style Revolutionary-era frock, a prairie dress representing Manifest Destiny, and a Civil War-era gown. The choices are deliberate; each is a simultaneously celebrated and derided time in US history. Undercurrents of slavery and the genocide of indigenous North Americans, both during colonization and Western expansion, abrade the grain of each garment.

Syjuco constructs each dress from commercially available modern-day patterns from companies like McCall's and Simplicity. Syjuco says of this decision, "I wanted the mass-produced commercial version. I chose the iconic garments that I assumed the everyday person might be able to identify." The Pilgrim dress in particular is stereotypical—it is almost cartoonish with its wide, flat collar and upturned cuffs.

Meant to replicate historic dress for the modern home sewing enthusiast, these commercial patterns, though often complicated to construct, are not historically accurate. They provide an inauthentic, aggrandized version of our nation's past through fashion. Historically accurate patterns *are* available through specialist companies, particularly for Civil War-era garments. Actual patterns from this period have (miraculously) survived, but the artist's choice of marginally accurate "costume" patterns accentuates the romanticized and often flawed eye we cast on our own past. As Syjuco hems 200 feet of monochrome green satin into Civil War-era ruffles, she gives us an opportunity to see through the construction of clothing to the construction of history.

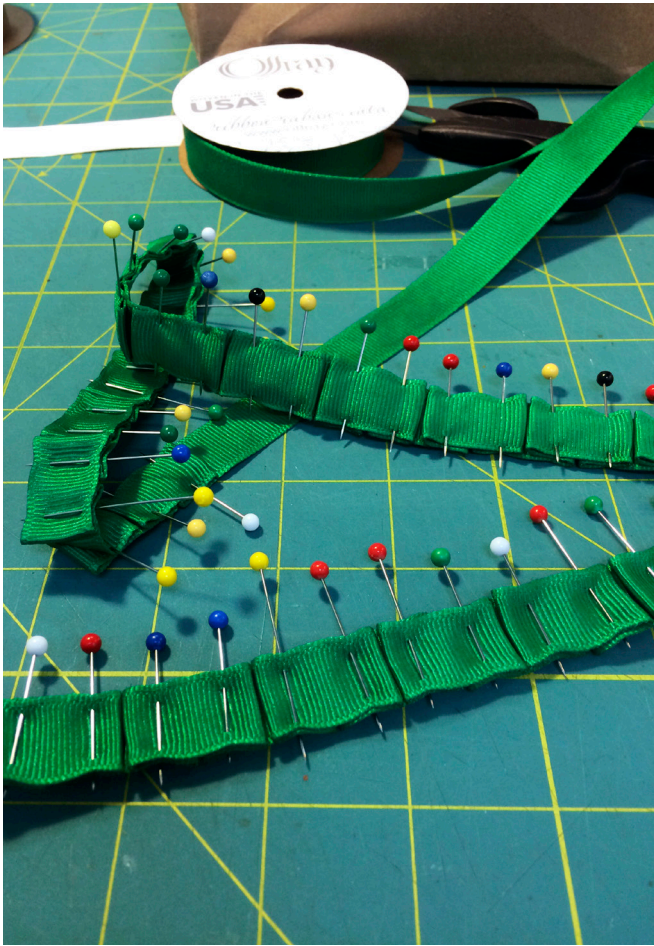
In the 1850s, paper sewing patterns became available throughout the United States by mail order through fashion magazines. With instructions printed or stamped on semi-transparent tissue, suddenly a very complicated bodice became accessible to a casual dressmaker or home-sewer. The accessibility of patterns and their relative ease of construction was advantageous for new settlers during westward expansion. Though newly annexed Western territories offered opportunities for Anglo-American settlers, the Manifest Destiny ideal forced the relocation of indigenous North American peoples onto small tracts of land, driving them out of sight as they struggled to re-establish lifestyles and traditions.



Left page: **Stephanie Syjuco *Total Transparency Filter (Portrait of N)*** 2017. Courtesy of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York. © Stephanie Syjuco.

Top: **Stephanie Syjuco *CITIZENS*** (installation) 2017. Courtesy of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York.

Bottom: **Stephanie Syjuco *Chromakey*** (in-progress, detail) 2017, bodice and sleeves of Civil War-era dress. Photo by the artist.



For the Civil War-era dress in this series, Syjuco pinned and sewed great lengths of grosgrain ribbon in pleats, attached six rows of ruffles and boned a bodice. A labor intensive process, these embellishments are indicative of the time period, where due to changing social mores and a higher social value placed on dress, elite women worked with seamstresses and dressmakers to recreate the fanciful frocks found in Parisian fashion magazines. Composed in newly available rich colors and bold patterns, heavy silks, taffeta and velvet with embroidery, lace and tatted collars, giant gigot sleeves, and convoluted crinolines and bustles, Civil War-era fashion was extravagant and ornate.

In Syjuco's version, embellished in layers of monochrome, we can avert our gaze from the marvel of fine fabrics and instead superimpose the complicated class dynamics of the mid-1800s onto the garment. Social gatherings and leisure time, which necessitated such finery, was afforded, at least in part, by slave labor. Tailoring and garment construction was frequently at



the hands of slaves and recently freed-women, their labor and specialist knowledge rendered anonymous and invisible beneath each stitch. Contemporarily, the unethical working conditions of sweatshops, fueled by fast-fashion industries, endangers the lives of its workers (as made brutally clear by the 2013 Bangladeshi Rana Plaza tragedy) and keeps its supply chain obscured.

All of the costumes created for *The Visible Invisible* are dresses, and sewing is often coded as feminine labor, but Syjuco resists a purely feminist reading of this work. She says, "I wanted to focus

Left: **Stephanie Syjuco Chromakey** (in-progress, detail) 2017, pinning intricate ribbon work to embellish the Civil War-era gown. Photo by the artist.

Right: **Stephanie Syjuco Chromakey** (in-progress, detail) 2017, over 250 feet of ruffles made to embellish the Civil War-era gown, stitched into place. Photo by the artist.

## Chroma key compositing offers a liminal space where the real and the fictional interact.

on female garments because I'm interested in how the female form, or being, or personhood, is equated to nationhood." Bound together, women and nations have both been conceptual tokens of sanctity. The garments are placed on mannequins with white jersey covered heads and poseable limbs. The blank white faces and bodies, though a common display technique for the exhibition of clothing, are a stark contrast to the chroma key green fabric. The featureless white mannequins offer a second site for projection, as a stand-in for the anonymous women who would own and inhabit these dresses. Laid bare, these four costumes provide a blank slate, acting as a prompt for criticality.

Chroma key compositing offers a liminal space where the real and the fictional interact. In film, actors are often placed within a sea of green and instructed to react and interact with featureless, objectless co-stars to be rendered only during post-production. The color becomes a placeholder, suggesting boundless potentiality between the real and unreal. This duplicity is at the core of *The Visible Invisible*, as the commercially viable version of American history is offered up as both a fact and a fiction to be superimposed, replaced, or projected onto. Pairing this relatively new technology with historical dress links past and present. It offers the viewer a critical eye toward past narratives, with the implication that the problem continues in present-day.

Syjuco began both *CITIZENS* and *The Visible Invisible* after the 2016 election, where "fake news" became a common rallying cry. Fabrication speaks both to the creation of a product and the formation of deceit. In our contemporary history, where media manipulation and entrenched media bias is the norm, *The Visible Invisible* deploys handmade costumes to shine a vibrant light on those projections and omissions that color the established narrative of our history.

*The Visible Invisible* will be on view as part of the Renwick Invitational 2018 at the Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in November 2018.

—Ariel Zaccheo is a curator and writer living and working in San Francisco, CA. She currently works as the Assistant Curator at the Museum of Craft and Design and has been the co-curator for Artist's Television Access Window Gallery since 2013. Her research interests include medium-specific practices of video, film, and photography, radical craft practices, and queer/feminist studies.



Top: **Stephanie Syjuco Chromakey** (in-progress, detail) 2017, ribbon swatches produced in preparation for adding decorative trim to garments. Photo by the artist.

Bottom: **Stephanie Syjuco Chromakey** (in-progress, detail) 2017, sleeve of Civil War-era dress. Photo by the artist.