



ART

Dazzling WWI Camouflage Public Art Project Transforms a Historic New York Fireboat

To mark the centenary of World War I's end, a New York fireboat is repainted by artist Tauba Auerbach in a dazzling tribute to the era's most colorful camouflage.



Allison Meier 7 days ago



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Tauba Auerbach, *Flow Separation* (2018) (commissioned by Public Art Fund and 14-18 NOW and presented on Fireboat John J. Harvey in New York Harbor, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, photo by Nicholas Knight, courtesy Public Art Fund, NY)

The *John J. Harvey* fireboat has cruised the New York City waterways since its launch in 1931, but this summer the ship has a radical new look. Painted in a flamboyant pattern of red and white, it's hard to tell which end of the ship is the front, or even which direction it's headed. "The captain has had a quite a laugh because a lot of the other boats on the Hudson have been radioing him and asking what happened, has the *Harvey* been through a blender?," said Emma Enderby, Public Art Fund adjunct curator.

The colorful makeover is artist Tauba Auerbach's *Flow Separation*, a project of the Public Art Fund in collaboration with 14-18 NOW, a World War I centenary arts program in the UK which has supported a series of ships inspired by World War I dazzle camouflage. Free weekend voyages through the fall allow visitors to experience *Flow Separation* on the move, while on weekdays access is available to explore its deck. It will be docked at three locations during its run, including Brooklyn Bridge Park's Pier 6, Hudson River Park's Pier 25, and finally Hudson River Park's Pier 66a.



Tauba Auerbach's *Flow Separation* (photo by Allison C. Meier for Hyperallergic)

If the bombastic color configuration doesn't seem much like camouflage, that's because it wasn't designed to hide, but to confuse. During World War I, German U-Boats were regularly sinking British vessels. Due to the constant changing of light and color on the water, it wasn't possible to hide the ships, so British naval officer and artist Norman Wilkinson had the idea to paint ships in a way that broke up their forms, using stripes, curves, and bright colors to baffle the U-Boat gunners as to which way a vessel was heading. Called "dazzle camouflage," it was influenced by Cubism and Vorticism, a British movement of abstract art. Thousands of ships were painted in the UK, and it was soon adopted in the United States. On its July *Flow Separation* tours, the *Harvey* cruises past the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where American World War I vessels were painted in dazzle.

MAURETANIA

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RMS Mauretania painted in dazzle camouflage (December 2, 1918) (courtesy Library of Congress, via [Wikimedia](#))

Auerbach has worked in a diversity of media, including painting, music, photography, and sculpture, often playing with color and perception, yet this is her first major public art project. “Her design was very much influenced by the fact that this was a fireboat, so it has water moving through the body of the boat as well, and that was her way into the project was thinking of that movement of water,” explained Enderby, who curated *Flow Separation*. “Through that she started marbling, which is essentially creating these kinds of patterns with fluid dynamics.”

The *Harvey* has been retired from fire department service since 1994; it was brought back on 9/11 to pump water for 80 hours onto Lower Manhattan, and aid with evacuation. Usually painted a more reserved red and white, *Flow Separation* reconfigures its traditional colors. After experimenting with marbling on paper — using fluid baths of floating inks to create swirling patterns — Auerbach combined these results with the principles of dazzle, such as offsetting the bow and the stern so it seems to be going forwards and backwards at once.



Tauba Auerbach's *Flow Separation* (photo by Allison C. Meier for Hyperallergic)



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Following *Flow Separation*, the *Harvey* will return to its more subdued appearance. The sandblasting, stripping of decades of paint and rust, and fresh coats for *Flow Separation* support the survival of the vessel. “Every layer of paint you give a boat helps to conserve and preserve,” Enderby said. “A lot of restoration went into the boat in order to do this, so it is going to be further preserved for a longer duration of time.”

Although the tactical success of dazzle camouflage is difficult to assess — it didn't protect all ships from U-Boats — sailors did report an increase in morale when their ships were outfitted in such buoyant patterns. Riding the *Harvey* on a recent July afternoon, it was enjoyable to spend time immersed in the exuberant design, which included everything from the lifeboats to the prow where custom marbled

flags fly. But the most thrilling moment came when the ship was sailing by the Statue of Liberty, and its firefighting cannons gave their salute, the fountain of water shimmering in the sunlight above the whirling red and white paint making for a truly dazzling sight.



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Tauba Auerbach: *Flow Separation* continues through May 12, 2019 on the New York City waterways.