

Désirée Palmen was born in Maasbracht in the Netherlands in 1963, and went on to study art in Maastricht, specialising in sculpture. She has also maintained a special interest in biology, in particular the strange forms and behavioural traits exhibited by mimics within the animal and plant kingdoms. Palmen has applied these concepts to her artwork, and in 2002 created the Streetwise series, an exploration of human mimicry in urban environments using garments painted to resemble their background. The series was influenced by the installation of police surveillance cameras in so-called 'dangerous' areas of Rotterdam. She comments: "My concern about the increasing use of identity-based electronic information systems and the frequent use of surveillance cameras has led me to the idea of wearing camouflage clothes in the public space. In my work I explore the possibility for people to 'dissolve' or even to 'disappear' into their surroundings."



Désirée Palmen, *Post*, Streetwise series, 2002. Acrylic on cotton.



Désirée Palmen, *Floor*, 1999. Acrylic on cotton.



Désirée Palmen, *Tram*, Streetwise series, 2002. Acrylic on cotton.



All images courtesy Désirée Palmen (www.desireepalmen.nl) & Reuten Gallery, Amsterdam, the Netherlands



Désirée Palmen, *Zebra*, Streetwise series, 2002. Acrylic on cotton. Courtesy Désirée Palmen & Reuten Gallery, Amsterdam



Robert E Fuller, *Zebra Migration*, 2001. Oil on canvas. 60 x 52 cm. © 2001 Robert E Fuller



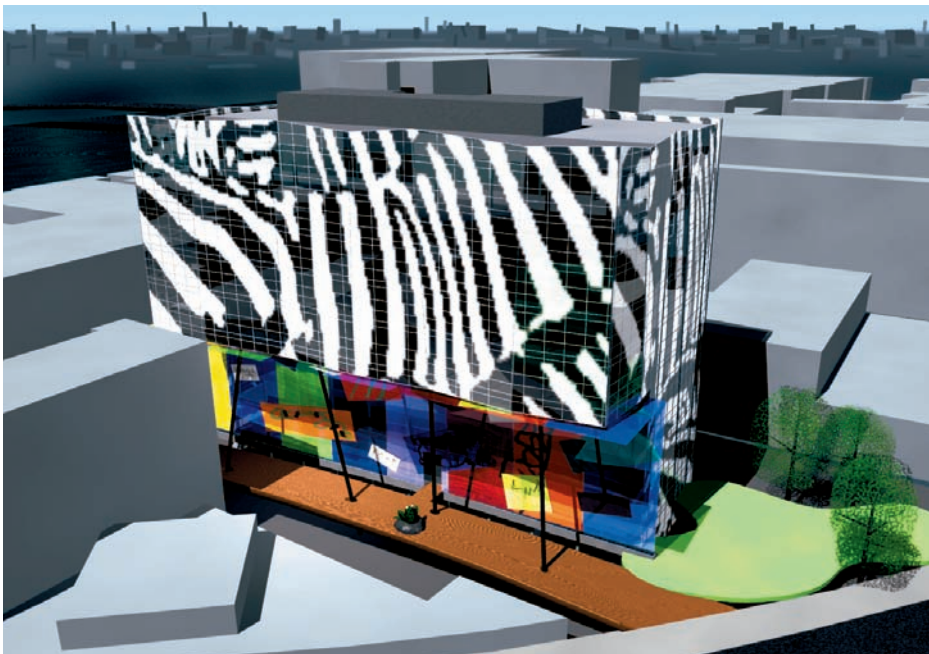
Juvenile sixline soapfish (*Grammistes sexlineatus*), the zebra of the Red Sea. © Alexander Mustard

The bold black and white stripes of the zebra appear to serve no camouflage purpose against the yellows, browns, and greens of its savannah habitat. However, the lion, which is the zebra's main predator, is colour-blind, so it is the disruptive pattern and not the colour of the zebra's coat that provides protection against attack.

While the zebra's stripes disguise the animal in areas of broken vegetation, they may serve another purpose in the open savannah. Zebra herds tend to congregate in groups and the visual sum total of many striped bodies makes it difficult for predators to distinguish individual outlines and the direction in which the animals are moving. Another theory suggests that the zebra stripes dazzle predators, impeding concentration as they close in on their target. Because striped objects break up outlines and have a tendency to appear larger than they actually are, the zebra's disruptive pattern may confuse the predator's sense of distance and make it fall short with an attacking lunge. This is similar to the way that ship camouflage, in the form of 'dazzle' paint schemes, worked during WWI and WWII [see pages 164 to 173]. Indeed, early military disruptive patterns in general were nicknamed *zébrage* in France because of their resemblance to zebra stripes.

A quite different hypothesis, put forward in the early 1980s, drew attention to the fact that biting insects such as the tsetse fly (family: Glossinidae) prefer to feed on big, dark animals, and that the zebra's stripes could act to obliterate large, single-coloured regions that the insects tend to target.

Although the disruptive pattern of the zebra may confuse predators and biting insects, among the herd it is believed to be an important communication signature. Each pattern is like a fingerprint, unique to its owner, which could, for example, assist a zebra mare in recognising her foal in a large group.



Proposed (but unbuilt) regeneration scheme for St Thomas' Hospital, Lambeth, London. Courtesy Alsop Architects



Désirée Palmen, *Park Bench*, 2001. Courtesy Désirée Palmen, www.desireepalmen.nl, & Reuten Gallery, Amsterdam