



IT'S EASY TO MISS THE models in Emma Hack's photography. Meticulously painted to match the backgrounds they're posing against, Hack's ladies vanish into her art, with only ghostly outlines suggesting their presence.

The works' elegance belies the hours of labour that go into every shot. The Australian artist first paints a background and then her model with the same pattern before taking photographs. "The design has to flow beautifully from where the human form is standing within it," Hack says. "The canvas background probably takes me up to 20 hours, and it takes eight to 15 hours to create the work on the model. They pretty much just have to stand there the whole time. It's quite a



Hidden Treasures

INSPIRED BY EVERYTHING FROM FASHION TO INTERIOR DESIGN, EMMA HACK'S CAMOUFLAGE BODY PAINTINGS ARE SURREAL LABOURS OF LOVE, LEANNE MIRANDILLA DISCOVERS

daunting process. You'd be surprised how much energy you burn just by standing still."

Hack's background was originally in advertising, and as an artist she is completely self-taught, making her start in face painting at children's events for extra cash while she was still a student. That and a healthy love of fashion led quite naturally to studying make-up artistry post-university. "About a year later [in 1992], the cover of *Vanity Fair* came out with Demi Moore

painted by Joanne Gair," Hack says. The cover was a *trompe l'oeil* piece photographed by Annie Leibovitz, where the actress had a three-piece pinstriped suit painted onto her body. The work recalled a photograph used on a *Vanity Fair* cover in 1991. The image, titled *More Demi Moore* and also taken by Leibovitz, featured the actress in the nude while heavily pregnant and without the paint. The iconic 1992 photograph effectively launched body art into the spotlight.

**DOUBLE
VISION**

FROM TOP LEFT
Exotic Bird
Mandala; Owl in
Birch Trees; Emma
Hack behind the
scenes; Utopia -
Oriental Bouquet
Cradle/ Ringneck



"It was then that I realised that there were people doing what I was doing, and they were making a career out of it," says Hack. Having completed most of her work for advertising campaigns and editorial shoots before then, she moved into fine art and in 2002 created her first collection, called *Petal*, in which models were transformed into flowers. Everything came together in 2005 when, using the wallpaper patterns of renowned Australian designer Florence Broadhurst as inspiration, she released a series called *My Wallpaper Collection*, where models blended into intricately patterned walls. This camouflaging style is eventually what would lead her to connect with singer-songwriter Wouter "Wally" De Backer, better known by his stage name Gotye, last year.

Having aspired to work with stop-motion animation for more than a decade, Hack was commissioned to work on just such a music video for Gotye's single, *Somebody That I Used to Know*, which went on to become the biggest selling song in the United States in 2012. In the short, Gotye and guest singer Kimbra appeared to be gradually subsumed by the colourful, abstract backdrop, which was based on a piece of artwork by Gotye's father, the artist Frank De Backer. The entire creative process took 23 hours.

"We were lucky getting off with that amount of time," says Hack. "By the end of it, my eyes were really tired. I said to myself, 'I'm never doing that again,' and then it turned out to be one of my most famous pieces."

Like many body-painting artists, Hack is inspired by iconic 1960s fashion model Vera Gräfin von Lehndorff Steinort, who went by the name Veruschka during her modelling years. After an illustrious career, she retired in 1975 and turned to the art world, collaborating with painter and sculptor Holger Trülzsch. The duo created a number of photographic portraits of Veruschka in which her body was painted to match her surroundings, which were often natural and rustic.



Like the Veruschka portraits, Hack's works are filled with flora and fauna of all kinds, from sapphire-blue butterflies perching on branches to peacocks flaunting their plumage and snowy owls hiding in atmospheric forests. Hack's work conveys her belief that the environment should be cherished and nurtured – that humankind should, quite literally in the case of her art, be at one with nature.

Using nature as a subject also creates a calming ambiance that is reflected in the look and poise of Hack's models, who are usually women. "They have quite a gentle spirit and look very peaceful, but there is a feminine strength to the work as well," says Hack, adding that it is important for models to feel comfortable and relaxed when photographs of the work are taken, despite their pain from holding a pose for hours. "Society puts a lot of pressures on us to be something that we may not necessarily be," she says, "so just to stop and have that peace of being one with yourself is very important. People like that I don't focus on the sexual side of nudity, that I very much respect the feminine form."

Today, having left the advertising and editorial world behind, Hack works full-time on her art. While her beginnings were in body art, she plans to expand into other media, including sculpture and porcelain. She also hopes to collaborate on more projects with other artists. "For me, my art is not about body painting any more – it's more conceptual," Hack says. "In the next five years I'll start integrating other kinds of art within my work. I don't want to limit myself." ■

Emma Hack's solo exhibition Trompe l'Oeil is on show at The Cat Street Gallery, Hollywood Road, Sheung Wan, until September 22. It features work from the artist's My Wallpaper Collection, along with newly unveiled pieces.



BLENDING IN

Emma Hack is not the only artist taking body painting in new and innovative directions

JEAN-PAUL BOURDIER California based Jean-Paul Bourdier took elements from dance and acrobatics, along with photography and painting, to produce his 2012 photography collection *Bodyscapes*. Complementing their surroundings rather than blending into them, Bourdier's models dance, skip and tumble through deserts and across snowy landscapes, and are snapped in these dynamic poses. Bourdier is a professor of design, drawing and photography at UC Berkeley.

LIU BOLIN Rather than paint models, Chinese artist Liu Bolin has his two assistants paint him so that he can blend into urban environments, earning him the nickname "Invisible Man". Occasionally he remains in

position for hours, startling unknowing passersby. Each photograph of painted Liu can take up to 10 hours in preparation. Nailing his first shows in 2005, and having been shown internationally since, Liu has been painted on supermarket shelves, construction sites, temples and even the Great Wall of China.

CECILIA PAREDES Peruvian multimedia artist Cecilia Paredes creates sculptures and installations alongside her body art photography. Much like Hack, Paredes has turned her models into animals and fantastic creatures, and has painted them over intricately patterned backgrounds. She prefers to leave traces of models' presence in her photography in the form of natural coloured hair or open eyes rather than spiriting them into the background altogether.