

Aware: Art, Fashion, Identity

Royal Academy of Arts, 2nd December, 2010 – 30th Jan, 2011

Review by Jenny Hockey

For me, as an anthropologist, clothing and footwear are part of the ‘stuff’ that people use to establish who they are, and for others to recognise them. Through these materials, people position themselves and are positioned in relation to the world around them, present, past and future. This exhibition made identity and fashion its focus and for me, it was a meeting point between sociology, anthropology, fashion design and art. Although these areas cannot be neatly divided from one another, we cannot assume a common language. For me, identity is about similarity and difference: knowing who we are and who we are not. Identity is lodged in and on the body, something people take for granted. What the *Aware* exhibition offered was, quite literally, a space of awareness. In some ways, the artists and fashion designers whose work was on display shared my commitment, as an anthropologist, to ‘making strange’ the taken-for-granted. Yet they had harnessed different media to show the ordinary – and then drew out its hidden dimensions, the structures and processes through which ordinariness is achieved. For them, the ordinary was a reference point, but it was re-presented in the extra-ordinary garments and associated paraphernalia on view.

For example, the containment of the body in clothing and footwear and the role of that process in informing a western sense of a ‘container’ body was both exposed for scrutiny and submitted to radical dismantling in the work on view. Repeatedly, the connections between the body and its wider social and material environment were evoked: Mella Jarsma’s images of models wearing makeshift buildings, a temple, a refuge, a cabin, and walking around humdrum urban spaces in Indonesia, resting against a wall amidst discarded packaging made of similar materials. Katerina Šedá screen printed images of an adjacent housing estate on shirts and sought to establish social connection by having the inhabitants of one estate give the shirts to those of the other. Azra Akšamija’s clothing also incorporated ‘place’, in this case drop-front trousers that could become a prayer mat, the sacred stitched into the profane. By contrast, Acconci Studio’s umbrufflas evoked continuity between the embodied self and its environment through beautiful, reflective cocoons, carried like elaborated umbrellas that made and marked a self/other distinction.

The body and its material environment cannot of course be understood independently of *social* connections, and indeed issues of power and inequality. Yinka Shonibare’s Victorian ‘little rich girl’ dresses had been ruffled up from traditional African fabrics. Lining an entire wall, the hybridity of these frocks displayed the gulf between imperialist nations and their colonies, the intimacy of their oppressive relations of power. Similarly, Meschac Gaba’s collection of hats, fashioned from traditional African hair braiding in the form of key western centres of finance and culture, conveyed the weight of western hands upon colonial resources.

Turning to the human body itself, its corporeality, Wilson's (1985) notion of clothing as both shield and display highlights the way in which clothing evokes what it conceals and so helps 'produce' the body. Many of the works on display in this exhibition told stories about the human body and its relationship with clothing. Marina Abramović's performance art used naked bodies; she and a companion stood without clothing opposite one another at the entrance to an art gallery in Bologna in 1977. Visitors were forced to squeeze between them. Watching the video of this performance made it clear that 'naked aggression' is one of the object body's affordances. Yet Cindy Sherman's animated cut-out of her naked body, one that selects dolls' clothes of choice, to then have them be removed by a giant hand, was presented as an evocation of the 'diminishing of opportunities for self transformation' for women. For Sherman, here, nakedness implied loss. Sharif Waked similarly revealed the association between the (semi) naked body and powerlessness in *Chic Point*. Here the exposed body was male and images of men being required to bare their midriffs at Israeli checkpoints were juxtaposed with male models in garments Waked has fashioned. These distorted conventional menswear designs in ways that revealed the stomach and back. Though one of Helen Storey's dresses was displayed unworn, on a hanger, its fragile, bio-degradable fabric spoke to both the potential death of a planet where consumption is unbridled, *and* the organic, ultimately bio-degradable nature of the human body that might inhabit it. In sum, the interface between the body, its coverings and their wider social and material environment was shown to be a site of possibilities, where meanings are potentially unstable and where relations of power may be embodied in less than obvious ways.

Through these exposures, the work displayed in this exhibition contributed to debates that are live within the social sciences. What was so distinctive to them, however, was the 'feel' of embodied being; the eviscerated leather pattern pieces that Dai Rees had strung like carcasses from kitchen hooks, the widow's stunningly beautiful leather gown, furred with dressmaker's pins, through which Susie MacMurray evoked both her grief and the impossibility of receiving the comfort desired. As sociologists and anthropologists working on the relationship between footwear and identity, we can find inspiration in many such pieces displayed in this exhibition. In the exhibition catalogue, Virginia Woolf is quoted as saying 'Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have [...] more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us [...] Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them [...]' (Scardi, 2010: 13).

Scardi, G. (2010) 'The Sense of Our Time', in A. Coppard (ed) *Aware. Art Fashion Identity*, Bologna: Damiani editore.

Wilson, E. (1985) *Adorned in Dreams*, London: Virago.