The Artists' New Clothes

by Judith Stein

Art inspired by the sculptural forms and the rich cultural associations of clothing blurs the line between fine art and fashion.

Left: Clothing has traditionally been consigned to the feminine sphere, so it is appropriate that many women artists have turned to garments for inspiration. For Miriam Schapiro, her work is a clear reflection of her feminism. Event, 1982, fabric and acrylic, 60x50". Barbara Gladstone Gallery, N.Y. Right: Barry Ledoux's Maquettes for Two Lead Suits allude to the human body and psyche. 1980. Mixed media, 52x39x11". Willard Gallery, N.Y.
Right: Most contemporary works of art based on clothing are not intended to be worn. Among the exceptions to this rule are outfits fashioned by performance artists, including Pattern and Decoration painter Robert Kushner, pioneer of the picarresque Eleanor Antin, and Colette (a.k.a. Justine), who recently offered her “Beautiful Dreamer Uniforms” for sale in what she described as a “special boutique environment.” Sculptor Michael Berkowitz takes a more sober approach, tailoring satin garments fit for a shaman for performance pieces that often draw on his travels. The 1981 Djemaa-el-Fna, named for the central plaza of the Old Market of Marrakesh, Morocco, was part of a large electronic installation that went into motion when a viewer entered the gallery. Robert Freidus Gallery, New York.

Left: Less clothing-as-art than art-as-clothing, Pat Oleszko’s outfits tend to appear in public in unexpected places. Tom Saw-yer, for example, made its debut entertaining at a convention for a furniture company. Made of foam, fabric, paint, plastic, and wire, it is one of a series of visual puns the artist calls “The Tool Fest” and plans to use in an upcoming film of the same title—“another big, big-budget spectacular,” she promises. Oleszko’s work is rooted in street theater, and she shuns galleries, preferring to wear her pieces and to take on the characters that they suggest in more flexible surroundings. 1981. 6’7”x4’. Collection of the artist.

and adorn their bodies as a sculptural form. Taking on Seventh Avenue in zany performances entitled The Fall and Spring Lines, 1971–73, and The Edible Clothes Line, 1972, Robert Kushner bedecked himself and his friends in carrot breastplates and artichoke sarongs or plastic tubing and garish fake fur. Colette, another innovative performance artist, draped herself and her room-sized installations of the mid- and late 1970s with yards of satin, literally inhabiting her art. Dressed in and as their creations, Kushner and Colette wryly embodied Picasso’s claim that “it’s not what the artist does that counts, but what he is.”

Other performance artists view clothes as soft sculpture for specific contexts. Pat “I Am, Therefore I Art” Oleszko, for one, makes a delightful spectacle of herself with whimsical regalia based on visual puns. Wearing her “signature piece,” Coat of Arms, a black jacket with twenty-six differently posed white-gloved hands, she becomes “Hands Art,” a character who often orchestrates the movements of other costumed participants. An artist who avoids affiliation with galleries, Oleszko rarely shows her get-ups unless she is wearing them.

Oleszko’s clothing pieces and performances derive from pageants, beauty contests, and street theater; Michael Berkowitz’s spring from ritual garb and religious ceremonies. The enterprising sculptor cum tailor constructs sumptuous gold and satin raiment to outfit a shamanistic alter ego. After their use in ephemeral performances like Vendor of Talismans, 1978, and Altar of the Shawl, 1980, the vestments are displayed on gallery mannequins.

Of the new, garment-shaped art, only these performance props are intended to be worn. For the other artists, the function of clothing is a conceptual, not a practical, issue. Judith Shea, a former dress designer and Minimalist sculptor, annexes the form of fashion for her wall-mounted reliefs. Her early work, which emphasized the profile of sleeves or the cut of a neckline, suggests unassembled pattern pieces. Shea’s recent garments, such as Sling and Young One, are shaped bodices, painted canvases with rich, gestural surfaces and haunting personalities. To the artist, her work is not representational but
Above: Ron Isaacs gives a narrative dimension to his illusionistic low reliefs of garments with small, painted plaques. In Gingko Jacket with Susanna and the Elders, voyeurs peek at a nude woman discreetly placed on the inner lining of the artist's representation of an antique jacket. 1981–82. Acrylic on plywood, 35 1/2 x 26 1/2 x 3". Monique Knavelton Gallery, New York. Left: Former fashion designer and Minimalist artist Judith Shea parses the forms of clothing to their essentials in her austere yet evocative sculptures. Shea's earlier projects resemble reconstructed pattern pieces, but such recent works as Young One are three-dimensional. 1981. Wool felt, 19x28x8 1/2". Willard Gallery.

Right: Impregnated with resin and covered with broken glass, elegant vintage garments—a pair of ladies' gloves, a beribboned bodice, a fitted blouse with a fancy lining—become metaphors for fragile femininity in the beautiful yet ominous work of Los Angeles artist Nancy Youdelman. Shattered Blouse #1. 1979. 21x22 1/2x 1/4". Artist's collection.

"a substitution for or abstraction from the human form."

If Shea mines clothing for its structure and content, sculptor Barry Ledoux uses the suit as a metaphor for his own persona. He fashions lead and galvanized zinc into stiff, armorial hollows, which are sometimes pierced by spikes or encrusted with the bodies of insects. The rigid gray expanses are enlivened by swashes of rash color and poetic quotes stenciled on and cut through the surface. For Ledoux, these outsize masculine jackets and pants are both abstract and figurative, "about a kind of unsatisfaction, about an absence and a presence."

Ron Isaacs's work also spans painting and sculpture. Isaacs paints trompe l’œil garments on low-relief plywood constructions. Their shapes yield a range of anthropomorphic associations, yet their symmetrical, frontal format suggests that they are also icons. Painted palm fronds or autumnal leaves and small figurative scenes add to the mystery of his illusionistic raincoats, kimonos, and chemises. In one recent work, a plaque depicting two voyeurs is mounted on the bodice of a Victorian woman's jacket and another, of a nude woman bathing, is attached to its inner lining. Together they transform the garment into a meditation on the story of Susanna and the Elders.

Some artists prefer to use actual garments and thereby appropriate the coded content of ready-made style. Los Angeles artist Simone Gad, for example, incorporates vintage prom gowns, sunglasses, and pocketbooks in wall tableaux dedicated to Hollywood's passé beauties. Maureen Connor, who lives and works in New York, is also fascinated by dated garments. She often works with specifically autobiographical content, dismantling and rearranging her family's castoffs into elegant, abstract compositions that allude to mother-child relationships. In twelve panels done in 1979 for New York's Tweed Courthouse, Connor used clothing more universally and abstractly to convey the past; crinolines represent the 1950s, and denim the 1960s.

One of the most potent forces for change in the art world has been the women's movement, which challenged many traditional evaluations of the female sphere—including the notion
Opposite: Maureen Connor uses the materials and shapes of clothing to create pieces that suggest historical periods and social relationships. For a February 1982 exhibition at her New York gallery, for instance, she combined ruffles and billows of white organdy with straw, caning, and paper to commemorate nineteenth-century conventions of fashion and of manners: Left, The Birth of the Bustle, 1981, 46x32x15"; center, Lindsay, 1981, 33x26x18"; and right, Chaperone, 1981, 44x36x18".
Opposite inset: The artist’s earlier work was more specifically autobiographical, with her family’s discarded clothes and her own closet serving, she explained, as her “palette.” In 1977, Hampton Garth, a piece for a 1977 installation, Connor deconstructed two dresses, one made of black velvet and the other of gold satin, that had belonged to her mother. 60x84". All Acqua Vella Contemporary Art, Inc., New York.

Above: Californian Simone Gad also exploits fashion’s links with the past, but her focus is on the Hollywood of the 1950s and early 1960s, and her material comes by and large from thrift shops and flea markets. Sophia and Jayne is a tongue-in-cheek homage to Sophia Loren, in plaid, and Jayne Mansfield, in beaded lace; it was inspired, the artist says, by a newspaper photograph of the two movie queens at a dinner party. 1978, Mixed media, 6x3’. Private collection.

Right: By replacing the fur trim on a filmy peignoir with fluffy bands of steel wool, feminist artist Mimi Smith transformed a honeymoon-style garment into a commentary on contemporary sexual roles and what the artist calls “the reality of marriage [and] the romance of marriage.” Peignoir. 1966. Steel wool, nylon, and lace, 59x26x8". Collection of the artist. That a preoccupation with clothes signals the limited and unwieldy extent of women’s interests. In the 1970s, many women artists rejected these implications and chose to base the form and content of their art on clothing. As early as 1966, a burgeoning feminist consciousness led New Yorker Mimi Smith to substitute steel wool for fur in Peignoir, a sinister reference to the choking burdens of eternal romance. Her Candy Bra of 1971 and Tootsie Roll Jock Strap of 1972 are more playful allusions to human sexuality.

Perhaps the best-known of the feminist artists is Miriam Schapiro, a principal force in the Pattern and Decoration Movement. Schapiro’s belief that the applied arts were part of her heritage as a woman artist led her to investigate the subject of dress and its manufacture. In her vestment series from the mid-1970s, she used the shape of garments as a theoretical and literal framework for an investigation of fabric pattern in a dialogue with painted strokes. Her fabric collages incorporated real aprons and handkerchiefs to relate directly women’s experience of use and manufacture. Although she has moved away from garment-shaped pieces to some extent, she continues to seek inspiration from clothing—particularly in its theatrical guise.

Schapiro inspired both male and female artists to forge into the formerly downgraded area of the decorative arts. One former student, Nancy Youdelman, addresses related themes of fragility and femininity in a series of wall reliefs of antique blouses layered with a glittery skin of shattered glass.

Like such precedents as Claes Oldenburg’s stuffed shirts, Jim Dine’s bathrobes, and Joseph Beuys’s evocative felt suits, contemporary artists’ “clothes” celebrate ambiguity. They omit the figure yet address the human condition. They camouflage boundaries between painting and sculpture, between the fine and the applied arts, between the conceptual and the functional, and stimulate an invigorating, often amusing, dialogue between life and art.

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