

Addressing the dress

Suzanne Spinner finds The Melbourne Fashion Festival bursting at the seams

Sometimes I wonder why I persist with all this creating—it's very demanding adorning the body.

Jenny Bannister

"Fashion Art and Advertising" was the subtitle of *Hype* one of the many exhibitions associated with the Woolmark Melbourne Fashion Festival and it encapsulates the pitch of this now major event. To find the Art, approach the triple sewn French seam with a Qik-Unpick and start ripping; on the surface you see the hype, underneath the advertising, behind that the fashion and at the raw edge the art.

The quest for the quintessential frock is an endless pursuit of perfection; I began with an attempt to pay homage to Givenchy and Audrey Hepburn in that first LBD in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* only to find that was the hype, the reality was an exercise in selling the *le grand homme's* successor, Alexander McQueen and an awful lot of scent, because today as *tout le monde* knows, the couturiers survive on their marketing chutzpah as parfumeurs. The frocks I was in search of were not in the David Jones "Gallery" but in the window on Bourke Street to lure me inside and up for the hard sell. But there they were in all their revolutionary simplicity; the cocktail version in a bubbly boucle with a flat fabric bow at the waist and the evening version on a long satin one with a surprising thigh-high side split.

If Hubert G is High Fashion/Art then Melbourne's own Jenny Bannister in retrospect 1978-85 at Span Gallery, is low trash. Bannister is the closest we've come to a Vivienne Westwood, all Pop, plasticky and fetishy imbued with that same

outrageousness and lurid wit. She makes frocks that are easier to look at than wear. Clear plastic full circle skirts embroidered with naked legless plastic baby dolls and curls of black electrical flex, shiny metal conical bras and corsets Xena style, fetish hats made of pigskin—bags over the heads with eye holes. Bannister mixes plastic leather and real fur with equal abandon—nothing is sacred. Even now these frocks are not nice, they still reek of the forbidden.

Jewellery as fashion hype et al was also on show despite the truism that art jewellery necessarily denies the dress, demanding bare skin or BB to show it off. At Makers Mark, which sells extremely expensive handmade decorative objects in precious metals and stones, the most compelling pieces were the ones made from found objects—Tracey Glasser's bracelets and neck pieces made from old plastic belt buckles backed with pieces of mirror, and brooches made from dismantled stainless steel tools. Rowena Gough's long rope necklaces called "Chanel Tryst" were made from 1920s mother-of-pearl buttons double strung in overlapping layers with silver wire; she also had a fetching ensemble of nose studs in yellow gold, pink gold and blue carbon steel, a snap at \$2,800. At Anna Schwartz, Susan Cohn's show *Catch Me*, upped the ante in the value-added stakes by showing great ropes of chains made from jewellers' bolt rings in silver and gold joined together. Cohn pointed out that "she attaches them herself", all 30,000 of them and that she liked the potential for the owners of the chains to decide how many to wear at once "creating the work themselves".



Jacinta Schreuder, *Wild and Free*, 1998

John Brash

A series of exhibitions variously addressed the dress at meta level. Pam Gaunt at Distelfink in *Nothing to Wear* made assemblages of sewing notions arranged in mosaics on cut-out dress pattern shapes, and Dorothy Herel at Smyrionos in *Fragmented Threads* displayed her mysterious dresses of paper hanging free. Gaunt's collages were overly neat and too crafty to be evocative but at Span Gallery the Australian Textile Design Association staged an exhibition on the craft of the fabric maker which was highly pedagogic in intent and extremely artfully executed. Seventeen Italian glass kitchen jars contained the Textile Designer's palette including gas mask, stained rubbed gloves, and an empty one labelled "breathing space". On the wall beside it, cardboard dress pattern templates set at right angles like the peeling bark of a gum tree; in another room a vast mountain of dyed yarn, because "without fabric, fashion does not exist".

The rebirth of Georges the quintessential Melbourne store was timed to be a centrepiece of the festival, and at The Old Treasury Building an exhibition from the store archives traced its history. The motto of the store was *Quod Facimus, Valde Facimus* (What we do, we do well) and its original charter promised "to activate good taste in the community we serve", and specifically mentioned "presentation" amongst its goals. In its new guise it doesn't need such a modern mission statement; it has Stephen Bennett from Country Road and Terence Conran to guide it exquisitely. Georges was always a special treat and it still is; a store full of divinely tasteful things where nobody idiotically importunes you offering to help, and then when you do want help, doesn't and can't anyway...in Georges when you do enquire, somebody who knows about the product is available, interested. Superb service, nothing is left to chance, no

Muzak—Frank Sinatra croons in Hats and Accessories.

But presentation on display (is it fashion or art or advertising?) was the highlight and a happy form of public art for those just looking thanks. Display art in Georges is Surrealism goes shopping: a stainless steel table with two long Chinese bitter melons like exclamation points, floating screens made of dozens of white plastic forks, a row of chairs patterned with oranges arranged in front of an exhibition of fashion photography and sitting on each chair a Polaroid camera (I think the chairs were for sale), a table set with elegant modernist china resting on place-mats that were Matzo biscuits, and wine glasses with large glossy green leaves folded inside them. Having exquisite coffee, I saw Mr Country Road himself break off from an intense conversation with a display artist to assist a woman with a pusher up the stairs, startled toddler notwithstanding—that's real service and actual style. Forget the hype.

HYPE: Fashion, Art and Advertising Exhibition, at the ultra smart RMIT Gallery curated by the Creative Director of the festival, Robert Buckingham, had the resources, the venue and the purchase on the best brief to be the defining exhibition but was disappointing in the extreme. Failing to grapple at all with the issues—and content to present representative examples of all three without teasing out any critical distinctions or disjunctions. The catalogue and the opening were more exciting and revealing than the show, but perhaps I misread the narrative and that was it—the hype!

Suzanne Spinner once dreamed of being a dress designer and wrote Running up a Dress (McPhee Gribble, 1988), a play about mothers and daughters and sewing.