

The thrall of the dress: blame it on Dior

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If you grew up in the fifties you are likely to be in the thrall of the dress. We may not wear dresses any more but we are infected by the dream dress and it erupts in the art we make. Perhaps it's because we grew up with mothers who wore proper dresses with form fitting bodices, scooped necks and capped sleeves and below the nipped-in waist the fullest of skirts, a gathering, that swirled and twirled, whizzy skirts that performed a dance of their own. We hid behind those voluminous skirts when strangers came to the door, sheltered by the New Look. At the time I was mystified, the connection was mysterious, tenuous, utterly abstract and completely compelling. The veils lifted when I read a recent article in *Vanity Fair* about a man called Charles James, an Anglo-American couturier. In the post-war period James's gowns were the most expensive in the world and among his wealthy clients was Mrs Johnson of Johnson & Johnson. In 1948 James was commissioned by Mr Johnson to create the Modess campaign, and he worked with the photographer who had already created memorable images for *Vogue* of his gowns, Cecil Beaton. The result was pure theatre — beautifully poised women standing on grand staircases in sculptured satin looking superb, the unmentionable transformed into the completely desirable. However, when one did grow up, those dresses had disappeared and we wore shifts, sacks, mumus and skimpy minis, dresses made with a minimum of fabric, and as few darts as possible in an abject denial of the female form that we embraced in the name of modernity and pop. But the unrequited desire for the dress persisted, went underground and has stayed submerged. As feminists, we abandoned dresses in favour of the practical, the androgynous; we wore jeans and pants, talked freely about menstruation; femininity and frocks were the new unmentionables. It has taken Madonna and Courtney Love to reintroduce the dress to the current generation, attended by irony but frocked up fully.

The relationship between fashion and art has a long and significant history and

recently the annual Melbourne Fashion Festival has provided a focus for artists and frock makers to explore that nexus. So alongside the serious business of fashion, the selling of the fleeting and the perpetual reinvention of the new (this year's story is grey, long, flat shod, funnel necked and made of boiled wool), there are exhibitions addressing the art of dress. There have been retrospectives of two of Australia's major art dressmakers at Span Gallery — last year Jenny Bannister and this year Linda Jackson — designers whose work is no longer in fashion but retains its own signature and can now be viewed from other perspectives. No longer on the body these clothes reveal the absent body. Displayed in a gallery they are available for all of us, the pleasure in the frock is pure. We don't have to fit into it or wonder where we could wear it, we can gaze at the form, finger the fabric.

Linda Jackson is best known for her use of colour and texture in unstructured traditional ethnic dress based on the principle of squares of fabric that are highly wrought, hand dyed, painted, embroidered and appliquéd, and then photographed in and among iconic Australian landscape, as if they were manifestations of that landscape. The surprise of this retrospective was to see those outfits isolated and displayed flat on the wall like paintings and to see other dress series that represent another element of her work which is more sculptural and characterised by blocks of solid colour, in black, red and green. These dresses are constructed from cutting out repeated organic shapes of leaves and petals so that the dress seems to have come out of the fabric on the same spiral principle as plant formation, where the body stands in the place of the stem or trunk and the dress grows around it. The same shape is repeated in ascending and descending scale and because of the bias cutting the fabric radiates and falls in regular asymmetric patterns.

Black magic (1976) is made by layering circles of petal lozenges cut from black silk taffeta, each layer longer than the previous one, making a skirt and a backless top. *Waratah* (1984) made in red silk taffeta uses

a similar method but the scale of the petals is larger in the double layered skirt, the bodice uses smaller tighter petals and gathers them into rosettes to suggest the central core of the flower. *Leaf* (1983) of bias cut emerald green silk taffeta was simply a sheath with a twisted bow. *Banksia* (1983) was a series of double sewn repeated shapes in black faille, some padded and quilted, others just quilted, all tied around the waist like aprons, starting small at the waist, becoming larger and more padded around the hips and then larger but flatter as the underneath shapes made the hem of the dress, the strapless top was made from an upstanding apron padded and quilted, the bias cutting making the distinctive asymmetric line.

Hung against the white walls these dresses had a surprisingly strong sculptural presence, an extraordinary fullness and ripeness, as if they were pinned creatures, like moths or insects that might at any moment fly away. Jackson talks about the connections in her work which arise from cutting and folding shapes and then placing and piecing them together. This process which she likens to origami or Matisse's papercuts has informed a range of work from her early appliques through to the petal dress and she even sees the same process at play in the construction of her recent paintings of Kimberley land forms and Boab trees.

Martin Grant is an Australian couturier living and working in Paris but he started in Melbourne and studied sculpture at the VCA and it is his work, frequently in collaboration with other artists, that explores the dress as sculptural or performative object that most intrigues me. I found myself drawn to a disparate range of things and subsequently realised his role in them, and the connections between them.

Amongst many startling and subtly beautiful works in Rosslynd Piggott's installation series *Suspended breath* at the NGV last year, the two dress pieces especially engaged me, and were the result of Piggott's collaboration with Grant. *Conversation* (1995) was two nineteenth century fine white cotton nightgowns hanging facing each other and connected by their trailing sleeves like those that form the ties of a strait jacket, and a warp of red threads making a hammock between them. When you followed each thread it ended up in an embroidered word. The words on one garment were in English, on the other garment the same word in French — the tension of language pulling at meaning in the air between words, at the moment of utterance or translation. The delicate balance of the conversation, the equivalence of meaning could only be held if neither speaker/garment moved, otherwise the thread would break or, if pulled too far in the direction of one speaker, the word might



Shelley Lasica, choreographer, performer, Martin Grant, designer, Dress: A costumed performance, 1998. Photo Kate Gollings.

unravel. The exact distance between the speakers had to be maintained, reinforced by the connecting sleeves. So long as they rested on the floor folded over themselves, there was enough slack between the red threads to forestall rupture. There are limits it seems even to perfect intimacy and complete understanding. For *La somnambule* (1997) Grant made two versions of the same found nightgown in silk. They are no longer joined by the sleeves but separate and in varying degrees of destruction, arrested at the point before complete disintegration from fraying, one is almost half frayed making a curtain of hanging threads, the form of the garment retained in the threads left. Sleep and dreams have unknitted the ravelled sleeve of care, and made a gown for Lady Macbeth to pace her bed chamber. Somehow the fineness of the fabric and whiteness spoke of the imminence of bloody deeds; such a nightdress might have been worn by Charlotte Corday. The act not done was felt in the pregnancy and vulnerability of the fabric. Piggott has described her interest in the image of clothes as being not so much

about fashion, 'but, more archetypal, about the idea of dressing, a psychological state of dress or undress'.

Material evidence — 100 headless women, was a collaboration between Grant and sculptor, Julia Morrison and shown at the 1998 Adelaide Festival. There are ten dresses or intimations of dresses, all large in scale, impossibly tall and thin, elongated like shadows, oversize, made for giantesses, female totem figures to be viewed from below in awe. In No. 4 *Shit*, the contradiction of the exquisite fabric, the detailed sewing, but then something not right, something intrusive — the fading rose dusky pink taffeta gown ruched and caught by blooms in the same fabric, and then a mark, a dirty brown mark on the skirt, shit-despoiled. No. 6 *Blood*, is of finest muslin, sewn with tiny fairy stitches, with many bias cut panels that create the fall, and fall it does till it spills all over the floor and is stained by dried brown blood. No. 5 *Pearl*, is not really a dress at all, more an almost transparent cocoon like a teardrop suspended and weighted by a single pearl enclosed in a chrysalis or a caul. Not



Linda Jackson, Waratah, silk taffeta. Photo the artist.

dresses for wearing or wanting to possess but gowns to fear, fear staining and it showing, fear being caught in a web of spiders silk. In all these dresses, the dress implies a drama within, a narrative unfolding. They are the skins shed after the event, the remnants of terrible acts.

In *Dress: a costumed performance*, made for the 1998 Melbourne Fashion Festival, choreographer and dancer, Shelley Lasica created a performance fit for the costume fashioned by Martin Grant, from remnants of other dresses from other times they found

with the dress and avoid being caught in it. At certain moments the dancer seems to try to fly free of the skirts but cannot, only her arms are free to move. She then unties the skirts and has more freedom in a short camisole slip; it even seems for a time that her movements are more graceful, but it is really that they are easy and unrestricted. Then she exits and reappears naked except for black high heels and the walking striding movement sequence is repeated, but her walk looks different this time, the naked flesh is its own drapery, the alignment of the

together in Parisian markets. *Dress* investigated the relationship between the moving body and the various costumes it dresses in; what happens to the body within and because of its costuming. The performance begins fully costumed, the dancer enters in a long dress which might be made of *eau de nil* tissue paper, the fabric is old, crushed, fine like dried skins, the skirts steel* behind and we can hear the scroop* of the fabric, its rustle as it sweeps the bare floor. The dress recalls the conventions of the nineteenth century and each element is separately revealed as the performance progresses. It is complicated with a long triple layered skirt forming a train and on top of that a three quarter length cut away sleeveless jacket with a high stand up collar. When the coat is removed the layers of skirts are revealed. The top skirt is like a swagged curtain framing and emphasising the hips. The dancer's task is to move

body at every step is clear and the sound is the insistent tapping of the heels. Then she removes the high heels and climbs into a stretchy body suit which has been suspended from the ceiling by its straps; it has been hanging there waiting to be filled throughout the performance. There is a wonderful irony in this body suit, a garment marketed as the freest, least constricting of female undergarments, but in this body suit the straps are anchored to the ceiling and act like puppeteer's strings, keeping the woman inside it dancing on the spot. Still hanging from the ceiling she ties on two calico panniers and over them a long gathered skirt and then tries to move her body but they keep on getting in her way, the only way to control the skirt contraption would be for her to move with regular, small steps, no purposeful striding, no exuberant high kicks. *Dress* recalled watching Balinese dance, the same powerful bare feet walking flat, the emphasis on the movement of the arms and hands, and the dancer's constant awareness of the constriction of the costume. The Balinese dancer is wrapped in many many metres of gorgeous fabric and bound in lengths of narrow brocade, none of it cut to shape, but entirely moulded to her body by the repeated wrapping and secretly pinned. In some costumes there are metres of fabric left trailing behind so that the dancer must negotiate the fabric with every step.

In Kristin Headlam's recent series *Public park* at Charles Nodrum Gallery, the dress as the ceremony of heavy satin in gowns worn by brides, bridesmaids and flower girls is the focal point. These olde worlde bridal gowns are in the tradition of the Jamesian Modest dress. The ordinary girls who wear them to be princess for a day, know that they don't sit well in our times, they need a special setting and in the absence of castles, the facade of an historic home or formal public park will be right for the photographs. So as Headlam found, the whole wedding party goes en route from the church to the reception en caravan to the Fitzroy gardens, to be someone else, somewhere else, accompanied



LEFT Polixeni Papapetrou, *Infant/infanta* 1999 (detail). Type C colour print.



RIGHT Polixeni Papapetrou, *Olympia's clothes*, 1999 (detail). Type C colour print.

by the documenters, the photographer and the video taker. The grooms and male attendants are present but merely function as dark vertical columns like the trees in the park, foils for the sensuous froth and folds of their partner's frocks. Headlam positions herself as the non-privileged observer, who can take in the whole picture in the moments between the album shots. Her paint records the baroque duchess satin drapery, and in some works it is the details of the dress alone that Headlam focusses on, the bride is absent. The sensuous folds and billowings are plumped out by the heavy shadows in the late afternoon. Headlam captures in these dresses the same vulnerability and surrender as that awful moment in *The piano* when the heroine collapses, drops to the ground and her massive crinoline skirts, saturated by rain and mud, balloon around her like a terrible black cloud.

Olympia's clothes, an installation of photographs by Polixeni Papapetrou looks at clothes as ritual offerings to propitiate the gods, to celebrate and protect the baby, the little girl, her daughter. In *Infant/infanta*, Papapetrou presents a portrait of her daughter Olympia as the infant as *Infanta*, a lush and fierce image of a serious important

child dressed ceremonially in a delicate hand knitted dress and matching bonnet holding a silver rattle like a sceptre, formally posed with a tasselled tapestry cushion of Mona Lisa herself. *La Gioconda* and the infant share the same knowing look. This photograph is the central panel of a triptych set between reproductions of Velasquez's Spanish *infantas* dressed in sumptuous costumes, but Olympia herself is the unquestionable centre of attention, vanquishing *infantas* and Mona Lisa alike.

On the other wall, a set of colour photographs of one hundred and thirty five items of clothing worn by this child, Olympia's clothes — they range from gum boots to tee shirts, dresses and jumpsuits; some are made by hand, some are grossly mass produced with images of Teletubbies and 101 Dalmatians. What is interesting about these clothes is that they belong to, were given to, bought for, made for, this particular child. They are photographed in bright, clear colours against a black background, the lighting is clean and hard, without shadows or texture. They could be read as a catalogue of mass consumption but they seemed to me more like votive offerings. They say surprisingly little about social class or even gender, many of them

could be worn by a little boy. They tell of the desire to adore by adorning with things as fleeting and insubstantial as flowers. These clothes will last but a few months, the child's growing out of them is relentless; many may only have been worn once, or not at all as the child was too big and the day too cool or the occasion not found within the time. This child can never return to these clothes, they are a testimony to her departure. They are the material evidence of investment in the child by all those who love her and are eagerly watching her growth out of them. Her future is marked by the waste of clothes she leaves behind, shells and shards discarded, her destiny is to forget what once adorned her as much as it is to leave her parents and all those who gave her these clothes.

notes

* *scroop* is the sound made by luxury fabrics

* *streeled* means trailing on the ground — and is found in *Vanity Fair* (the book not the magazine) 'a yellow satin that streeled after her like the tail of a comet'.

Correction

In 'The thrall of the dress: blame it on Dior' by Suzanne Spinner in *AM* April, page 15, it was incorrectly stated that Martin Grant worked on the nightgowns for *La Somnambule*. In fact Martin Grant helped Rosslynd find the source material for the garments in the works *La Somnambule* (1997) and *Conversation* and Rosslynd then made the dresses in her Melbourne studio.

