



Mara Held "Tower II" 2004 36" x 48"

ART IN REVIEW

Where Fashion Meets Its Artistic Match

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

Many art exhibitions have explored the linkages between art, design, architecture and fashion, most notably "Skin + Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture," an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2006-7. "Fashion Forward" at the Islip Art Museum is the most sustained effort on this subject to date in the New York region, and for this reason it really must be seen.

Of course, don't come expecting anything on the scale of the Los Angeles exhibition, or a meaty research catalog. The more trimmed-down ambition of "Fashion Forward" is merely to point up some of the everyday cross-pollination that goes on between the worlds of art and fashion in the work of 14 artists from New York and its environs. Like many shows here, it is organized by Karen Shaw, a guest curator.

The opening room of the exhibition includes a half-dozen interesting works by Andy Warhol, who started his art career doing illustrations for fashion magazines. They are mostly prints of drawings of shoes, from the 1950s through '80s, along with a portrait of Diana Vreeland, the

fabled editor of *Vogue*, but there is also an original “Souper Dress” from 1968, one of the artist’s more successful fusions of art and design. The dress is printed with Campbell’s Soup cans.

Although clearly concerned with fashion, Warhol’s works can seem a tad out of place in an exhibition largely devoted to more recent contemporary art. But that is not a real concern in a show in which the other works on view are imaginative and amusing, beginning with a freaky mixed-media sculpture by the artist and designer Nick Cave. “Soundsuit” (2005) is a costume wildly adorned with thrift-store finds, twigs, plastic bags, and socks twisted and painted to look like dreadlocks. The ensemble resembles African ceremonial costumes.

Whether this sculpture falls into the category of fashion or art is unclear, but the mingling of elements of both disciplines makes for a compelling object. The same goes for Jen Scott’s life-size skirts, dresses and blouses made out of used teabags; I know of no other artist who uses teabags in this way. The artist opens, empties and irons the bags, and then sews them together to make her garments. Some of them are wearable, and they are fun to look at.

The wearable art on display here from Meridith McNeal might be considered a far cry from the latest fashion. In other ways, however, it is very much of the moment, for the artist makes Victorian-style dresses out of a cheap, throwaway material: New York City subway maps. I like these works a lot, for in addition to their pleasurable juxtaposition of material and design, they suggest that the mysteriousness of taste is somehow navigable by intellect.

Three of the artists in the show make artwork related to intimate apparel. Cristina Vergano paints fantasy portraits of beautiful, exotic women in places like Africa and the Middle East wearing racy underwear beneath traditional garb. Meanwhile, Vadis Turner re-creates delicate, lacy women’s underwear using waxed paper and dental floss. Michelle Jaffe also remakes women’s undergarments, but out of anodized aluminum and Plexiglas. All three groups of works are beautiful, ingenious and very well crafted.

Consumerism as it relates to fashion also seems to preoccupy several of the artists exhibiting here. The glamorous advertisements for clothing that appear in magazines and newspapers are spoofed in Carter Kustera’s colorful paintings. In particular, they parody fantasy narratives created to make the clothes desirable to the consumer. In one work, a woman confronts a tsunami in her stylish new outfit made of “light but durable fabrics,” as the advertising copy at the top of the painting proclaims.

Perhaps the most literal fusion of art and fashion is “Jack It” (2006-8), a painting-cum-installation by an artist who goes by the name Tait. On display is a large red and white painting with sections cut out of it, along with a wearable jacket made of the cut-out pieces of the painting that have been sewn together. The title of this work has a double meaning, referring both to the jacket and to the artist’s decision to destroy one of his own paintings.

Something more consequential seems to be happening in Mara Held’s paintings, which also invoke the way garments are made. The artist draws the patterns for sleeves and bodices, or basic units of clothing design, on linen, which she then covers with layers of encaustic — pigment mixed with melted wax. Here again the sum of fashion and art is greater than its individual parts, for we sense something unfathomable beyond what we see.

“Fashion Forward,” Islip Art Museum, 50 Irish Lane, East Islip, through Jan. 25. Information: islipartmuseum.org or (631) 224-5402.