

When Art Mocks – and Inspires – Fashion

By Rebecca Voight

PARIS — “One thing is sure. There are more fashion designers who want to be artists than the other way around,” says Elein Fleiss, co-founder of Purple, fashion’s artist style review.

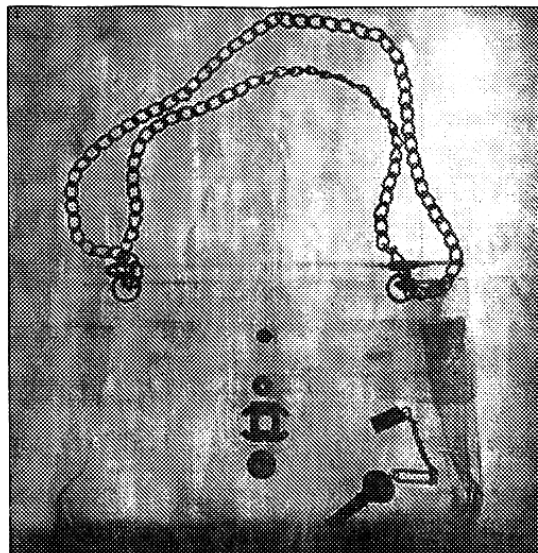
That may be true, but there are an increasing number of artists rummaging through the collective closet. Their takes on the rituals of dressing and modern brand lust could pass for avant-garde clothing collections, or fashion ads.

The American artist Steve Miller’s “My Mother’s Vuitton Suitcase” is an X-ray view of the bag filled with long-stemmed roses. For Miller, whose medically inspired art employs CAT scans and microscopic views, fashion is irresistible. “It all started a few years ago when I was given a pair of Roger Vivier pumps to illustrate for a book. I never saw anything so beautiful. They looked like black Ferraris, so I took them to the hospital and had them X-rayed.”

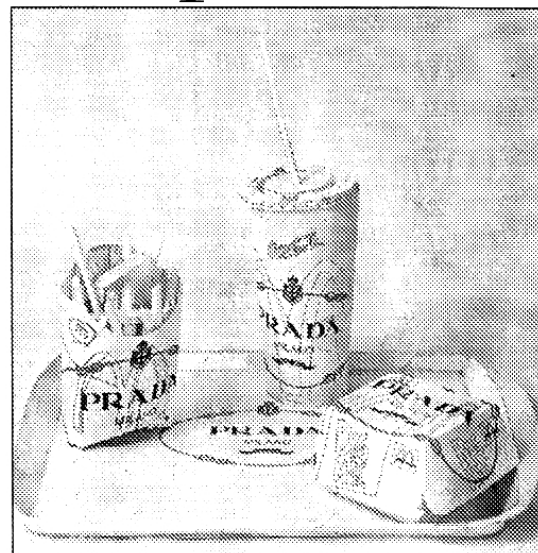
Miller went on to explore his mother’s designer shoe collection. And when he came to Paris, among the first to buy one of his purse X-ray paintings was the house of Chanel. “Fashion objects have incredible power. They are superficial and profound,” says Miller. “We’ve gone from Andy Warhol’s star system to the object system.”

Caroline Smulders of the Thaddeus Ropac gallery in Paris whose exhibition “Sous le Manteau” included the clothing-inspired work of 43 artists in 1997, says artists are obsessed by fashion. “It fascinates them because of the attention it generates,” says Smulders. “Contemporary art has to get out of the gallery. The art world is too small. Very few people wear designer clothes, but more people watch fashion shows on television than will ever visit a gallery.”

“Sous le Manteau’s” catalogue looks like an advance plan of fashion’s forward moves.



Artists are making forays into the fashion world and, in return, giving their own take on the rituals of dressing. At left, Steve Miller’s “My Mother’s Purse,” at right, Tom Sachs’s “Prada Valuemeeal.”



ion’s forward moves. The photographers Wolfgang Tillmans from Germany and Dutch partners Inez Van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin participated in the show as artists. Since then they have been picked up by the fashion world. The artist Mathieu Manche’s grotesque body parts stacked on a table and photographed on models as accessories and Oliver Herring’s coats knit from silver Mylar yarn have all been amply echoed on recent runways.

Herring, who collaborated with Rei Kawakubo for Florence’s first Art/Fashion Biennale in 1996, has been using knitting in his work for years. “The Biennale is a meeting of two different worlds. Rei and I tried to create a third world without overlapping,” he says.

Herring says he continues to knit his pieces from coats to human figures “as a process to transform and not a reference to fashion.” But he concedes he is fascinated by clothes and that designers are into his work. “It was funny to see Mylar sweaters show up on the runway two years later.” Herring is now knitting

chairs and shelves with wood. History doesn’t lack examples of artists’ fashion forays. From the painter Sonia Delaunay’s “simultaneous dresses” which injected graphic color into ’20s fashion to Marcel Duchamp’s drag incarnation as Rose Selavy photographed by Man Ray for the bottle of the fictional Belle Haleine Eau de Violette, artists mock fashion a little and inspire it a great deal.

FOR HIS winter men’s collection, Kenzo worked on the style of Joseph Beuys. And in 1970, Beuys produced a very fashionable “self-portrait,” a limited edition of 100 of his own felt suits.

“Art and fashion may get together, but artists still limit their fashion work to representation,” says Purple’s Fleiss. “Pascale Gatten from Holland dips into fashion, but she doesn’t want to be trapped by it. And photographer Wolfgang Tillmans limits his commercial work. He doesn’t even have an agent,” she explains. “Artists create beyond fashion’s rules, even if there is a

crossover at times.” Niels Klavers of the Netherlands considers himself a fashion designer, but his multiarmed jackets and layers of coats and pants with innumerable legs seem better suited to a gallery than a commercial runway.

Klavers will show with a group of young designers, all graduates of the Netherlands’ Arnheim Academy during the Paris collections. Yet to produce a commercial collection, he already has attracted a fashion following. Even the French weekly *Elle* seems to be under his influence. The magazine recently devoted a fashion spread inspired by his mad layering, featuring pants, shirts and skirts piled on top of another, six or seven at a time.

Smulders was surprised by the number of visitors to Thaddeus Ropac’s recent show of Tom Sachs’s “Creativity is the Enemy.” The current works of the American artist include what he calls “dub versions” or remixes of designer logos from his Chanel guillotine dining table to the Prada death camp and Hermes happy meal. “Sachs had

never shown in Europe before,” said Smulders. “One would imagine he was unknown here, but many of the pieces were sold before the show opened.”

The artist’s dark, albeit humorous view of fashion’s stranglehold on culture, didn’t deter Paris’s fashion community from turning out in force. For them it was just another big style event. But for Sachs, fashion is dead, or at least he has moved on.

Fashion, one of the examples of what he calls “cultural prosthetics,” followed on the heels of his work with zip guns, the firearms made from bits of pipe used by street kids.

From fashion he has moved on to airplane toilets. “That’s the only space where you can be alone on a plane,” he says. The toilets are the starting point of the R&D phase for his upcoming show in New York next fall which, he says, will add transportation to his favorite themes: death, horror, genocide and sex.

Fashion and art are, however, not always so opposed. “It’s like a game of Ping-Pong,” says the artist Fabrice Langlade of the relationship between art and clothes. Langlade began his *Chrysalides*, a series based on dresses, for Smulders’ “Sous le Manteau” show. The dresses formed with an industrial plastic material that looks like a strip of glue, trace the words of the first two chapters of Mikhail Bulgakov’s “The Master and Margarita.” He based them on a pattern supplied by his friend, the Italian designer Carlo Ponti. And now Barneys New York has taken one to introduce its Ponti collection in the store.

Langlade thinks culture has become too sectarian. “I remember, growing up in Paris in the early 1980s. Jean Paul Gaultier was a friend and I modeled for one of his early menswear shows. Artists and designers mixed more then, there was a constant exchange. Today everything is too cut off.”

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