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**Reviewed by
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Garmenting: Costume as Contemporary Art

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***Garmenting: Costume as Contemporary Art*, Museum of Arts and Design, New York, March 12–August 14, 2022**

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Visitors to fashion exhibitions have come to expect a spectacle. Dramatic lighting, theatrical staging, and star-studded openings frequently mirror opulent designs on display. By contrast, *Garmenting: Costume as Contemporary Art* at the Museum of Arts and Design, New

York, is an understated presentation despite its ambitious scope. The white cube of the exhibition space is unaltered, its navy-blue accent walls and silvery text adding little glamor. Yet that is precisely the point: *Garmenting* is decidedly *not* a Fashion Exhibition. The 35 artists assembled by guest curator Alexandra Schwartz intend for their work to be contemplated as contemporary art. This contrasts with the vast majority of clothing in the world's museums, where the institution is a secondary site for garments originally designed for the catwalk, red carpet, or retail. While the intersections of fashion and art are myriad, *Garmenting* is the first major museum exhibition to systematically study this particular category of cultural production. Accordingly, Schwartz breaks new ground in terms of theme, vocabulary, and display as she experiments to find new forms of presentation appropriate to the unique visual language of garmenting.

However, to focus exclusively on such questions of semantics and epistemology would be to miss the point. Though fascinating and necessary, these academic issues of (inter)disciplinarity take a backseat to urgent social and political concerns in Schwartz's thesis. She argues "*Garmenting* centers on contemporary artists' exploration of how dress both expresses and shapes who we are—our personal, cultural, and political identities—and it is my hope that their work will help stimulate discussion and foster understanding during these troubled times" (Schwartz 2022, 6). These "troubled times" have formed a turbulent context for the exhibition's production and reception. The ongoing pandemic, murder of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter protests, war in Ukraine, Uvalde school shooting, and US Supreme Court's reversal of *Roe vs. Wade* have only increased the urgency of the BIPOC, queer, and anticapitalist activist art in the exhibition (Figure 1).

Spread across two floors, *Garmenting* is divided into five overlapping themes: Functionality, Cultural Difference, Gender, Activism, and Performance. The first section, "Functionality," opens with Louise Bourgeois' *Blue Days* (Figure 2). The sculpture subtly introduces the question of how functional clothing can be differentiated from fine art, as it reads simply as a commercial clothing rack of Bourgeois' plain outfits. Only a ruby-red orb—and the aura of the artist—signal that this is a work of art. Didactic panels unfold on either side, providing a global chronology of garmenting beginning with seventeenth-century royal vestments. The narrative is illustrated with seminal works from earlier in history including Atsuko Tanaka's neon *Electric Dress*, Hélio Oiticica's *Capas*, Joseph Beuys' *Felt Suit*, and Lorraine O'Grady's *Mlle. Bourgeois Noir's* pageant gown. This account provides important context and signals the scholarly ambition of the exhibition, but would also have made a blockbuster exhibition in its own right.

The relatively mild debate over what constitutes clothing or fine art in the "Functionality" section primes the viewer to contemplate more socially charged issues as the exhibition unfolds. "Cultural Difference"

Figure 1

Devan Shimoyama's *February 11* (2019) honors George Floyd through a hoodie adorned with memorial flowers. Gracing the cover of the exhibition catalog, it speaks to the turbulent social context for the exhibition's production and reception. Image courtesy of the author.

**Figure 2**

Subdued wall color, extensive historical background, and thought-provoking works like Louise Bourgeois' *Blue Days* set a thoughtful intellectual tone for the exhibition. Image courtesy of the author.



creates a conversation between artists such as Nick Cave and Yinka Shonibare, two of the most visible and established figures in the garmenting genre (Figure 3). The capacious label "Cultural Difference" acknowledges the layered identities of the artists. Yet at the same time, it undermines the power of this assembly, as seven of the eight artists

Figure 3

Yinka Shonibare, CBE (foreground) and Nick Cave (background) are two of the most visible and established figures in the garmenting genre. Image courtesy of the author.

**Figure 4**

Esmaa Mohamoud and Qendrim Hoti's *Untitled* from *One of the Boys* foreground the "Gender" section. Hanging behind from left to right are works by Zoë Buckman, Mark Newport, and Andrea Zittel. Image courtesy of the author.



belong to the African diaspora (the eighth, Tanis S'eitlin, is indigenous). Labeling artists of color as the carriers of "difference" risks reinforcing whiteness as the normative mainstream. Furthermore, displacing an opportunity for discussing race—specifically blackness—onto the vague,

Figure 5

Works from Zoë Buckman's *Every Curve* illustrate the overlapping nature of the exhibition's sections, touching on issues of "Gender" as well as "Activism." Image courtesy of the author.

**Figure 6**

From left to right, works by Kent Monkman, Jeffrey Gibson, Jakkai Siributr and Hunter Reynolds. Monkman, Gibson, and Reynolds's pieces are all examples of artworks that appear as sculptures in one part of the exhibition, but are also used as a costume in the "Performance" section. Image courtesy of the author.



comfortable topic of "culture" is an anomalous decision in this otherwise brave exhibition.

A similar looseness of terminology underpins the next section, "Gender," which conflates gender and sexual orientation by discussing both in the section text. However, this umbrella also acknowledges the

disciplinary expansion of gender studies to encompass masculinity and intersectionality. Both concepts are treated in a pair of gowns from Esmāa Mohamoud and Qendrim Hoti's *Untitled* (from *One of the Boys*), whose princess skirts are corseted with basketball jerseys to disrupt expectations about gender, race, and class (Figure 4).

"Activism" is another collection of powerful works by genre-defining artists like Jeffrey Gibson and Hunter Reynolds. Of all the exhibition's sections, this one is most amorphous, functioning as a critical framework for understanding works across the show. For example, the indigenous patterns in Gibson's *The Anthropophagic Effect, Garment #4* and Sheelasha Rajbhandari's *My Great-Great-Grandmother's Shawl* would be equally at home in the "Cultural Difference" section as the curator has defined it. Conversely, Zoë Buckman's misogynistic lyrics embroidered on sheer lingerie voice a powerful #metoo protest despite their location in "Gender" (Figure 5).

Much like "Activism," "Performance" is a lens that could be applied to nearly any work in the show. In fact, several videos correlate to sculptural works displayed elsewhere in the galleries, including Kent Monkman's *Miss Chief's Tipi Dress* (Figure 6). Many works of garmenting can only be understood when they are activated by the body in space. Accordingly, MAD organized a series of five performances that play an integral role in the exhibition rather than serving as auxiliary programming. Just as the exhibition pushes the boundaries of artistic categories, so too does the inclusion of performance reimagine the format of fashion and art exhibitions alike.

Central to performative garmenting, the human body is paradoxically omnipresent and conspicuously absent from the exhibition. The eerie effect of floors of unoccupied clothing is preemptively addressed in Rhonda Garelick's catalogue essay, "The Sartorial Uncanny." Instead, the exhibition is enlivened by the other gallerygoers walking among the mannequins. Prompted by the exhibition to view wardrobe in a new light, one begins to wonder what stories, identities, and statements are driving other viewers' sartorial choices. At a time when the gravity of life outside the museum might make high fashion seem frivolous, garmenting—a deep, esthetic consideration of how clothing makes meaning—is more relevant than ever.

Reference

Schwartz, Alexandra. 2022. "Preface and Acknowledgements." In *Garmenting: Costume as Contemporary Art*. New York: Museum of Arts and Design.