MIRROR MIRROR – FASHION AND THE PSYCHE

The double exhibition *MIRROR MIRROR – Fashion and the Psyche* at MoMu and the Dr. Guislain Museum in Ghent explores the connections between fashion, psychology, self-image and identity.

In most fashion exhibitions, the human body is discrete and quiet, in the background, symbolised by a nondescript mannequin or tailor’s bust. The focus is on the fashion. The body beneath it all becomes an anonymous carrier, a kind of coat rack for the creations. For the first time, *Mirror Mirror* looks at the body and the human psychology underlying those articles of clothing. How do we actually see ourselves and how do we observe one another? How do contemporary designers and artists express ideals of beauty? Is fashion able to give us mental protection, strength or power?

The exhibition opens with reflections, self-reflections and disturbed images of the human body. Human replicas from the worlds of art and fashion cross your path as you move through the museum galleries. Where exactly do mannequins and dolls get their mysterious power of attraction? What role do dolls and human replicas play in times of crisis and why are designers and artists so attracted to them? In the digital finale, the physical body is no longer present. Art, fashion and technology all come together in the form of virtual bodies, feminist cyborgs and lonely avatars.

# REFLECTION

Art and fashion can play an important role in breaking free from demanding beauty ideals. With unexpected forms and proportions, avant-garde creations embrace diverse body types and therefore challenge classical beauty ideals. These sculptural, in most cases voluminous silhouettes, leave the forms of their wearer’s body to the imagination. More importantly, they form a new body around the wearer and show how fashion can be an artistic armour, a source of self-expression and mental power.

# WIGS BY CYNDIA HARVEY

Before moving to the United Kingdom as a teenager, Cyndia Harvey grew up in Jamaica. Because her mother was a hairdresser, she was always attracted to the tactility of hair. As a young adult, she began working in a Black hair salon in London - an experience that taught her how to work with a multitude of textures, use expressive artistry such as braiding, and gave her insight into the limitless possibilities of hair. She had her first taste of the fashion industry as an assistant to fashion hair stylist Sam McKnight. Today, Cyndia Harvey not only collaborates with fashion designers, but also works with artists such as FKA Twigs, Kendrick Lamar and Frank Ocean.

# FILTERING REALITY

Beauty standards have persisted throughout history, evolving and fluctuating, but never disappearing. As a result of social media, they have become even more demanding. In 2016, Snapchat first launched its playful augmented reality (AR) filters and, as ‘selfie culture’ became increasingly popular, the array of face beautification filters exploded, from the smoothing of skin to undetectable alteration of facial features. As nearly everyone can now digitally manipulate their appearance, troubling psychological consequences become evident, such as body dysmorphia and insecurities about one’s actual face. Rather than embracing and celebrating diversity, most filters make people appear eerily similar and, functioning as contemporary masks, they alter individuality into one single, cyborgian face.

# BODY FRAGMENTATION

It was only in the 19th century that psychiatry began to pay attention to disorders of body image. Someone suffering from body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) thinks obsessively about their appearance and features that they consider ugly or abnormal, when the actual ‘flaw’ may be partly or completely imagined. People with BDD often spend hours a day trying to fix or hide certain parts of themselves and frequently examine their appearance in the mirror. When focussing on specific parts that might need ‘improvement’, people fragment themselves into separate parts that need to be worked on. Similarly, advertisements for cosmetics or fashion break the body up in as many pieces as necessary to market a specific product. The campaigns by Jil Sander and Prada shown here, we see playful, artistic hints at the way the female body is often divided, broken, shattered into multiple pieces, all to serve the purposes of consumerism.

# REPLICA: THE POWER OF THE DOLL

In this oversized doll’s house, mannequins and dolls from the worlds of art and fashion come together. The theme of the haunted doll is common in horror movies, where fear is ignited when they unexpectedly come to life. Both designers and artists have worked with dolls to explore the ambiguity between the living and the lifeless. Comparatively, the history of art reveals how they have been and remain meaningful conduits for the articulation of critical ideas about society. Artists have used them to comment on our neoliberal, capitalist society and, in a feminist art context, to question symbols of femininity and undermine the power structures of the patriarchy. Welcome to the doll’s house.

# THE DOLLS OF FASHION

Historic fashion dolls were transported across European countries to present regional fashions. Mostly dressed in court attire, they exported ideas about new fashion styles from at least the 14th century onwards. In times of crisis, such fashion dolls not only showcased local fashions, but served to boost national economies and a sense of patriotic pride. Fashion dolls were so valuable in sustaining France’s economic supremacy in the fashion trade that they were granted an ‘inviolable passport’ by the ministers of the courts of France and England during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714), when all other trading was disrupted.

# MANNEQUINS IN THE MUSEUM

Mannequins first appeared in European shop windows between 1880 and 1890. They were designed to seduce the passer-by into entering a world of fashion and consumption. Displaying fashion in a museum has a similar need for a support or a body. Fashion museums primarily work with mannequins that were originally developed for commercial use. For conservation reasons, these mannequins must be relatively light, easy to handle and not damaging to the garments. They need to fit the mostly tiny, ‘sample’ sizes of garments in designer archives. As a result, we often encounter tall, thin, abstracted female forms, devoid of hair or facial features. In the real world, however, there is no such thing as a generic body. Artists and curators have developed artistic experiments that have successfully challenged the omnipresence of the Caucasian, standardised body.

# AVATAR

In this final space, the physical body has been cast off entirely. Like mannequins and dolls, the avatar is a human surrogate, a product of our digital culture. The art world has been experimenting with computer-generated imagery (CGI) since the 1970s, whereas in the fashion industry, the use of these technologies and the embrace of video games and NFTs are relatively recent developments. Avatars appear in immersive works of art by Ed Atkins, Pierre Huyghe and Melik Ohanian, as well as in Lynn Hershman Leeson’s feminist photo collages. By using post-human figures, these artists and designers are able to consider the changing position of the physical body in an increasingly artificial and technological reality. By testing and bridging the sharp divide between the physical and the virtual, these avatars transform both our self-image and our perception of the world.