

The Phantasmagoric World of **THIERRY MUGLER**

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Abstract

This review of *Thierry Mugler: Couturissime* approaches the exhibition through a feminist art-historical lens and attends to the various ways that both Mugler's clothing and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' curatorial team has framed and constructed the powerful, threatening woman as a complex figure who is hard, cold, sensual, strong, hard-working, and spectacular, among many other valences. The exhibition, which had its world premiere at the MMFA in March 2019, is organized as a fashion opera in six acts, and each room illuminates disparate yet interconnected parts of Mugler's body of work: his costumes for a 1985 performance of *Macbeth* in Paris; the decadent and excessive clothing worn and worshipped by past and present celebrities; the black-and-white power dressing that Helmut

Newton and others have canonized in fashion photography; the astounding creations inspired by insects and reptiles; and finally, the cyborgian fembots that have been presented in both *Vogue* and music videos. The inclusion of photographs and videos — not a new strategy in blockbuster fashion exhibitions — is essential to the success of *Thierry Mugler: Couturissime*, as they reveal that while these clothes are works of art, they were made to be worn and mobilized. Although not explicitly a feminist exhibition, for viewers who are looking for feminist, political inspiration wherever they can find it Mugler's warrior women and formidable clothing — whether made of metal, latex or feathers — provide a powerful reminder that clothing is just one of the many weapons in our arsenal.

KEYWORDS:

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Review: The Phantasmagoric World of Thierry Mugler

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' (MMFA) exhibition *Thierry Mugler: Couturissime* (March 2–September 8, 2019) opens boldly in a small space that is dark and moody and filled with the, at times, overly bracing sounds of sighs, violins, and ravens cawing. The curator, Thierry-Maxime Loriot, who also curated the MMFA's two previous fashion blockbusters dedicated to Yves Saint Laurent (2008) and Jean Paul Gautier (2017), has chosen to welcome viewers into Mugler's phantasmagoric world not with his iconic power femmes of the 1970s or the fembots of the 1990s, but rather with his lesser-known costumes created for an open-air performance of *Macbeth* in Paris in 1985.



FIGURE 1

View of the exhibition *Thierry Mugler: Couturissime*. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Photo MMFA, Denis Farley.

Upon entering the first room the viewer is met with a formidable, dark, Renaissance-style gown with a large, black pleated satin ruff around the neck, a wide skirt, and a faceless head wrapped in bandages (Figure 1). This costume, which is in the collection of the Centre national du costume de scène in Moulins, France, was made for the character of the First Witch, one of the three witches who play integral roles in Shakespeare's 1606 tragedy. Along the bottom of the dress are latex appliques that mimic flames and charred cloth, signifying the history of witches (and other threatening women) being burned at the stake. One of the didactic labels notes that the pleated satin ruffs recall the blocks of guillotines and that the witches in the 1985 performance of *Macbeth* had shaved heads, traditionally the ultimate punishment and humiliation for (white) women, although there have been many others.

The exhibition as a whole was conceived of as a fashion opera – fitting for a designer who was once a professional dancer and who created fashion shows as spectacles and performances – with six acts.

This first room is entitled “Acte I: *Macbeth* and the Scottish Lady.” In addition to the witch’s dress there are costumes for men and women, including a dress created for Lady *Macbeth*. The duchess satin gown is massive and black, covered in its entirety with hand-applied metal studs; there is also a matching headdress. This first room suggests a theme that is threaded throughout the exhibition, namely the powerful woman who has been both lauded and punished, desired and loathed. This theme is underscored by a virtual reality presentation in the back of the first room (seen in the background of Figure 1). The 4D artwork, entitled *The Disappearance of Lady Macbeth* (2019) and created by Montreal artist Michel Lemieux, begins with an auburn-haired Lady *Macbeth* sheathed and shielded in her giant Renaissance gown. The dress begins to

burn, and as it does so, Lady *Macbeth* (not the most sympathetic figure in the Western canon) falls to the ground, wearing only a chemise that clings to her body like antique drapery. She proceeds to perform a dance that communicates her guilt, vulnerability, and eventually release or relief as her body disintegrates.

Mugler, who re-fashioned himself as Manfred Thierry Mugler in 2002, was notorious for refusing to collaborate on a retrospective of his work with museums such as the Met and other international institutions. Apparently, Mugler took a liking to the MMFA’s director Nathalie Bondil when they met in Berlin a few years ago, and just like that, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts became the site of the world premier for *Couturissime*. The exhibition travels next to Rotterdam.

The exhibition includes one hundred and fifty of Mugler's creations, as well as sketches for *Macbeth*, music videos, and iconic fashion photographs.

Although the photographs are spread out throughout the exhibition, it is in the second room that the photographs and music videos are most effectively put into dialogue with the clothes. The outfits are modeled by both black and white mannequins on a long platform the length of the room, and large photographs are hung along both of the longer walls. At the end of the room, a large screen plays snippets of music videos, such as Lady Gaga and Beyoncé's hit song "Telephone" (2010), in which Gaga wears a huge black brimmed hat with a bit of white trim, yellow hair, round sunglasses, a top with long, tight black sleeves, and a buttoned white bodice, finished off with black, leather finger gloves. Of the many striking photographs, Bruce Weber's 1986 photograph of Madonna wearing a sequined bustier and short, bleached-blond hair for *Life* magazine is a highlight. The outfits, sketches and photographs on display were selected from an archive of over seven thousand pieces.



FIGURE 2

View of the exhibition *Thierry Mugler: Couturissime*. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Photo © Nicolas Ruel.



The music videos and photographs are crucial, as they show how gorgeous the clothing is when worn by real bodies.

FIGURE 3

Patrice Stable, Emma Sjöberg during the shooting of the video for George Michael's song "Too Funky," Paris, 1992, directed by George Michael and Thierry Mugler. Outfit: Thierry Mugler, *Les Cow-boys* collection, prêt-à-porter spring/summer 1992. Photo: © Patrice Stable.

As is often the case with fashion exhibitions, the clothing sometimes looks disappointing on the mannequins, if not downright cheap. This is the case, for example, with one of the first ensembles presented in the second room, "Acte II: Stars & Sparkles: Staging Fashion": the deliberately trashy motorcycle bustier with black short-shorts with red fringe, created for Mugler's *Les Cow-boys* collection, prêt-à-porter spring/summer 1992. The outfit has the added virtue of a metal-studded thigh holster holding a can of Budweiser (Figure 2). And yet in photographs and videos these clothes come alive and are instantly recognizable as pieces of art (Figure 3).

As this room makes abundantly clear, celebrities have long adored Mugler's clothes. There is a 1991 photograph of David Bowie, looking tanned and alien-beautiful, wearing a green wool crepe suit with collarless jacket; the photo was taken while Bowie was shooting the video for Tin Machine's song "You Belong in Rock n' Roll." There is a video of Celine Dion accepting an award in Mugler (as Kim Kardashian recently did) and a *Vanity Fair* photograph of Faye Dunaway wearing Mugler and lying on top of a car, surrounded by rabid fans.

One photograph that gave me pause was Steve Meisel's 1990 photograph of Pat Cleveland (wearing something from the *Music-hall* collection, fall/winter 1990–91) for *Vogue Paris*. I imagine that it is because of the collection's title that Cleveland is shown pulling on both of her ears so that they stick out and blowing out her cheeks. This pose is borrowed directly from Josephine Baker, the African American woman who took Paris by storm in the 1920s by performing "primitiveness" for her largely white audiences. Baker is a paradoxical figure, having had both a relatively large amount of agency and a persona constructed as "savage." [1] A didactic panel or two engaging critically with issues related to fashion, representation, and race would have been appreciated and would have enhanced the exhibition.

[1] For more on this see Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).



FIGURE 4

View of the exhibition *Thierry Mugler: Couturissime*. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Photo © Nicolas Ruel.

It is in the room dedicated to the *Belle du Jour* and *Belle du Nuit* that the theme of the powerful woman, or “glamazon” as one wall panel would have it, is made explicit. In the midst of the 1970s-hippie movement, Mugler leaned into creating clothes for the modern professional woman as both strong and sexy through exceedingly broad shoulders, architectural silhouettes, and the use of latex and vinyl, materials associated with the fetish and underground scenes. In this room, feminist art historian Linda Nochlin is quoted as stating in a 1994 *New York Times* interview with Mugler: “[His fashion is] so extreme that these women aren’t sex objects, they’re sex subjects.”

The most magnificent room by far is “Acte V: Metamorphosis: Fantasy Bestiary.” The clothes in this room are primarily those inspired by living creatures

such as insects, reptiles, and birds. By this point in the exhibition, even the most athletic viewers are exhausted and over-stimulated. The curatorial team must have anticipated this, as there is a bench thoughtfully provided immediately to the left of the entryway to this large, oval-shaped room. And that’s not all. Immediately in front of the bench one of the most arresting gowns (though not the most impressive) has been placed on a turning pedestal, so that tired viewers can view the dress from all angles from a seated position (Figure 4). This room also has an immersive environment created with projections on the walls and ceiling as well as a soundscape; this *Gesamtkunstwerk* was created by Montreal’s Rodeo FX, the exhibition’s second successful intersection between Mugler’s fashion and the Montreal art scene.

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The showstopper for this room, and indeed for the entire exhibition (not surprisingly, it was also chosen for one of the three exhibition posters) is the Chimère gown (Figure 5), part of Mugler's *La Chimère* collection (haute couture fall/winter 1997–98). This masterpiece, a long sheath with gold articulated corset adorned with "scales" and embellished with feathers, crystals, and horsehair at the end of the sleeves and at the bottom of the gown, was created in collaboration with Jean-Jacques Urcun and Mr Pearl, the celebrated South African corset-maker.



FIGURE 5

Alan Strutt, *Yasmin Le Bon*, Palladium, London, 1997;
Evening Standard Magazine, October 1997. Outfit:
Thierry Mugler, *La Chimère* collection, "La Chimère"
gown, haute couture fall/winter 1997–1998.

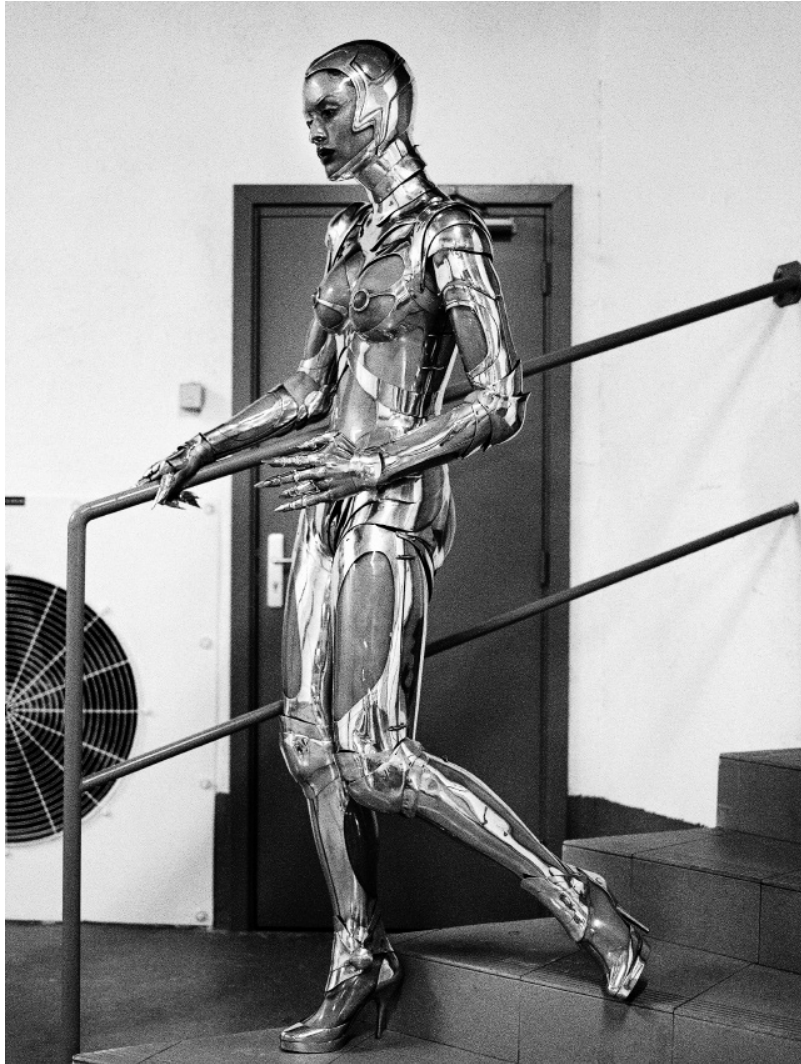


FIGURE 6

Helmut Newton, *Johanna*; *Vogue* (US), November 1995.
Outfit: Thierry Mugler, *Anniversaire des 20 ans collection*,
prêt-à-porter fall/winter 1995–1996. Photo: © The Helmut
Newton Estate.

The final room — “Acte VI: Futuristic and Fembot Couture” — will likely be the most exciting for younger viewers familiar with Lady Gaga’s video for her song “Paparazzi,” in which she wears one of Mugler’s iconic metal ensembles that conjure up both feminist cyborgs and Medieval/sci-fi maiden warriors (Figure 6). The powerful women in Mugler’s body of work aren’t exactly the *femmes fatales* of Alexander McQueen’s oeuvre, but they are nonetheless fierce and provocative. [2]

[2] For more on McQueen’s *femmes fatales* and the criticism that he received for shows such as *Nihilism* (1993) and *Highland Rape* (1995), see Caroline Evans, “Desire and Dread: Alexander McQueen and the Contemporary Femme Fatale,” in *Body Dressing*, eds. Joanna Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 201-14.

Today, Mugler's clothes remind us that feminism comes in many guises, whether it's a metal breastplate or a pencil skirt.

Clothes may not shield us from wounding words, but they can still make us feel protected when we go out into the world and demand for social change. Mugler, after all, once stated: "In my work I've always tried to make people look stronger than they really are."

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