

Exhibition Review: *Gender Bending Fashion*

By Myriam Couturier

Abstract

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts' recent 2019 exhibition, *Gender Bending Fashion*, explored some of the ways in which designers and wearers in European and American contexts have challenged traditional ideas around dress and gender over the last century. This included the rejection of conventional dress codes (in the form of men wearing skirts and women wearing suits); the blurring of gender lines in fashion (the combination of "masculine" and "feminine" design elements and the construction of unisex clothing); as well as attempts to transcend the idea of gendered dress altogether (through the creation of new forms of genderless clothing). This review highlights key

objects featured in the exhibition, with special attention paid to everyday ensembles and personal narratives that effectively communicated ideas of embodiment, cultural experience, and fashion storytelling that were missing from some of the high fashion garments on display. The deliberately critical and academic approach taken by the curatorial team is discussed, as are some of the tensions and material challenges inherent in representing different bodies and expressions of gender in the context of a major museum fashion exhibition. This exhibition addresses themes that are of critical importance to fashion curators, scholars, and anyone interested in fashion studies more generally.

KEYWORDS:

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Exhibition Review: *Gender Bending Fashion*

Curated by Michelle Tolini Finamore, Penny Vinik Curator of Fashion Arts at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), the exhibition *Gender Bending Fashion* (March 21–August 25, 2019) examined “moments when people have disrupted, blurred, and sought to transcend concepts of gendered clothing over the last century” through its display of couture, prêt-à-porter, and other historical garments. These were set in a colourful, geometric, neon-accented space filled with the music of Grace Jones, David Bowie, and Lady Gaga. Throughout the gallery, historical ensembles were presented along with contemporary designs, highlighting the various stylistic exchanges that helped shape the material and visual expressions of fashion on display.

DISRUPT, BLUR, TRANSCEND

The exhibition opened with a tiered, ruffled ensemble (Figure 1) created by Italian designer Alessandro Trincone and worn by rapper Young Thug on the cover of his 2016 album *Jeffery*, which reflected both artists’ personal ideas around the fluidity of gender.



Figure 1. Alessandro Trincone, ensemble from the “Annodami” collection, Spring/Summer 2017. Photo by Myriam Couturier.

The first section of the exhibition, *Disrupt*, explored fashionable challenges to the paradigms of the suited man and the skirted woman, with colourful skirted ensembles and coat dresses designed for men — including pieces by Walter van Beirendonck, Jean Paul Gaultier, and Alejandro Gómez Palomo — as well as suits worn by women. These included Tilda Swinton (a 2003 Viktor and Rolf suit with multiple collars and lapels arranged in a pointed, fan-like pattern); Marlene Dietrich (a 1930 evening ensemble by costume designer Travis Banton); and Janelle Monáe (a red pant suit with a sculptural, oversized peplum skirt designed by Christian Siriano).

Adjacent to these celebrity and runway looks, one of the most interesting outfits on display was a tailored suit made by the gender inclusive, queer-positive Brooklyn shop Bindle & Keep. The suit was provided by MFA staff member Margaret Scott, who purchased it while working as a corporate attorney. In the accompanying text, Scott explained the difficulty, for female attorneys, of finding suits that are stylish, well-fitting, and do not accentuate “female” features in a business setting. Scott’s personal account effectively connected the clothing to a concrete, embodied narrative. As Joanne Entwistle argues, “in everyday life gender plays a significant part in



Figure 2. Zoot suit, 1943, re-tailored in 2019 by MFA textile conservators. Photo by Myriam Couturier.

the way in which individuals, male and female, experience embodiment and come to live in their bodies,” including how they wear clothes and how they move through time and space (2001).

Another memorable, everyday fashion piece was a zoot suit from 1943, re-tailored by MFA conservators as it would have been for a female wearer at the time (Figure 2). The display text discussed the social significance of the zoot suit, which was worn by African American and Latino youth during the 1930s and 40s, and became a counter-cultural symbol during the Depression and WWII years. As the information panel explained, zoot suits — with their exaggerated silhouettes that used large quantities of fabric — were seen as unpatriotic at a time when material rationing was considered crucial to the war effort, and they were an object of racial discrimination. During the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles, military servicemen targeted the local Latino population in violent, racially-motivated attacks, using the zoot suit as a visual identifier. According to Catherine S. Ramírez, “[a]s a sign of personal extravagance and assertive individualism during a period of collective austerity and conformity, the zoot suit was rendered a sign of un-Americanism” (2009, 62). Ramírez explains that male zoot suiters were pathologized as effeminate because they took care of their appearance and actively participated in consumerism (73), while the ensemble became even more transgressive on female bodies; wear-

ing it constituted a kind of queering of both American and middle-class, heteronormative Mexican-American culture, and the suit “destabilized race, class, and gender categories” (80). By recreating a zoot suit specifically for a woman, the exhibition attempted to fill a material and narrative gap — such extant garments are rare and, according to Ramírez, the female zoot suiter has often been overlooked in documented histories of the movement.

In the following section, *Blur*, designs by Yohji Yamamoto, Rei Kawakubo and Rudi Gernreich — who all attempted to blur gender distinctions and subvert traditional silhouettes in their clothing — were displayed. Gernreich’s colourful, futuristic 1960s unisex jumpsuit and caftan (Figure 3) acted as bold centerpieces that anticipated the avant-garde designs to follow in the next room. As Chloe Chapin, Denise Nicole Green, and Samuel Neuberg argue: “While these styles may have focused more on an ‘equality of the sexes’ or a deconstruction of western fashion ideals, unisex styles also might be seen as a precursor to current expressions of gender nonconformity” (2019, 78). In this section new and historical garments were also juxtaposed, focusing on themes of modernity, the body, mobility, and technology. The display highlighted how functional clothing such as sportswear, military and wartime clothing, cycling costumes, riding habits, and swimwear had historically shifted to allow traditionally masculine forms of dress to be adopted by women. It should be noted that the text panels and garments in this section were displayed in a way that was difficult to follow at times. With pieces grouped together on an inclined platform with the wall text at its base, it could be challenging to clearly identify specific pieces and their corresponding information labels.

One of the most compelling moments of the exhibition was a video that featured ten local residents who were asked to discuss their personal style and their thoughts on gender and the expression of identity through clothing. The video featured queer and nonbinary individuals, religious dress, diverse bodies, and personal narratives that were often missing from the rest of the exhibition. Most visitors seemed very engaged, pausing to watch the video in its entirety.

The final section, *Transcend*, showcased the work of four contemporary designers and fashion studios: Two Point Two Studio, Rad Hourani, Palomo Spain, and Not Equal. These designers presented clothing they described as agender, rational, and, in the case of Hourani, “Genderless, Ageless, Raceless, Nationless, Limitless.” The Palomo Spain pieces were said to focus on “comfort, beauty and happiness” rather than on gendered differentiation. Interestingly, with the notable exception of Palomo’s colourful designs, the clothing in this final section was overwhelmingly monochrome, minimal, and streamlined. I noticed here that the mannequins had changed as the exhibition progressed: the first section used mannequins that could be interpreted as male or female by the viewer, with this difference emphasized using wigs and other accessories; the second section made use of some mannequins that appeared gender neutral; while the last gallery included mannequins with even fewer gender distinctions and accompanying typ-



Figure 3. Rudi Gernreich, caftan, 1960s. Photo by Myriam Couturier.

ically-gendered accessories. Unfortunately, however, throughout the exhibition the mannequin forms showed no real body and size diversity, in keeping with many of the high-fashion garments on display. Several of these pieces were designed for the runway or for celebrities, and they were displayed on mannequins reflecting largely normative bodies (i.e. thin and able-bodied). As noted by Chapin, Green, and Neuberger, mannequins pose a common challenge for curators who wish to represent different types of bodies and forms of gender expression in the museum, as they cannot easily translate the dynamic, lived experience of clothing (81). As the authors state: “Gender is complex: informed and produced through intersections with other aspects of identity like sexuality, religion, nationality, ability, age/generation, race, and ethnicity. Mannequins are by nature static, thus already diminishing the complexity of the fashioned body” (81).

CURATION AND MATERIAL LIMITATIONS

“How does a curator incorporate the histories not represented in the material culture of museums or in the fashion history canon?” asks Tolini Finamore in her curator’s remarks. This complex and reflexive question — a crucial one for fashion curators and scholars alike — evidently informed the thoughtful curation and extensive research that went into this show. Upon entering the gallery space, the exhibition’s scholarly approach was immediately apparent. Information labels repeatedly emphasized the historical, social, and cultural forces that have traditionally

shaped and policed clothing along a rigid gender binary in the United States and Europe, as well as critical intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and class in fashion and society. The exhibition booklet included a bibliography of academic literature on fashion studies, gender, subculture, queer fashion, and the body — something I personally have never seen in a major museum fashion exhibition. Importantly, a text panel near the entrance defined key terms that would be found throughout the show, such as agender, androgyny, cisgender, genderfluid, genderqueer, nonbinary, and transgender.

Along the lines of what Tolini Finamore acknowledges in her curatorial statement, however, the exhibition’s thesis was sometimes limited by the exclusive, high-fashion nature of many of the garments on display. This was true especially in the first section, where the reliance on couture and prêt-à-porter pieces made for a visually rich experience that sometimes failed to meaningfully connect the objects to the important, critical themes that were explored in the exhibition’s supplementary texts, videos, and photographs. These valuable contextual materials attempted to centre the narratives of queer and trans individuals, individuals of colour, and other groups that were not always represented in the material artifacts. Overall, the exhibition really succeeded in those moments where it directly connected garments to specific individuals and expressions in the social world, which is where clothing (even in its most spectacular forms) truly gains its meaning and significance.

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