

Modern Romance

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Any definition of romance or modernity is certain to be contentious as both words have been defined and redefined for centuries. The coupling of the two words in “Modern Romance” needs to be clarified and, to this author, it is through sex roles that this notion is best revealed. Further, the sexual arena is a *great* place to explore the roles of women. Fantasies, sexual fantasies in particular, are the grounds where many of the roles and practices of a culture are played out and explored.

To this end, I have chosen as my thesis project to create sexy, fantastical costumes that emphasize role-play as a way of distilling roles into a manifestation of what they are – constructs to be applied, removed, mixed and matched at the whim of the wearer. The behavior that a costume may elicit is equally broad in scope like a theatrical performance that carries a host of emotions from exuberance to catharsis.

The clothing choices for this project are variations on themes of the modern woman in which the fanciful and liberated spirit of my generation eschews the limitations of previous conceptions of the garments in question by alterations in design and purpose that expand the utility of the outfits as well as the notion of identity perceived by wearer and observer. The pieces I chose to re-fabricate are the suit, the wedding dress, the maternity dress, the apron, the robe, the corset and the jumpsuit.

My work is partly a response to a general adoption by members of the second wave feminist movement of menswear and the ubiquitous disdain cast upon garments deemed too feminine. While this was an important step in alleviating external pressures to maintain looks and beauty at an absurd cost, it sent an unintended message that to be smart and to be taken seriously was to look and act like a man, an idea which had been tacitly accepted all along. In the political struggle where women’s roles are forged and reworked, the desires of those affected sometimes fall casualty. Ideas of sex, childbirth, maternity and marriage have, in my view, been controlled by the patriarchy and reclaimed by the matriarchy, only to taken again from the individual and placed on lofty and

inaccessible ground. The costumes or uniforms of everyday people are the targets of socio-sexual critique which often presumes a level of choice in the wearers whose real motivations are more typically driven by finance and local culture. In order to let go of the yokes of past gender and role definitions in clothing, we need to allow for new contextualization of old garments.

This being said, I have chosen Western style garments of the last half of the 20th century as templates for my project. The social movements of this period make it fertile ground for appropriation. My color choices are predominantly shades of red, white, and blue in a nod to my influence by Americana and ‘vintage’ representations of gender.

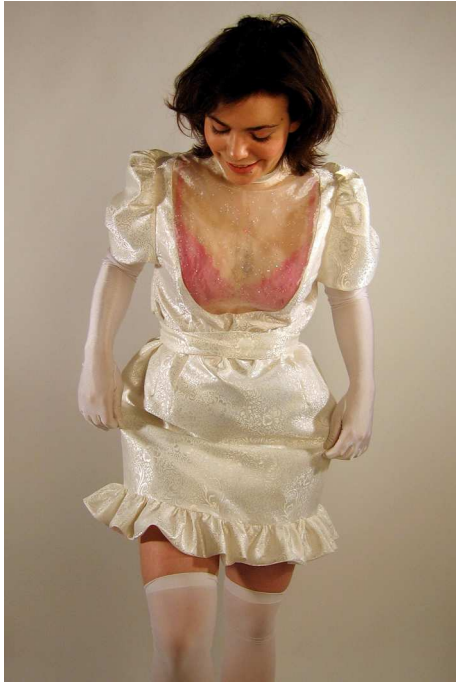
The first of these pieces is the suit, which is inspired in cut and material by the pants worn by Kathryn Hepburn in the ‘30s and ‘40s. The difference is in the intention of design. Even in relatively simple garments, such as shirts and pants, one can easily figure which pieces were designed for a woman or for a man. If one wants to change the wearer of a shirt or pair of pants from a man to a woman or woman to man, it is not enough to simply pick a different size from the rack. In



fact, major alterations are necessary to accommodate the differences of physique between the sexes. In its extremes, fashion calls *attention* to sexual dimorphism. A dress may emphasize a womanly hip, whereas a suit coat boasts a manly shoulder.

This suit features a pair of flowing pink suit pants with a high fitted waist that ends just below the bust, and pleats that begin at the hips, adding fullness. These features, when coupled with the color of the suiting, turn a pair of work pants into a garment that might have been designed intuitively for a woman, not something adapted from menswear. The lovely silhouette is distinctly

feminine, but gives the wearer an unmistakable confidence and power, as well as the illusion of length and height. The blouse is sheer with red stripes, bishop sleeves, and a tie at the neck. The sheer material will be repeated in an outfit we will visit later, the jumpsuit.



In keeping with the office theme, I will make an argument for my next pieces through the telling of an experience had by one Miss Patti Smith. Patti categorically prefers slacks and a jacket, and is denied a secretarial position by James Taylor, a prestigious lawyer, in favor of another applicant who wears a skirt, nylons and heels. One day shortly thereafter, Mr. Taylor appears in court wearing a skirt, nylons and heels and is promptly fired from his firm. How could his clothing have caused such a scandal, and why would his partners assume he had a mental breakdown? The codes in clothing have potency in our culture, but the symbols change meaning when clothing crosses from one milieu to another and becomes mainstream, as in Patti's pants. A woman in a skirt is still more feminine than one in pants (read subservient vs. strong), and a man in a dress is still a man in a dress unless he is seen as a woman.

It is my intention to equalize these garments without conflating them, which is why the wedding dress is one of the first garments I made, in answer to the chaste and somewhat ugly western wedding dress, in which the bride is encased and given away. I kept the palette white (a color symbolizing purity – read virginity – in Western culture) because it the symbolism of the color in Western culture (read purity and virginity) is alone sufficient in alerting the viewer to the garment's use, while yielding an abundance of traditions and stereotypes to play against. Like a traditional dress, my wedding dress is sweet and white and made of patterned brocade. It has the

obligatory puff sleeves, pearl buttons, and a ruffle along the hem. The silhouette is flower-inspired, a shape which ends up being just a bit too short and is subsequently complimented by bloomers with blue ties (something borrowed, something blue...). The dress also features a lovely sheer window that begins at the neck and exposes everything below, down to the waist. The intention of this dress is to wield the idea of a meek bride and toss it away like so many tacky bouquets. It seems to have been designed for a rebellious yet *very* feminine woman who would give any soon-to-be partner a run for his money.



The next stage in my list of roles is of course, the maternity dress. The maternity dress I designed is in keeping with the ultra-feminine, almost satirical tone of the wedding dress. It comes with a soft attachable belly made of red satin material, and a pair of pink satin bloomers. The dress itself is cotton with a pink and red paisley print, reminiscent of the biological structures that carry and receive our DNA. Sperm and ovum swim lushly across the swells and curves of the design. The dress is cut after a short '60s-inspired design with room left in front for a large belly, and sweet puff sleeves that echo this primary form. I have again included a window front that quietly demands the viewer confront the nature of his or her origins, and highlights the breasts which are so vital to the process of propagation.

In more mundane terms, the role of a woman as provider of nourishment is discussed in the arena of the kitchen, and a woman's role within it must of course be addressed. I designed the *apron* in nod to this area of contention and clearly takes its cue from aprons of the '50s. The apron incorporates high ruffles atop the shoulders, a tie at the waist, and tiers of gathering that form the apron skirt. The fabric references curtains, tablecloths, and other culinary paraphernalia. The twist



in this garment is again in the daring neckline, which features ruffles at the bustpoints, gingham shorts to cover the exposed rear of the garment, and an inordinate amount of sass. The high shoulders and tight waist create a strong silhouette that contrasts with the fluffy plaid material and excess of ruffles in an almost intimidating way: this is not the apron we would expect from the traditional Domestic Goddess.

The counterpart to the apron is the *robe*, designed after a man's lounge coat. The light blue fabric is borrowed from the apron, making these two a pair within the group. It features

masculine details without sacrificing a bit of femininity or comfort. The lumberjack plaid of the flannel is a study in color and pattern when juxtaposed with light blue checked silk, cut on the bias. The cut is based on the bog coat, a pattern which originates in Wales. The bog coat is the western version of the kimono – a single square of fabric is used without cutting away, much like the whole strips of cloth that are bound together to create a kimono. This single square is only embellished with a large ruffle along the collar, and small ones on the sleeves, hem, and yoke. These additions give the simple form of the bog coat distinction, make it eminently feminine, and tie it in visually with my other pieces.



Again through my next piece, the corset, I attempt explore and undermine the strictures of gendered clothing. Without such codes, there would be no play in dress and no statement to be made. Without its Victorian history, there would be nothing racy about a corset which derives its



allure and power of fantasy from modern conceptions and interpretations of the submissive/dominant interplay between men and women of the past. How did an everyday garment come to have connotations of sexual fantasy and submission? The corset, like many other pieces of clothing, has undergone a historical and a popular interpretation that projects today's roles onto old garments, judging them emblems, in the case of corsets, of women's submissive roles in bourgeois society. I, however, happen to agree with feminist American archivist and historian Mary Ritter Beard who stated in defense of her

book, *Woman as a Force in History*, that "The dogma of woman's complete historical subjection to men must be rated as one of the most fantastic myths ever created by the human mind."¹ Perhaps the patriarchy *was* aware of the physical limitations corsets imposed on women or maybe, like the heel today, they were an, at times, extremely uncomfortable thing women wore in order to stylize a body part. In any case, women are somewhat culpable for the modern connotations of BDSM the corset has taken on, and it is incumbent upon us to reclaim our history and insist on a more equal power dynamic. I have tried to do this in my own interpretation of the corset.

Like elements of the maternity dress, the corset is made of soft, shiny satin in a brilliant red. It is fully boned and laces up the back via rivets. It is somewhat stiff to give support to the wearer, but it is as comfortable as it is functional. The corset is lined with the same material that the shorts are cut from, a silk-screened chain motif that references the plastic chains worn around the neck (chains easily broken and clearly intended as symbols as opposed to means of torture). The design is intended to evoke and question the dynamics of a dominant/submissive relationship. By giving

¹ A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard Through Her Letters, page 53.

the corset bold colors, textures and graphics, it makes the wearer stand out in a way that is anything but submissive. Once worn it transforms the wearer into a superhero-like character, breaking forth from a meek alter-ego.

Pants are bookends for my project. One of these, the last garment, is a jersey jumpsuit which combines pants with an unmistakably feminine blouse. Again, the comfort of the wearer is of the utmost importance, which is why I chose to cut the jumpsuit from stretchy jersey and to support it with elastic that hits the waist. The jumpsuit is inspired by dancewear and like the jumpsuit of the working person, is designed to encourage movement and flexibility without sacrificing comfort. It features a drawstring at the waist, gathering at the ankles and shoulders, and a yoke of sheer navy striped fabric like that featured in the previously mentioned work blouse. Like the suit pants, this garment flatters curves and gives emphasis to the waist and hips and is eminently feminine, despite being pants. As opposed to work wear, the garment is intended to be worn 'out' and allow the wearer to move freely, and be sexy and comfortable.



My hope for these garments is that they relay my message that the feminine is an important and functional paradigm that can be re-imagined and legitimized only if we embrace the pejorative as defined and propagated by people on both sides of the political spectrum. It is my belief that through a reworking of design and intention, women can reclaim the promise of the social and sexual joy, so often heralded in second wave feminist ideology, without neglecting the long history of garments at once deemed sexy and sexualizing. Like Judy Chicago's famous piece, *The Dinner*

Party, my work may too be dismissed as pornographic kitsch.² However my intention is much like hers, for she wrote in her book, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage*, which chronicles the piece; “To reclaim our past and insist that it become a part of our human history is the task the lies before us” (Chicago, page 215).



² Notes for *Critical Feminist Studies, F07*, Bryn Marr College website.

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