Folding image

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Summery

‘Deer (Borrowed imagination)’ is the 2009 Master project with which Marthe De Buck graduated from the Textile Design programme of Sint-Lucas Visual Arts in Ghent (Belgium). It is an artistic-visual investigation of a different visual language in fashion and textiles. The research plays with ‘borrowed imagination’: the recuperation of an idea and the aura of an existing image or the memory of an object are the inspiration for a unique visual language. The project is exemplary for the openness with which the Textile Design programme defines textiles research. The aim of the programme is to provide a research environment in which textile can be recalcitrant and multiple in meaning. Textile Design at Sint-Lucas ‘approaches textiles with a broad vision, makes room for cross-fertilization between art and design, and provides opportunity for an independent approach. Materials and techniques are important to the identity of the medium, but are not a goal in them selves. Artistic representation and design, and an engaged and reflective attitude, are central.’

Deer (Borrowed imagination) – fig. 1

Deer (Borrowed imagination)’ is the 2009 Master project with which Marthe De Buck graduated from the Textile Design programme of Sint-Lucas Visual Arts in Ghent (Belgium). In this project textile is recuperated and is no longer strictly textile: what one takes for textile is bubble wrap, sticky tape or the shell of a modernist chair. ‘What is the definition of textile? What makes something textile? Can this still be called textile? Or better: what do I think of as textile?’ These are questions that lay at the basis of this research in which concrete design praxis is supported and stimulated by theoretical insights and by the design praxis of such fashion designers as Hussein Chalayan, Martin Margiela and Issey Miyake. The eye for
theory does not prevent the designer from allowing her work to take shape, ‘to go its own way’. Intuition, coincidence and metamorphosis play an important role.

In the visual essay, the bubble wrap at first sight seems not much more than a few wads carelessly thrown away (fig. 1-5). They seem to lie around aimlessly, as though the wind took pleasure in toying with the light material. Just as autumn leaves spiral down and land haphazardly, so the shapes in the photographic images change place almost unnoticeably. The camera moves around the packing material in an almost cinematic rhythm. Close-ups alternate with broader views. The images follow one another like frozen fragments of time from a performance teased out in stills.

The textile ‘thing’ looks small but nevertheless has something monumental. It is strange how the viewer cannot really gauge the true dimensions of what has been photographed. Only the silhouette of a chair, visible through one of the white shapes, gives any indication of scale. But it is not really clear whether this is an ordinary chair or a miniature chair. The obscurity or ambiguity of the scale is a strategy to create distance, to allow the image to be its own commentary and construction, as is the case with the doll’s house exhibited by Viktor & Rolf’s in *The House of Viktor & Rolf* at the Centraal Museum Utrecht, 2008 (Clark 2009, p.186). The images in the photographic record of ‘Deer (Borrowed imagination)’ follow the logic of an
investigation that circles around abstract concepts, repeatedly returning to them and transposing them. The concepts move in the world of fashion, a world in which content is also, or can also be, a leitmotif of design. The goal is not a desirable product or a collection that will increase the designer's market share. The focus is on the process by which concepts are explored and visualized in images that demand an attentive viewer.

De Buck feels a sense of recognition in the 'substance designer' as described by Ginger Gregg Duggan in her groundbreaking essay “The Greatest Show on Earth” (Duggan 2001; reprinted 2006, p.228): ‘Designers whose shows fit within the substance category are connected to performance by emphasising process over product. For these designers the concept behind a season remains central to the understanding of each garment and the fashion show.’ The photographs in De Buck’s research are staged images in an artistic and analytical visual discourse. The hybrid and sometimes-surreal reality that they create resides in a poetic space between art and fashion and between research and result. The appropriation of readymade material does not give the work a look of non-art as with Marcel Duchamp, or even a look of non-textile. The bubble wrap acts like textile and derives its dynamism from real-world textile applications and artistic reflection on them. This is achieved without cutting and stitching.

Deer (Borrowed imagination) – fig. 6, 7 and 8

The undefined form in which the packaging material appears, has all it needs to trigger the flow, ‘the let it happen’. Effortlessly, the wad changes shape and location, changing identity as it does so. From a chair-cover it becomes a cover without a chair, then a chair in flexible artificial foil, only to sag into a certain shapelessness. The sleeve covers the chair like a second skin, a transparent fitted shape around a body that appears as a wooden frame, a modern piece of design furniture reduced to a spatial skeleton. The cover can also be reduced to an ephemeral contour that easily seeks a new setting – sometimes as a rough sketch on paper, sometimes in an endless interchange of graphic variations, drawn origami (fig. 6, 7 and 8). Borne along by coincidence and intuition, the sleeve transforms again into
another wrapper. This time the body wrapped is a tailor’s dummy (fig. 10). The cover folds into a piece of clothing. (Notwithstanding the explicit context of war and refugees in Hussein Chalayan’s *Afterwords* (Autumn/Winter 2000), the transformation of the wrapping into clothing in De Buck’s research has to be seen in relation to one of the transformations in *Afterwords*: four models put on furniture covers, that fit like garments.)

The designer plays this game of metamorphosis against the backdrop of the tailor’s dummy as standard, something she both alludes to and contradicts. In fashion, a dummy is the measure of the real body. The two are interchangeable. As a voluminous coat hanger, the
dummy displays the clothing that the viewer might wear. The theatrical staging plays upon desires, vanity and fantasies. But the dummy is also different from the real body. It is an artificial body, an immobile trunk that is also used in the design process to construct wayward forms. The dummy continues to reappear in De Buck’s many displays, as the transformations know no end (fig. 11-13). The dummy is a coat hanger for the changeability of folding, pleating, swaddling, assembling. The tailor’s tool is not only the point of departure for these manipulations, but also the following point on an axis on which every experiment with form is again taken in hand.

The tailor’s dummy partly guides the designer’s moves and the viewer’s interpretations, but to some extent this is also denied. De Buck is fascinated by the Japanese view of clothing. ‘In the West the cut of a garment is subordinated to the body of the wearer. The problem addressed is therefore that of cutting and shaping the cloth in such a way that the flat surface conforms to the body in three dimensions. A garment designed by a Japanese stylist, in contrast, masks the proportions of the woman-as-Venus: the bulge of the bosom and the curve of the waist. The Japanese aesthetic vision is, for better and for worse, deeply rooted in the ‘culture of the kimono’. The body as it is, is screened by fabric.’ (Fukai 2006, p. 291) Furthermore, ‘as the example of the kimono again testifies, Japanese fashion design aims to create a universal garment, one that can easily pass over differences in age and appearance, but also that elides the distinction between the masculine and the feminine.’ (Ibidem) De Buck indicates the narrow boundary between masculine and feminine with the simple pinning of the wrapping around the breast (fig. 9 and 10). The result can be read as a diagram of the male body that with one small change again becomes a code for female fashion.

The minimal use of material – minimal as textile and minimal as clothing – fits the conceptual approach. The tight silhouette is redrawn, three-dimensionally folded into something that looks more or less like clothing, but needn’t be. No textile is made in this research, and nor is any clothing. If the textile forms need a label, sculpture will do. In De Buck’s research, textile and fashion are plastic materials that give rise to sculptural volumes and rhythms that do not coincide to the body they clothe. The textile is folded into volumetric constructions that attach to the body but remain alien to it. It is an approach typical of many of the collections of Hussein Chalayan. Body and garment do not coincide. The body does not ‘embody’ the connotations that the garment carries, something that is also explicitly communicated in the collections of Martin Margiela. ‘Women dressed by Maison Martin Margiela no longer have to body forth fetishistic femininity: they come to relate to it as to an unfamiliar fabrication, and demonstrate it rather than embody it.’ (Vinken 2008, p. 112) But nor is femininity absent. The sculptural forms reference flared dresses and coats. With a strip of fake fur, a black patch of cloth and a lamp that illuminates the plastic from within, an uncanny collage is created, a new character brought to life by the viewer’s imagination (fig.
14-17). Textile here is construct and volume, packaging and protection, concealment and disguise.

Deer (Borrowed imagination) – fig. 14, 15, 16 and 17

The white transparency of the recuperated bubble wrap is still a plain textile, blank and so open to transformation in all directions, over and over again. ‘With minimal manipulation you can create constantly changing forms that can never be exactly reproduced, different each time and starting from a blank. It ought to be possible to conceive of a garment in the same way. The screen is folded up afterwards in accordance with its essential structure and stored away (in memory?). The wearer can create a new piece every morning while
getting dressed’, says De Buck. The non-colour also provides a transparent (weak) evocation of the white that is used in such abundance by fashion designers who utilize it as a parameter for abstraction, for the rejection of fashionable colours and datable styles. In this artistic research colour is, in a certain sense, limited to white and black and naturally occurring colours. The quasi-absence of striking shades reinforces the idea that colour is not really essential to what is being said. The transparent foil has the effect of making things float, and gives the appearance of dissolving mass.

Deer (Borrowed imagination) – fig. 18, 19, 20 and 21
Black is in the first instance a patch of shadow behind the tailor’s dummy (fig. 18). For the designer, shadows are chance shapes that are superadded. They create an additional ‘volume’, a doubling of the sculpture, and are at the same time the textbook example of a two-dimensional silhouette. The shadow asks to be put on, as actually happened in Viktor & Rolf’s *L’apparence du vide* (1995). The shadow also becomes a new character, unexpectedly exchanging his DNA for that of another species. In the theatrical space and on the sheet of paper the shadow changes into a body with squirming legs (fig. 19-21). The unsettling metamorphosis of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* seems here to be fixed in endless repetition.

In one photographed image ‘Spotted’ (fig. 22) a further transformation takes place: the weathered skin of a mirror mixes optically with the mirrored image of the manipulated wrap. Organic structure and colour are adopted as a pattern. The reflected image and the reality merge. The smooth skin of the mirror shows as a layer between viewer and the third dimension of the mirrored image. This poses the question of the role of the mirror in the construction of self-image and identity, with wrapping/covering as the bearer of pattern and colour and the instrument to communicate that identity (Diepens, 2009).

‘Deer (Borrowed imagination)’ shamelessly appropriates icons from various visual cultures. A ceramic statuette, a design chair from the 1950s and a scale model of Charles and Ray Eames’s *La Chaise* (1948) provide polarities of kitsch and good taste, of tradition and modernity. The process of getting dressed is almost caricaturally magnified. Here too objects exchange scale. The porcelain figurine becomes an unapproachable mannequin dominating the whole image, but equally vanishes as an unnoticeably tiny doll in a motion-filled painting where the boundaries between two- and three-dimensionality and between spot
of light and spot of paint are unclear (fig. 23-26). In these images De Buck evokes the intriguing uncertainty that characterizes the paintings of Jackson Pollock. The skin pulled over the porcelain lady is mobile, organic, almost animal. When she gets her own setting, this too is defined as skin.

Deer (Borrowed imagination) – fig. 23, 24, 25 and 26

For De Buck the shell chair is a modish form, a collar with bizarre protrusions. The full-sized chair and the scale model dress the tailor’s dummy and the porcelain figurine (fig. 27-32). Minimal alterations create a chain reaction. Once the process is initiated, the image changes by itself, as though reality were an escaped chameleon. How large is the distance
between the shell of the chair and a hat or collar? How fast does bubble wrap turn into a floating cloud, a pixelated image or a series of magnifying glasses?

Deer (Borrowed imagination) – fig. 27, 28, 29 and 30
Normal situations are effortlessly redefined. This summons forth an alternate reality, which despite its surreal touches can still count on recognition. This recognition makes it possible to show the practical applications of textile research. The portraits of young ladies, fictive mise-en-scènes like those of Cindy Sherman, refer to real situations in which we show ourselves to the world in our clothing. But the garments are not closely attached to the body (fig. 33-34).

The inelegant packing makes the artificiality of this covering highly visible. ‘Until recently clothing primarily functioned as the symbolic skin that regulated our desires: the wearer displayed his or her identity, and in the street and in town played the game of seeing and being seen. This classic sense of fashion as a system of meaning and communication now seems to have passed its sell-by date. In avant-garde fashion, identity is increasingly problematicized and the construction of fashion is made visible.’ (Teunissen 2009, p. 19)
Fashion is often a clumsy prosthesis, less likely to differentiate than to confirm social patterns. Thus the ephemerality of fashion gives way to the timelessness of cultural models.

Over and over again, the research plays with reversal and metamorphosis, and gives the aura of the appropriate image: a chair becomes a garment, becomes a dressed woman, becomes a woman on a chair, becomes a woman-chair. And when only the frame of the chair remains, a deer stands waiting: a body with antlers, looking for protection; looking for textile (fig. 35-36). A sleeve becomes skin, body and sculpture.

Deer (Borrowed imagination) – fig. 35 and 36

Translation by Paul Arblaster

References


