

CRAFTS

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FRONT

The Royal Academy stages an important exhibition on the coding of clothing. By Emma Love

Cut from a different cloth

Every time we decide what to wear, we're subconsciously sending out messages about our identity. Clothing is a huge part of who we are, and a powerful medium of communication: politically, socially and artistically. And it's an issue that has inspired the Royal Academy's *GSK Contemporary - Aware: Art Fashion Identity* (opens 2 December, in the space normally occupied by the Haunch of Venison).

Over 30 international artists and designers are taking part, including such late 60s figures as Cindy Sherman and Yoko Ono.

Both cultural and personal stories are explored by the clothes on show. Grayson Perry's *Artist Robe*, based on the Japanese kimono but incorporating elements of British heritage, is about wanting to fit in with a particular institution. Meschac Gaba's wig sculptures look at preconception and cultural stereotype: he uses traditional African braids, in the form of such key Western buildings as New York's World Financial Centre.

Helen Storey's disappearing dress (which does exactly what it says), Vito

'I've worked with clothing to make political statements since the 90s'
LUCY ORTA

Acconci's mirrored umbrella (which is fixed to your waist and wrist and acts as a type of camouflage), and Claudia Losi's lifesize, cashmere travelling whale (turned into suit jackets by Antonio Marras so that they carry the memories and scars of their journey), all look at clothing as a mechanism of expression, to help us think on a far deeper level than we're perhaps used to. Recent techniques can be seen as well: a piece by Dai Rees, for example, uses traditional marquetry, usually found in wood and furniture, to create an installation of leather sculptures derived from a distortion of dress patterns.

The original idea for the show came from artist and exhibition co-curator Lucy Orta, well known for addressing political and social messages through clothing, particularly in her *Refuge War* project, where tents become ponchos. 'I've been working with clothing to make various political and social statements since the 90s, through performances and interventions that I've staged over the years,' she says. 'Back then it was

difficult to get my message out, but I realised that people take a lot of notice of clothing. I wanted to take this exhibition beyond what people imagine fashion to be.'

The exhibition looks at belonging, displacement, nationality, and how central performance is in the presentation of fashion and clothing (examined via pieces by Gillian Wearing and Hussein Chalayan, among others). For Kathleen Soriano, director of exhibitions at the Royal Academy, it's an area that she's been keen to focus on for a while. 'I'm interested in shows that speak to audiences in different ways, particularly those with a thematic storyline to them, and I've been thinking about the relationship between clothing and artists. Clothing identifies so many different things; our tribe, intelligence, aspiration and how we connect with other people.' Just remember all that next time you're having a wardrobe crisis. *'GSK Contemporary - Aware: Art Fashion Identity'*, Royal Academy of Arts, 2 December - 30 January 2011. www.royalacademy.org.uk



Far left: *Carapace: Human Observations/Casing Two* (detail), Dai Rees, leather hide, marquetry detail, leather, enamel, ink, incised etching, 107 x 40 cm, 2003
Left: *Artist's Robe*, Grayson Perry, embroidered silk brocade, leather, printed linen and ceramic buttons, 179 x 70 cm, 2004